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Rabbi David J. Zucker

“The Past hides but is present”

-Bernard Malamud, *A New Life*

Philip Roth admired his older colleague Bernard Malamud. Roth explained that Malamud wrote “four or five of the best American short stories I’ve ever read (or I ever will). The other stories weren’t bad either.” He goes on to say that Malamud “published some of the most original works of fiction written by an American in my lifetime” (“Pictures” 121, 129).

This article focuses on two novels, Philip Roth’s *The Dying Animal* and Bernard Malamud’s *A New Life*. Roth’s book serves as homage to Malamud’s work. The characters and the plot in the Roth novel either directly contrast with or mirror the characters and the plot in Malamud’s book. Roth followed Malamud’s lead in loosely basing his novel on a Biblical book. For Philip Roth, it is Ecclesiastes, for Bernard Malamud, it is the Song of Songs.

Philip Roth’s *The Dying Animal*

The locale for Philip Roth’s 2001 novel, *The Dying Animal*, is New York City. Urbane and erudite Professor David Kapesh appears earlier in the Roth novels *The Breast* (1972) and *The Professor of Desire* (1977). Kapesh, a professor of literature and criticism at a local university in New York, is economically secure. He is smart, successful, and sophisticated. He is a seasoned serial seducer who has had multiple affairs with women of all ages and stages in their lives. The novel centers largely on Kapesh and his relationship with a former graduate student and lover, Consuela Costillo.

Now it is eight years later. Consuela contracts cancer. She has but a 60/40 chance of survival, though in any case she will lose her exquisitely beautiful breasts. Kapesh now is seventy-years-old. Even as he grieves for Consuela, he is well aware of the limit of his own years.

Bernard Malamud's *A New Life*

By contrast, Bernard Malamud's 1961 novel, *A New Life*, takes place in the Pacific Northwest, at fictional Cascadia College, probably based on what was then Oregon State College. At the center of the novel is S. (Sy, Seymour, Sam) Levin, a newly hired instructor in the English Department. This is Levin's first full-time teaching position at the college level. A New Yorker, an idealist, and a liberal, he has come west to begin "a new life."

At the novel's close, Levin leaves Cascadia College, but he has indeed started a new life, figuratively and literally. He departs with Pauline, his newfound lover, and she is pregnant with his child.

Contrasting/Comparing

At first glance these works, *The Dying Animal* and *A New Life*, do not seem to be connected. Forty years separate their dates of publication. Roth's novel appeared as the new millennium began. Malamud's work was published a decade past mid-point in the previous century. Roth has published many books over the years; Malamud's novel is one of his earlier works. Roth's David Kapesch is seventy-years-old. Malamud's protagonist, S. Levin, is thirty. Though both are college professors, Kapesch is celebrating the conclusion of a distinguished career, while Levin is just beginning his profession at the college level. Kapesch is gregarious and self-assured. Levin is shy and suffers self-doubts. Not only are their locales set at opposite parts of the country, but also urban New York stands in stark contrast to rural Oregon.

There are many other differences. Kapesch celebrates ongoing sexual successes; Levin is an inept seducer. Kapesch's exploits are prodigious and promiscuous; Levin's sexual experiences are limited. Kapesch is divorced; Levin is single and never married.

The main female characters in the novels are very dissimilar. In *The Dying Animal*, Consuela Costilla is considerably younger than Kapesch. Pauline Gilley, the main character in *A New Life*, is a bit older than Levin. Consuela is single and never married; Pauline is married with two children.

The Dying Animal centers largely on Kapesch and his relationship with a former graduate student and lover, a young (twenty-four-years old at the time of the affair) Cuban-African woman, who possessed a "marvelous body," which was "damned attractive." She is "a self-contained woman of such sexual power" with large "gorgeous breasts." Consuela looks similar to the Modigliani painting in the Modern Museum of Art, *Reclining Nude [Le Grand nu]*.¹ By contrast, in *A New Life*, Pauline Gilley, who is Levin's limited success story in the sexual arena, is not physically well-endowed. She is tall and "flat-chested" (4). Consuela Costillo is a sophisticate, proud, and self-confidant; Pauline Gilley is demure, naïve, and quiet.

The contrasts continue. In terms of the books themselves, *The Dying Animal* is but 156 pages. *A New Life* is a full-length novel, well over 350 pages. Roth's book is a monologue; Malamud's work features description and dialogue. A continuing theme in *The Dying Animal* is about the specter of dying and clearly about the in-

evitability of death itself. A continuing theme in *A New Life* is a new life, primarily, Levin remaking himself, but also at the close of the novel, literally and figuratively as well, creating a new life.

Yet, for all these contrasts, there also are compelling comparisons, striking similarities between the books. While the contrasts outweigh the similarities, the similarities are significant. In both novels, the professor protagonist has sexual relations with a student in his class. Kapesch used to bed students while they were taking his courses, though he now follows the rule that he will not “get in touch with them on a private basis until they’ve completed their final exam and received their grade and [he is] no longer in loco parentis (5).” Levin has a brief affair with his student, Nadalee Hammerstad (151).

In each book, a woman with large breasts faces mammary surgery. Further, both women ask their lovers to touch the nodule, which they do.² Both men are strongly attracted to, and then have a sexual relationship with the main female character. In both books, the male lead cares deeply about, and is committed to supporting, his lover. At the close of *The Dying Animal*, Kapesch is leaving his apartment to be with Consuela. At the literal conclusion of *A New Life*, Levin is actually leaving Cascadia with Pauline. Though they are at opposite ends of their career trajectories, both Kapesch and Levin are professionals, specifically educators, and they teach at the university level. Each is connected with English language/literature. Each, at this moment, is unmarried. Each is a male Jew, though neither author specifically addresses this matter in the novel. Indeed, in each novel there is no mention of Jews or Judaism, or of the main character—or anyone else—doing anything identifiably Jewish.

The very differences in a variety of specific areas and, likewise, the overlapping of the characters’ lives in *The Dying Animal* and *A New Life*, suggests that Roth consciously set out to write a novel which offered both contrasts and similarities, much as the key words in the titles, *Dying/Life*.³ In terms of Roth himself and this particular book, the matter is even more complex. *The Dying Animal* is in itself a conscious reworking by Roth of certain character types as well as certain themes found in his own previous novel, *Sabbath’s Theater* (Zucker).

Biblical precedents

The Dying Animal connects to *A New Life* in other ways. Roth’s novel features elements of the Biblical book, Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes is of unknown provenance, but it is attributed to Solomon. Malamud’s novel features elements of the Biblical book, The Song of Songs (also called the Song of Solomon or the Canticle [of Canticles]). Though it also is of unknown provenance, the first line attributes it to Solomon. Roth’s “utilization” of biblical material from Ecclesiastes is more subtle than that of Malamud’s “utilization” of The Song of Songs.

Ecclesiastes reflected in Philip Roth’s *The Dying Animal*

The book of Ecclesiastes (also called Qoheleth or Koheleth) derives its title in Hebrew

from the root *qahal* meaning “assembly.” That is why the Greek translators gave it the name *ekklesiastes*—assemblyman, or sometimes The Speaker, the Preacher, or the Teacher. One of the most quoted books in the Bible, the

author's theme song is sounded at the beginning and again at the end of the book, “Vanity of vanities—all is vanity and a striving after wind.” (Eccl 1:2; 12:8). Futility and emptiness result from the constant human search for the meaning of life. The biblical author is particularly aware of the useless attempts to understand the mystery of divine purpose behind the order of the world as it is, *the tragic finality of death*, the reasons for success and failure, and the justice of rewards and punishment for good or evil behavior. These are beyond our capabilities to discover. (my emphasis, Boadt)

Roth creates settings and dialogue, which are based on material found in the Biblical book of Ecclesiastes.

A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under heaven: a time for being born, and a time for dying [...] a time for embracing and a time for shunning embraces [...] a time for seeking and a time for losing [...] a time for silence and a time for speaking. (Eccl 3:1-2, 5-7).

Those words from Ecclesiastes, that there is a season for all things, birth/death; embracing/shunning embraces; seeming/losing; silence/speaking; take on a poignant meaning given the particular plot of *The Dying Animal*. Kapesh and Consuela's mutual seduction, their torrid affair, their eventual breakup, and, finally, Consuela's cancer, all reflect directly the words of Ecclesiastes.

There are other connections to verses in Ecclesiastes in *The Dying Animal*. In terms of their affair, it is clear that for the lovers, “Two are better off than one, in that they have greater benefit [...] Further, when two lie together they are warm; but how can he who is alone get warm?” (Eccl 4:9, 11).

Consuela Costillo's cancer and the real possibility of her demise is not the only mention of death in the novel. George Hearn, Professor Kapesh's colleague, longtime friend, and confidant, suffers a massive stroke. He does not die immediately. Over a number of weeks, Kapesh visits him daily, touches his cheek, and squeezes Hearn's hand. Professor Kapesh is committed to being present for his friend, even in these emotionally devastating circumstances. Here too, though in a different way, he lives out the words of Ecclesiastes that “Two are better off than one [...] For should they fall, one can raise the other” (Eccl 4:9-10).

At the close of *The Dying Animal* after a hiatus of eight years, Consuela suddenly seeks out Kapesh. Having undergone chemotherapy, she has lost her beautiful black hair. About to face a radical mastectomy, Consuela asks Kapesh to say goodbye to her breasts, to see her body “before it is ruined by what the doctors are going to do.” She wants this because, as she tells him, “After you, I never had a boyfriend or a lover who loved my body as much as you loved it” (131, 130). Surely, this is “A time for seeking and a time for losing.” Kapesh readily agrees to her request. He is very tender with her. Once again, though here in a still different manner, he lives out the

maxim, “Two are better off than one [...] For should they fall, one can raise the other; but woe betide him who is alone and falls with no companion to raise him!”

Early on in the Biblical book, the author of Ecclesiastes remarks that “One generation goes, another comes” (Eccl 1:4). Kapesch would not dispute that observation. Yet, he finds it emotionally devastating. Kapesch is nearly forty years older than Consuela. Realizing the differences in their ages, the professor is consumed by the fact that he knows she will eventually exchange him for another lover.

The jealousy. *That poison*. And unprovoked. Jealous even when she tells me she is going ice-skating with her 18 year-old brother. Will he be the one who steals her away? [...] On the nights she isn't with me, I am deformed by thinking about where she may be and what she may be up to [...] There is no peace in it and there can't be [...] Because of our ages, I have the pleasure but I never lose the longing [...]

How do I know a young man will take her away? Because I once was the young man who would have done it [...].

A young man will find her and take her away (emphasis original, 38-40, 42).

Ecclesiastes' author, thousands of years earlier, captured Kapesch's concerns, the emotional pain he experiences, the all-consuming jealousy that cannot be sated. “The rich man's abundance does not let him sleep,” observes the Biblical author. Further, “There is an evil I have observed under the sun, and a grave one it is for man: that God sometimes grants a man riches, property, and wealth, so that he does not want for anything his appetite may crave, but God does not permit him to enjoy it; *instead a stranger will enjoy it*” (5:11, 6:1-2).

Seventy-year-old Professor David Kapesch reflects on not only the “pornography of jealousy” but also the “pornography of one's own destruction” (41).

Can you imagine old age?” he asks rhetorically. “Of course you can't. I didn't. I couldn't. I had no idea what it was like. Not even a false image—no image. And nobody wants anything else. Nobody wants to face any of this before he has to [...] there's a distinction to be made between dying and death. It's not all uninterrupted dying. If one's healthy and feeling well, it's invisible dying. The end that is a certainty is not necessarily boldly announced [...] To those not yet old, being old means *you've been*. But being old also means that despite, in addition to, and in excess of your beenness, you still are. Your beenness is very much alive. You still are, and one is as haunted by the still-being and its fullness as by the having-already-been, by the pastness [...] One cannot evade knowing what shortly awaits one. The silence that will surround one forever. (35-36).

In these musings, he sounds like the author of Ecclesiastes who writes, “No matter how many the days of his years may come to [...] it comes into futility and departs in darkness.”

Further, "The same fate is in store for all" (Eccl 6:3-4, 9:3).

Philip Roth, no less than David Kapes, understands that human life is finite. Through our actions, through our family, or through those we know and influence, we can touch a part of eternity. Nonetheless, physical life *is* finite. Roth is now in the autumn of his years. Born in 1933, he knows the Biblical statement that the days of our years are seventy, or if by reason of strength, eighty (Psalm 90:10). As David Kapes explains, the young measure time backward, to when they started. "Time for the young is always made up of what is past" but when one gets older, or is seriously ill, that person "measures time counting forward, counting time by the closeness of death" (148).

David Kapes focuses on dying. He knows that his days (never mind Consuela's) are limited. Yet, he still wants to live life to the fullest. His melancholy musings notwithstanding, he has not turned his back on living. Like the words in Ecclesiastes, he demonstrates that "The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear enough of hearing" (1:8). Further, even though the same fate is in store for all, "he who is reckoned among the living has something to look forward to—even a live dog is better than a dead lion" (Eccl 9:4).

The Song of Songs reflected in Malamud's *A New Life*

The Song of Songs is romantic poetry set largely within nature. There are various settings for the lovemaking in the Biblical book. These include "(a) the cultivated or habitable countryside; (b) the wild or remote natural landscape and its elements; (c) interior environments (houses, halls, rooms); (d) city streets [...]" All the love dialogues and many of the love monologues take place, at least in part, in the countryside" (Falk 139). Malamud creates settings and dialogue, which are based on material found in the Song of Songs.

A New Life portrays Pauline Gilley (who, in time, will become Levin's lover) as "a lily on a long stalk." The novel is set in a valley in Oregon, located between two mountain ranges. This description of Pauline consciously echoes the words found in the Song of Songs, which describe the female figure as "a lily of the valleys" (2:1). Later in the narrative, when Levin and Pauline first consummate their affair, it is "in the open forest." "They went into the woods [...] in the green shade. The evergreens were thick, the ground damp but soft with fir needles and dead leaves [...]" He hung his trousers over the branches of a fir" (4, 199). Later, she combs the needles out of her hair. This locale for their tryst echoes the words in the Song of Songs where it says, "Our couch is in a bower; Cedars are the beams of our house, cypresses the rafters" (Song 1; 16-17).

When Levin and Pauline initially embrace and then make love in the forest glade, it is a "warm, sunlit day exhaling pure spring." It is a "reasonable facsimile of a late March day." The "winter [...] a few months of darkish rain, a week of soft wet snow [...] gone quickly to slush then gone forever. Camellias were budding [...] quince and heather in flower, petals touching the stillest air...a cluster of violets" was visible, as were jasmine and primroses (193, 194). This description in *A New*

Life of winter...gone...forever carries a double meaning. Seasonally, winter is past metaphorically (if not literally, it is still January.) Each has been unhappy (suffering a long winter of discontent) emotionally and spiritually, and the other with these words, “Arise, my darling; my fair one, come away! For now the winter is past, the rains are over and gone. The blossoms have appeared in the land [...] the green figs form on the fig tree, the vines in blossom give off fragrance. Arise, my darling; my fair one, come away!” (Song 2:10-13).

Levin lauds Pauline with words reminiscent of the Song of Songs. He thinks to himself, “You are comely, my love. Your self is loveliness. You make me rich in feeling...In heaven’s eye he beheld a seeing rose” (217). In the Song, the female is praised with these words, “You are beautiful, my darling [...] Comely as Jerusalem.” “How fair you are, how beautiful!” She calls herself “a rose of Sharon” (6:4, 7:7, 2:1).

In the Song, one of the characters roams through the town, through the streets in search of love. *A New Life* features a similar passage.⁴ The man in the Song of Songs is bearded, and so is Levin. The female lover is praised as an “orchard of pomegranates and of all luscious fruits, of [the pleasant smell of] henna and of nard, nard and saffron, fragrant reed and cinnamon, with all aromatic woods, myrrh and aloes, all the choice perfumes” (Song 4:13-14). At one point, Levin is conscious that Pauline “smelled like a flower garden” (127, cf. 366).

Song in *Dying*; Ecclesiastes in *Life*; Overlapping themes

Lovesong

Roth’s *The Dying Animal* and Malamud’s *A New Life*, like the Song of Songs, are love songs. The lovers’ admiration for the beauty of the other, captured so passionately in the Song of Songs, finds expression in Roth’s novel. *The Dying Animal* is a monologue in Kapesch’s voice. Yet with imagination, we can hear Cosuela reciting these words from the Song.

While the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance.

My beloved to me is a bag of myrrh lodged between my breasts [...] He brought me to the banquet room, and his banner of love was over me [...] His left hand was under my head, his right arm embraced me [...] His left hand was under my head, his right hand caressed me [...] I adjure you [...] Do not wake or rouse love until it please! [...] My breasts are like towers. So I became in his eyes as one who finds favor. (1:12-13, 2:4, 6, 8:3-4, 10).

In like manner, with imagination we can hear Kapesch telling Consuela, “I have likened you, my darling, to a mare in Pharaoh’s chariots: your cheeks are comely with plaited wreaths, your neck with strings of jewels. We will add wreaths of gold to your spangles of silver [...] Every part of you is fair, my darling, there is no blemish in you [...] You have captured my heart, my own, my bride, you have captured my heart [...] honey and milk are under your tongue [...] Your breasts are like clusters

[...] Let your breasts be as clusters of grapes” (Song 1:9-11; 4:7, 9, 11; 7:8-9).

Another famous line in the Song reads, “For love is fierce as death” (8:6). When applied to *The Dying Animal*, it has multiple meanings, for love is entwined with death.

Endings/Beginnings

A number of themes from Ecclesiastes appear in *A New Life*. “The end of a matter is better than the beginning of it” (Eccl 7:8). This is an idea with which Levin certainly would concur. He came to Cascadia College filled with foreboding. He leaves having grown emotionally and spiritually. He has achieved a new life with Pauline, both literally and figuratively. Pauline’s two children were adopted (her husband was sterile); therefore, she is pregnant in her own right for the first time, another aspect of a new life. Leaving her husband she, too, might well claim that the end of the matter was better than its beginning.

As Kapesh and Consuela rejoice in their affair (“Two are better off than one, in that they have greater benefit [...] Further, when two lie together they are warm” [Eccl 4:9, 11]) so do Levin and Pauline. Levin also would find agreement with Ecclesiastes’ comment, “Enjoy happiness with a woman you love all the fleeting days of life that have been granted to you under the sun” (Eccl 9:9).

The lines are “A season is set for everything, a time for every experience under heaven: [...] a time for tearing down and a time for building up [...] a time for seeking and a time for losing [...] a time for silence and a time for speaking” (Eccl 3:1, 3, 6-7) fits well with Levin’s career at Cascadia College. He brings about changes in the English department, he seeks and loses, and he learns that there is a time for silence, as there is a time for speaking.

As the author of Ecclesiastes observes, so Levin would agree, that even when we try to do well, sometimes we fail. “For there is not one good man on earth who does what is best and doesn’t err” (Eccl 7:20).

Philip Roth’s *The Dying Animal* is a fine and powerful novel. It takes on even greater meaning because it serves as homage to Roth’s older colleague, Bernard Malamud, and, more specifically, to Malamud’s novel, *A New Life*. There are many connections between the two works. Each involves a college professor, and each involves a love affair with someone directly connected to the main character’s professional life. There are both contrasts and similarities between the novels. It is not a matter of either/or, but rather both/and. In addition, each novel draws upon a Biblical book traditionally associated with King Solomon; for Roth it is Ecclesiastes, and for Malamud it is the Song of Songs. Philip Roth’s *The Dying Animal* stands on its own merits. It deals powerfully with the themes of life and death, gain and loss, as well as passion and purpose. *The Dying Animal* does all that, but it takes on an even greater meaning, for in many ways it both contrasts and mirrors Bernard Malamud’s novel *A New Life*, a work written by someone whom Roth deeply admired as an author.

Notes

1 Consuela, though American-born, is the daughter of Cuban émigrés, and regards herself as a Cuban (Roth 13, 26-28, 98).

2 In Roth's work, it is the central female character, though in Malamud's, it happens to be a secondary figure. In both novels, however, the protagonist meets this woman through his teaching duties. (Roth 132-34, Malamud 133).

3 There are other similarities. Roth is a very purposeful writer, sensitive and subtle. Each title is quite brief, but three words. Roth's *Dying* is a clever touch in opposition to Malamud's *Life*. One could argue that most of the books published by Malamud and Roth only have two or three words in their titles (Malamud: *The Natural*, *The Assistant*, *The Magic Barrel*, *Pictures of Fidelman*, *Dubin's Lives*; Roth: *Goodbye*, *Columbus*; *Letting Go*; *The Ghost Writer*; *Sabbath's Theater*; *The Human Stain*), but that does not deny the connections between *Dying/Life*.

4 In Roth's novel, there also is an incident when the main character roams through the city, looking for his lover. (Malamud 75, Roth 113)

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