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#### SUMMARY

The Mosaic ideal of the Promised Land has sustained the Jews throughout their history in the Diaspora. With the birth of the State of Israel and its rapid emergence as a modern, affluent Western nation just an airplane ride away from New York and Los Angeles, the longing expressed by the phrase "Next year in Jerusalem" came to an end for American Jews. Those who wished to, could, after all, easily immigrate to Israel, or visit frequently, and in this way maintain close ties with the Jewish homeland. With this promise fulfilled and with younger generations of American Jews now fully Americanized, has the idea of the Promised Land lost its power, or even become obsolete? Has the exilic experience, which played such a key role in Jewish history, culture, and literature, come to an end for the Jews of America? If so, how does this final arrival home affect their sense of identity? Do they still subscribe to the ideal of the Promised Land, or has this quintessentially Jewish concept been transformed into something else? Does it even figure in their way of looking at the world? This paper examines how members of the younger, post-acculturated generations of Jewish American writers confront these questions in new works of fiction that show that the theme of the Promised Land continues to maintain an abiding allure, now largely metaphorical but no less powerful than the geographic, religious, and political ideas that inspired the preceding generations of Jewish American writers. The fiction discussed in this paper appears for the first time in the anthology *Promised Lands: New Jewish American Fiction on Longing and Belonging*, edited by Derek Rubin, published by Brandeis University Press in November 2010.

#### KEYWORDS

Jews, America, Promised Land, Diaspora, Fiction

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# AT HOME IN THE DIASPORA

## THE PROMISED LAND IN POST-ACCULTURATED JEWISH AMERICAN WRITING

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### INTRODUCTION

The present essay originates from my work as editor of an anthology of Jewish American fiction titled *Promised Lands: New Jewish American Fiction on Longing and Belonging*, which was published in 2010 by Brandeis University Press. I would like to begin by explaining what kind of anthology this is and the thinking behind it, then I will briefly discuss some of the ideas on the Jewish American diasporic experience that came out of my work on this book, and finally I will devote some time to the short stories in *Promised Lands* and the ways in which these ideas figure in them. *Promised Lands* is a collection of twenty-three short stories by leading contemporary writers. Their stories offer striking variations on the core Jewish theme of the Promised Land and how it continues to shape the collective consciousness of contemporary American Jews. This anthology is different from most other fiction anthologies in two ways. Rather than gathering previously published stories, it looks forward, showing the state of Jewish fiction in the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century and where it is headed. It does this by presenting new, unpublished short stories written exclusively for this collection by Jewish American writers, ranging in age from their late twenties to early sixties. And rather than comprising an eclectic collection of discrete short stories, *Promised Lands* reads like a unified book, consisting of fictions that cohere around, explore, and shed light on a single theme – the Promised Land.

Why did I choose the Promised Land as the thematic focus for this collection? Because it was both narrow enough to lend the book coherence and yet wide enough to guarantee a rich and diverse collection of stories. As a concept, it is quintessentially Jewish *and* American and therefore enabled the contributing authors to direct their gaze toward either Israel or America, or to negotiate imaginatively between the two. Furthermore, as perhaps the key metaphor of longing in Jewish experience, the Promised Land has a specific referent *and* it can be applied more generally to any place at which one directs one's hopes and longing – the New World for the immigrant and the children of immigrants, the Old World or Israel for some members of the third or fourth generations, or California or Buenos Aires, for example, for a fully Americanized Jewish American in search of himself. Finally, given its multivalence, the Promised Land

can be perceived either in concrete or in abstract terms, either as a physical space or as a metaphorical space of great promise.

That the Promised Land exists as a vibrant idea among young Jewish Americans was borne out by the contributing authors' overwhelming enthusiasm when I proposed the theme of *Promised Lands*. By writing fictions in which they responded, each in their own way, to the idea of the Promised Land, the writers participating in this project created—separately yet collectively – an exciting collaborative work that both highlights what is new and distinctive in the writing of young Jewish Americans today and serves as a revealing window onto contemporary Jewish American life and culture.

I will begin by taking a very brief look at the concept of the Promised Land and how it has evolved over time in the American context.

#### THE PROMISED LAND: VARIATIONS ON A THEME

The Mosaic ideal of the Promised Land has sustained the Jews throughout their history in the Diaspora. For centuries, the Jews of Eastern Europe found sustenance and meaning in the belief that they would one day return home to the Land of Israel. With their coming to America at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, the exilic experience changed fundamentally, and with it, their ideal of the Promised Land. For most Jewish immigrants and their American-born children, the geographic, religious, and – in more recent history – political longing expressed by the phrase “Next year in Jerusalem” was replaced by a new geographic longing and by the cultural and material desire to make a home for themselves in America. Insofar as the best immigrant and post-immigrant fiction written by Jewish writers in America displayed a strong assimilationist impulse, it gave powerful imaginative expression to this new, secularized dream of the *Goldene Medineh* as Promised Land. Where the idea of Israel as the Promised Land has persisted among American Jews, it has maintained its geographic and political meaning mainly as a haven or home for Jews from countries in which they have been less welcome than in the United States. The vast majority of American Jews were never interested in making *aliyah*. For those who were, however, with the birth of the State of Israel and its rapid emergence as a modern, affluent Western nation just an airplane ride away from New York and Los Angeles, the longing expressed by the phrase “Next year in Jerusalem” came to an end. American Jews who wished to, could, after all, easily immigrate to Israel, or visit frequently, and in this way maintain close ties with the Jewish homeland.

With this promise fulfilled and with younger generations of American Jews now fully Americanized, has the idea of the Promised Land lost its power, or even become obsolete? Has the exilic experience, which played such a key role in Jewish history, culture, and literature, come to an end for the Jews of America? If so, how does this final arrival home affect their sense of identity? Do they still subscribe to the ideal of the

Promised Land, or has this fundamental Jewish concept been transformed into something else? Does it even figure in their way of looking at the world?

The stories in *Promised Lands* confront these questions and show vividly how the theme of the Promised Land maintains an abiding allure, now largely metaphorical but no less powerful than the geographic, religious, and political ideas that inspired the preceding generation of Jewish American writers. The writers of that post-immigrant generation – such as Saul Bellow, Grace Paley, and Chaim Potok – were preoccupied with the tangled experience of being caught between past and present, between the Jewish Old World of their parents and present-day America. Their fiction was fueled by the need to find a home within the tension between these two worlds to which they felt strong ties but did not fully belong. By contrast, most of the younger writers represented in *Promised Lands* are fully at home – in *both* of these worlds. They are comfortable with being Jewish *and* American; indeed, many of them move easily between the two, whether in real life, as reflected, for example, in Jonathan Rosen’s nonfiction work *Talmud and the Internet*, or in their fictions – think, for example, of Rebecca Newberger Goldstein’s “Jewish” and “non-Jewish” novels *Mazel* and *The Dark Sister*. In a wonderful essay titled “Against Logic”, Goldstein explores this sense of being imaginatively at home in different worlds, both Jewish and non-Jewish. She talks there about how it is out of *love* and *against all logic* that she – a secular and fully Americanized Jew with a PhD from Princeton University in the philosophy of science – *chooses* to write “Jewish” fiction alongside her “non-Jewish” stories and novels.<sup>1</sup>

Yet paradoxically, for the writers in *Promised Lands*, having multiple roots means a new kind of rootlessness. However much the younger generations of Jewish writers may be continuing the literary tradition begun by their immigrant and post-immigrant predecessors, they are also expressing something entirely new in *Promised Lands*: they are writing in and responding to today’s fractured world in which many individuals are simultaneously at home in multiple settings and yet not completely rooted in any. In most of the stories gathered in this anthology, the Promised Land is an ever-elusive phantom, and the central, sustaining value is not necessarily the ideal that one longs to *attain* but the very *longing* itself.<sup>2</sup> In terms of the Mosaic ideal of the Promised Land, these stories can be said to be driven not by a longing to *be* in Jerusalem next year, but by hopes and aspirations that spring from a variation of that longing expressed by the phrase “Next year in Jerusalem”.

Longing has often shaped Jewish understanding of the ideal of the Promised Land. There have been periods in history when the Jews of the Diaspora found themselves in such hopeless circumstances that they felt that they would never be able to reach the Promised Land, whether real or metaphorical. One way of coping with the devastating heartache, or at best passive resignation, that such lack of hope could lead to was to turn their longing *itself* into a sustaining value. For Jews of the *shtetl*, for example, acknowledging the futility of their hope for deliverance often served as a comic defense

mechanism. This *Yiddish* folktale, “Why the Night Watchman of Chelm Was Denied a Raise”, tells it beautifully:

It was once rumored that the Messiah was about to appear. So the Chelmites, fearing that he might bypass their town, engaged a watchman, who was to be on the lookout for the divine guest and welcome him if he should happen along.

The watchman meanwhile bethought himself that his weekly salary of ten gulden was mighty little with which to support a wife and children, and so he applied to the town elders for an increase.

The rabbi turned down his request. “True enough”, he argued, “that ten gulden a week is an inadequate salary. But one must take into account that this is a permanent job.”<sup>3</sup>

The idea of unfulfilled longing as a self-sustaining value features not only in earlier Jewish folklore but also in the work of some of the towering figures of modern Jewish literature – for example, in Franz Kafka’s “A Hunger Artist” – and in Jewish immigrant fiction in America, such as Abraham Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky*. In a fascinating essay on Cahan’s rags-to-riches immigrant classic, Isaac Rosenfeld describes David Levinsky as the embodiment of the “Diaspora Man”, the person for whom, as Rosenfeld puts it, “the hunger must be preserved at all cost”.<sup>4</sup> Longing is the core value that drives Levinsky’s ambition and nourishes him – even after he has attained the wealth and position he aspired to in America and finds himself yearning for what he lost spiritually as he made his way up in the world. However, a fundamental difference exists between the unfulfilled longing found in these early examples and the unfulfilled longing that resides at the center of the stories in *Promised Lands*. The former, whether comic or serious, was shaped by the powerlessness of the diasporic Jew and by the uncertainty and lack of hope caused by the constant threat of spiritual and physical destruction. In contrast, the new generation of writers are fully secure; they are at home in America, and are looking for an anchor in an ever more spiritually depleted yet materially over-abundant world. This search leads them back to the age-old Jewish emotion of unfulfilled longing, which serves for them as a source of moral, spiritual, and creative sustenance. The stories in this volume show that the ideal of the Promised Land, while radically transformed from the geographic, religious, and political to the metaphorical and deeply personal, continues to shape, indeed inspire, this new generation.

Let me now turn to a brief thematic discussion of a selection of stories from *Promised Lands* that aims to illuminate connections among them and to suggest some of the many ways in which the multivalent idea of the Promised Land features in this book.

Back in the 1970s, some critics such as Irving Howe and Ruth Wisse wondered whether successive generations of writers would have the resources to sustain and give new direction to the great tradition of Jewish American fiction that began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with immigrant writers like Abraham Cahan and Anzia Yeziarska and that was taken to new heights by postwar luminaries such as Saul Bellow, Grace Paley, and Bernard Malamud.<sup>5</sup> Today, however, there is little doubt that the skeptics have been proven wrong. Writers such as Melvin Jules Bukiet, Dara Horn, Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, Binnie Kirshenbaum, Jonathan Rosen, Thane Rosenbaum, Steve Stern, and a host of others have produced numerous works of fiction that have significantly enriched and diversified the canon of Jewish American writing. Indeed, with an even-younger generation of highly talented writers appearing on the literary scene, Jewish American fiction is in a particularly creative, transitional phase as it moves beyond the literary heritage left by the post-immigrant generation and explores new themes and literary forms in response to contemporary American life.

In a 1997 symposium organized in *Tikkun* magazine by Thane Rosenbaum, Morris Dickstein discussed the nature of the creative revival among young Jewish American writers. While praising their work, he argued that it was “too early to tell whether this new wave would achieve the stature or create the body of major work of a Bellow or a Roth”. He further pointed out that “the ultimate test is not quantity but the challenge of taking possession of one’s experience in an inimitable way that resonates beyond the writer’s own life, as books like *The Magic Barrel*, *Herzog*, and *Portnoy’s Complaint* definitively did”.<sup>6</sup> Critics have argued that the post-immigrant Jewish writers broke through as major *American* writers in the 1950s and 1960s because their particular experience as the children of Jewish immigrants placed them in the unique position to articulate the concerns of many Americans, both Jewish and non-Jewish. *Promised Lands* suggests that the fiction of the younger generation of writers has a similar broader relevance. By responding imaginatively to the age-old Jewish ideal of the Promised Land, their stories, separately and together, not only speak to the lives of American Jews today but also go to the heart of the experience of many Americans at large who are fully at home in different worlds and yet experience the same kind of rootlessness that gives rise to a sense of unfulfilled longing.

Because the authors approach this subject from a range of perspectives, their voices crisscross and echo each other in a rich and surprising conversation. Some of the writers in *Promised Lands* situate the unattainable object of their yearning for home in the imagined past of their immigrant forebears. Others express this unfulfilled longing through the lingering ideal of Israel as homeland and safe haven. Then there are those who express a yearning for a more meaningful existence in present-day America. If, for all of the writers in *Promised Lands*, longing issues from a profound need to extract

themselves from a sense of being adrift, between past and present, present and future, there are those who overtly explore this sense of “in-betweenness” as a consequence of the Holocaust. And finally, there are writers who emphasize the value of longing as a source of spiritual sustenance by paradoxically locating the unattainable Promised Land in the here-and-now.

Of the writers in *Promised Lands* who direct their unfulfilled longing for home to the past, some locate the Promised Land in the vanished world of the *shtetl* or *Yiddishkeit* and some locate it in the American immigrant ghetto. In her story, “Shtetl World”, Dara Horn dramatizes the question of cultural authenticity and the inaccessibility of the past to painfully hilarious effect. She does this through the story of Leah, a graduate student of *Yiddish*, who unwillingly winds up with a summer job running the dry-goods store in a *shtetl* theme park in Western Massachusetts and is angered by her own role in what she considers a shamefully trite reconstruction of the past – replete with a *World of Our Fathers* ride and a *pogrom* staged daily at 4:30 p.m., “right before closing”. Horn’s story expresses disappointment in contemporary America, where the trivialization of the Jewish past threatens to cut American Jews off from the legacy of *shtetl* culture, with which Leah so profoundly wishes to connect.

In contrast, Tova Mirvis’s story “Potatoes”, which is set in the immigrant past, presents a view of America as offering the hope of renewal and regeneration. To Mirvis’s newly arrived young protagonist, Bella, America is the Promised Land that holds out the possibility of liberation from the psychic prison of her nightmarish past. Paradoxically, she longs to return to Eastern Europe because her suffering there has rendered her incapable of living fully in the New World. However, the love and kindness with which she is met in Memphis, Tennessee, where her family has settled, provide the promise of healing and overcoming the pain she experienced in Grodno, where she was brutally raped as a young girl.

Whereas Mirvis’s protagonist comes to see America as a safe, nurturing home, Avigdor Bronfman, the protagonist of Steve Stern’s “Avigdor of the Apes” experiences the harsh everyday life of the American immigrant ghetto as exile. To him, the unattainable Promised Land is the realm of the purely physical, where he can transcend the crush of the Lower East Side and his cramped, constricting existence as the son of a *mohel*. In his youth, the constant butt of jokes and the target of local bullies, Avigdor is inspired by the figure of Tarzan. He trains himself to soar above the jungle-like city where “his apprehension dissolved, his brain ceased its caviling, and he became a pure expression of the physical”. However, Avigdor’s ability to dwell in this “timeless space” proves to be only very brief and he spends the rest of his life longing for this unattainable Promised Land.

In contrast to Mirvis and Stern, who set their stories in the past, Melvin Jules Bukiet, like Horn, sets his in the present as a means of talking about the links between contemporary American Jews and the world of the *shtetl*. Bukiet’s disturbing story, “The

Florida Sunshine Tree”, sardonically suggests that American Jews’ quest for their European heritage is futile. It does so by describing how Sandy Levinson, an adolescent growing up in an affluent suburb in south Florida, kills the Gentile neighbors’ baby boy and drinks his blood in the belief that he is fulfilling the Chosen People’s covenant with God. To Sandy, the Promised Land is the inaccessible world of his forefathers in Eastern Europe as recounted to him by his two recently deceased grandfathers, Max and Nate. He is profoundly moved by their accounts of the kidnapping of Jewish children by *khoppers* and especially by their tales of blood libel. Jewish life in Eastern Europe as Max and Nate described it to Sandy is so remote from his world that reality and imagination fuse in his mind, and he begins to think the unthinkable: “What... if blood was the ultimate Old World flavor that had been denied in the New World?” The story thus suggests in darkly humorous and absurdist fashion that in America, where Jewish history has been reversed and the “outsiders [are] insiders”, where Jews enjoy unprecedented affluence and unparalleled security, the vanished world of their forefathers is gone forever. If it can be accessed, it is only imaginatively, via the psychotic mind of a boy like Sandy.

Among the writers who portray Israel as the elusive Promised Land, there are some who present it as a place of healing and regeneration that is bound to disappoint those who travel there in the hope of beginning anew. For example, the unnamed protagonist of Nessa Rapoport’s story, “Sovereignty,” is a forty-year-old New Yorker whose husband has given her a trip to wherever she chooses as a gift on the occasion of their twins’ first birthday. She travels to Jerusalem, where she lived as a student and fell deeply in love with the city and with a young Israeli soldier. Back in the Holy City after an absence of twenty years, her visit turns into a futile quest to recapture the pristine sensual beauty and carefree happiness of her youth that were closely bound up with the city that has now changed so much she hardly recognizes it. In this story, Rapoport employs vocabulary that links Jerusalem to the body and the body to Jerusalem, and that allows the past and present to reverberate within and between the two, while all the time maintaining a balance between the poetic and the everyday. She thereby turns this moving tale of exile and homecoming into a parable of the female Jewish body as a trope for the rich Jewish history of unfulfilled longing for the Promised Land.

If some of the stories in *Promised Lands* explore the idea of Israel as a place of healing and regeneration, in others Israel serves as the locus for the characters’ futile longings and aspirations: artistic, amorous, or political. Rachel Kadish’s “Come on Zion Put Your Hands Together” lyrically recounts the painful tale of unfulfilled love between Ahmed Almasi, a Palestinian who has spent most of his life abroad, and Karen Reed, who is Jewish and from England. Almasi and Reed, who run a top international mediation consultancy firm, are in Israel to coach a team of government negotiators. It is here, ironically in the Promised Land, that Karen is confronted with both the depth and the futility of their love for each other. Kadish’s story dramatizes the complex paradox



of the unattainable Promised Land as played out in the tangled crisscrossing forces of love, lineage, and land that have shaped the lives of her two would-be lovers.

The stories in *Promised Lands* that perceive the futile yearning for the Promised Land as a means of imaginatively going beyond or through the American dream are rich and varied. I will give just a few examples. Lauren Grodstein and Elisa Albert spin fascinating tales of the affluent worlds of Manhattan and Los Angeles, in which longing takes the form of a hopeless desire for marriage and a meaningful relationship with a person one loves and with one's children. Grodstein dramatizes this theme by painfully laying bare the complexities of a romantic relationship between a Jew and a Gentile, while Albert does so in conjunction with the theme of the Internet as new, "virtual" Promised Land through which people try in vain to connect meaningfully with others. Their respective stories, "Homewrecker" and "One Good Reason Why Not", expose with wit and sensitivity the myriad factors – personal, religious, social, cultural, and generational – that complicate and frustrate the longing for the Promised Land of domestic bliss in America today.

Whereas Grodstein and Albert's stories are about Americans longing for self-fulfillment, Lara Vapnyar's "Things That Are Not Yours" is a sardonic, latter-day immigrant story of the post-Soviet era (Vapnyar herself immigrated to the United States from Russia as a young adult in 1994). "Things That Are Not Yours" ironically echoes Anzia Yezierska's romantic tales of early twentieth-century Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe and Mirvis's story in this volume. Vapnyar's story is written in the form of a letter addressed by a Russian immigrant living in the United States to a friend, Masha, who is about to emigrate. The letter begins humorously with the well-intentioned purpose of offering Masha advice on what she should bring with her to America, but as it unfolds it turns into a bitter lesson about America as a failed Promised Land in which the immigrant is destined never to feel fully at home.

In contrast to Vapnyar's story, Janice Eidus's "A Bisel This, a Bisel That", is a touchingly humorous celebration of contemporary multicultural America. As in Albert's "One Good Reason Why Not", here, too, the Internet is depicted as adversely affecting meaningful aspects of people's lives. *The Promised Text*, "the monthly independent Jewish newspaper 'for progressive Jews, their friends, and everyone else'" that Myron Gerstler, the protagonist of the story, has worked for as book editor for twenty-five years, is about to shut down. Like other fringe newspapers, *The Promised Text* is being squeezed out of existence by the proliferation of digital media and the popularity of the Internet. Through Myron's interaction with a motley group of colleagues lamenting the disappearance of their "medium" and the lack of an audience for their "message", the story presents us with an endearing image of present-day multicultural America as the true alternative to the digital Promised Land of the twenty-first century. In stories far less celebratory and light-hearted than Eidus's "A Bisel This, a Bisel That", some of the authors in this anthology dramatize the longing for an unattainable Promised Land

against the backdrop of the Holocaust. Thane Rosenbaum, for example, approaches this theme from the perspective of the American-born child of survivors. In the fractured world of his absurdist, semi-allegorical story, "The Yehuda Triangle", Rosenbaum addresses the psychic implications for members of the second generation of their ties to Israel and America as homes to which they simultaneously belong but to which they cannot commit fully. The son of survivors, born and raised in Florida, and currently living in New York, Jerry Bender (or Yehudah Ben-David, as he has renamed himself) is caught in the unfathomable vacuum left in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Scarred by his parents' nightmarish memories of events that he himself never witnessed – what Marianne Hirsch tellingly refers to as "postmemory" – he exists in a state of in-betweenness into which, like the ships and airplanes in the mythic Bermuda Triangle, he is in continuous danger of vanishing. He has three non-Jewish ex-wives who converted to Judaism, three daughters living with their mothers in different parts of the world, and three homelands: America, where he resides as a citizen, Israel to which he belongs as a Jew, and his parents' traumatic past in which he is trapped but which he never will be able to access fully. Rosenbaum's story darkly suggests that his protagonist, as the son of Holocaust survivors, is doomed to longing for an unattainable Promised Land in which he is at home within this painfully tangled state of in-betweenness.

While Rosenbaum sounds the implications of the Holocaust with reference to Israel and America as promised lands, Yael Goldstein Love's "Lonely, Lonely, Lonely is the Lord of Hosts" does so with reference to the utopian ideal of a community based on its members' supreme commitment to their "loving responsibility" for each other. The story presents such a community established by Jewish émigrés from Europe in the Berkshires in the 1930s. Set during the Second World War, "Lonely, Lonely, Lonely is the Lord of Hosts" describes how the main character, Anna, is torn between her urgent need to use the community's funds to save her younger sister from the Nazis, and her lover Alfie's unswerving belief that fulfillment of the community's covenant as a means of making this a better world must take precedence over any exigencies of the moment. The story becomes a parable of the impossible choice between two ideals: personal love and moral commitment in the here-and-now versus "immaculate kindness" that ignores the immediate suffering of one's fellow humans. "Lonely, Lonely, Lonely is the Lord of Hosts" takes on an inter-generational dimension that links it to Rosenbaum's tale of second-generation experience when at the end of the narrative we learn that it has been presented to us by Anna's granddaughter as a means of coming to grips with "the chill remove [her mother] had always felt in [Anna's] way of loving".

Finally, there are stories that focus on the here-and-now as unattainable Promised Land. Rebecca Newberger Goldstein's "The Afterlife of Skeptics" contains several promised lands, all of which prove to be illusory for her protagonist, Max Besserling, because they involve great personal loss. Besserling, a Jewish émigré from Crakow, is an ambitious, selfish, and spiteful skeptic. As he is about to die, he looks back and realizes

that everything he had desired and attained – marriage with Nina, the love of his youth; a beautiful daughter; a life in America; and academic success built on the philosophical rigor of relentless rationalism – meant turning his back on the world. He finally understands that although his youthful friend Jakob Binder – a romantic metaphysician with whom he competed jealously for Nina and came to hold in contempt for his ideas – died in the Holocaust, he had lived to the full in the here-and-now and it was therefore Binder, rather than Besserling, who had understood what constituted the true Promised Land.

The final story in *Promised Lands*, which like “The Afterlife of Skeptics” focuses on the here-and-now as unattainable Promised Land, is paradigmatic of the theme of unfulfilled longing at the heart of this volume. “The True World”, an entertaining yet enigmatic parable-like story by Jonathan Rosen, captures succinctly the idea that spiritual sustenance can be derived from the awareness that the Promised Land is unreachable. Rosen presents the ideal of unfulfilled longing as the source of artistic sustenance. He does so by linking it as a key value to the Emersonian ideal of artistic self-reliance. Believing that “literature was finished” and “the future was with the dead,” the protagonist of the story – who remains unnamed, but the suggestion is that he is a fictional projection of Rosen himself – travels by boat from Ellis Island to the Beyond in order to interview the deceased Saul Bellow for a magazine. Bellow, who in real life believed firmly that death is silent and that one can be a writer only if one says “yes” to life, teaches the young man that the Promised Land must be sought in the present, in the everyday world that he inhabits. But how can one believe in an ideal that is within the realm of the real? That is, after all, the very problem Rosen’s protagonist was faced with in the first place. By *acknowledging* that it is unattainable and yet still *longing* to attain it – this is the deeply Jewish answer given, not explicitly within the story, but by the story as a whole, as summed up in its epigraph, taken from Isaac Bashevis Singer’s masterpiece “Gimpel the Fool”:

No doubt the world is entirely an imaginary world, but it is only once removed from the true world.

Singer’s legendary schlemiel embodies the Eastern European Jew’s self-sustaining spirit in the face of powerlessness. Duped and fooled all his life, the lesson Gimpel learns when he reaches old age is that one has to *choose* to believe even when there are no grounds for belief, because not to believe is to lose faith, and to lose faith is to give up on the value of life. This simple wisdom is what prompts the imaginary Jews of Chelm to appoint a watchman to look out for a messiah they know will not come. It is also expressive of the belief in the importance of longing for an unattainable Promised Land – the Jewish essence from which the stories in *Promised Lands* spring. Longing and belonging are, of course, at the heart of human experience. Given the centrality of the

ideal of the Promised Land in both Jewish and American culture, it is not surprising that it should shape, indeed inspire, the literary imagination of contemporary Jewish American writers. Drawing on the crucial role that longing plays in the Mosaic ideal of the Promised Land, the writers in *Promised Lands* highlight the importance of longing even when one belongs fully, both as an American and as a Jew. In doing so, they speak to the experience of many readers, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, who are at home in multiple worlds yet share the condition of rootlessness – an enabling legacy that continues to define the manifold richness of contemporary Jewish American experience.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Goldstein 2005.

<sup>2</sup> The seeds for this idea as I develop it here were sown in an earlier essay of mine on Paul Auster's *The Invention of Solitude*. See Rubin 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Howe & Greenberg 1973, 626.

<sup>4</sup> Rosenfeld 1988, 157.

<sup>5</sup> See Howe 1977 and Wisse 1976.

<sup>6</sup> Dickstein 1997, 35.

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