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GESM130 Assignment #1

Exploring American Jewish Identity in *It's a Whole Spiel: Love Latkes, and Other Jewish Stories*

“Two Jews, three opinions (Lowenstein 2).” This proverb perfectly describes the diverse nature of the Jews. Many factors such as military conquest, persecution, and economic opportunity led them to scatter worldwide, creating a vast Jewish population of dispersion. Through contact with local cultures, Jewish migrants often developed a unique culture that combines both their Jewish heritage and the local influences, leading to diversification within the Jewish community. While core ethnic elements like the “great tradition” helped maintain unity among the Jewish community over the years, the history of migration did create differences among them, as seen by the variety of the “little tradition” that exists today (Lowenstein 2). Therefore, it is important to note that every Jew has a unique identity formed by their Jewish heritage and the local culture.

One of the most popular destinations of the Jewish migration, the United States is estimated to have about 7.6 million Jews today (Forman). The category of “American Jew” groups all Jews that immigrated to the U.S. as if they all have the exact same identity, but the reality is that every American Jew has their own unique identity. A collection of short stories on the lives of the American Jews, *It's a Whole Spiel: Love, Latkes, and Other Jewish Stories* focuses on their fascinating nature that combines Jewishness and other identities. By analyzing two characters in this anthology, this paper examines the diversity within the American Jewish community and their complicated yet profound relationship with their Jewish heritage.

Before analyzing the two characters, it is essential to highlight that most of the conversation in this anthology takes place in English, with some loanwords in Jewish languages.

Loanwords, or borrowing, can be defined as adopting words from one language into another language. The fact that American Jewish characters use English as their primary language represents a language shift, which happens when various external (language policies, economic disparities, discrimination, etc.) and internal (assimilation, etc.) factors cause the original language to be abandoned and replaced with another language in the community. In the case of American Jews, migration to the U.S. caused English (the majority language in the community) to replace Jewish languages (like Yiddish) they originally spoke over the course of the generation. However, as mentioned earlier, some Jewish language loanwords are still used by the characters. The use of these loanwords reflects language contact, a language change that begins with incorporating items from another language (Matras 110). Because Jewish language still serves as a vital component of the Jewish national identity, American Jews frequently use Yiddish and other Jewish language loanwords in their English-based conversation (Mintz 211). This is an example of postvernacular engagement, as these loanwords are usually not used as a part of the regular communication.

So what kind of diversity exists among the American Jews? One of the most interesting differences is their views towards their Jewish heritage. Like Mali in “Two Truths and an Oy,” some characters possess negative feelings towards their Jewishness, as seen by “I am finally done with yeshiva life, and then I have one last super-Jewish summer at camp before I become a Normal Person. (Locke et al. 34).” Yeshiva is a Textual Hebrew word that refers to an institute that focuses its education on Talmud. This quote shows that Mali was desperate to finish her Jewish education and to enter a “normal” college. Her use of the word “Normal Person” to refer to the people who did not go to Jewish school illustrates that she feels ashamed and embarrassed for going to a Jewish school. To prevent her fellow students in the orientation program from

thinking of her as an “abnormal, weird” Jewish girl who went to a Jewish school, she tries her best to hide her Jewishness as much as she can. Mali’s negative perception towards her Jewish identity makes her highly self-conscious about what she says: “‘I’ve actually been there a bunch of times. It’s--’ My tongue trips as the word ‘davka’ almost spills off it. It’s not even a word I use that often, but now I can’t think of any other way to express my intention (Locke et al. 39)”

Here, Mali panics for not being able to find the English word for “davka,” which is a word from Hebrew, Aramaic, and Yiddish that means “specifically.” It is not a difficult word to replace with English, as there is an exact English equivalent (Matras 110). Nevertheless, Mali’s mind struggled to replace this word because she was thinking in Jewish English. In fact, davka is often used by Jews who are religious, have received a Jewish education, and feel a strong connection with Israel, indicating Mali’s strong connection to her Jewish heritage. Her struggle to find the English translation of davka shows that Hebrew is a core part of her identity, yet she rejects this, thinking it as a shame. For her, American Jews like her are a minor group separate from American society. Feeling some sort of isolation from the broader society while studying at a Jewish school, her desire for assimilation to the “majority,” grew strong. Thinking that her Jewishness will prevent her from fitting into the “normal” world, she rejects her Jewish identity and language. Mali’s example shows how some American Jews refrain from using Jewish languages due to the feeling of prestige towards the majority language (English) and the non-Jewish, majority part of the American society.

While some American Jews like Mali reject their Jewish identity, others feel the complete opposite: they want to be more “Jewish,” thinking they are fake and not authentic enough to call themselves a Jew. One example of this is Miri from the story “Aftershocks,” an American Jewish high schooler who visits her boyfriend Aaron’s (who is also an American Jew) family. Miri

worries that she is not Jewish enough for Aaron, who she describes “he was Jewish, like really Jewish, in a way she’d never been. He missed school during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. She not only attended school those days but ate the occasional BLT for lunch.” (Locke et al. 65). In the history of Jewish migration, some families maintained their religious customs more strictly while others became more reformed. It is evident that Aaron’s family is more conservative than Miri’s family, resulting in Miri’s feeling inferiority. Afraid of disappointing Aaron’s family with her lack of Jewish authenticity, she does a lot of “research on Wikipedia and JewFAQ.org (Locke et al. 71).” This is the complete opposite of Mali, as Miri views Hebrew as the prestigious language. However, despite her effort, she fails to maintain a conversation with Aaron’s family without exposing her lack of Jewishness, resulting in her escaping the dining scene and confessing to Aaron, “Sorry. I just... You shouldn’t have invited me tonight. I’m not Jewish enough for you. Or for your parents. (Locke et al. 86).” Unlike Mali, Miri feels stigmatized for overly assimilating into American culture and losing her Jewish identity. However, despite the difference in the level of Jewishness, Aaron and Miri are ultimately able to form a strong bond through their shared Jewish heritage; at the end of the story, Miri says “Shalom” to mark the beginning of their romantic relationship (Locke et al. 88). Here, Shalom, a Modern Hebrew word that means hello, is used as a sort of a secret word that creates an intimate connection between the two characters.

Regarding contemporary language practices of the American Jews, there were many loanwords from Jewish languages, such as Modern Hebrew and Yiddish. This is natural as American Jews are known to use words from various Jewish languages in diverse ways to highlight their Jewish identities and show that they are certain types of American Jews (Benor 34:44 - 35:04). For the stories analyzed in this paper, the use of Jewish loanwords could be

divided into two groups. The first use was to refer to the “great traditions” such as Jewish religion and holidays that do not have an English translation, known as cultural loans (Matras 110). Some examples are Textual Hebrew words such as Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, each referring to Jewish new year and day of atonement. The other use of Jewish loanwords was to form a connection with another Jew, as seen in the example of the use of “Shalom” in the romantic relationship of Aaron and Miri. The former would be more common among those who are relatively more religious, like Aaron’s family, who celebrate Jewish holidays and customs more proactively. The latter could be used by any Jews, but in general, the frequency of language contact of English and Jewish language depends on the individual's language ideologies. People like Mali, who try to limit their Jewishness to assimilate into the non-Jewish parts of the society would obviously limit their use of Jewish languages while those who value their Jewish heritage like Miri and Aaron would use it whenever they want.

Mali and Miri’s difference in perception towards Jewish heritage is just one of the many diversity that exists within the American Jewish community. History of migration has led to this diversification, with Jews having different levels of religiosity, amount of Jewish education received, the ability of Jewish language, family background, the strength of connection to Israel, and many more. Every Jewish American has their own balance of Jewishness and non-Jewishness, making every one of them unique, and ultimately, “It is who we were. It is who we’ve become. (Locke et al. 63)” to be Jewish.

## Work Cited

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