Genealogies of the Future*

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Abstract

A very brief story titled, “At That Time: or, The History of a Joke,” by the twentieth-century American Jewish writer Grace Paley, appears enigmatic at first, but upon examination alludes to key moments in the relation between Jewishness, Christianity, and the rhetoric of futurity and “pastness” in kinship and genealogy. While initially taking off from and then returning to the Paley story, a number of additional texts are identified and discussed that, together, demonstrate an emerging notion that genealogy is a means for not only fixing the past but also for projecting our present selves and family structures into the future. Examples presented range from the powerful ancestral self-portrait photography of Rafael Goldchain to the fiction of A. B. Yehoshua and the ethnography of Joshua Friedman.

The study of kinship is a mainstay of what is called in Britain social anthropology. In the United States, the study of kinship is virtually central to what we have been calling cultural anthropology since the days of Franz Boas. However, studies of what were once called “kinship structures” may be seen as somewhat out of fashion now, as they are linked to the period of high imperialism and colonialism, when anthropology on both sides of the Atlantic was understood to be primarily the study of peoples then called “primitive,” usually with more or less derogatory intent. By the time anthropologists began turning their attention toward their own societies and, often, to their own peoples, the notion of attempting to establish a group’s kinship structure as a central concern of ethnography had become somewhat passé. Nevertheless, as anthropologists know, kinship in its protean forms remains a dynamic and shaping aspect of the realms of power, authority, prejudice, and solidarity that shape all of our lives.

My colleague Lucinda Ramberg at Cornell University sees kinship at work in an unlikely place, among the Jogati, who are Indian devotees of the goddess Yellama, and provide sex as part of their temple service. Ramberg, along with other anthropologists, reminds us that what we properly call “kinship” is not simply a matter of biological generation but a complex symbolic system. She, therefore, argues for a very inclusive notion of what she calls “kin-making”—pointing to these Jogatis’ assertions that they truly are, in the words of her book’s title “given to the goddess.”

Ramberg offers an expanded concept of kinship:

As a technology, kin-making is innovative. . . . To think of kin-making as a technology of human generation and transformation is to get beyond the distinction between ‘real’ and ‘fictional’ kin and out of a field conscripted by blood and alliance. It might seem that we long ago left this field, but to the extent that the genealogical grid continues to delimit our categories of gendered personhood and relatedness, we have not.

The things I talk about this evening, unlike Ramberg’s fascinating ethnography, will hardly escape the realm of what she calls here, “blood.” Blood, in our common culture, is a common enough metaphor for biological descent, albeit not a particularly Jewish one. And Jewish kinship remains very much about alliance, that is,

the strategies of matchmaking that parents and extended families engage in for the purpose of their larger projects, their individual and shared projections of the future, and their innovative making of time using the tools of kinship.

Though I confess to being an anthropologist myself, my examples tonight will largely be drawn from literature and art, with ethnography making the odd guest appearance. My primary text—the text with which we will begin and to which we will return—is a very short story by our late friend and colleague Grace Paley. Grace was a longtime chronicler of everyday life, especially in New York City, and especially its Jews, women, and poor people. She was a tireless activist for peace and for women’s rights, and a beloved teacher at Sarah Lawrence College.

Her tale is enigmatically titled “At That Time, or the History of a Joke,” published in Paley’s 1985 volume of short stories Later the Same Day as well as previously in a literary journal (fig. 1). Upon recently rereading this text, I was astonished at how well the story seems to capture the potentially distinctive ways that Jews shape time through their practice of kinship and gender. And so, I sent the story to my very clever son, Jonah, but he was puzzled, asking me: What was he to make of it? I hope to provide some clues to answer his question in this talk. I can’t guarantee that at the end of it this talk you will find the story as insightful as I do. But I hope it will help frame a set of references and questions, all of which circle somehow around these distinctive modes of Jewish time and kinship.

To begin, the story surely alludes to the continuing controversy surrounding the birth of Jesus of Nazareth over two thousand years ago, but it is still primarily about an imaginary baby, born in the future. At least since the ministry of Jesus’ contemporary Paul of Tarsus, what we now call, in retrospect, Judaism, has been linked in the dominant discourse of the West to an outdated past, while what we have come to call Christianity is now understood to be oriented toward the future. As argued among some authors, to include my brother, Daniel, in his book A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity, Paul’s rejection of marriage and procreation was part and parcel of his expectation that the end-times were imminent. Paul, that is, rejected genealogical identification in favor of individual freedom and future-orientation. This rejection of the past and concomitant stress on novelty as liberating is dramatized in his writings, as where he declares that for the sake of the Redeemer:

I have accepted the loss of all things and I consider them so much rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him. . . . Just one thing: forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead, I continue my pursuit toward the goal, the prize of God’s upward calling, in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:8–14)

As Paul makes clear in this text, he now considers ancestral Jewish Law and the Jewish Law of ancestry to be rubbish. Paul, thus, signals a set of concerns focused around problems of genealogical and legal identity formation, which found expression over the course of centuries in the dialectic of Jewishness and Christianity. It is important to insist at the outset that these tensions remain with us. Indeed, abstract and lofty notions as seemingly distant from family life or even family trees as a philosophy of history are inseparable from the problems of personal identity through time, hence of connections to ancestors and to some expected future outcome, whether for oneself or one’s dependents.

Thus, when, for example, the German Jewish philosopher Karl Loewith writes that “[h]istory has time and again to be recovered and rediscovered by the living generations,” the word “generation” needs to be understood not only collectively as a body of “contemporaries” but also in a more literal sense than he seems to have intended. That is, children have to rediscover history, and their children’s children will have to do the same.
At that time most people were willing to donate organs. Abuses were expected. In fact there was a young woman whose uterus was hysterically ripped from her by a passing gynecologist. He was distracted, he said, by the suffering of a childless couple in Fresh Meadows. The young woman said, “It wasn’t the pain or the embarrassment, but I think any court would certainly award me the earliest uterine transplant that Dr. Heiliger can obtain.”

We are not a heartless people and this was done at the lowest judicial level, no need to appeal to state or federal power.

According to the Times, one of the young woman’s ovaries rejected the new uterus. The other was perfectly satisfied and did not.

“I feel fine,” she said, but almost immediately began to swell, for in the soft warm interior of her womb, there was already a darling rolled-up fetus. It was unfurled in due time, and lo! it was as black as the night which rests our day-worn eyes.

Then: “Sing!” said Heiliger, the scientist, “for see how the myth of man advances on the back of technological achievement, and behold, without conceiving, a virgin has borne a son.” This astonishing and holy news was carried to the eye of field, forest, and industrial park, wherever the media had thrust its wireless thumb. The people celebrated and were relatively joyful and the birth was reenacted on giant screens in theaters and on small screens at home.

Only, on the underside of several cities, certain Jews who had observed and suffered the consequence of other virgin births cried out (weeping) (as usual): “It is not He! It is not He!”

No one knew how to deal with them; they were stubborn and maintained a humorless determination. The authorities took away their shortwave and antennae, their stereo screen TV and their temple videotapes. (People were not incarcerated at that time for such social intransigence. Therefore, neither were they rehabilitated.)

Soon this foolish remnant had nothing left. They had to visit one another or wander from town to town in order to say the most ordinary thing to a friend or relative. They had only their shawls and phylacteries, which were used by women too, for women (by that time) had made their great natural advances and were ministers, seers, rabbis, yogis, priests, etc., in well-known as well as esoteric religions.

In their gossipy communications, they whispered the hidden or omitted fact (which some folks had already noticed): The Child was a Girl, and since word of mouth is sound made in the echo of God (in the beginning there was the Word and it was without form but wide), ear to mouth and mouth to ear it soon became the people’s knowledge, outwitting the computerized devices to which most sensible people had not said a private word for decades anyway.

Then: “O.K.!” said Dr. Heiliger. “It’s perfectly true, but I didn’t want to make waves in any water as viscous as the seas of mythology. Yes, it is a girl. A virgin born of a virgin.”

Throughout the world, people smiled. By that time, sexism and racism had no public life, though they were still sometimes practiced by adults at home. They were as gladdened by one birth as another. And plans were made to symbolically sew the generations of the daughters one to another by using the holy infant’s umbilicus. This was luckily flesh and symbol. Therefore beside the cross to which people were accustomed there hung the circle of the navel and the wiggly line of the umbilical cord.

But those particular discontented Jews said again, “Wonderful! So? Another tendency heard from! So it’s a girl! Praise to the most Highness! But the fact is, we need another virgin birth like our blessed dead want cupping by ancient holistic practitioners.”

And so they continued as female and male, descending and undescending, workers in the muddy basement of history, to which, this very day, the poor return when requiring a cheap but stunning garment for a wedding, birth, or funeral.


Moreover, this tension between “past orientation” and “future orientation,” which I have suggested has been understood to help structure the tense dialogue between Jewishness and Christianity in the West, found expression in twentieth-century debates about the best way to organize revolutionary forces.
In the twelfth “illumination” of Walter Benjamin’s now canonical essay “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” written on the eve of World War II and near the end of his too short life, he writes that revolutionary passions are really fueled more by “the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren.” To me, when I was a young graduate student trying to recuperate a sense of East European Jewish life while also willing himself a political radical, the “enslaved ancestors” part, the call of memory, resonated as “Jewish,” while the future-oriented promise of liberated descendants sounded vaguely Christian.

Of course, Jewish families and broader kinship networks are not only oriented toward the past. Nor, for that matter, have the lives of most lay Christians been characterized by actual freedom from kinship ties or by even the desire for such freedom. Still, given the common association of Jewishness with the past, one might have expected more work by anthropologists on Jewish kinship patterns. Rhonda Berger-Sofer’s analysis of the kinship patterns of the Schneersohn family (the leaders of Lubavitch Hasidism), for example, dramatically shows the rich potential for social anthropology in studying marriage patterns among Hasidic elites. Yet her analysis itself is not distinctively Jewish. Rather, it is a product of the culture of social anthropology, in this case, using Jews as its material. Kinship studies until now, indeed, have been past-oriented, largely because they depend on patterns derived from data already established, more than on imaginations or projections of the future.

There is now some research into the workings of what I’m trying to name this evening as Jewish genealogies of the future. And in the culture of liberal United States Jewry, we perhaps find something most like Ramberg’s idea of kinship divorced from biological genealogy or marriage alliances per se. In a fascinating recent dissertation on institutions in the contemporary United States that work to further the transmission of the Yiddish language and the resources of secular Yiddish culture, Joshua Friedman articulates a related useful notion of “abstract kinship.” “Abstract kinship” involves a diffuse sense of intergenerational relations, in which notions, especially of grandparenthood and, if you’ll permit me, “grandchildhood,” implicitly underlie the connections made between elderly financial donors and youthful students of Yiddish language and culture. The Yiddish Book Center in Massachusetts, where Friedman did his fieldwork, has become both a prime repository for printed Yiddish books and a leading center for education, dissemination, and translation related to Yiddish heritage. The Center’s publicity calls Yiddish language and culture yerusha, a term whose base meaning conveys material inheritance, as of money or property, but which has long been rhetorically stretched to include symbolic resources. Unlike money or property, these symbolic resources dissipate if there is no descendant to act as an heir.

The college-aged and young adult interns Friedman interviewed at the book center were smart and reflective. They were well aware that, in return for a summer in New England and a guided entrée into the world of Yiddish, they were being recruited into the role of “abstract heirs.” However, their participation was not always abstract, since the program includes carefully staged opportunities for major donors to meet with the interns. Sometimes, specific cross-generational relationships combined with the prospect of wealth transfer and the creation of new family bonds. Friedman recalls in his dissertation a conversation as students prepared for one such meeting:

“Do you think if I become my donor’s best friend she’ll fund my trip to Vilnius?” asked Mary, who had coincidentally met her donor earlier that summer on the latter’s visit to the book center. “Seriously, though,” she only half seriously insisted, “that woman loved me.”
“I’m gonna get set up with someone’s granddaughter!” Brian said to the laughter and a few eye rolls of those around him.\(^8\)

One of the interns, whom Friedman calls Evan, even compared himself to one of the Yiddish books that was on display for visitors to the center, suggesting that the center collects young Jews like it collects old Jewish books. The interns, even more than the Yiddish books at the center, thus, serve as abstract heirs to donors who love this language and culture but, except in rare cases, have not managed to pass it on to their own children and grandchildren. Of course, as Friedman also explains, this attempt to secure the future through kin-making does not always work, as he explains further:

In the case of students like Evan, a college freshman still in the process of determining the objects of his devotion, he may very well refuse such interpellations; he might, in other words, turn out much less “Yiddish” than the book to which he compares himself. But where Evan may opt out, another student potentially opts in and enacts the desirable future of possible Yiddish (and indeed Jewish) returns.\(^9\)

Citing Pierre Bourdieu’s critique of Levi-Strauss, Friedman notes that even when intergenerational relationships may lend themselves to structural analysis, they remain contingent in practice: they don’t always work out. Of course, the chances that an individual who is designated as an heir or marriage partner will reject her assigned role in the kinship structure may be and seem greater when that individual is a free-thinking student at an American university than when she is the daughter of a Hasidic rebbe. And, thus, the prospect of slippage—the uncertainty about reciprocation that means the supposed structure may at any moment potentially be violated—may seem both slimmer and potentially more dramatic in the traditional case than in the “modern” one. But the principle remains the same: kinship as a project, an attempt to throw ourselves and our identities forward, is always plagued by the uncertainty of that which only the future will tell.

While kinship is a strategy to mold the future, the future cannot guarantee success. Perhaps this very uncertainty—the notion that we might be betrayed by the future—propels research in genealogy back into the past. Here we are certainly on unstable ground, where it is not clear whether our projections are based on our values or whether what we claim and articulate as our “values” is based precisely on our future anxieties. As Susan Buck-Morss has similarly asked, in the context of debates about the multiple effects of Muslim presence in contemporary Europe, “Does such a thing as Europe exist that is threatened by the future or is the future [a] threat to the concept, Europe, itself?”\(^10\)

I suggest that we must acknowledge if we are honest with ourselves that our values and our anxieties reciprocally shape each other. And one of the most promising forms of response to this knowledge is a consciously artistic invocation of kinship, explicitly understood as a message to the future. That is the kind of work the Chilean-Canadian Rafael Goldchain, a grandchild of emigres from Poland, performed in his series of ancestral self-portraits as various relatives: maternal and paternal, male and female, known and unknown, and sometimes purely imagined altogether.

In the series’ web presence, prior to its eventual publication as an album, titled I Am My Family, Goldchain writes of the interconnected symbolism across the portraits:

On Familial Ground is an autobiographical installation work that includes digitally altered self-portrait photographs, reproductions of pages from an artist’s book, videotapes, and aural works. It is about grounding identity within a familial and cultural history subject to erasures. . . . The self-portraits in On Familial Ground are detailed reenactments of
ancestral figures, and can be understood as acts of ‘naming’ linked to mourning and remembrance. . . . They propose a form of intersubjective connection between us and those we mourn. . . . [They] suggest that we look at family photographs in order to know ourselves through the photographic trace left by the lost ancestral other . . . [and they] remind us of the unavoidable and necessary work of inheritance.

Familial Ground [he continues] is the product of a process that started several years ago when my son was born. I gradually realized that my new role as parent included the responsibility to pass on to my son a familial and cultural inheritance and that such inheritance would need to be gathered and delivered gradually in a manner appropriate to his age. My attempts at articulating histories, cultural and familial, public and private, made me acutely aware of how much I knew of the former, and how little of the latter. . . These images are the result of a reconstructive process that acknowledges its own limitations, in that the construction of an image of the past unavoidably involves a mixture of fragmented memory, artifice, and invention, and that this mixture necessarily evolves as it is transmitted from generation to generation. 11

This work offers something like hope, a word that I usually regard with suspicion. I regard hope as a name for a drug that offers illusion at least as often as genuine inspiration, especially when we are most insistent that “we must not lose hope.” What warms me in Goldchain’s statement is the forthright acknowledgment that artifice—and not merely dogged research—is necessary if he is to shape a record of ancestry that he can transmit to his son. To use Lucinda Ramberg’s words again, Goldchain’s art is a work of “kin-making” as an “innovative technology,” oriented both to the past and toward the future. In truth, not only the future but also the past, to a great extent, is not known but must be imagined.

DNA is at once an atlas and a time machine that can transport us to biblical times and beyond, awakening us to the shared roots of civilization and the promise of designer therapies to target disease. . . . [W]e carry pinpoints of DNA that suggest that maybe human population groups aren’t really quite so alike. However slight our genetic differences may be, they are defining. . . . And they mark me indelibly as a Jew. 12

This artistic work of recuperation is not easy. In fact, it is not only difficult, it is precisely uneasy. In one notable moment of slippage in Goldchain’s very lucid text, he asserts that his images suggest “we look at family photographs in order to know ourselves through the photographic trace left by the lost ancestral other.” But his are not family photographs; they are self-portraits sometimes and not always inspired by the documentary photographs that he has gathered. His portrait work is inescapably a work of self-knowledge. Here, however, he skirts the risk of authorizing his audience to simply and uncritically look at their own collections of ancestral images and think that, thereby, they know themselves. Does this perhaps, in turn, betray some anxiety about the balance Goldchain had to constantly maintain between recuperation and illusion? We may, I think, fairly call this anxiety one that is distinctively if not uniquely Jewish, and one that centers on the relationship between kinship and time.

The temptation to overcome anxiety about lost ancestry is betrayed in the current fascination with the supposed ability of DNA analysis to tell you, as anthropologist Naida Abu El-Haj’s interviewees put it, “who you really are.” Through new technologies of kinship such as the study of the genome, the past can be not only recuperated but become even more fixed than it was before. The rhetoric used in this search is sometimes most flamboyant, as is apparent in one author’s words in 2008:
So wrote a man named Jon Entine, a male carrier of the BRCA gene that is tied to a greatly increased risk of breast cancer and father of a daughter whose mother is identified as Christian. The anthropologist Kaja Finkler eloquently summed up the temptations of the idea that DNA testing tells us, once and for all who we really are as she writes, “Knowledge of shared DNA may substitute for our fragile memories and may transcend memories of ancestors recorded in faded photographs and other artifacts, or embedded in the consciousness of sounds, smells, affect, and tales, and leaves little to mystery in the absence of experience and feelings.”

American Jews, largely of Ashkenazi descent, are among the most avid consumers of the new technologies promising to tell you where you come from and who you’re related to through DNA testing. They are not the only ones, and the similar popularity of such tests among African-Americans might suggest something about the relation between traumatic breaks in generational continuity and the desire for a technology to restore a semblance of the past. I suggest, however, that there are several good reasons, none having to do with any putative neurotic tendencies, why Jews may have been and may remain particularly anxious about the future of kinship.

First, for millennia, and almost certainly for most of the time they have been called and have thought of themselves as Jews, they have lived not in a land they and others called “their own,” but in diaspora. Diaspora, as a technology of identity, depends, in turn, more on the maintenance of kin boundaries than do collective identities grounded in shared territory.

The second reason why Jews may be especially anxious about is the still recent experience of genocide. True, Augustine argued for the persistence of a degraded remnant, arguing against the idea that there is no place in Christendom for Jews after the revelation of the Messiahship of Jesus and their stubborn refusal to acknowledge that Messiahship. This is, of course, what is known as the doctrine of supersession: the idea that “Judaism” (whatever the status of that term) is now obsolete. Hence, also, the trope of the “old Jew” that persists through European Christian folklore, as richly documented, for example, in Claudine Fabre-Vassas’s remarkable
book on Jews, whose subtitle is, “Jews, Christians, and the Pig.”

Fifth, and last in this list for now, the perceived prospects of future Jewish generations are oddly skewed toward the negative for the following reason: Those sectors of the contemporary Jewish population that have the strongest and most strictly regulated kinship bonds—the Hasidim and other Haredi groups—are frequently perceived as belonging to the past. One contributor to a 1994 volume on The Jewish Family and Jewish Continuity wrote of the Hasidim as a “dynamic” group, but he dismisses them as “remain[ing] in the nineteenth century.” As I pointed out recently in my book on Jewish Families, “That doesn’t make sense: everyone you or I might talk to today, which fortunately includes Hasidim, is living at the same time as you or I.” Actually, the notion that communities persisting in strictly regulated and gendered kinship patterns are inherently stuck in the past is only one horn of the dilemma of “Jewish continuity.” The other horn is its mirror: the sense, prevalent in some Jewish communities for centuries now, that Jews can only “get ahead”; that is, they can only join the march toward some presumptive better future for all by escaping the bonds of in-group marriage and identity. Such a sense, it needs to be said gently, harmonizes well with the millennial Christian view that Jewish particularism needs to be overcome if all, and not only the Jews, are to be redeemed.

It’s worth pointing out here that, while I’ve been emphasizing the pulls of both the past and the future on kinship, the desires that technologies of kin-making are designed to express may also be desires for stasis, or more prosaically, maintenance of the status quo. When representatives of Jewish community organizations speak about the imperative of “continuity,” might this not sometimes betray a covert wish that things remain as they are rather than continue to be transformed? To be sure and to be fair, the rhetoric of Jewish continuity in organized Jewish organizations recognizes that change is necessary. But, perhaps far too often that change is understood as learning how to make “Jewishness” fit what a new generation, already understood as having escaped the constraints of Jewish kinship, might respond to. In that respect, “Jewish continuity” is not so much about past, present, or future, as about a perpetual attempt to catch up—often with nothing more substantial in justification than by a passing fashion as dictated by the marketplace.

Early in this talk, I invoked my intellectual hero Walter Benjamin and his dictum pointing to enslaved ancestors rather than liberated grandchildren as a major source of revolutionary zeal. It should be mentioned that in his own writings he had little to say about the specifics of his own ancestry. In his memoir, A Berlin Childhood Around 1900, he recalls one elderly aunt living in an already obsolete quarter of that very new city. He passes on few details of what she told him about his ancestors, beyond the very suggestive observation that their recently acquired last names were often toponyms, the names of small towns and hamlets in the countryside and, hence, smacked more of the memory of place than the memory of family. But he also gives us enough to suggest a narrative trajectory from the past, intended to guide the neophyte toward a future anticipated by his ancestors. The bits of information about his family learned from relatives offered him some insight into how his ancestry was meant to determine his own trajectory:

Such stories brought to light what little I knew of my forebears. The career of an ancestor, a grandfather’s rules of conduct, were conjured up before me as though to make me understand that it was premature for me to give away, by an early death, the splendid trump cards which I held in my hand, thanks to my origins.

Nothing is said in Benjamin’s memoir about the Jewishness of these forebears, and, in fact, one gets the impression that what was distinctive about them was their origin in the countryside.
as opposed to the city. After all, Benjamin's emphasis in that memoir is his Berlin childhood, not his Jewish childhood. When he recalls a childhood ritual of springtime, that ritual is an Easter egg hunt, rather than the search for *khomeset*.

Our patience is short—shorter, perhaps, than that of our ancestors, if a bit longer than that of our children. We will read Grace Paley's story again, in just a moment, but this time trying to shed more light on some of its possible deeper meanings than we were able to perceive on the first hearing. Before we do that, let me linger a bit with one more text, hundreds of times longer than Paley's sketch. I refer to Aleph Bet Yehoshua's novel *Mr. Mani*, published in English in 1992. The novel comprises five parts. Each part is told as one side of a dialogue between a younger person and a parent or other "parent" figure. Each part features a different "Mr. Mani," another in a direct line of Sephardi males. Each part as well focuses on the upbringing of the one who is to become the next Mr. Mani. The parts are told in reverse chronological order; that is, each successive part is set in a time and describes a generation earlier than the one that precedes it. Rather than "back to the future," this narrative moves forward to the past.

The first section, set in Jerusalem at the time of the novel's writing, describes an encounter between a young woman with the provocative name Hagar, who believes herself pregnant, and the father of her boyfriend. The father seems in suicidal despair over the recent death of his wife. The young woman's intervention, at least as she perceives it, prevents his suicide. Thus, in a sense, Hagar takes the place of her boyfriend's father's deceased wife.

If we skip *forward* in pages, and *back* in time, to the fifth and final section of Yehoshua's novel, set in Athens, in 1848, another Mr. Mani visits, consoles, and confronts his revered rabbi from childhood. That revered rabbi, by now quite aged and utterly incapacitated following a stroke, had belatedly married the Dona Flora, whom Mr. Mani had desired in his own youth. The rabbi's marriage to Dona Flora has borne no fruit. Meanwhile, Dona Flora's niece has married Mr. Mani's son, and the couple are now living in Jerusalem. In the course of this, Mr. Mani's one-sided conversation with Dona Flora and then only with his stricken rabbi, he reveals the secret that his supposed grandson, recently born in Jerusalem and presumed to be the child of his recently deceased son, is actually his own son, conceived during the year of mourning for the Mr. Mani, who was his son. The question he desperately and, it seems, tauntingly, and vengefully seeks an answer for from his mute rabbi is this: Will he, by his own suicide, be able to expiate the grave sin of incest that he has committed in getting his son's widow with child? Later, we are told in a passage that Yehoshua calls a "biographical supplement" that, having received no answer from his rabbi, Avraham Mani did not commit suicide.

Are we, the readers, then to understand that suicide as being deferred from generation to generation in the Mani family, down to the near suicide that our Hagar of the narrative's first but most recent part thinks she has interrupted? Perhaps even she, in the course of her relation to her own widowed kibbutznik mother, has confessed that she felt like she was part of some much larger tale. It would, of course, not be the first time in the history of Jewish literature that the arc of the collective's future is foretold in terms of a number of generations. Indeed, the Mishnah in Tractate Eduyot (4a) asserts that a son benefits his own father by helping to fulfill the number of generations that God has already declared will come before the end of the Exile, as it is stated in Isaiah (41:4), *kore hadoros marosh*: He announced the generations beforehand. Thus, each new generation brings us one step closer to redemption.

Though the allusion to Isaiah might tempt us to read *Mr. Mani* as a tale of redemption with the fulfillment of the male line, the book itself does not end on anything like a triumphant note. In any case, the multigenerational
narrative’s first but culminating episode seems to have brought us to some degree of healing. Possibly that healing has something to do with the fact that the generation whose stories are told in the book’s first sections are all citizens of a Jewish state, unlike their ancestors whose distracted longings and fantasies had much to do with the lack of homeland and territorially grounded peoplehood. Hagar, the current-day narrator, becomes “pregnant” again, this time for real, and while her lover is abroad in graduate school, his widowed father comes from time to time to visit the kibbutz and to get to know his own grandson. Perhaps the widowed father and Hagar’s widowed mother will marry each other, perhaps not. It is not even clear that this tale of generations has been about an inherited curse or about what its fiercely Zionist author believes are the inherent pathologies of families in diaspora. What is clear is that a family story can be told not only going forward, but also going backward, and perhaps more powerfully so.

If Grace Paley’s “At That Time, or the History of a Joke” can be called a family story as well, it is only be in the very broad sense that the Jews are a big family or that all members of *Homo sapiens* constitute an even greater family of humankind. As I mentioned, Jonah didn’t immediately share my enthusiasm for the story. I suppose I thought he might since, even more than I, he is sensitive to the continuing workings of white Christian privilege in our own United States. Thus, these ruminations are sparked, in part, by my own disappointment at a failed attempt to connect with my own descendant and also constitute, in part, the work of trying to recuperate that failure. Still, I’m not sure I can fully answer my son’s puzzlement, because like all great fiction, “At That Time” surpasses any one individual’s interpretation; or perhaps because Grace Paley herself was not quite sure what to make of this story. But here are a few signposts toward understanding this “history of a joke” that I hope will make it easier to understand.

The story was published in 1981 and again in 1985, yet, it includes reference to a “stolen uterus” and then to a uterus transplant, which we, in our own world and in our own time, hear of happening for the first time just a few years ago in Sweden. So the “at that time” of the story’s title refers to what might just be in “our own time,” more than thirty years in the future from when the story was conceived. The doctor who commits this theft is referred to as “hysterical,” suggesting that not only those who actually possess a womb are subject to the diagnosis of hysteria. The “passing gynecologist” might not just have been hurrying by but pretending to pass as a Christian rather than a Jew; certainly, his name, “Dr. Heiliger” or “Holy Man,” is ambiguous enough for him to pass as either. The reference to Fresh Meadows is harder to read, but I should tell this London audience that it names a neighborhood in the borough of Queens, New York, outside the city proper.

There are a series of transformations in the story or, perhaps, said better, a set of conveyances that strike us as magical, whimsical, or both: a stolen uterus replaced by transplant; a virgin birth assumed to be a boy child and announced as such but who is actually a girl; a child unexpectedly born black (though why did we readers assume that the young mother herself had white skin); a repetition of the birth of a savior rather than the annunciation of his return as the Messiah, mature and ready to redeem; and then—not a transformation but a mythic repetition, not “the Jews” *tout court* but only “certain” of them, evidently two thousand years old, because they had “observed and suffered the consequences of other virgin births,” crying yet again, “It is not He! It is not He!”

As a result of their denial of this new advent, these “certain Jews,” this “foolish remnant,” as Paley also calls them, are cut off from electronic media—thus, in the world of the tale, from all contact with anyone except themselves—and must actually come face to face in order to maintain everyday contact. They are materially reduced to the most basic
religious symbols but not thrown into the past, for these symbols—“shawls and phylacteries”—are by now routinely worn by woman as well. Moreover, this “foolish remnant,” like the naïve child who declares that the emperor has no clothes, is the first to announce that the product of the virgin birth is a girl. Not a problem for most people in the world of this story, since everyone else except the “particular discontented Jews” is ready to modify the old myth by adding the symbol of a circular navel and wiggly umbilical cord.

The Jews—let’s just call them that after all, since particularity is characteristic of Jewishness in any case—are by now quite ready for a female Divinity, offering their “Praise to the most Highess!” Yet they continue stubbornly, nostalgically if you will, to refer to twentieth-century left-wing politics (“Another tendency heard from!”) and to premodern medical practices, doubtless quoting their grandmother’s Yiddish to insist that another virgin birth _vet helsn vi a toytn ban kes_—it will do about as much good as the old folk remedy called cupping.

I grant that the identity of “they” in the final paragraph (see fig. 1) is a bit ambiguous: Did only the Jews here “continue as female and male” as the God of Genesis had created them, stubbornly denying the triumphal supersession of gender difference Paul announces in his letter to the Galatians? The “if so” suggests that their persistence as gendered humans is a consequence of their rejection of the newborn’s saving power. Certainly, they continue in their generations, “descending” by continuing to conceive and bear in the old-fashioned way and in the old-fashioned way as well to stick it out in the “shmatte” business. The “muddy basement of history” they continue to occupy suggests the “bargain basements” of New York City department stores in the mid to late twentieth century. And the poor Gentiles as well, it seems, also continue to “descend;” else why would they need to be dressed for such life-cycle rituals as “weddings, births, or funerals?”

If one didn’t know Grace Paley better—at least through her many writings—one might be forgiven for wondering what the author of this curious brief fantasy thinks about “those particular discontented Jews.” Are they stubbornly remaining behind, refusing universal redemption? After all, the world of this story is one where “sexism and racism had no public life”: real progress no doubt. But shining through Grace Paley’s stories is a fierce, tremendous, and unsentimental love for the skepticism, the stubborn difference of “those particular Jews” and also of those poor people—many but by no means all of them also Jews—about whom she so often wrote. The Jews descend, every day but Saturday perhaps, to the “muddy basement of history,” finding the right clothes for those moments that make it possible, somehow, always tentatively, in ways that are transformed whether we celebrate the transformations or attempt to deny them, to locate ourselves forward and backward in time through our practices of genealogy.

References