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Being Jewish: Bonds and Boundaries in Grace Paley's "The Loudest Voice" and Philip Roth's "The Conversion of the Jews"

Ada Savin

- 1 It takes some audacity to write an essay on Grace Paley and Philip Roth, two writers with vastly different sensibilities and writing strategies. Roth is the masculine writer *par excellence* whose work leaves little room for the feminine. Paley, on the other hand, is Roth's strong female counterpoint, as her short stories espouse a quintessentially feminine, at times feminist, perspective.¹ And yet, some of their early writings show forth similar preoccupations: being Jewish in America, adjusting vs. rebelling within and without one's community. Whether it is the "cosmic comedy" (Brody) of Roth's "The Conversion of the Jews" or the re-creation of the Nativity by Jewish children in "The Loudest Voice," the two short stories treat religious matters on a playfully serious tone.² Moreover, the bouncy voices and the budding themes in both short stories signal, in hindsight, the thematic and formal concerns that characterize Paley and Roth's later works.
- 2 A steady admirer of Paley's work, Philip Roth was one of her first reviewers. "Splendidly comic and unladylike" says the blurb he signed on the cover of *The Little Disturbances of Man*. Roth alluded to his kinship with Paley's "bouncy style" (*Reading Myself and Others* 120),³ to her reliance on spoken language, her ear for accents and turns of phrase as well as her "attempt to incorporate into American literary prose the rhythms, nuances and emphases of urban and immigrant speech..." (*RMAO* 120). He refers to Paley as a "genuine writer of prose, writing in a language of new and rich emotional subtleties, with a kind of back-handed charm and irony all its own" (*RMAO* 120). He ascribes the particular "illusion of intimacy and spontaneity [in her stories] to her inventing a whole new idea of what 'being yourself' sounds and looks like" (*RMAO*

197). In an interview published shortly after Paley's death, Roth, interestingly, singled out "The Loudest Voice":

There's the story of hers called "The Loudest Voice," I think, about the kid in school who gets the part of playing Mary [she plays Jesus, in fact!] in the Christmas pageant, this little Jewish kid, because she has the loudest voice, and she did have a distinctive literary voice, a certain kind of breezy lyricism and a streetwise charm that was very appealing. (Interview Nissley)

- 3 As far as we know, Grace Paley did not make any public comment on *Good-bye Columbus* but she did remember her New School teacher advising her "to get off that Jewish dime in her short stories" to which Paley added: "The idiocy of that remark was that he was telling me this just as Saul Bellow and Philip Roth were getting more famous every day" (Paley, Interview Lidoff).
- 4 "The Loudest Voice" and "The Conversion of the Jews" open *in medias res*, with an abrupt, loud voice (one can almost hear the exhaled breath)—apt *incipits* since both stories are concerned with Creation, with myths of origin, with the Word. More or less naively, Ozzie and Shirley, the two "loudmouth" Jewish protagonists question the meaning of Jewishness by raising essential, hence embarrassing questions. This being said, the two stories differ vastly in their thematic argument and formal treatment. Occasional comparisons notwithstanding, I will discuss them separately and bring them together in my concluding remarks.

A Talk-Story

There's an old joke: A Jewish boy comes home from school and tells his mother he's been given a role in the school play.

"Wonderful. What part is it?"

The boy says, "I play the Jewish husband."

The mother scowls and says, "Go back and tell the teacher you want a speaking part."

- 5 "The Loudest Voice" contains the first stitches of the large tapestry of voices that make up Paley's *oeuvre*, "a human comedy of New York's boroughs spoken in the local idioms by immigrant parents and their newly minted American children" (Dekoven Ezrahi 144). A sepia-toned story of many voices, past and present, individual and collective, couched in Paley's terse poetic language, the short story captures the Jewish families' mixed feelings about the casting of their children in the main roles of a Christian celebration (the "tra-la-la for Christmas" [58]). Owing to her particularly loud voice ("lots of stamina" [56]), Shirley Abramovitz, one of these kids, has earned the honor of playing the "remembering tongue" of the boy playing the part of Jesus. Understandably, the project gives rise to impassioned discussions within the (mostly Jewish) neighborhood as well as in Shirley's family.

My father couldn't think of what to say to that. Then he decided: "You're in America! In Palestine the Arabs would be eating you alive. Europe you had pogroms. Argentina is full of Indians. Here you got Christmas... Some joke, ha?"

"Very funny, Misha. What is becoming of you? If we came to a new country a long time ago to run away from tyrants and instead we fall into a creeping pogrom, that our children learn a lot of lies, so what's the joke." (58)

- 6 As the story unfolds and voices emerge in counterpoint—as if by free association—the young girl, both protagonist and narrator, clearly appears as the conductor of this reconstituted orchestra made up of quasi greenhorn Russian-Jewish immigrants. Her

memories, intertwined with the characters' vivacious exchanges, at times interrupted by silence, provide the canvas for this nostalgic piece which also pays homage to her departed parents ("my mama, may she rest in peace" [58]; "I thank you papa for your kindness" [59]). Shirley's private, solitary ruminations are externalized as a running series of remarks or wisecracks, which create "a superstructure of dialogue that the narrator maintains with the reader" (Perry 191).

- 7 Structurally, the whole story is framed between the "loud voices" and the noises of the *incipit* ("There is a certain place where dumb-waiters boom, doors slam, dishes crash" [55]) and Shirley's repeated calls to silence ("ssh" [63]) in the closing lines. Ultimately, it is she, "the loudest voice" who admonishes her parents to quiet down. Somewhat at a loss after having diligently delivered her awkward role, the girl needs silence to regain her self which she seems to achieve by praying an all-inclusive "Hear, O Israel," with her hands made into a little church (63). The narrative ends on a quasi-ecumenical note: "I was happy. I fell asleep at once. I had prayed for everybody: my talking family, cousins far away, passers-by and all the lonesome Christians. I expected to be heard. My voice was certainly the loudest" (63). Ironical reversals mark the appropriation of the Christian holiday by the numerous Jewish inhabitants of the neighborhood: the plight is in fact that of the "lonesome Christians" who "got very small parts or no part at all" in the pageant (62).⁴
- 8 Thematically, the story is concerned with the Jewish-American community experience, its interaction with the Christian Americans and its tentative acculturation: dialectics of sameness and difference are at play. This transplanted Eastern European Jewish community whose members feel American to various degrees, lives side by side with its Christian neighbors. In a few pages, Paley brings to life memorable cameos of children and adults, Christians and Jews. A day in the life of a motley, mixed community is brought to life: the Abramowitzes, other Jewish families, other children, the grocer; Mr Hilton, the Christian schoolmaster; the aptly named Miss Glacé, a student teacher. The mock-confrontational tone is tainted with discrete nostalgia while the reader becomes a virtual spectator of an unforgettable episode from Shirley's childhood.
- 9 For the Abramowitz family, their daughter's participation in the Christmas pageant is a means of sharing America's "rites of assent"⁵ rather than a betrayal of Judaism. Consonant with both Jewish and American messianism as a deferred promise, a work in progress, the model of reconciliation suggested in "The Loudest Voice" has informed many other literary works addressing religious amalgamations.⁶ In Paley's story it is embodied by Shirley's father. His down-to-earth, no-nonsense attitude toward life, religion and human nature, betrays centuries of *galut*⁷ experience. His skepticism notwithstanding, the father entertains high hopes for his daughter. He is the one who encourages Shirley to "go for it," to make use of the chameleonic gift Jews supposedly possess—that of "passing," of impersonating the other (be it Jesus, a Jew himself, after all!).
- 10 Shirley is not her own self during her performance backstage—she has merely "lent" her voice with its pitch and volume, for the duration of the show. "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (62)⁸ is the only line rendered verbatim, perhaps because it is the only which she, as a Jewish kid, can identify with. Her loud voice, however, has proved capable of transcending cultural and social boundaries and of reconciling supposedly antagonistic religions. Replete with pungent humor and subdued nostalgia, this episode of intercommunity divergence ends up in silent convergence. As Hana

Wirth-Nesher points out, "Paley writes from a universalist concept of America that humorously ridicules Shirley for her naive yoking of Jewish and Christian religious practice but simultaneously applauds her spirit of accommodation" (219-20). The narrator's "loud voice," at once subversive, ironic, poetic and nostalgic encapsulates the unmistakable voice of the author, audible and discernible since the beginning of her career.

In the Beginning Was a Voice

- 11 Even though Paley's narrative voices and themes grow more diverse in her subsequent short stories, the unique voice audible in "The Loudest Voice"—one that would render her prose forever recognizable⁹—as well as her deceptively simple, transparent style, make this short story possibly the best entrance into the author's liminal fictional universe, poised between the Old World and the New, between the old language—Yiddish—and the new one, American English.
- 12 Paley's *Weltanschauung*, her bittersweet humor, her idealism and her Yiddish-English all draw their roots from the old Eastern European *shtetl* of her kin. Bonnie Lyons has convincingly argued that Jewishness is central to Paley's work: "tracing its role will enable the reader to see hidden patterns in the carpet" (30). Some of the patterns in Paley's motley carpet betray the influence of Anzia Yezierska, the Jewish-American writer of Russian origin whose writings are set in New York's Lower East Side, at the beginning of the 20th century. Most strikingly, Sara Smolinski the tough protagonist of Yezierska's novel *Bread Givers: A Struggle Between a Father of the Old World and a Daughter of the New* (1925) eerily anticipates Shirley Abramowitz's determined character and stamina down to her "loud voice." Sara has to fight her way out of her Orthodox Jewish home, dominated by "a father of the Old World," so as to be accepted by the New World. And it is precisely her "loud voice" that will carry her through, from her childhood years of peddling and house chores all the way to college: "My voice was like dynamite. Louder than all the pushcart peddlers, louder than all the hollering noises of bargaining and selling. I cried out my herring with all the burning fire of my ten old years" (21).
- 13 A generation removed from Yezierska's representation of the Lower East Side, Paley's "Jewish miniatures" (Lyons 26) portray the everyday life of *dos kleine menschele*,¹⁰ the idealism of first generation immigrants, their impassioned kitchen table political discussions—undoubtedly reminiscences from her own childhood woven into a "fictional carpet" (Lyons). Identity markers point to the Jewish origin of the main characters: the names are (still) unchanged (Abramowitz, Kornbluh); their English accents and peculiar syntax retain an unmistakable Jewish immigrant flavor ("Active? Active has to have a reason" [57]); homeland onomatopoeia (Nu! Ach! Oi, oi, oi") punctuate their dialogues and their wry humored jokes ("lemon will sweeten your disposition" [62]).
- 14 Though Paley's American Jews have evolved toward assimilation and appropriation of new ways, their language is still imbued with a Jewish-American cadence and tone. The author, who often admitted that she writes "with an accent" (Interview Lidoff 5), forges a new, unique idiom out of diverse linguistic sources: her American English is shot through with Yiddish, a transnational hybrid language and therefore not associated with a permanent homeland, and to a lesser extent, Hebrew, the ancestral, unifying

component of Judaic civilization.¹¹ The very rhythms of her prose and the oft-inverted syntax betray the presence of the old tongue without reproducing it on the printed page:

"Ach," explained my mother [...] after all why should they [the Christian kids who had only small parts in the pageant] holler? The English language they know from the beginning by heart. They're blond like angels. You think it's so important they should get in the play? Christmas ... the whole piece of goods ... they own it." (62-63)

- 15 Paley's genius is to evoke the phenomenological qualities of the oral by means of the written, often through deliberate grammatical irregularities that foreground the differences between written and speech standards. The Yiddish influence is felt on every verbal level; it is a matter of word choice, grammar, and a whole style of ironic phrasing. Sometimes it is not only a matter of English spoken with a Yiddish-knowing tongue; it has to do with metaphors ironically derived from Jewish life (a Christmas tree in a Jewish neighborhood is viewed as "a stranger in Egypt" [60]). Thus Paley's style and themes form a new ethnic voice that slips comfortably into pluralistic, multicultural America.
- 16 Sometimes the author makes voice the very topic of her stories—perhaps because talking, remembering stories, be they from one's childhood or from the Old Testament, are part and parcel of the Jewish mode of survival. As Mr. Darwin reminds his American-born daughter in "Faith in the Afternoon": "To a Jew the word 'shut up' is a terrible expression, a dirty word, like a sin, because in the beginning, if I remember correctly, was the word!" (*Enormous Changes* 41). In a sense, Paley's stories are a never-ending conversation¹² which the author interrupts, almost haphazardly, only to take it up again, changing the setting, sometimes the characters. Many of Paley's stories start with talk or intimate dialogue, so much so that even everyday objects can become interlocutors in her talkative universe. Indeed, in the often-quoted opening lines of "The Loudest Voice," the aural/oral worlds are filled with noisy sounds, and mind and matter collapse: "There is a certain place where dumbwaiters boom, doors slam, dishes crash; every window is a mother's mouth bidding the street shut up, go skate somewhere else, come home" (55). In Paley's universe, talk is vitality, life itself: "In the grave it will be quiet," claim Shirley and her father (55). This side of the grave, in America to boot, one is better off speaking up, be it playing the part of Jesus during a Christmas celebration. In many respects Shirley's attitude in Paley's story matches Ozzie's performance on the roof of the synagogue in Philip Roth's "The Conversion of the Jews."

"The Conversion of the Jews" or Revising Jewish Lore

- 17 Compared to Paley's story, the cast of characters in Roth's "The Conversion of the Jews" is minimal: the confrontation is basically triangular, involving Ozzie, a thirteen-year-old Jewish boy, his mother and Binder, a counter-father figure, a caricature of a rabbi. Significantly, Ozzie's father is absent from the story, which makes him possibly Roth's first literary "ghost." The predicament of the character, the antagonistic counter-posture marking the starting point of Roth's every single work are already present in "The Conversion of the Jews, a short story with profound and lasting resonance, as Nathan Englander confesses.¹³ In novel after novel, from *Portnoy's Complaint* to *Sabbath's*

Theater, the characters' multiple identities are the writer's way of questioning, on a dialectic mode, national, political or religious allegiances.

- 18 Roth's very first published short story¹⁴ "Her successes are intermittent, unpredictable, often unshapely and without wholeness; there is no progression of revelation, the stories do not build one upon another, they do not—as is abundantly clear in this new collection—create an emotional unity. On the other hand: Paley when she is good is so good that she is worth ninety-nine 'even' writers, and when one hears that unmistakable Paley voice one feels what can be felt only in the presence of a true writprovides an appropriate entrance into the writer's elaborate fictional examinations of the Jewish Self. "The Conversion of the Jews" stages a quasi-Talmudic argument between Ozzie and his two authorities: Rabbi Binder and his mother. An unmitigated rebel, the boy challenges the Rabbi to admit that God, in his almightiness, was surely capable of bringing a child into the world "without intercourse." Fleeing the Rabbi's wrath, Ozzie ends up on the roof of the synagogue and preaches tolerance to his "subjects": the Rabbi, his mother and the other children.
- 19 An adamant, unstoppable calling into question of imparted, taken-for-granted "truths," coupled with the unabashed will to open his mouth and speak up are ingrained in Ozzie Freedman's character. In the opening lines, the narrator eavesdrops on Ozzie and Izzie's animated exchange, replete with slang, onomatopoeia and indications of body language:

"You're a real one for opening your mouth in the first place," Itzie said. "What do you open your mouth all the time for?"
"I didn't bring it up, Itz, I didn't," Ozzie said.
"What do you care about Jesus Christ for anyway?"
"I didn't bring up Jesus Christ. He did. I didn't even know what he was talking about." (127)
- 20 The kids mingle "theologizing," sex ("he said intercourse?!!!" [128]) and brash questioning of the rabbi's version of the Nativity. The dialogue between the two boys shows a marked kinship with the spontaneous, impromptu exchanges that pervade Paley's short stories. Over the course of the story, the narrator turns into a side observer of the standoff between Ozzie Freedman and Rabbi Binder and he ultimately embraces the entire scene of the "conversion," as if in a wide traveling movement of the camera: "By the time Mrs Freedman arrived to keep her four-thirty appointment with Rabbi Binder, the whole little upside down heaven was shouting and pleading for Ozzie to jump, and Rabbi Binder no longer was pleading with him not to jump, but was crying into the dome of his hands" (140). The provocative title notwithstanding, the short story does not stage a conversion *per se* but rather an individual's rebellion from within the fold against the dogmatic Judaism embodied by the Rabbi.¹⁵ There are many ways of being Jewish, Ozzie intuitively, and he knows the path that he does *not* want to follow, the one that leads to intolerance, tyranny of thought, imposition. Behind Ozzie's spectacular gesture one detects an early manifestation of Roth's adamant stance against any form of submission or silent acceptance.¹⁶
- 21 Ozzie's questions target crucial issues such as the paradox inherent in the secular vs. sacred vision (Ozzie wonders "how Rabbi Binder could call the Jews 'The Chosen People' if the Declaration of Independence claimed all men to be created equal?" [129]); the Jews' paranoiac singling out of Jewish victims goes against his common sense (his mother counts the Jewish casualties after a plane crash). But the question that slices at the heart of Judaic beliefs and values is the one Ozzie repeats doggedly: "if He could

make all this in six days...why couldn't He let a woman have a baby without having intercourse?" (128). With infallible logic the boy points to the hollowness of Rabbi Binder's teaching, to his incapacity to engage in a dialogue, let alone sustain it. Ironically, Ozzie legitimizes the Christian version of the nativity by resorting to the Jews' almighty God. His "outrageous" question has ostensibly nothing to do with Judaism or Jewishness *per se*. It is in Binder's (and Ozzie's mother's) reaction that it takes on its humor and putative relevance to Jewish identity. In a Manichean struggle of sorts, Ozzie, the free spirit, literally brings to his knees a tyrannical rabbi (Binder). At this point the story turns into a fable of good vs. bad, freedom vs. coercion (as shown by the allegorical names: Freedman vs. Binder). Having been hit in the face by his mother and by Rabbi Binder, Ozzie's final address to the entire "congregation" gathered at his feet, including his mother, is understandably a plea for tolerance: "Promise me, promise, you'll never hit anybody about God" (145). "The Conversion of the Jews" culminates in a pyramidal structure with Ozzie "preaching" down to the "converted" Jews who in their turn ask themselves who they are, who they have become: "Rabbi Binder was on his knees, trembling. If there was a question to be asked now it was not 'Is it me?' but rather 'Is it us?...Is it us?'" (142).

- 22 There is a magical, surreal quality to Ozzie's defiant act (Ozzie, the wizard!); an Icarus of sorts, the Jewish boy who confronts his authorities, vents his rage and ultimately has his say.¹⁷ "The Conversion of the Jews" reveals a "budding concern with the binding ideas of religious exclusiveness" (RMAO 8) even as it is beckoning toward other possible ways of being Jewish which Roth would explore extensively in his subsequent writings.

The Rebel on the Roof

- 23 The story reaches its climax as Ozzie, on top of the roof, experiences a moment of existential doubt:

Louder and louder the question came to him—"Is it me? Is it me?"—until he discovered himself no longer kneeling, but racing crazily towards the edge of the roof, his eyes crying, his throat screaming, and his arms flying everywhichway as though not his own.

"Is it me? Is it me, ME...ME...ME! It has to be me—but is it!" (135)

- 24 The print from "me" in small letters to ME, from question mark to exclamation mark—suggests the apparent dissolution of his body, of his entire self, his incapacity to fathom the extent of his act, the impact of his daring words: the Rothian "counter" posture voiced in the nervously insistent voice is already there, boldly testing the forbidden. "Is it me?" also suggests his possibly impersonating a messianic identity: "Ozzie is not wondering if he is Ozzie, if what he is doing coincides with the identity of Ozzie Freedman as he has known it; he is wondering 'Is it me?' while thinking messianically, wondering if the identity of Ozzie Freedman coincides with messianic identity. He is asking, 'Am I the Messiah?' (Steed 152).¹⁸ Arguably, Ozzie's frantic question, repeated several times—Is it ME?—lies at the origin of Roth's various impersonating selves, of the multiple, contradictory identities encapsulated in the epigraph to *Operation Shylock: A Confession*, which is a quote from Kierkegaard: "the whole content of my being shrieks in contradiction against itself."
- 25 Humor, farce and the tragic come together in this climactic episode: even as Ozzie is enjoined by his mother not to "be a martyr," the kids take up the unknown word as "Be

a Martin, be a Martin" (155). Their chant becomes a kind of *mantra*, much like the prayers mumbled by the janitor, old Yakov Blotnik. Jumping into the firemen's net, Ozzie reenters a world of moral ambiguity—the well-spring of his future reincarnations —, Alexander Portnoy, David Kepesh, and others. In *The Counterlife*, Ozzie has reached his ultimate "reincarnation" as Nathan Zuckerman, "a Jew among Gentiles and a Gentile among Jews" (370). He is "a Jew without Jews, without Judaism, without Zionism, without Jewishness, without a temple or an army or even a pistol, a Jew clearly without a home, just the object itself, like a glass or an apple" (370).

Concluding Remarks

- 26 "The Loudest Voice" and "The Conversion of the Jews" portray moments of existential awareness experienced during childhood, acts of compliance or rebellion. Shirley and Ozzie's attitudes vis-à-vis their authorities, family and community, signal the diverging paths of Paley and Roth's subsequent writings. In "The Loudest Voice" past and present, here and elsewhere, form an intricate web. The finely-woven tapestry of Paley's short story is the graphic representation of a community striving to embrace differences, be they religious, ethnic, or social. There are no winners or losers in the pseudo-standoff opposing Jews and Christians in Paley's short story. The peculiar Christmas pageant foregrounds community concerns rather than theological arguments. "The Conversion of the Jews" on the other hand announces the embattled *Weltanschauung* of Roth's fiction, of his characters' rebellion, of their counter-posture vis-à-vis conformity, imposition, dogmatism.
- 27 In a rare comment on Paley and Roth's respective styles, Robert Pinsky considers that Paley's poetic gift "distinguishes her from even such brilliant writers as Philip Roth, whose writing has every virtue except poetry; in a way, Mr. Roth must write alternate realities for his characters in order to provide a rough equivalent within the bounds of his talent, which is so entirely a prose talent." There is a good measure of truth in this assessment but also in Roth's confession on his writing life, via his alter ego Zuckerman: "... the book of my life is a book of voices. When I ask myself how I arrived at where I am the answer surprises me: 'Listening'" (*I Married a Communist* 222).
- 28 All things considered, Shirley and Ozzie's voices resonate far beyond the pages of these two early short stories, prefiguring the combination of spunk, wisecracking and urbane wisdom we have come to associate with Faith and Zuckerman, Paley and Roth's household *personae*.

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NOTES

1. I found only one article discussing the two writers albeit from a literary historical point of view. See Nancy Miller, "Starting Out in the Fifties: Grace Paley, Philip Roth, and the Making of a Literary Career."
2. "The Loudest Voice" was published in *The Little Disturbances of Man*; "The Conversion of the Jews" in *Good-bye Columbus*. The quotations from the two short stories follow the editions cited.
3. For the sake of convenience, this volume will be abbreviated as *RMAO*.
4. The celebration actually conflates Christmas and Easter. According to Sidra Dekoven Ezrahi, this deceptively simple reconciliation of two dire monotheisms is one of the healthiest symptoms of the diasporic imagination. She adds: "In fact, it is the non-Jews in these neighborhoods who merit special attention, because, [...] they are 'stranger[s]'" (150).
5. Sacvan Bercovitch's *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (1993) underscores the centripetal power of America's legal, political and religious institutions, linked by a complex system of symbols, rituals, and beliefs. This phenomenon is visible in the literature of writers belonging to successive waves of immigrants. Jewish American writers from Abraham Cahan, Anzia Yeziarska or Henry Roth to Grace Paley and Philip Roth have all been subjected to America's "Ritual of Consensus;" they have been torn apart between what Werner Sollors has called "consent" and "descent," i.e. between assent to the American ethos and adherence to their culture of origin.
6. Malamud's *The Assistant* comes to mind but also, more recently, Tahira Naqvi's short story "Thank God for the Jews" (1991) or James McBride's *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to his White Mother* (1998).
7. The Hebrew term *galut* (meaning exile in Hebrew) expresses the Jewish conception of the condition and feelings of a nation uprooted, exiled from its homeland and subject to alien rule (Jewish Virtual Library).
8. The well-known line appears in Psalm 22:1 and also figures in Jesus' lament on the cross. Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34.
9. At a PEN tribute to Paley at the Great Hall at Cooper Union in New York in 2007, Michael Cunningham argued that, like only a few other writers, one recognizes Paley's unmistakable voice from the first few words of any of her stories. To prove his point, he read the beginning of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, and of Paley's "The Loudest Voice" (Hirsch 124-25).
10. *dos kleine menschele* (Yiddish): an ordinary, insignificant man.
11. See Paley's "Midrash on Happiness" in which the writer adopts a form of biblical exegesis that she adapts to the all-American concept of "happiness."
12. "You can hear it in the titles of Paley's stories: "Conversation with My Father," "The Loudest Voice," "Listening," "Zagrowsky Tells." "Although about many different topics, her stories are built on talk, on direct face-to-face conversation between people rather than third-person narration or wordless incident" (Perry 190).

13. "Sharpest in my memory from that collection is my reaction to the story 'The Conversion of the Jews' ...I can hardly express to you what a revelation it was to find that story already waiting for me in the world. I remember looking at one of my own rabanim and having the exact same thought as Ozzie, experiencing the same rush of confused-surety and sincerity and pure intellectual rage. I remember my own deeply felt theological questions asked and then answered with, "Englander, get out!"

14. Roth made no changes to the original version of "The Conversion of the Jews" for the Modern Library edition.

15. The rabbi as dictator resurfaces in a more sinister guise in the figure of Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf, a character in Roth's novel *The Plot against America* (2004). Zierler argues that Roth shows himself to be even more suspicious and derisive toward American rabbis than he was before (260-61). If we are supposed to laugh at Rabbi Binder, we are meant to loathe the grandiloquent, and dangerously obtuse Bengelsdorf whom Roth captures in these words: "My Uncle Monty, who hated all rabbis but had an especially venomous loathing of Bengelsdorf dating back to his childhood as a charity student in the B'nai Moshe religious school, liked to say of him, 'The pompous son of a bitch knows everything-it's too bad he doesn't know anything else'" (*The Plot against America* 35).

16. "Ending persecution involves more than stamping out persecutors. It is necessary too to unlearn certain responses to them. All the tolerance of persecution that has seeped into the Jewish character—the adaptability, the patience, the resignation, the silence, the self-denial—must be squeezed out, until the only response here to any restriction of liberties is: 'No, I refuse'" (RMAO, 149).

17. In many respects Alexander Portnoy, Ozzie's immediate successor, is "an aged incarnation of claustrophobic little Freedman," says Roth. Unlike Ozzie, however, Portnoy is not able to escape since "he is imprisoned in his rage against ... himself, his most powerful oppressor" (Roth, RMAO 9).

18. This is confirmed in the paragraph that follows Ozzie's query: "It is the question a thief must ask himself the night he jimmies open his first window, and it is said to be the question with which bridegrooms quiz themselves before the altar" (148). The Bible states that the Messiah will come as a thief in the night (for example, 1 Thess. 5.2) and often is likened to a bridegroom (for example, Matt. 9.15).

ABSTRACTS

Cet article propose une lecture comparée de "The Loudest Voice" et de "The Conversion of the Jews", deux nouvelles de jeunesse dans lesquelles Grace Paley et Philip Roth traitent gdf gf2016-03-04T16:29:00ggde problématiques similaires : être juif en Amérique, se soumettre ou se rebeller vis-à-vis de la communauté et de la société. Les deux nouvelles donnent la parole à des enfants qui abordent les questions religieuses avec une certaine innocence, non dépourvue de sagesse. L'humour, l'ironie et la subversion qui se dégagent de ces voix préfigurent les thématiques et les aspects formels propres aux ouvrages de gdf gf2016-03-04T16:29:00ggla maturité de Grace Paley et de Philip Roth.

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