


inherently uprooted. While Diaspora had been central to the Jewish imagination since the Second Temple's destruction, this was different. Sholem Aleichem's writing articulated the difference between being away from a place and being *no* place. The writer's *Railroad Stories* employed that churning, smoke-breathing symbol of modern times to perfection, presenting a new natural habitat for the Jews of Europe: nowhere and everywhere. The writer's final masterpiece, "Tales of A Thousand and One Nights," put the emphasis on nowhere. A chronicle of Yiddishland's devastation during the Great War, caught as it was between Russia and Germany, the story raises a dark prospect tragically fulfilled by history and brilliantly, elegiacally explored by a second great Yiddish writer, Isaac Bashevis Singer.

Singer, living in a fast-deteriorating Poland, was brought to America in the mid-1930s by his brother Israel Joshua and by the publisher of the *Forverts*, Abraham Cahan. But it took Singer years to recover the literary momentum and promise he'd displayed with his brilliant and terrifying first novel, *Satan in Goray*. The reasons had everything to do with forced homelessness — but a far different kind of homelessness than the unmooring infused in the writing of Sholem Aleichem.

In his controversial essay "Problems of Yiddish Prose in America," written as the war was at its height, Singer claimed, bluntly, that to write Yiddish literature in America was impossible. Language and cultural milieu — and place — were linked inextricably; Yiddish belonged to

Europe, to Yiddishland. The corollaries were startlingly clear. American Yiddish literature was a contradiction in terms (even as Singer typed his Yiddish essay in New York); and the only other option — writing about Yiddish culture in situ — was increasingly, brutally, a thing of the past. To evaluate the merits of the argument on its own terms is irrelevant. It captured Singer's own psyche and silenced him. Ultimately, he found a solution that worked brilliantly for him and eventually shaped the history of Yiddish literature — indeed, of Jewish memory. He embraced his irrelevance to his current context, and rendered himself largely — if not entirely — of the place he had left behind.

Unlike Sholem Aleichem, who served as an interpreter and mirror of a former place, which required an audience (and events had rendered that impossible), Singer understood that a different audience required a different role for him. He became an elegist, a witness spirit, and a living ghost. Even as his earthiness, his wit, and his spry media presence rendered him a vibrant, vital part of American culture — not just of American-Jewish or Yiddish culture — in the third quarter of the 20th century, his appeal depended on his being there and not there at the same time. While his Nobel Prize may have come from the West, it was only because his heart, as it were, was in Eastern Europe.

The history and legacy of Yiddish is unimaginable without these two major writers' careers and fortunes. America was home and haven to both; but it only mattered because, in some essential way, it served as neither. 

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The Place of Place

JENNIFER GLASER

"The world is, minimally and forever, a place-world." — Edward Casey

Where were you born? How many times have you moved? What makes a place special? When you travel, what makes you feel at home? Could we live, but not live *anywhere*?

Over the past several years, there has been a renewed interest in the role that place plays in Jewish life. It follows a general Western re-thinking of identity from one in which identity is situated in a set of mental contents (the mind-body split in which "who I am" is given by my value system or a set of beliefs, that are only incidentally housed in a body), to a more

holistic approach that takes our physical presence in the world more fully into account. This approach sees mind and body as aspects of a single, whole person, (whereby "who I am" is at least in part determined by my actions, my relationships, and the physical environment in which I live).

We might say that if modernity's focus was on space/time, the contemporary focus is on place/temporal experience, and with it, on notions of dwelling, inhabiting, and heritage. With this new focus comes an acknowledgement of the role of place in building individual as well

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as social and communal identities. On an individual level, this has meant reclaiming the importance of our body in thinking about identity and, with it, Jewish identity. Not only are our bodies the most intimate “place” we inhabit, but through our body’s movement in space we express meaning in our daily lives and experience the world around us.

Place is space embedded with meaning.

Communally, we have just begun to puzzle over what this means for collective identity. We are beginning to pay increasing attention to the way our communities are located in and shaped by their physical environments, the patterns of movement and the historical meanings that are embedded in place. Asking where someone was born is not merely a conversation starter; it offers us a window into the internalized patterns through which an individual organizes and negotiates the world. (Would I be the same person if I had spent my childhood years growing up in Paris, France, rather than Paris, Texas?)

Attending to place helps us not only to attend to the origins and construction of Jewish cultural and social diversity, but also to explore the ways in which our physical environment affects our identity in the details of everyday life. In what ways does the architecture of a school impact a student’s experience? Does the architecture of a synagogue make Judaism seem grand or intimate? What effect does this have on the Jewish experience and identity of its members? What purposes and commitments are put forward through our design and furnishing of the spaces we inhabit?

Much of the work on place is happening in the field of geography, and there is a growing Jewish interest in applying its insights to our thinking about Jewish identity, community, and peoplehood. In a beautiful book titled *Space and Place*, the American geographer Yi-Fu Tuan distinguishes between space as movement and place as rest (a pause, a dwelling). Place is space embedded with meaning. We all know the difference between a house and a home: A house is a physical set of spatial parameters, while a home emerges from a life of meaning lived within that spatial/temporal framework. To come home is more than to come to a specific building; it is to come back to one’s center, to the interpretative structures, even the obstacles, that lead us to navigate our lives in a cer-

tain way. We might say that the challenge of Jewish education today is to make Judaism a “home” in the lives of the next generation.

In this overview, I will focus on three interests that emerge in current writings on place.

The first concerns the way physical form shapes our cultural imagination. Our relation to geographic place is three dimensional, and the contours of this space shape our orientation in the world. When I visited Cape Town, South Africa, for example, I was intrigued by the way people there spoke about the surrounding hills. The hills gave them a feeling of nestedness, even constraint, while at the same time leading their eyes ever upward. They shared the ways in which this experience contributed to the spiritual life of their community. The experience of growing up in Australia was different; there, the eye was led outward, toward an expansive horizon. In Israel, geography shapes our interpretation of both the desert and the Mediterranean shore. In the Jewish textual imagination, the desert carries with it the experience of awe, fragility, timelessness, and spiritual encounter. Yet in modern Zionist terms, the desert was considered a void — an untamed landscape awaiting settlement, thereby transforming mythic space into new modern dwelling places.¹ Urban spaces, too, capture different meanings of place: Tel Aviv’s White City sits in contrast to Jerusalem’s City of Gold. Jewish place is open to an additional dimension. It can be *makom* or *HaMakom*: a place in which God dwells, a name for God, “the place” as an orienting center. *Makom* brings with it the politics of dwelling: sharing place, dividing place, multiple expressions of allegiance.

The physicality of place shapes our imagination at a micro, or bodily, level as well. Gestures and actions become internalized as meaning structures through which we relate to the world around us. High/low, left/right, in/out, inhale/exhale, hold/release, gather/scatter: “All my limbs shall say ‘Who is like You, O Lord?’” (Psalms, 35:10) The choreography of prayer — sitting, standing, bowing in the *amidah*, rising for kaddish, sitting in the *sukkah*, *shucklen*, placing one’s hands on one’s children’s heads with a Shabbat blessing, and sitting in the same seat around the table each Friday night. Our bodies turn space into sites of meaning.

In *The Poetics of Space*, French philosopher Gaston Bachelard speaks to the way home constitutes a cultural space of meaning, identity,

¹ Yael Zerubavel, “Desert and Settlement: Space Metaphors and Symbolic Landscapes in the Yishuv and Early Israeli Culture,” in *Jewish Topographies: Visions of Space, Traditions of Place*, Julia Brauch, author/editor, and Anna Lipphardt and Alexandra Nocke, editors, pp.201-222, (Ulster, U.K., Ashgate) 2008

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and memory. My grandmother's side table, the family's *kiddush* cup and candlesticks, the contents of the bookshelf and the kitchen, cupboards of clothing (the *shtreimel*, the knitted *kippah*, or the kibbutz shirt), items from our travels, all embody our personal narrative. The home also reflects the place where one is in life; it conveys socioeconomic and family cues transmitted through choices of fabric, furnishings, and style. Home is not just physical, but sensual; it is transported through the melodies we sing, through spices, through festivities and through the telling of stories. It travels with the immigrant, reflecting individual experiences, collective history, and socioeconomic standing: a poor man's gefilte fish, the numerous traditions of *charoset*. All these place us within the kaleidoscope of Jewish possibilities.

The architecture of place also reflects changing social values — a changing relationship between public and private, vertical to horizontal authority; and this, too, has entered the intimacy of the home. For example, the open-plan kitchen reflects shifting attitudes toward gender and family life, giving expression to changing sensibilities about what should be visible and what should be kept behind closed doors.

Place is also an internalized metaphor. In the European context, the idea of the family

home was a multigenerational space where people connected through genealogy, and those who dwelt with them merged in the shared house, or *casa*. The house established occupations and passed on traditions.² Such homes, as sites of meaning, are challenged by modern mobility. In the American experience of constant movement — to college, to work, or to another job in another city — home ceases to be constitutive of a multigenerational identity. Place becomes contracted, carried in one's travels through symbolic items that transport a narrative *from* place to place — the immigrant's experience naturalized.

A third contemporary interest in place is in the textured traces of Jewish presence as it has permeated local history and culture in the public domain. For example, traces of occupations and industries (the fur and clothing districts), the stories of street names, the history of old stones used in new walls, the doorpost with its niche for a mezuzah — all carry traces of Jewish place memory. Shifting Jewish neighborhoods as well as our cemeteries and historic sites remind us of Jewish worlds nested in a larger civic sphere.

Through all of this, we as Jews seek to find our place in the world and to build a world in a place. Place is space embedded with meaning. 



² Joelle Bahloul, "The Memory House: Time and Place in Jewish Immigrant Culture in France," in *HouseLife: Space, place and family in Europe*, eds. Donna Birdwell-Pheasant and Denise Lawrence-Zuñiga, pp. 239-250, (Oxford, UK., Berg)

Untitled, Tel Aviv 2012

BARBARA E. MANN

The new wing of the Tel Aviv Museum opened last November to quite a bit of noise. The building — which had been contemplated, planned, and constructed over the last decade or so — has since been both duly celebrated and condemned (the reaction of *Haaretz's* architecture critic was not atypical: She called it "a beautiful waste of space.") On the one hand, the museum feels like a grown-up museum in a city that has become a major international cultural destination. On the other hand, the building resembles, in some respects, other recently built modern art museums. This brings us to a question: What is the relation between an art museum and local architectural norms? Does this relationship have a different meaning in Israel, where the built environment is often contested, and where there exists a long-standing critical discussion about architecture and its local roots,

or lack thereof? Would such a blatantly post-modern and almost neutral box of a building have been less of an issue if the surrounding architectural fabric was less contested? More self-assured?

The timing of the opening of the museum's new wing also affected how it was received. The building opened in the wake of last summer's social protests, and many could not help but sense the disparity between the version of Tel Aviv offered in the name of the new wing — postmodern in spirit, high-flying, "glocal" (in the phrasing of the new exhibit) — and the version of the city that had actually occupied the headlines for most of the summer — economically strapped, progressive, and vociferously demanding a return to the benefits of Israel's historic social net. In fact, some artists protested on the plaza in front of the museum — an outgrowth, as it were, of the

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REVIEW

Please see a review of Barbara E. Mann's new book, *Space and Place in Jewish Studies*, on p. 16.