

An Illusion of Seamlessness

Josh Rolnick: As a writer of fiction, do you think of your work, in the broadest sense, as translating — and why or why not?

Tova Mirvis: There is often the sense that fiction is translating life onto the page. When people read fiction, they often assume that the page is exactly as life is, but the writer always takes the language of life and shapes it into a novel or a story; it has a different shape than life itself has.

Josh Rolnick: Obviously, though, you must work to make the writing appear authentic.

Tova Mirvis: “Authentic” is a complicated question. Though fiction is made up, I use life as my raw material, beginning with a spark or snippet that comes from real life — and mix that with imaginative thinking. The magic of fiction is that it’s all made up and yet it feels real. As a writer, I can translate it for the page, the story. Life is not narrative; we create narrative out of our lives through recollection. Life is broader and messier and episodic.

Josh Rolnick: When I finished reading *The Outside World*, I felt very emotional. In the final scene, the family is finally together, yet they’re also individuals with different and competing trajectories; they have different doubts, different yearnings. I thought of my own life, my own yearnings, and how complicated it all is. How do you use a writer’s toolbox to translate the complexities of life into a work of fiction?

Tova Mirvis: That life is complicated is what moves me as a writer. I’m very interested in the outer presentation of the so-called orderly life, certainly in religious communities. It looks like everything lines up neatly, but the inner world is teeming with so many more complicated things. While structure enables me to think about character and dialogue and how I’m building my book, imposing it runs the risk of a rigid translation. We lose some of the loose ends, which are so much of what life is about. The characters travel an arc, even if it’s a broad arc, sometimes crisscrossing the book. Real people are traveling many arcs at once or we’re not changing, not moving. Imposing structure or shape runs the risk of simplifying because life is messier.

Josh Rolnick: In her book *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott writes: “When writers make us shake our heads with the exactness of their prose and their truths and even make us laugh

about ourselves or life, our buoyancy is restored. We are given a shot at dancing with or at least clapping along with the absurdity of life instead of being squashed by it over and over again.” I wonder if fiction can truly ever capture the absurdity of life, to use her phrase, or is there always some real separation — almost like a mechitzah — between lived experience and the words on the page?

That is the kind of mirror that I want to hold up; it is not an external mirror, but some kind of fantastical creation — an internal mirror where we see the mess of things that exists inside us.

Tova Mirvis: I often return to *Bird by Bird* to inspire my writing. Fiction at its best can capture some flickering moment of life. And then, when we read it on the page, reflected back at us, there is a moment when we find ourselves in a different place than where we are — we step out of ourselves to see ourselves in another character.

Josh Rolnick: Capturing a moment is ephemeral, but translating is very concrete — one language into another. Is there an ephemeral quality to this kind of translation?

Tova Mirvis: As a movie version of a book is always condensed, so is the novel version of life condensed. A novel rarely captures a character’s full inner-life experience. There would be a “too-much-ness”; so I think about how to grab a thought or image as a means of telling a fuller story.

Josh Rolnick: In *The Outside World*, Baruch and Tzippy are newlyweds and Baruch comes home after a long day of work at the grocery in Memphis and he’s talking about the meat and the chopped liver and they get under the covers and she pulls the covers over her head and makes a tent and says “hi” — creating an incredibly sweet moment of reconnection. And then you go back to their wedding night and the next four or five pages after that, we’re in another moment. You translate that authentic, wonderful newness of being a newlywed with just a line of dialogue, enabling a whole piece of the back story to unfold. Can you talk about how you know when to reveal and how you know when personal history becomes important to the front story?

Tova Mirvis is the author of two novels, *The Ladies Auxiliary* and *The Outside World*. Her essays have appeared in various anthologies and newspapers, including *The New York Times*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Poets and Writers*, and her fiction has been broadcast on National Public Radio. She is a visiting scholar at the Brandeis Women’s Studies Research Center. She lives in Newton, Mass., with her husband and three children.

Josh Rolnick, a fiction writer, is the publisher of *Sh’ma*. He has served as managing editor of *Moment* magazine and as editorial director of the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Three of his stories have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, and his most recent story, “Pulp and Paper,” appeared in the *Harvard Review*. Rolnick holds a master’s degree in fine arts from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. He lives in Akron, Ohio, with his wife and three children.

For a fuller version of this conversation, see www.shmadigital.com.

Tova Mirvis: It's finding the moment to reveal — knowing how far to go back, how to make a detour and then reconnect and re-enter the present-day moment. I always try to make it appear seamless, but while I am writing a scene, it feels like a puzzle; I'll have little pieces and sometimes my impulse is to put them in early on and then I sometimes feel like I should wait. Unlike life, a narrative requires that I move flashback moments around.

Josh Rolnick: In *The Outside World*, Naomi is sitting in shul and has something like a religious epiphany; she senses God close by. When Baruch is studying in yeshiva, he sees “the shadow of God peeking out from behind the words” — he, too, has a religious epiphany and “realizes that it was all true, it was true that God existed.” If I ever try to write about anything spiritually stirring in my own life — even in a journal — it loses its ineffable transcendent quality. Is writing about God and religious fervor different from writing about love, fear, lust, or any other emotion?

Tova Mirvis: The difficulty about writing about God has to do with contemporary times and expectations — to write in ways where it's not moralistic or sappy. We're conditioned to satirize moments of epiphany rather than help our readers enter into the experience. We're conditioned to doubt a character's belief in God in a way that we don't doubt a character who loves another person.

Josh Rolnick: Your book offered an incredible lens into an Orthodox world that I know very little about intimately. Do you see yourself as a translator for different segments of the Jewish community — for a more secular person to learn about Orthodoxy or for someone in the Orthodox community to experience secular Judaism?

Tova Mirvis: That does happen, but I have mixed feelings about it. It's a world filled with detail and language and ritual, so as a writer — or translator — I'm responsible for those details. I also have to think about how to translate phrases or words that would be awkward to use in English and still sound authentic. And of course the novel is not intended as an educational primer on Orthodox Judaism. I'm interested in the people, the experiences, what a character feels like. Some in the Orthodox world become anxious that readers will think that all Orthodox Jews respond as these particular characters do.

Josh Rolnick: The process of writing about

lives is always so messy. It is almost the opposite of seamless — though that's the end result. How does an accurate translation of life ever evolve from that chaos?

Tova Mirvis: John Gardner said that fiction should be a continuous dream. But for the writer, it is the most interrupted, fractured dream of all. It is the illusion of seamless that we're after, but the writing process is never seamless. A writer knows where things have been moved around. I know that my current first chapter didn't used to be my first chapter — the multiple drafts live on for the writer.


Josh Rolnick: The author Richard Ford said that the ultimate purpose of fiction makes readers *feel* something. It is not just edifying, entertaining, or educational; it is emotional for the reader as well. The very best novels and stories change readers by opening windows into our selves. It doesn't have to be a grand epiphany. It could be something small like, wow, I really miss my sister. But we feel. Do you believe one of the jobs of fiction is to hold up a mirror so that we learn something about who we are?

Tova Mirvis: I am probably obsessed with this idea of outer presentations and inner truths that are hidden away — that we're not allowed to see what goes on inside the jungle of feelings inside people's lives. That is the kind of mirror that I want to hold up; it is not an external mirror, but some kind of fantastical creation — an internal mirror where we get to see the mess of things that exists inside us.

Josh Rolnick: Can you talk about reading experiences that have been translational for you?

Tova Mirvis: I went to a small Orthodox high school in Memphis, and there read a book called *Catholic Girls*, an anthology about going to a Catholic high school. It was so outside my world and yet revealed a great deal of similarity. It was an experience of translation — making text accessible to someone who speaks a different language. Those fictional works translated that Catholic world into my own language, into my own experience. My desire to write might have grown out of a recognition that writers create those experiences.

Josh Rolnick: Do you ever learn something about yourself when reading your own work?

Tova Mirvis: Sometimes I feel like I'm cannibalizing myself — using experiences or memories or uncomfortable pieces of myself. I tell myself that I am just giving it to a character; it is not really me. This yields the most fertile fiction. 

Upcoming in Sh'ma

- Succession: How We Rebuild Jewish Leadership
- New Visions for Jewish Education
- Jewish Polarities
- Where does History Begin?
- New Jewish Identities: Trends on Inheritance, Identity Formation, and Ethnic-Religious Expressions

What Jewish conversation would you like to have? Send suggestions for future *Sh'ma* topics to SBerrin@shma.com.