OF BOOKS, MEN AND IDEAS

Maurice Wohlgelernter

Dr. Wohlgelernter, the Contributing Editor of this Department, is assistant professor of English at Yeshiva University and rabbi of the Inwood Jewish Center. The author of many articles and reviews, he is best known for his widely acclaimed book, *Israel Zangwill — A Study*.

BLOOD LIBEL — FACT AND FICTION

I

Of all the charges leveled against Jews, Blood Libel, "the accusation that Jewish religion calls for the ritualistic consumption of the blood of a Christian," is the most heinous. Born at about the time of the First Crusade in the middle of the twelfth century, this accusation has raised its ugly head periodically ever since then up to the turn of this century. The Russia of 1911, a land of absolutism and reaction, was the last to sponsor this recurring slander.

By an odd, though fortunate, circumstance two books* have recently appeared dealing with the case of Mendel Beiliss, a Jew in Russia, unjustly accused of ritual murder. One, factual, is so brilliantly executed that it reads like fiction; the other, fictional, is so beautifully rendered that it interprets fact. And what both relate is more than mere fact or fiction: they touch on destiny, the destiny of the Jew in our time. Both works, in fact, complement each other.

That the Beiliss case, unlike the Dreyfus, has received, despite the autobiographical account of the accused and an occasional monograph, such scant attention is an historical misfortune. This may be due, as Samuel points out, to a number of causes: it lacked the intrigue and complicated forgeries of the French theatrical production; it was followed closely by World War I "which swallowed it up and robbed it of its chance to settle into the public memory;" and, finally, its improbability, that is, not only "the inanity of the attempt to prove the Blood Accusation but also the entire structure of the conspiracy." Fortunately, this inattention has now been rectified.

In the hands of these masters— Samuel and Malamud — this case will not soon be forgotten. For what it reveals, among other things,

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Blood Accusation, by Maurice Samuel, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1966.
The Fixer, by Bernard Malamud, New York, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1966.

is not only that Russian officialdom engaged in rabid anti-Semitism and that hooligan groups like the Black Hundreds could, because of such trumped-up cases, stage with official approval programs of infinite variety, but also that a national government in, if not of, the twentieth century, could endorse "a bugaboo, a blood-stained superstition." Of course, our generation which witnessed the Nazi holocaust might be shocked or frightened at nothing. Nevertheless, even we, as shall become apparent, dare never again ignore the Beiliss case and its meaning for our time. To do so might be an act of national as well as personal peril.

II

What is the Beiliss case? In the Luknayovka slum districts of the sacred city of Kiev, better known as "the dark place" because of its "delinquency as well as ignorance and illiteracy," there lived both criminals and decent people. Among the latter was Mendel Beiliss, of whom "there was nothing to remember except that he was Mendel Beiliss." His Christian neighbors, the decent ones, who called him *"nash* Mendel" — our Mendel — had nothing but good to say of him. In fact, when a parochial school was being built in his district, Mendel persuaded his boss, the philanthropic Jew Zaaitsev, to contribute bricks at less than cost. So great was their respect for him that, despite official pressures, they refused to testify that this Jew, committed to kindness, could ever commit a crime of murder. It is interesting to note also, in light of the entire case, that Beiliss was not a religious person; it is even more striking, as Samuel clearly indicates, that "none of the Jews accused directly or indirectly, of complicity in the crime of religious fanaticism was particularly religious or particularly versed in the tradition."

Of the criminals versed in crime and murder who infested this district, Vera Cheberyak, a woman of ill-repute, was the most notorious. Free with her hands, she once blinded her French lover with sulfuric acid and, among other things, made her house headquarters for the local gangsters. Her youngest child — she poisoned her two elder children soon after Beiliss' arrest — Zhenya was a friend of Andrei (known by the diminutive as Andryushka) Yuschinsky, who knew, or at least was suspected of knowing, the goings-on in the Cheberyak house. On Sunday, March 20, 1911, young Andrei was found dead of forty-seven wounds on a site "about equidistant from Zhenya's home and the brickworks where the Jew Mendel Beiliss was employed and lived with his family."

Unable to find the killer or killers and determined not to be confused by the facts or lack of evidence, the state officials—Golubev, Ivanov, Shmakov, Vipper, Zamyslovsky and, above all, the notoriously evil Shcheglovitov — found Beiliss easy prey. The date was close to the Passover holiday, a matzoh left by a bearded visiting solicitor of charity funds was found in Beiliss' room; hence, by a non-sequitur, he had to be guilty. To be sure, there were some officials,

notably Krasovsky who, though otherwise "tough, persistent, crafty, and foresighted," had sufficient professional pride and integrity to realize soon enough that not Beiliss but Vera Cheberyak and her troika of gangsters, Pyotr Singayevsky, Ivan Latiphev and Boris Ruzinsky, were not only implicated but actually committed the murder. However, Krasovsky, like his assistant Kirichenko and the state prosecutor Brandorf, were, each in his own way, removed from the investigation. The prosecution, more anxious to start a pogrom than to convict Beiliss, pounced on their prey and ordered his arrest. In the dead of night, "a small expeditionary force of fifteen gendarmes headed by the local chief of the *okhrana* Colonel Kuliabko" marched this hapless, hopeless victim to the city jail where he languished for "two years [and] two months, before he was put on trial." Even the indictment, without which, in Russia, a defense attorney and staff cannot be solicited, took more than a year to be made public.

The defense was alerted in part by the Jews of Kiev, who learned, three months after the arrest, of the tragic circusmstances of their brother in sorrow. This defense force, with the execption of Oscar Gruzenberg, were all non-Jews: Karabchevsky, Vasily A. Miklahov, A. S. Zarudny, and Grigorovich-Barsky. Their learning was impressive; their knowledge of the law, encyclopedic; their ability at cross-examination, masterly; their reputation, beoynd dispute. But of what avail were all these credentials when these attorneys were forced to present their case before a jury, consisting, as one liberal journalist remarked at the time, of "seven peasants, three townsmen, two government clerks . . . for a university city the choice is certainly extraordinary."

The trial, which Samuel reconstructs with extraordinary brilliance, saw the judge, somewhat confused, confuse the jury even more. He placed, in his charge, two questions before them: "Was this a ritual murder, and was Beiliss the murderer. When you have answered yes to the first question, you will have to pass on the second. How you decide on the second question is a matter for your conscience." What emerged from their deliberation was as startling as it was revealing: they split their collective conscience. Anxious, apparently, to save the face of the government which, as the testimony against Beiliss began gradually to crumble, rested most of its case on ravings against Jews obtained from anti-Semitic literature of the lowest kind, the jury ruled Beiliss innocent but that a ritual murder had, nevertheless, been committed. To which Mr. Samuel, after subduing, as a true historian must, all personal emotions while presenting an objective review of this tragic event, finally bursts out with justifiable rancor: "Do it! Say openly: This is how the Blood Accusation is perpetuated. This is a classic example of the method by which the great lie has been perpetuated, and you, the administration and the prosecution, are the latest of the long line of provocateurs." And

the latest, as history teaches, may not, alas, be the last.

What emerges from this excellent description of a bloody story concerns not only the past but also the present. The Beiliss case is relevant, very relevant to our time. And Mr. Samuel draws our attention to its relevancy in a searing, soul-searching "Epilogue." In fact, if one were to offer any criticism of this remarkable book it would be the all too few pages the author devotes to this postscript. He should have said more, much more, about the lessons we learn from this black page in man's history.

And what are these lessons? First, the Beiliss case, however primitive and ill-timed, is an early illustration — predating the Hitler era by only some twenty years — "of the modern governmental use of the big lie, which must be distinguished from the traditional modes of lying common to governments and individuals. The big lie does not simply misstate facts: rather it aims at the subversion of the intelligence. It does not ask how plausible the lie appears in the eyes of informed people; it makes its assertions with brazen disregard for what is known and seeks by immense clamor, by vast rhythmic repetition, to make thinking impossible." What Shcheglovitov began in Russia, Himmler continued in Germany. And where, Mr. Samuel implies, next?

Second, this case is also instructive "as clarifying the design to subvert the moral in government, to establish the working rule that those in the service of the state must find their moral satisfaction exclusively in obedience to superiors who stand outside moral evaluation." Reviewing the villainies of this trial as well as Eichmann's testimony one perceives clearly the destructiveness of this twentieth century, and the depths to which civilized man could and did, in fact, sink.

Finally, Mr. Samuel warns, it would be perilous to place ourselves "outside the danger zone," or, if we believed "this or that noxious force to be worsted beyond the possibility of a resurgence in our midst." These lessons, however frightening, are no less true. And those, in particular, who, after witnessing the subversion of all morality in Nazi Germany, still seek an accommodation with its present heir, might well ponder them. The big lie can again, at any moment of national or international crisis, be used effectively, especially within the vast range of modern mass media, to subvert all reason and justice by perpetuating fasehoods long believed antediluvian. Witness the publication, not so long ago, by no less an august body than the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, of *Judaism Without Embellishment* or, say, any current issue of *Common Sense.*

As a historian, however, Mr. Samuel can, we know, only record and, as he does powerfully, interpret history; he cannot predict it. But now that he has placed us inside the "danger zone," we might deepen the understanding of our destiny by looking to the novelist who, because of his art and imagination, seizes, no less than the historian, the essence of personae

and movements and, in his own way, unifies chaos.

III

Whereas Samuel concentrates on the evidence and trial, Bernard Malamud in *The Fixer,* his best book to date, fixes our attention on the suffering in prison of Yakov Bok, the fictional Mendel Beiliss. So penetrating is his analysis of this suffering, and, simultaneously, the nature and destiny of modern man and modern Jew that Malamud adds considerably to his already eminent position among the distinguished novelists of our time.

To be sure, in transforming history into art, Malamud rearranges some details in the interests of necessary simplification—while the government's case against Beiliss, for example, rested on shabby evidence and was, as indicated, a mass of rabble-rousing anti-Semitic propaganda, Malamud, in order not to violate novelistic probability, has to invent shreds of supporting evidence which the prosecution can grasp at. There are, also, some changes in the actual circumstances, but, in the main, he follows the outline of the case as presented to us by the historian, Samuel.

Central to all of Malamud, with the exception of *The Natural* and, perhaps, one or two of the short stories, is, of course, the Jew and his Jewishness. For him, the Jew has always been a folk figure, at once "a *shlemiel,* the well-meaning bungler," and "a *shlimazel,* the hapless soul who is invariably at the wrong end of the bungling." It should be understood, however, that the Jew is not the stock comic property who adds color to a story but who, despite the troubles he invariably falls into, is as much to be pitied as laughed at.

And Jewishness, according to Malamud, means imprisonment. Nowhere is this seen better than in the life of Morris Bober in *The Assistant,* a simple Brooklyn grocer whose store is one of the best descriptions of claustrophobic containment anywhere in current fiction. "In twenty years the store had changed little. . . As a man, in America, he rarely saw the sky. In the early days when he drove a horse and wagon, yes, but not since his first store. In a store you were entombed." And when Leo, the cake man, was leaving one morning, he turns and hestitatingly says, "Bad all over, Morris," to which the latter answers dolefully, "Here is the worst."

The Jew, needless to say, tries to break the chains of his ghetto and escape his prison. Be it Bober or Fidelman, or Bok, the Jew must shatter his confinement. Departing from Kiev, the latter says to his father-in-law, Shmuel: "The *shtetel* is a prison. . . It moulders and the Jews moulder in it. Here we're all prisoners, I don't have to tell you, so it's time to try eslewhere. . ." He wants only to be left alone, to earn enough at "a job that pays rubles, not noodles . . . a full stomach now and then. Even some education if I can get it." But, arriving elsewhere, the *shlemiel* still gets nowhere, except into more trouble. Invariably, despite a good heart and good intentions, he bungles his way into hopeless situations. "That's what they live for . . .

to suffer."

And yet, however luckless and hopeless, this *shlemiel,* like all others in Malamud's fiction, assumes a moral stance which adds stature to his lowly station. He is committed to the world of men. "The world suffers. *He* felt every *schmerz.*" To be otherwise would have placed the Jews in the alternative pose which Malamud reserves for the manipulator—men like Karp, the liquor store neighbor in *The Assistant;* Gerald Gilley, the Cascadia professor scheming for the departmental chairmanship in *A New Life;* and Gronfein, who betrays Bok in *The Fixer.* The latter sums up the role of these cunning operators, who, to advance their fortune, remain aloof from men and circumstances while using them at will, saying: "Don't expect a moral man. . . It's every man for himself."

But Bober, like his fellow *shlemiels,* refuses to live only for himself. One day, he was robbed in the store by two local thugs, one of whom, Frank Alpine, an Italian whose patron saint is St. Francis of Asissi, comes, hungry and destitute, to work for the Jewish grocer. When, to his horror, Morris discovers the identity of his assistant, he does not call the police. On the contrary, because of his feeling for this Italian *shlemiel* and the general *weltschmerz,* Bober decides to shield him from the law. In fact, when confronted by the police with evidence that the Italian was a party to the holdup, Morris, feigning amnesia, refuses to identify him. And all because of his Jewishness which, according to Malamud, cannot be equated with being religious—in fact, none of his protagonists are keepers of the law—but, rather, with a kind of univeralism which, umbrella-like, covers every unfortunate human being. Bober may, therefore, be a kind of ghetto symbol of Jesus suffering for mankind.

However true this condition might be, Malamud, sensitive to history as well as art, understood, deep in his creative conscience, that suffering for all mankind alone cannot be equated with Jewishness. Nor is it the suffering of humiliated egos or the gnawing fears of poverty that makes one a Jew. It is the suffering of violence just for being a Jew, for being of the tribe of Abraham, for entering the covenant of being different — that is the distinguishing mark of Jewishness. Bok is tortured by inches, by attempted poisoning, by the obscene inventions of a jailer's sadism — these and similar punishments make him a Jew in Malamud's special sense — "a prisoner placed in progressively restricting confinement." And one must hastily add that Malamud also gives this suffering a new dimension: namely, one now suffers for his people. "If I must suffer," says Yakov, "let it be for something. Let it be for Shmuel." And let us recall, too, that if only Bok had confessed that not he alone committed the murder but that he was the agent of his fellow Jews in Kiev, he would have been freed from the shackles that tied his hands and feet to the wall. "Listen, Bok," says the prosecutor Grubeshov, "I speak to you for your

own good. Your position otherwise is hopeless. A confession by you will have more than one beneficial effect. For your fellow Jews it may prevent reprisals. . . Think it over, there are strong advantages for you. I am willing to see that you are secreted out of prison . . . to some country outside of Europe. This includes Palestine, America, or even Australia, if you choose to go there. I advise you to consider this most carefully."

Or, if he wished, he might, according to the priest who visited his cell, choose an alternative which would insure his immediate release: to accept the Christian faith. The priest is emphatic: "If you embrace Christ, you will have truly repented. He will save you from damnation. And if you are converted to the Orthodox faith, your captors will be compelled to reconsider their accusations and ultimately to release you as one of our brothers. Believe me, there is none so dear in the eyes of God as a Jew who admits he is in error and comes willingly to the true faith." And Bok, groaning with pain, summarily rejects both offers, with contempt. He would rather suffer for his faith and people.

Some critics — George P. Elliott and V. S. Pritchett, to name but two — have, to be sure, taken Malamud to task for assuming that "to suffer is to be Jewish." Historically, they argue, "all men suffer and very few are Jews." Metaphorically, they continue, it is no better: "though the Jewish people may have done better than most peoples at putting suffering to spiritual use, there is nothing exclusively Jewish about doing so." This may be true of the other works. But, in *The Fixer,* who ever said there was? Certainly, not Malamud. Had these critics read *this* novel more carefully, they should have realized that the good novelist, since he is sensitive and honest, also reads and, more, understands history. Malamud never claimed that *only* Jews suffer but, rather, that Jews throughout history have suffered *more* while gaining less. For when Yakov, for the ten thousandth time asks himself, "Why me?" he comes to the realization that personal fate — his various shortcomings and mistakes — and also the forces of circumstance have brought him to a new understanding of his role in life. "It shows history, which means what happens to somebody starts in a web of events outside the personal. It starts before he gets there. We're all in history, that's sure, but some are more than others, Jews more than some." And that, neither history nor, one fears, critics can deny.

IV

In any event, why did Malamud find the Beiliss case so attractive? And why, indeed, should he have found it a congenial subject? The reasons may not be too difficult to find. First, as Samuel has indicated, the Beiliss case was a "crude preview of the possibilities of the twentieth century." The big lie was used by a government not only to destroy an individual but, far worse, a whole nation. Genocide was added, in our time, to our life as well as our vocabulary. States, like men, can and do go insane.

Second, Beiliss himself fits well into Malamud's fictional world. He was, we know, a simple man, hard working, honest, and a prisoner of his fate. Above all, he was not particularly religious or versed in tradition and thus, capable of being the symbol for all of life's unfortunates. In addition, Bok, like all of Malamud's protagonists, felt the *weltshmerz* and committed himself to the world of men. This, naturally, makes him attractive to a novelist engaged in defining, among other things, Jewishness.

And, finally, of greatest significance is the fact that, for Malamud, 1911 may be 1942, the Beiliss case being the one event which best places Nazi Germany in sharp focus. To have attempted a work of fiction that would encompass the greatest tragedy of all time, the tragedy of six million, might have found even a Tolstoy inadequate. By concentrating our attention, instead, on one individual whose suffering is both real and symbolic, Malamud is able to delineate the madness of our times. To accuse anyone in the twentieth century of blood libel and order fifteen soldiers to make a false arrest in the middle of the night is not only 1911, 1942, 1984 but also, alas, 1966, both in mass societies as well as those parading as free. This frightening condition recommends itself to anyone interested in history, especially a serious contemporary novelist.

Just when this subject actually occurred to Malamud does not matter. One is tempted to conjecture that the reality of modern history and the enormity of Jewish suffering came to him when, in a writing grant, he went abroad during the early fifties and came face to face with the ruins of European Jewry. He saw the ashes and, apparently, changed. Be that as it may, what is important is that *The Fixer,* like his other fiction in most ways, is unlike it in some. His "Jewishness" is different. And the beginnings of this shift, it would appear, occur not in this new work but in that remarkable collection of short stories, *The Magic Barrel.*

In one of these stories, "The Lady of the Lake," generally agreed to be one of his lesser accomplishments, Malamud tells of a young man, Henry Levin, changed to Henry R. Freeman, who, fleeing the tourists of Paris, heads for Milan. A nature lover, he sees Lake Maggiore, loves it, and goes no further. On a visit to Isola del Dongo, a castle owned by one of the wealthiest Italian families of that name, Freeman spots a beautiful girl swimming in the waters nearby. Because of her beauty, she appears as a goddess in human form and spirit who, undoubtedly, owns that estate. At their very first meeting, she hesitantly asks: "Are you, perhaps, Jewish?" Because he did not look Jewish at all, and, afraid he might lose her, Freeman lied to her. At several other meetings, despite his genuine feelings of love, she repeats the same question, receiving, each time, the same denial. What bothered him, obviously, was "not so much the denial of being Jewish — what had it brought him but headaches, inferiorities, unhappy memories?— as the lie to the beloved." Finally,

she reveals her true identity: she is not a del Dongo but Isabella della Seta, the poor caretaker's daughter and, slowly unbuttoning her bodice, Freeman, expecting other things, discerns, to his horror, that "tattooed on the soft tender flesh [is] a bluish line of distorted numbers." It was carved in Buchenwald, she tells him, "when I was a little girl." She, thereupon, rejects his hand in marriage, saying: "I cannot marry you. We are Jews. My past is meaningful to me. I treasure what I suffered for." Moaning in disbelief, he is about to reveal his own true identity as a Jew, when she suddenly fades into "the veiled mist that had risen from the lake," while he is left standing "to embrace only moonlit stone."

This story, however contrived, contains thematically what later becomes fixed in *The Fixer*: namely, that one dare never deny his past and his history. To do so at any time is foolish; in our time, tragic. How can one possibly deny the most horrible sadism of all time? The Europe of World War II is not only burned on the skin of man but also in his spirit. And, what is worse, to reject the past destroys also love and hope and freedom.

The affirmation of history, however, is not, according to Malamud, enough! One must do something about it; one must fix what is broken. And this, in the final analysis, is the story of Yakov Bok. At first, he, too, would have loved to be like Karp and Gronfein, removed from circumstance. Questioned, for example, immediately after Zhenia's murder, he tells Bibikov, the lone sympathetic government investigator: "If I'm anything, I'm a peaceful man. 'Yakov,' I used to say to myself, 'there is too much violence in the world and if you're smart, you'll stay out of it.' It isn't for me. . ." Or, sitting in his dark prison cell, "his beard tormented, eyes red, head burning, the acid cold cracking his bones," Yakov, nauseated by his fate, thinks: "Escaping from the Pale he had at once been entrapped in prison. From birth a black horse had followed him, a Jewish nightmare. What was being a Jew but an everlasting curse? He was sick of their history, destiny, blood guilt."

Nevertheless, the prison teaches him the cold fact that he is, and must always remain, "a fixer." He must do something, anything, about this bloody world, where "Jewish blood is water," where "overnight life becomes worthless." First, he must, naturally, endure; he must "hold on, wait it out." His cause is just and he *will* win. And then, although he's only "half a Jew himself," he is enough of one to protect them. "After all, he knows the people; and he believes in their rights to be Jews and live in the world like men. He is against those who are against them. He will protect them to the extent that he can. This is his covenant with himself."

This lesson, interestingly enough, is first brought starkly to his attention by Bibikov. Falling asleep one night from pain and exhaustion, Bok, dreaming of the investigator, who, after being caught trying to

help Yakov by making contacts on the outside, commits suicide in this very prison, hears him say: "What you must watch out for is the sudden and unexpected peril, the apparently accidental . . . and if you should ever manage to get out of prison, keep in mind that the purpose of freedom is to create it for others." Bok must continue to be involved, to use his hands, to be a fixer.

This freedom demands sacrifice, not the sacrifice of the lamb to the slaughter but of the individual's natural inclination not to do, or fix, or become involved. Even as regards history, Yakov thinks to himself, "there are ways to reverse it." And it is foolhardy not only for the individual person but also the community to think that they can ever stand above battle. This lesson comes to Bok from his own defense attorney, Julius Ostrovsky, who tells him bitterly: "To my great regret some of our people shiver in every weather. We have organized a committee to help you but their caution is excessive. They're afraid to 'meddle' or there'll be another calamity. That's in itself a calamity. They shoot with popguns and run from the noise." Thus, Yakov, like his community, dares never to withdraw from the fray even if he has only a small thing to contribute. One dares do so only "at the risk of diminishing his humanity."

And this is what makes *The Fixer* Malamud's most powerful and best novel. He is able at once to join fact and symbol: the prison walls are not only in the "Lukianovsky District" of Kiev but wherever men are "entombed." (Shades of Byron's "Prisoner of Chillon"). There is much to be done that "demands the full capacities of our hearts and souls." Every life has value and if the law, as Bibikov reminds him, will not protect one it will, in the end, protect none, as his own life clearly showed.

It must, however, always be remembered that, even if Bok is the fictional symbol of the *shlemiel* who is committed to the *schmerz* of all mankind, he is here identified as a specific person, involved in the facts of a particular people, actively identifying with its history. This is the shift in Malamud's thinking which, it appears, gives this novel its power. He moves from the general to the particular, leaving us extremely interested and, because of his peerless mastery of style and form, passionately spent.

In his remarkable ability to gain insight into and even unify chaos, Malamud is anxious that we share Yakov's final thought as he leaves prison: "One thing I've learned, there's no such thing as an unpolitical man, especially a Jew. You can't be one without the other, that's clear enough. You can't sit still and be destroyed." Unlike *The Assistant,* Malamud is demanding in *The Fixer* that the Jew had better act decisively not only for mankind but for himself, lest his freedom, won only after endless suffering, might again, because of the irony of history, be lost. "Where there's no fight for it, there's no freedom," Yakov, heading for the fixed trial, concludes.

Catching a glimpse of the fixer, the reader, still in the "danger zone" but anxious to become involved, need only beware of the caprice of circumstance, in fact and fiction.