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Truly Jewish: Diasporic Identity and “Chosen Glory” in “Monte Sant’Angelo”

In her memoir *Unorthodox*, Deborah Feldman observes, “A Jew can never be a goy... even if they try to become one. They may dress like one, speak like one, live like one, but Jewishness is something that can never be erased” (96). Feldman’s intriguing perspective on her own Jewish identity parallels the major themes of Arthur Miller’s short story “Monte Sant’Angelo,” which explores the nature of Jewish identity. The story exhibits the modern concepts of diasporic identity, “chosen glory,” and “chosen trauma,” three psychological constructs that were developed after the short story was written. Nevertheless, these concepts help to interpret the psychological drama unfolding in the little village of Monte Sant’Angelo. Bernstein, a diasporic Ashkenazi Jew, struggles with his untraditional Jewish American heritage. The internal conflict burgeons as he watches his Italian friend Appello enthusiastically explore his ancestral village. But eventually, in this tiny Italian hamlet where “they all look like brothers” (Miller 560), Bernstein reckons with his Jewish identity. Through his experience with his friend Appello and the assimilated Italian Jew Mauro di Benedetto, Bernstein realizes that he will find identity security not by renouncing his Jewishness, but by embracing a diasporic identity and “chosen glory.”

Before he meets Mauro di Benedetto, Bernstein negatively compares his lack of a homeland to Appello’s eager exploration of his ancestral village. Throughout their adventures, Bernstein’s lack of connections in Europe keeps him from empathizing completely with his friend’s enthusiastic search for his connections in Italy (Miller 561). Appello finally asks, “Well, don’t you have any feeling about your ancestors? Wouldn’t you like to go back to Austria... and see where the old folks lived? Maybe find a family that belongs to your line...” (Miller 561). Surely, if Bernstein’s heritage were like Appello’s, he could do so. Tragically, many European

Jews lost their European homeland through centuries of persecution and emigration, finally punctuated by the Holocaust early in the twentieth century (Robinson 43). Bernstein's response starkly summarizes his lack of belonging: "I have no relatives that I know of in Europe...And if I had, they'd have all been wiped out by now" (Miller 561). Before World War II, there were 192,000 Jews in Austria (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum "Austria"). As persecution grew worse, many Austrian Jews fled the country. Those who stayed suffered the heinous cruelty of the Nazis' "Final Solution." Emigration and genocide reduced the Jewish population in Austria to a mere 7,000 by 1942 ("Austria"). These statistics confirm that Europe's violent expulsion of the Jews effectively effaced Bernstein's homeland from the continent. Hence, he envies his friend's sense of place and purpose: "At first he had taken the attitude that all the fuss was childish, and yet as incident after incident, landmark after old landmark, turned up echoing the name Appello, he gradually began to feel his friend combining with this history" (Miller 561). Appello has a place in the history of Italy, at the end of a long line of Appellos stretching back for millennia. Bernstein, on the other hand, has no place in Europe, not even a family cemetery to visit. When he observes Appello's close connection with his ancestral village, Bernstein feels this lack of a homeland profoundly.

Bernstein also feels a lack of connectedness and brotherhood after watching Appello's interview with his aunt. Jacobson acknowledges, "Bernstein senses an increasing distance between himself and his friend... The major factor that accentuates their separateness is the vast difference between their family backgrounds" (206). When he and Appello visit Appello's aunt, Bernstein is disturbed by the old woman's dramatic emotion and struggles to cope with the melodrama of the interview (Miller 563). She lavishes Appello with love, so overcome with joy at seeing him that she cannot control herself (Miller 563). Bernstein concludes that he does not

envy the effusiveness of the Appellos. He does, however, envy Appello's sense of family and belonging. He realizes that his own life lacks the strong family ties that Appello seems to take for granted (Miller 563). As he watches Appello's interaction with his aunt, Bernstein realizes that "some part of him [is] not plugged in" (Miller 563). He covets Appello's sense of belonging and longs to share a similar sense of wholeness. Indeed, Bernstein's diasporic Jewish background precludes a traditional identity. Baron affirms this distinction in his discussion of the unique circumstances of the Jewish heritage: "Diaspora communities... [are] members of at least two political and geographical communities at once: the state where they reside and their people or kin abroad" (295). As a Jew and an American, Bernstein must establish his own unique identity. He cannot belong in the same way that Appello belongs in Monte Sant'Angelo, nor does he want to. Nevertheless, reflecting on Appello's family situation makes Bernstein sensitive to his own lack of brotherhood and belonging.

Bernstein also considers his Jewish background inferior to Appello's extensive heritage. After meeting his aunt, Appello goes searching for his family crypt beneath the monastery. The search puts him in a reflective mood, and he imagines the glorious deeds of his forefathers: "They might have even ridden horseback down there, in armor—Appellos" (Miller 564). The contemplative observation profoundly impacts Bernstein, who immediately feels "alone, desolate as the dried-out chalk sides of this broken pillar he stood upon" (Miller 564). By now, Bernstein has completely discarded his initial indifference toward ancestry, acutely aware of the rapture his friend is experiencing. Faced with Appello's filial pride, he pessimistically compares his own background to the illustrious exploits of the Appellos, concluding that "certainly there had been no knights in his family" (Miller 564). Appello prides himself on belonging to the long line of Appellos, a "distinctly honorable" name (Miller 561). Some of his ancestors were famous monks

(Miller 561). He imagines that others were brave knights. Bernstein mentally contrasts this pride with his sense of shame about his father's stories of Europe. Plain and unimpressive, they reflect a dreary, miserable existence composed of "a common water barrel, a town idiot, a baron who lived nearby" (Miller 564). Bernstein laments that these stories "[have] nothing to do with *him*" (Miller 564). Whereas Appello's ancestors passed down an immaterial heritage of pride and self-satisfaction to their progeny, Bernstein believes his ancestors have left him nothing but shame and insignificance. Without this immaterial legacy to bind him to his forefathers, Bernstein feels as if he has no ties to any meaningful past.

In an attempt to resolve his search for identity security, Bernstein briefly decides to escape his shameful Jewish heritage and tries unsuccessfully to replace it with his Americanness. His decision is driven by his overpowering conviction that there is "no pride, no pride in [his Jewish heritage] at all" (Miller 564). He has no knights in his family line, no exotic land to call his ancestral home, not even any distant relations to visit in Europe. Bernstein, convinced that a proper cultural identity must include these elements, decides that he would rather not call himself a Jew because the fragmentariness of that identity is too painful (Miller 564). Yet as soon as he tries to identify solely as an American, he realizes that the effort is futile: he can find no pride in his American heritage either (Miller 564). Bernstein is not merely American, any more than Appello is only American or only Italian. Thus, Bernstein cannot ignore his Jewishness, whether or not he likes it. Appello serves as a non-Jewish example of what Bernstein's dual identity might look like by "maintain[ing] his identity as an American but also enjoy[ing] status as a 'son of Italy'" (Jacobson 206). Unlike his friend, Bernstein feels more like an adopted child who discovers that "he entered his house not from warmth, but from the street," an analogy that derisively equates his Jewish background to the life of a homeless urchin (Miller 565).

Nevertheless, further fragmenting his own background will not solve Bernstein's problem.

Ironically, attempting to discard his Jewish heritage proves to Bernstein that he cannot escape his Jewishness. Instead of dismissing his supposedly disappointing Jewish heritage, he must learn to exist in a cultural plurality, embracing both the Jewish and the American aspects of his identity.

Bernstein longs to belong in a homeland the way that Appello belongs in Italy, but he must come to terms with his unique situation as a member of the Jewish diaspora. Although Bernstein perceives the homeland to be a central part of an appropriate, normal identity, Blumer dismisses "the centrality of the homeland, and the creation and fixity of boundaries" as "the classic version of diaspora" and asserts that the concept of diasporic identity has developed beyond this point to embrace "multiple belongings and movement; by de-centring [*sic*] the primacy of the homeland..." (1332). Bernstein's struggles suggest that he has a classic conception of the diaspora, which emphasizes the longing for a homeland. Indeed, Robin Cohen's construct of diasporic identity lists "an idealization of the real or imagined ancestral home" as one of the central characteristics of a diasporic identity (36). However, other theorists clearly disagree, arguing that a diasporic identity embraces a more dualistic sense of the homeland, encompassing elements of the host country as well as the homeland. For instance, Baron claims that diasporic groups are unique because they are "always potentially at home in more than one place" (298). The details of the narrative clearly suggest that Bernstein must realize this plurality of identity. His excessive focus on the need for a homeland is inappropriate because he cannot do anything to change his past and establish an ancestral homeland. To become content with his Jewish heritage, he must shift his focus away from the need for one specific homeland.

Rather than lamenting his lack of traditional brotherhood among fellow countrymen, Bernstein must recognize that he shares brotherhood with both his fellow Jews and his fellow Americans. At the beginning of the story, this concept of cross-cultural brotherhood briefly occurs to Appello, who has the odd impression that he and Bernstein “resembl[e] each other” (Miller 561). Although his friend experiences a fleeting sense of their brotherhood as Americans, Bernstein misses it completely and feels utterly isolated (Miller 564). Sinclair and Lewis, in their study of the cultural identity of young Jewish adults, concluded that a Jewish sense of belonging has two dimensions: “kinship and connection” and “awareness of social difference” (100). Bernstein has clearly achieved the latter; he keenly senses of the difference between himself and Appello. Unfortunately, he remains emotionally crippled because he lacks a sense of kinship. He is impatient with Appello’s search for his family crypt. When his friend asks if he will help him search, Bernstein lamely tries to avoid going: “This is no place for me to get pneumonia” (Miller 564). Bernstein’s reluctance implies that he has erected an emotional barrier between himself and Appello to avoid feeling his painful lack of belonging. The isolation Bernstein enforces upon himself often characterizes diasporic peoples, whose members often identify more closely with their dispersed people than with their fellow citizens in the host country (Cohen 36). Baron suggests that Cohen’s assertion does not apply to every diaspora. Sometimes, diaspora groups successfully cultivate a sense of belonging within both their diaspora community and their host country (Baron 305). Bernstein has not yet progressed to this point. In order to achieve contentment with his Jewish-American heritage, Bernstein must realize he belongs within both cultures.

Ultimately, instead of emphasizing the “chosen trauma” of his heritage, Bernstein must focus on “chosen glory” to reconcile his dual identity. The terminology “chosen trauma” and

“chosen glory” come from Vamik Volkan’s social group theory, which Howard Stein applies to the collective experience of the Jewish people in diaspora (Stein 236). Thus far, Bernstein has expressed a pessimistic view of his heritage, scornfully reducing it to “a common water barrel, a town idiot, a baron who lived nearby” (Miller 564). This scornful description fits what Volkan labels “chosen trauma.” The term signifies “the mental representation of an event that has caused a large group to...feel helpless and victimized...and share a humiliating injury” (Volkan qtd. in Stein 238). Stein notes that when a group experiences “chosen trauma,” they may project the tragedy of a whole history of trauma onto one tragic event and act as though they had personally experienced the past event. Borrowing Volkan’s terminology, Stein refers to this phenomenon as “time collapse” (Stein 242-3). Bernstein follows this thought pattern, repeatedly recalling his father’s village and personally experiencing the shame of his ancestors’ insignificance. To find security, Bernstein must escape his “chosen trauma” and structure his identity around “chosen glory,” which signifies the “ritualistic recollections of events and heroes whose mental representations include a shared feeling of success and triumph” (Volkan qtd. in Stein 238). As long as Bernstein views his Jewish heritage as “chosen trauma” and ignores “chosen glory,” he will not escape his frustration and insecurity.

The assimilated Jew Mauro di Benedetto enters the story near its conclusion, drawing the tale to its climax as the catalyst who transforms Bernstein’s perception of his Jewish identity. Bernstein’s longing for a homeland disappears from the story after he encounters Benedetto in the restaurant and watches the Italian Jew model his own secure diasporic identity. Benedetto’s manner and appearance demonstrate his clear attachment to his adopted country. He speaks Italian, and from Bernstein’s perspective, even looks “Sicilian” (Miller 565). Through his concern for the waitress’s mother, Benedetto asserts his place within the community. He clearly

cares about the welfare of his fellow villagers, and they care about him. He identifies so completely with his host land that he has forgotten any other homeland. When Bernstein asks if he is Jewish, Benedetto responds, “Are they Catholics? The Hebrews?” (Miller 568). Benedetto cannot imagine having an identity that contradicts the traditions of his adopted homeland, Italy. In his mind, if he is a Jew, Jews must be a sect of Catholics. Christina Bettin maintains that such complete assimilation reflects the historical reaction of some Italian Jews, who mentally replaced their ancestral homeland, Israel, with Italy (331). Benedetto has embraced Italy as his homeland, conforming to Italian dress, manners, and religion.

Although at first astounded by Benedetto’s profound assimilation, Bernstein eventually achieves his own sense of homeland through the encounter. As they leave the restaurant and return to the church crypt, Bernstein tells Appello, “You know a funny thing? I feel like—at home in this place. I can’t describe it” (Miller 569). The comment has a two-fold significance. First, it demonstrates a sense of belonging within a foreign culture. Bernstein has achieved a sense of place in the middle of an Italian village, even though Monte Sant’Angelo has no connection to him or to his Austrian ancestors. More significantly, he makes his observation while standing in a Catholic crypt, his Jewishness unthreatened by the Italian religious heritage that surrounds him. Rather, he feels proud that “beneath the brainless crush of history a Jew had secretly survived, shorn of his consciousness, but forever caught by that final impudence of a Saturday Sabbath in a Catholic country” (Miller 569). Benedetto’s Italian identity, with its subversive Jewish undercurrent, overcomes Bernstein’s insecurity about his homeland by proving that Jewishness does not depend on a physical homeland.

Bernstein’s transformational encounter with Benedetto also gives him a new sense of Jewish brotherhood. The change happens so quickly that the alteration in his character seems

incredible. When Benedetto first enters the restaurant, Bernstein has an instantaneous and unmistakable impression that he already knows him (Miller 565). Desafy-Grignard explains the feeling as “those mysterious bonds, feelings and thoughts a Jew shares with his Jewish brothers and sisters” (4). Certainly, Bernstein’s feeling transcends external bonds, since he has never met Benedetto before. The uncanny impression illustrates what Baron labels “diasporic security,” that is, the sense of personal identity that characterizes displaced people groups. Baron writes, “Diasporic security reflects the geographical experience of being a member of a trans-state community, of having a fluid identity that is shaped by sometimes contradictory discourses emanating from a community that resides both at home and abroad” (292). As a fellow Ashkenazi Jew, Benedetto connects Bernstein to this diasporic security. Although the two men have never met, and do not share the same culture, language, or life experiences, they are brothers because of their Jewish identity. This common diasporic heritage, Robinson explains, confirms that “meaning resides not simply in the ancestors, but in the connection to their living descendants” (41). Bernstein’s personal connection with Benedetto, a complete stranger, strengthens his sense of belonging and brotherhood than a thousand family crypts could ever do. Through this human connection, Bernstein begins to find his place within the Jewish diasporic identity.

Thanks to Benedetto, Bernstein also finds a sense of brotherhood with Appello. Baron’s psychological theory confirms that this dual sense of brotherhood characterizes healthy diasporic identity, arguing that “diasporas...hold multiple narratives of belonging and peoplehood simultaneously” (295). Whereas he had emotionally distanced himself from Appello mere moments ago, Bernstein now welcomes Appello’s friendship. In the final scene, Bernstein’s response to Appello’s friendly touch emphasizes his new connection with his American friend:

“Bernstein had never liked anyone grasping him, but from this touch of a hand in the darkness, strangely, there was no implication of a hateful weakness” (Miller 570). Now secure in his Jewish identity, Bernstein destroys the interpersonal barriers he had erected to protect his formerly fragile identity. This new perspective leads him to more fully assimilate into the universal human community, as well as the Jewish community.

Finally, Benedetto unintentionally compels Bernstein to replace his “chosen trauma” with an unorthodox version of “chosen glory.” Before meeting Benedetto, Bernstein focused entirely on aspects of “chosen trauma” in his father’s stories about the old world and derived an inescapable sense of shame from his heritage. Benedetto’s mere existence turns that perspective on its head, because his Jewish identity has somehow survived “the brainless crush of history” (Miller 569). Rather than dwelling on the tragic aspects of Benedetto’s life, such as his indifference to his Jewishness, Bernstein regards Benedetto’s stubborn though unconscious Jewish identity as an example of “chosen glory,” a “final impudence of a Saturday Sabbath in a Catholic nation” (Miller 569). To Bernstein, Benedetto heroically exemplifies Jewish resiliency, as a man whose “very unawareness was proof, a proof as mute as stones, that a past lived” (Miller 569). Bernstein acts as though Benedetto’s silent Jewishness constitutes an example of “chosen glory,” insofar as he derives a sense of “success and triumph” from the knowledge that Benedetto exists (Volkan qtd. in Stein 238). However, this example of “chosen glory” contrasts with the details of Volkan’s psychological construct, which asserts that “chosen glories” often arise from a shared pinnacle in a group’s past experience, such as the construction of Solomon’s Temple in ancient Israel (Stein 241). Somehow, Bernstein achieves “chosen glory” without discovering anything new about his past. On the contrary, Benedetto’s long history in the obscure little Italian village shares quite a bit with Bernstein’s father’s pitiful common water

barrel. Hence, one would expect Benedetto's extreme assimilation to reinforce Bernstein's "chosen trauma." Yet the surreal encounter with the Italian Jew leads to "chosen glory" because the source of "chosen glory" may not lie in historical events, but in one's mental perception of them. As Volkan explains, "the historical truth about the event is no longer of psychological moment... what is important is the sense of being linked together" (qtd. in Stein 239). Bernstein's experience certainly supports this assertion. Leaving the restaurant, he senses "an ecstasy he had not imagined was part of his nature" as he imagines Benedetto making his mundane, tenacious Sabbath walk (Miller 569). He finds that "chosen glory" transforms his heritage from a source of shame to a source of pride.

The brief encounter revolutionizes Bernstein's attitude toward his homeland, his heritage, and his fellow man. Through a simple conversation, Bernstein is "no longer the outcast, the misfit, but a man with a proud though vicarious history" (Shepherd 204). Bernstein's visceral struggle with shame ends in triumphant security. At last, he embraces his diasporic identity and "chosen glory." Feldman insightfully summarizes Bernstein's newfound Jewish identity in discussing her own struggle with Jewish identity: "For a while, I thought I could un-Jew myself. Then I realized that being Jewish is not the ritual or the action. It is one's history. I am proud of being Jewish, because I think that's where my indomitable spirit comes from, passed down from ancestors who burned in the fires of persecution because of their blood, their faith. I am Jewish; I am invincible" (250). Likewise, Bernstein is now truly Jewish; he is invincible.

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