Charles University, Faculty of Education

Department of English Language and Literature

The roles of women in the works of two Jewish-American female authors - Rebecca Goldstein and Allegra Goodman

Author: Tereza Kozáková

Supervisor: Mgr. Jakub Ženíšek

Thesis handed in: April 14, 2006

Prohlášení o původnosti práce

Prohlašuji, že jsem diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně a že jsem uvedla veškerou použitou literaturu.

V Praze, dne 14. 4. 2006 Tereza Kozáková

Key words:

- Jewish-American context
- Female roles
- Assimilation
- Education
- Identity
- Preserving traditions and values
- Traditional community

Abbreviations:

- MBP: The Mind-Body Problem
- KF: Kaaterskill Falls

Contents

1. Introduction

Jewish – American literature has always been concerned with finding ways to reconcile two cultures. Some authors and novels present a closer look at the historical process of the Jewish people coming to the United States, settling there and founding their new homes. The traditions and values of the Jewish religion were what they brought with them to face the uneasy task of survival in the host culture. The works of two contemporary Jewish-American female writers, Rebecca Goldstein and Allegra Goodman, depict this historical situation. They reflect on the difficulties that Jewish people in America, and especially Jewish women, have had to deal with.

Since their arrival from various European countries to live in the diaspora, there have been several generations of Jewish people who grew to be more or less assimilated into the new environment and the new society. How painful has this process of assimilation been for Jewish women? Have their roles changed? How? Or have they succeeded in retaining the traditional Jewish ways of life in their communities? What have been the main difficulties of Jewish-American women? And what are their challenges today? The works of Rebecca Goldstein and Aliegra Goodman can help to answer these questions.

There have been several generations already living in the United States. The younger generations are now searching for connections with their roots and ancestors in order to find their identity. How thorny is the path back to the past? Is it easy to understand one's place in the world without knowing where one came from? Goldstein and Goodman bring up the issues of heritage – cultural heritage and personal heritage - that should be passed on in circumstances that invite people to forget and start anew. What is the importance of history and its role in one's identity? How do Jewish women respond to this? Jewish identity, female identity, assimilation and gender roles are the most prominent themes introduced by these two contemporary authors. They both have a lot to say about these issues and lead the reader to understand how difficult it is to find a new female identity within Judaism when the prevailing social environment is no longer Jewish.

2. Gender Roles in Judaism

The roles of men and women in the Jewish religion are set rather clearly in the Torah and especially in the Talmud, the interpretation of the Torah. It is apparent in the novels that are to be discussed, how the traditional role of a Jewish woman can be seen, interpreted or fought against. The female heroines of Goldstein's and Goodman's novels and stories try to cope with their gender roles within their religion, being well aware of its traditional Jewish concept. It is, therefore, important to clarify the main gender determiners in Judaism.

In the following chapter, the significant differences of the male and the female elements in the religion is going to be presented in several areas – the Torah, the different spheres of life, gender obligations and education.

2.1 Women in the Torah

Although the main codex of the Jewish law, the Torah, assigns a rather submissive role to a woman, there are two different approaches to the question of the importance of a woman in Judaism.

Judaism sees woman as a complementary counterpart to a man. Therefore, she is just as important as a man and thus equal. Some might even go as far as to say that a woman, who was created from a rib of a man, is therefore a being of a higher status as from the evolutionary perspective it was she who was created later and so of better qualities than a man.

Also, Judaism is often credited for recognizing woman's role before other cultures. In her study, Karla Goldman introduces the view of Kaufmann Kohler, one of the most influential and articulate shapers of American Jewish thought[1]:

"(Kohler)...praised the Jewish tradition for recognizing the merits of women in an age when other cultures had excluded them from all participation in community concerns. It was "only the Jewish religion" Kohler claimed, which "assigned woman a worthier place" and recognized that woman was of the same "flesh and the same ethical nature" as man. "Beginning with Biblical times," he wrote, "we find the Hebrew woman at once occupies a far more dignified position than do women of other nations."."[2]

[1] Goldman, Karla – Beyond the Synagogue Gallery (Finding a Place for Women in American Judaism), Harvard University Press, 2000, p. 152

[2] Goldman, Karla – Beyond the Synagogue Gallery (Finding a Place for Women in American Judaism), Harvard University Press, 2000, pp 153-154

2.2 The Public and the Private

The female and the male space in Judaism are rather strictly divided into the private and public spheres. The woman in her ideal fulfillment of the religion is limited to the private space. Her place is in the background of the formal and traditional Judaism.

The household is her domain where she occupies herself with many chores. In synagogues, women are traditionally seated in the women's section on the gallery, apart from the men who carry out the service on the ground floor, or in the back of the shul, behind their men. Their place is aside, away from the public space which is dominated by men.

Iris Parush points out that also in the biblical texts (Psalms and Proverbs cited with minor deviations from the King James Bible) the right place for woman is suggested:

"Being patriarchal, traditional Jewish society – in official outlook at least – relegated women to the domestic sphere. The ideal of the woman it held in view was that of a wife who "looketh well to the ways of her household" (Proverbs 31:27) and the passage from the Psalms, "the full glory of the king's daughter lies within" (Psalms 45:14), was often approvingly cited as an apt expression of this ideal of femininity. Men in this society were made responsible for ritual matters and for the realm of the spiritual, and the ideal of the man was that of the scholar bent over in the study at the "tent of Torah"."[3]

While the women were responsible for the household and the smooth management of the family, the men's occupation was a scholarly dedication to the study of the Torah. Men's daily life was bound to strictly assigned ritual prayers, whereas the women were not expected to follow the prayer schedule, the reason being their role as child bearers, educators and housewives, which was not

[3] Parush, Iris – Reading Jewish Women (Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Jewish Society), Brandeis University Press, 2004
Translated from Hebrew by Saadya Sternberg, p. 38

compatible with the order of the prayers. This division of life-spheres raises the question of leadership and formal success:

"Because women were not required to participate in public prayer, they were excluded from religious leadership. Someone who was not obligated to participate in prayer could not presume to serve as a leader for those who were so obligated."[4]

The success of women and their work is thus much harder to measure when it lies outside of public institutional life. Although their influence in the Jewish community might be outstanding, it is not easy to evaluate the seemingly peripheral part that the Jewish women represent in their religion:

"Historical observers focusing on women's experience within Jewish culture have also emphasized the importance of ordinary, undocumented lives that were, nevertheless, religiously vital and crucial to communal identity. Such experience has often been dismissed as peripheral because it fell outside the normative categories of institutional Judaism."[5]

This division of public and private is important in Judaism and is also a dichotomy that has been much discussed and challenged in modern theories of gender in general. In a Jewish context, it seems to be one of the main areas of women's struggle against the traditional Jewish system.

Their role does not allow them to be ambitious in any other sphere than in their households. When the motivation and yearning for a formally recognized success takes over a Jewish woman, as we will notice in the Jewish-American setting, the conflicting values bring on a chaos much unwanted in traditional Judaism.

---

[4] Goldman, Karla – Beyond the Synagogue Gallery (Finding a Place for Women in American Judaism), Harvard University Press, 2000, p. 5

[5] Goldman, Karla – Beyond the Synagogue Gallery (Finding a Place for Women in American Judaism), Harvard University Press, 2000, p. 6

2.3 The Obligations of Jewish Women

As stated above, the Jewish woman's place is restricted to the house and the private space. Her obligations are thus connected to family growth, household management, community work and the endless support of her husband and children. Barbara Myerhoff in her essay "Jewish comes up in you from the roots" formulates the obligations of a Jewish woman as follows:

"The woman was to bear and socialize the children and provide a harmonious home, conducive to the men's study and prayer. The woman had the exacting job of carrying out the dietary regulations according to the men's instructions and interpretations. Whenever possible, women worked outside the home, enabling their brothers, sons and husband to spend more time in religious study, providing the support system, the mundane base for the primary undertakings of the men."[6]

Though the Jewish woman, as Myerhoff puts it, and as we can witness in the novels of Goodman and Goldstein, is not only a housewife spending all her time in the house cleaning, washing and cooking according to the dietary laws, she is often also the financial manager of the family budget and a breadwinner, for her husband gives all his attention traditionally to scholarly work. In a further description of a woman's obligations, Myerhoff makes us believe the role of a woman is of a much higher importance, at least from the pragmatic point of view, than that of a Jewish man:

"She had to manage the household, earn the budget money, regulate time, funds, and attention within the family, make countless practical decisions, allocate labor, and organize and integrate family schedules, articulating the familial with the public demands."[7]

---

[6] Women's Studies – A Reader
Edited by Stevi Jackson, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993
Barbara Myerhoff: "Jewish comes up in you from the roots", p. 100

[7] Women's Studies – A Reader
Edited by Stevi Jackson, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993

However, there is a feeling of discrepancy. It is obvious that the role of a Jewish woman in the private space of the household and the community cannot be substituted. Yet, it is the men's assembly that is responsible for the community decisions and the publicly important matters that concern women as well. The female role is strictly assigned by the higher law of the Torah and controlled by men in Jewish society. The gender issue can be addressed here as a significant tool of making decisions and having the right to control.

As Iris Parush confirms in her research, "The patriarchal nature of this division of labor is self-evident."[8]

Barbara Myerhoff: "Jewish comes up in you from the roots", p. 101

[8] Parush, Iris – Reading Jewish Women (Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Jewish Society), Brandeis University Press, 2004
Translated from Hebrew by Saadya Sternberg, p. 39

2.4 Education

Education plays an important part in Judaism and as we will notice, both Goldstein and Goodman dedicate a considerable time and space in their works to this theme. The traditional role of a Jewish woman did not provide many opportunities for her education. On the contrary, it has always been a prominent occupation of Jewish men to study the Torah and the Talmud, to execute scholarly work and the proper religious rituals and prayers. Since women were left out of this holy service, their education was fully based on their practical needs:

"As I have previously noted, in traditional Jewish society Torah study played a central role in the construction of male gender identity. This function of the act of study was one reason why women were excluded from it. Yet paradoxically, that very exclusion made it easier for women to acquire the kind of education that could assist them in practical life."[9]

This separation of the male and female education had its strengths and weaknesses. Obviously, it kept women out of public life and scholarly aspirations as well as any leadership positions in the Jewish community. Yet, at the same time this female marginalization opened up the possibility for women to receive a rather secular education that led towards modernity and their better and easier assimilation:

"A curious conjunction of weakness and strength, of inferiority from the perspective of Jewish society and advantage from the perspective of modern society's values, opened a "window of opportunity" for certain groups of women, permitting them to learn foreign languages, to acquire a secular education, and to receive an exposure to modernity."[10]

---

[9] Parush, Iris – Reading Jewish Women (Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Jewish Society), Brandeis University Press, 2004
Translated from Hebrew by Saadya Sternberg, p. 71

[10] Ibid, p. 39

Without even knowing it, they were taking a step forward while their husbands were still buried in religious books in the yeshiva.

Iris Parush notices an advantage that women were given in their limited private role:

"...women were granted instruction in secular topics and foreign languages so as to be able to perform their functions as breadwinners, and ... this education at times surpassed that of the men in their families."[11]

Women with all their obligations needed to think pragmatically. The knowledge of languages and basic arithmetic served them in their lives better than the scholarly knowledge of their husbands. This can be seen as the key factor determining their earlier independence and adaptibility in the new environment and conditions.

"Where the mother's proficiency is in foreign languages and knowledge of arithmetic, the father's is confined to knowledge of Torah and Talmud."[12]

[11] Parush, Iris – Reading Jewish Women (Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Jewish Society), Brandeis University Press, 2004
Translated from Hebrew by Saadya Sternberg, p. 40

[12] Ibid, p. 42

3. From Jewish to American

The relation of the two cultures is a quintessential feature of the literature with which this thesis is concerned. The Jewish one has already had a long tradition, is deeply rooted and established, has its long and unfortunate history, and what is very important, it is based on an exact traditional set of laws and values which have been in use since this culture has existed. The other, American, culture has neither a long tradition, nor such a specific codex of laws. Its history and roots do not reach to the times of the Jewish culture.

It is not now desirable to compare the American Constitution to the laws of the Torah, or to try to evaluate whose struggles in the historical process have been more affecting and damaging to the culture. Nevertheless, the main differences can be easily traced.

The strongly established Jewish culture has to face the challenge of surviving in the conditions of another much younger culture. The advantages and disadvantages are obvious: the new culture is accepting and after all provides a safe place for the Jewish people and not only them. The "melting pot" that America has been offers a good possibility to find a place for Judaism. At the same time, isn't this turmoil with its new international culture a dangerous space for the old Jewish traditions? Is American culture threatening Judaism as well as offering new possibilities?

Jewish people trying to live their traditional Jewish lives in the American setting will have to face numerous obstacles arising from their cultural differences, as can be noticed in most of the works of Jewish-American authors as well as in those of Rebecca Goldstein and Aliegra Goodman.

3.1 Restructuring the Religion

In the process of settling down in America, Jews have had to cope with different expectations and social patterns. However, even American culture in the first half of the 20th century employed the gender patterns of public and private:

"The religious institutions to which Americanizing Jews turned as models of more appropriate gender ordering reflected a culture shaped by its own assumptions about the proper roles and behavior for middle-class American women. Here too, men's and women's roles were defined by distinctive, if evolving, notions of public and private."[13]

Yet it was not the law as much as conventions that restricted the roles. The rigid Jewish law put it rather clearly and while American women started to test conventions, Jewish women had much harder work in fighting the law which was given by the Torah and controlled by men. Yet, in moving to the American environment, Jewish women's position started to change. They recognized their opportunity and decided to take it, while at the same time they were also determined to keep the Jewish faith.

Also, the features of the American way of life that favored women had an immediate influence on the newly arriving Jews. They realized that to survive in the new conditions, at least a small change was inevitable.

"...to reconcile the rigidity of familiar Jewish practice with the similarly fixed expectations concerning the proper treatment of women, which were a fundamental feature of American gentility."[14]

Apparently, gender roles in American society did have a noticeable impact on the Jewish community. Although the Jewish communities started leading their own inner lives protected and guarded from the threatening influence of the outside

[13] Goldman, Karla – Beyond the Synagogue Gallery (Finding a Place for Women in American Judaism), Harvard University Press, 2000, p. 9
[14] Ibid, p. 12

world, it has never been entirely possible to keep one culture apart from another. As will be demonstrated later on in *Kaaterskill Falls*, a novel by Aliegra Goodman, the traditional life of a Jewish community can be eroded from the outside as well as from the inside.

Karla Goldman says on this topic:

"Inevitably, the Jewish community's aspirations to respectable religious, ethnic, race, and class identities in American life necessitated a restructuring in the position assigned to women in Jewish religious practice."[15]

The task of Jewish women to reconcile their religious traditions, new views of the gender roles and the American ways resulted in the feminist movements that were much influenced by Jewish-American women. Betty Friedan or Susan Brownmiller found it essencial to confront the gender aspects of their Jewish tradition in order to accept both feminism and Judaism. Their works that are primarily dealing with feministic issues might originate in the Jewish concept of a woman and its gradual change.

The task of Jewish women to reconcile their religious traditions, new views of gender roles and American ways can ultimately be seen to have had a huge influence on the feminist movement. For example, many of the leading figures of the "second wave" of feminism, including Betty Friedan, Susan Brownmiller, Shulamith Firestone, and Andrea Dworkin, were Jewish-American women.

[15] Ibid, p. 4

3.2 Degrees of Assimilation

Ever since Judaism had to deal with the changes brought on by the conflict of the two cultures, the question of assimilation has been very topical. To what extent could communities cut themselves off from outside influence? How can Jewish traditions, values and religion survive in the rather evasive American culture? Almost every Jew in America had to ask him or herself such a question. The issue of assimilation has been much discussed until the present days and as long as the Jewish-American people recognize these two conflicting principles in themselves, it will stay a problematic matter.

Much to the surprise of the male representatives of Judaism, it is their female couterparts that have played a crucial role in the uneasy process of assimilation.
As discussed above, the men's public obligations were very engaging and did not allow much contribution to the emotional life of the family or social background. It was the woman who dominated these fields that have become important. Also, the woman's peripheral place led to the opportunity to have a modern, non-Jewish education and opened a space for the incoming influences to which the women were very receptive.

As Irish Parush points out:

"Nor do the numbers alone indicate how influential the reading women were, as the marginal place in society that these women occupied created special opportunities and pathways for their influence. It is the combination of these factors that holds the key to understanding the unique role played by women as agents of change in Jewish society."[16]

By the term "reading women" Parush means the educated women who understood their situation and resolved to find a new place for themselves as those who could eventually make some, although restricted, decisions about their Jewish practice.

---

[16] Parush, Iris – Reading Jewish Women, Brandeis University Press, 2004
Translated from Hebrew by Saadya Sternberg, p. 96

While the boys were educated at the yeshiva by their fathers, the girls were left to their mothers' care and instruction. That is why the changes in Judaism in America were mostly introduced by women as daughters received the modern and in many ways pragmatic education of their mothers.

It should not be forgotten that the woman is traditionally the one who passes on the Jewish identity to her children. That is yet another important role of the woman, which can be broadly seen as passing on the heritage, both personal and cultural, that has a deeper sense for religion identity.

Outside of the home, a woman busied herself in several social community activities where there was yet another space for her to work on assimilation, often even unconsciously. Jewish women, through their traditional obligations, readily responded to the new trends prevailing in the host culture and before the men came home from the yeshiva, their minds were already working in a slightly more American mode.

4. *In Search of a New Female Identity*

The assimilation which played an important step in finding a safe place for Jews in their host culture meant also a crucial change in women's perception of the outer world and therefore of their own identity. Typically, the Jews coming from Europe were leaving closed lives in shtetls, the Jewish communities, which were no longer places of safety and protection. After their arrival in America, they found themselves in the new situation of establishing their new lives in new conditions. This step meant a big change for both men and women. Though, as discussed in the previous chapter, the receptiveness and traditional chores of Jewish women made them more sensitive to the idea of assimilation. To cope with the new situation the women needed to recreate their identities, much formed by the American society and conditions previously unheard of or not dealt with in the shtetl.

4.1 Identity Reconciliation

The practical life and obligations of Jewish women opened up many possibilities to accept American ways and make a good use of them. Women, more than men, were able to distinguish between the practical and religious aspects of Judaism. Soon they started realizing the new possibilities of work, which did not necessarily mean a loss or decline of their faith. This topic is going to be closely looked at in the thorough analysis of the works of Goldstein and Goodman as well as the whole issue of regaining a new female identity.

The formal structure of the religion and the traditional gender roles also started changing under the inevitable influence of American conventions. The female element started gaining a more prominent space as can be symbolically seen in the formal organization of synagogues:

"Because women in the synagogue started from a place of marginalization, if not exclusion, efforts to integrate women into the physical space and organizational structure of the synagogue provide an extremely sensitive barometer of Jewish perceptions of American gender ideals."[17]

Not only did the synagogues accommodate women in a more inviting manner but soon also education opened up and helped the further assimilation of the Jewish people, and significantly Jewish women, in America.

The attention shifted from male self-importance to the gradual importance of women. In the conditions of a new American society, the traditional values and concepts needed to be preserved. Apparently, it was a woman who, by her contribution to the family, children's upbringing and her social community work, carried the significant features of the Jewish identity. As Goldman puts it, "Women had preserved what was truly special about Jewish existence."[18]

---

[17] Goldman, Karla – Beyond the Synagogue Gallery (Finding a Place for Women in American Judaism), Harvard University Press, 2000, p. 10
[18] Ibid, p. 154

4.2 Psychological Differences

To help understand why the Jewish women showed a higher ability to receive the host culture better and faster than their male counterparts, one could refer to research that suggests some innate psychological determiners of men and women in general.

It may be claimed that gender differences are not only socially implied and maintained through the formal organization of a social or a religious structure. A series of psychological tests given to both men and women resulted in the following:

"{women's} style is *contextual* rather than analytic. As noted earlier, they have a more complex interdependent relationship with the world than men do. They are more "open" to influence, where men are "closed"."[19]

As demonstrated by the female acceptance of American culture, the female relationship with the world offers access to new useful incentives, which women have been ready to include in their concept of the world. That, for them, does not mean leaving out anything that had already constituted their identity, but to add something on. The analytical thinking rather typical of men leaves them closed to a surrounding context that women perceive. As David C. McClelland claims, "...women pay more attention to context, the *whole* picture, while men are abstracting something out of it..."[20]

Similarly, recent studies have tried to find out to what extent we can draw a line between the female and male brain and its functions. In his book *The Essential Difference*, Simon Baron-Cohen talks about the skills and abilities that all people have, regardless of gender. He claims that systematizing and empathizing skills are

---

[19] The Woman in America, Beacon Press, 1965
Edited by Robert Jay Lifton
Chapter "Wanted: A New Self-Image for Women" by David C. Mc Clelland, p. 180

[20] The Woman in America, Beacon Press, 1965
Edited by Robert Jay Lifton
Chapter "Wanted: A New Self-Image for Women" by David C. Mc Clelland, p. 181

common to all of us, yet women tend to have more empathizing skills than men and men, on the other hand, have more systematizing skills than women. Baron-Cohen calls them the "female brain" and the "male brain"; however, he also mentions the possibility of an individual in whom these skills are equally strong and balanced. All in all, the study seems to imply that most men tend to think in a different manner than women.

Baron-Cohen distinguishes five levels of gender distinction: genetic sex (determined by chromosomes), gonadal sex (determined by hormones), genital sex (by genitals), brain type (the already mentioned male-systematizing versus female-empathizing) and sex-typical behavior that follows from the brain type which includes interests typical of men (football, gadgets, CD collections), or women (caring for friends, worrying about their feelings, need of intimacy). [21] In chapter 9 of his book, Baron-Cohen describes the advantages of a male brain – for instance using and making tools, trading, power, social dominance, expertise, leadership and tolerating solitude – and the advantages of a female brain – for instance making friends, mothering, social mobility or communication. The fact that most women tend to have the female type of brain while most men have the male type contributes to the idea of complementarity included in Judaism as well.

As it may be concluded from Baron-Cohen's study, women tend to be better in communication and empathy, therefore they are the ones who sooner react to assimilation, unlike men who tolerate solitude better, are less social than women and thus stay shut off from the new trends longer.

Carol Gilligan sees the differences in feminine voices through the perspective of cultural feminism. Gilligan argues that gender socialization produces two different notions of morality.[22] She discusses the moral judgment of women that is more based on relationships and sensitivity to the needs of others, whereas men emphasize principles of rights and logic in a conflicting situation. Similarly to Baron-Cohen, she talks about two different modes of language and thought based on gender.

---

[21] Baron-Cohen, Simon – The Essential Difference, Penguin Books, 2003, p. 99
[22] Modern Feminism, edited and introduced by Maggie Humm, Columbia University Press, 1992
Gilligan, Carol – "In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development", pp 219-223

4.3 Identity Recreation

Jewish women in the American environment were exposed to a different concept of a female identity, which brought a wild turmoil in women's lives and a need to recreate an identity that could eventually define the Jewish-American woman.

Edna G. Rostow analyses the "conflict and accommodation" of women in her essay of the same name. She talks about American women who in the last decades had to undergo the similar process of identity change. The conflict is even more obvious in the Jewish-American concept, where both Jewish and American aspects fight for their own place:

"...they find the search for their own identity – which each person must carve out for himself from the bewildering opportunities offered by the society – a complicated process beset by needs and feelings which often conflict. For educated women the search for identity and for their rightful place in the society involves finding the rightful means of achieving satisfactions through clouds of conflicting values, needs, feelings, and situations."[23]

Women want no longer to be defined by their husbands or marriages. The Jewish woman has traditionally been recognized either in her father's family or in the alliance that she formed with her husband, rarely as an individual. The male-dominated society did not give much chance to Jewish women to express themselves other than through marriage. This became one of the major conflicts that arose in the American circumstances. Work and self-realization started to gain more importance in the female world.

Woman proved to be a rational being, she is aware of the conflicting concepts and feels the neccessity to take further steps to her own individuality, new identity and therefore also to a further assimilation:

---

[23] The Woman in America, Beacon Press, 1965
Edited by Robert Jay Lifton
Chapter: "Conflict and Accommodation" by Edna G. Rostow, p. 220

"...to rationalize the conflicts and to incorporate both the goal of marriage and the goal of work outside the home into the pattern of their lives. Dealing with that conflict is a task this generation faces knowingly and consciously, a fact which seems to be crucial to its view of the roles of men and women."[24]

In many ways the Jewish women's experience is parallel to what American women (and not only American) had to go through – the conflicting values and needs on the way from the close family to the male-dominated working world. Jewish people, just as any immigrants who came to America to find a brighter future, needed to cope with the blend of two cultures – the original one and the host one, each of them being of a different kind. An attempt to define a new identity in such a cultural shift is not an easy task and requires a greater strength, will and a high degree of rationality.

Reconciliation with the past has always been an important issue in Judaism and plays a great part in traditional Jewish celebrations as well as in their perception of uniqueness, the concept of "the chosen people" and the suffering that the Jews had to go through. History, personal or collective, plays a crucial part in Jewish identity. In America, the past does not seem to be as important since everything is rather new, fresh and is meant to provide a new start, not only for Jews but for other ethnic groups as well.

There are two cultures and two time zones that the Jews need to come to terms with. Their identity neccessarily changes according to these conflicting concepts. As seen in the novels of Goldstein and Goodman, the responses might take various forms and can stretch from an extreme clinging to the past and traditional Jewish values, to a rebellion and a complete assimilation in the American cultural conditions.

Women feel these pressures of past and the present and search for ways to retain their faithfulness to both, however hard it may be.

---

[24] Ibid., p. 220

"She must create, out of her own needs and abilities, a new life plan, fitting in the love and children and home that have defined femininity in the past with this work toward a greater purpose that shapes the future."[25]

Those who can achieve such reconciliation and recreation of their identities are highly valued and appreciated in American society. Then, the idea of well-rounded female characters is the objective. The taste of success and the capability to handle all the different areas of a rich life is new to a Jewish woman and it is a sweet one. The strength of Jewish women helps them achieve their goals.

"Theirs is not a success that has come about by shutting family and community responsibilities out of their lives. Most of them have pursued their many interests with vigor and enthusiasm, whether in their own work, or in their community, or in their husband's careers or in their children's lives, alternating capably from one to the other, ready always to take context into account, to give up one interest for the other if need be. One gets the impression that for these women the more they did, the more they were able to do."[26]

The feeling of personal self-satisfaction through work that has been well known to men started to find its place in women's lives as well. Like every novelty that is suddenly available to society, the women explored their possibilities to the fullest and in some ways went even further than their male counterparts. Their identity has been recreated and their lifestyles took a new direction as will be discussed in the following chapter.

---

[25] Betty Friedan – The Feminine Mystique, Dell Publishing, 1963, p. 326

[26] The Woman in America, Beacon Press, 1965
Edited by Robert Jay Lifton
Chapter "Wanted: A New Self-Image for Women" by David C. Mc Clelland, p. 188

5. The New Generation

Unlike those who came from Europe to find a new homeland on the other side of the ocean, the new generation has had their own issues to deal with. Born in America, or just before arriving there, the young Jewish–American generation has been unmercifully assigned a new quest of their own. While their parents faced the difficulty of reconciling the two cultures and redefining their identity, the new generation needed to find their place in the Jewish–American setting right from the start. Seemingly an easier task, many factors made it even harder and often a very bittersweet experience.

The Jewish parents and/or their community put considerable pressure on the youth to retain their Jewish values. Understandably, the elders are frightened that their heritage will not be passed on, their own values forgotten and in the end the bonds between their children and them torn apart. Many such efforts to force the Jewish traditional lifestyle on the new generation have resulted in resentment and mutual confusion and misunderstanding. Both Goldstein and Goodman, whose novels are going to be analyzed in the second part of this thesis, have a lot to say about the experience of parental or community pressure on those who no longer live in the traditional purely Jewish setting.

Reminding young Jewish girls of the traditional chores and characterictics of a proper Jewish woman might bring very bitter consequences:

"The ideal role of the woman in the shtetl – performing her household and religious duties in a quiet and self-effacing manner – specified not only her duties but the manner in which they were to be performed, that is, the kind of person she was supposed to be: submissive, docile, decorous, retiring, modest, patient, and utterly devoted to her family without ambitions or aspirations of her own."[27]

---

[27] Women's Studies – A Reader
Edited by Stevi Jackson, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993
Barbara Myerhoff: "Jewish comes up in you from the roots", p. 101

The parents sometimes tend to forget that the setting for their offspring to be brought up in is no longer a shtetl. As will be later discussed, in Goodman's novel, the Jewish community at the Kaaterskill is an attempt to lead a lifestyle that it is no longer possible to attain in the American context.

While the traditional Jewish values are pressing from the inside, the American pressure is felt on the outside. The invasive American social patterns cannot be shut away from the new generation that yearns to explore, come out of their home environment and absorb whatever there is to learn.

The new American feminism is but one instance of the pressures the young Jewish women encounter. Not only the newly born Jews in America but also their mothers feel the new possibilities and views that form their American existence. Liberal feminism shapes the female Jewish perspectives and leads them to a further independence:

"Liberal equality feminism, then, asks for equality in the sense of sameness of attainment, and therefore treatment, and justifies it via sameness, 'androgyny'. It says: we deserve to be equal with you, for we are in fact the same. We possess the same capabilities; but this fact has been hidden, or these abilities have, while still potentially ours, been socialized, educated, 'out'."[28]

The idea of equality in Judaism and in liberal feminism differs in the sense of what it means for each "to be equal". The quote above discusses men and women being the same, possessing the same abilities and so forth. This approach to equality via sameness can be contrasted with the Jewish perception of equality as complementarity, where men and women are not the same, but their roles and positions in the world are of the same importance and thus they are equal. Each of them adds an equal share to the whole.

[28] Evans, Judith – Feminist Theory Today; Sage Publications, 1995
Chapter: Equality and Difference in Feminist Thought, p.13

The awareness of one's abilities and the possibilities that exist in American society brings out the inner suppressed wishes and dreams that people were taught to keep hidden. Moreover, after coming to understand all is there that America offers, Jewish women, so readily predisposed to adapt to the new contexts of life, suddenly emerge into fields never before connected with female nature or Judaism. Goodman's and Goldstein's female Jewish characters show their abilities in philosophy, mathematics, business, entertainment or law. The shtetl would proclaim such women to be non-observant outcasts. In the American setting, such occupations are embraced and supported for women. This can be seen as a prominent example of a great shift from the Jewish to the American.

The new generation's challenge also includes the question of homeland and roots. While their parents remember and more or less remind them of the abandoned home in Europe or the original homeland Israel, the youth born in America do not have any personal ties with faraway places. For them it is a matter of consciously acquiring the painful longing for the lost homeland, if it is ever possible for them to feel their parents' reminiscence. Mostly, it is one of the issues that disjoints the generations – whereas one insists on the uprooted existence in the conditions of a new continent, the other feels at home and does not need to yearn for the lost.

However, the roots and the forgotten Jewish values can unexpectedly strike back. As it happens, the new Americanized generation needs to turn back to their cultural heritage in order to come to terms with their present existence. Often the new generations, already assimilated, seek their Jewish origins and try to reconstruct Judaism as their religion with its traditions and rituals. Such a turn from the assimilated self to the proper Jewish rituals is to be witnessed in Goldstein's novel *Mazel.*

However, Judaism in the American setting undergoes inevitable changes and is shaped by the needs and lifestyles set by the new conditions. Leah Kohn, the director and co-founder of the JRC (Jewish Renaissance Center, based in NYC), shows how the new Judaism in America can be reconstructed. Much of the original concept remains in the progressive views:

"The role of Jewish women in Judaism is not what people think it is. People think it means being at home, diapering and running after your children," Mrs. Kohn said. Women also nurture their husbands, friends and their community through understanding and volunteering. "Jewish women are responsible for the spiritual, emotional, physical well-being of the next generation," she said. "This puts diapering in a whole new light."[29]

The concepts of Judaism in America stretch from the very orthodox to the reform, very liberal one. Interestingly enough, the younger generations let their Jewish heritage enter their lives not as a threat but as an enrichment and support of their American identities.

[29] http://www.forward.com/issues/2001/01.05.11/women6.html
nov 7, 2005

Two Jewish-American Contemporary Female Writers

Rebecca Goldstein and Aliegra Goodman are both Jewish-American writers whose works have been published since the 80's in the United States. Both of them have experienced the fate of a Jewish woman in America and the themes of Judaism, assimilation and female identity are very prominent in their works. In their novels and stories they gently introduce the topics that have been crucial for many Jewish women in America. With their careful manner of telling stories, which often deal with deeply emotional and sensitive topics, these writers help to open a window of understanding on the cultural, personal and social issues with which Jewish women in America have had to cope.

Let us now look at both authors from the perspective of the major themes in their novels and their ways of depicting the important features of Jewish–American women. It is interesting to notice how the same or similar themes in the works of Goldstein and Goodman can be seen from different angles, not contradicting each other but adding its parts to form a fuller picture of the Jewish–American reality.

6. Rebecca Goldstein - the prominent themes in her works

6.1 Female Characters and Roles

In the works of Rebecca Goldstein women play a quintessential role. Her novels and stories are full of female heroines who are each trying to solve the problem of their existence and identity in their own way. In *Mazel*, her novel published in 1995, Goldstein presents a long narrative of several generations of Jewish women, which helps to reveal many subjects concerning female roles and their place in the world. In *Mazel*, the readers meet an orthodox Jewish family living in a Polish shtetl, where Leiba – the mother – takes care of her family of 6 children, including Sorel/Sasha and Fraydel, while her husband spends all his time studying the Torah. Fraydel is a rebellious girl who pretends to be insane for the sake of having at least a little bit of freedom, her younger sister Sorel looks up to her and after Fraydel's suicide fights for her independent life and a theater career as an actress, calling herself Sasha. After World War II starts, Sasha leaves for America leaving her husband Maurice in Europe and meeting him irregularly in New York later on. She raises her daughter Chloe in a rather non-religious way. Chloe studies classical languages and gives birth to Phoebe without having a husband or even a partner. In the opening scene of Mazel, we see the preparations for Phoebe's marriage to a Jewish man. In Goldstein's short stories "The Geometry of Soap Bubbles" and "Strange Attractors", we meet the same characters – Phoebe as a introverted child and as a young adult, Chloe as a rather puzzled mother and Sasha as a kind and loving grandma.

The range of Goldstein's female characters is very broad and shows various concepts of their roles, however, they are all typically very strong and independent, pursuing their own path to the future in the best way they can.

Goldstein presents an orthodox Jewish woman living in a shtetl as being just as strong as, or maybe even stronger than, her assimilated granddaughter in America, as if she was saying, no matter what are the circumstances, a woman can stand up for her own happiness and succeed in reaching a state of fulfillment. Indeed, personal happiness and satisfaction is the goal of all of her characters – and

most of them reach as far as a state of reconciliation and peace. It is not coincidental that the pursuit of personal happiness is mentioned in the constitution of the United States and it is a prominent aspect of the American approach to life.

This emphasis on emancipation and having full control over one's fate is visible in most Goldstein's works. Yet, each character has her own way of interpreting "emancipation": while a traditional Jewish woman (Leiba in *Mazel,* Renee's mother in *The Mind-Body Problem*) sees her ultimate happiness and peace in her role as a wife, a mother, a breadwinner and an endless supporter of her family and community, an assimilated Jewish-American woman (Sasha, Chloe, Phoebe in *Mazel* and "The Geometry of Soap Bubbles", Renee in *The Mind-Body Problem,* Rachel in "Rabbinical Eyes") realizes her emancipated self through education and a career.

As Goldstein shows in *The Mind-Body Problem,* a novel in which the world is seen through the eyes of Renee, a young Jewish-American woman who is trying to figure out her place in the world and her identity, a mother's perception of the role of a woman is not identical to that of her daughter. The Jewish mother cannot but say: "You should be very proud, Renee, that such a man should love you.[...]" (MBP, 57) to her daughter's marriage announcement. In the assimilated eyes of Renee, it is hard to see herself being defined through her husband, as was common for the previous Jewish generations.

The shift of female roles is not an easy and smooth process. In the historical and cultural circumstances, Goldstein lets her female characters cope with their unique problems that lead to a deeper understanding of female views in various religiously conditioned situations, settings and times.

In Goldstein's works, the male characters are rarely at the center of the action, sometimes they are not even mentioned and therefore the female characters readily take up their place on the stage. But Goldstein goes further than just emphasizing the independent role of a woman in a relationship – she introduces the somewhat scandalous subject of an unmarried woman, a single mother, who despite the traditional views can still lead a happy life, achieve personal satisfaction in her career and social position, and be a good caring mother (Sasha and Chloe in *Mazel*).

According to Rebecca Goldstein, the spectrum of possibilities for a woman is endless – the only problem is to choose. Her female characters are set to find the way to take the best of their Jewish identity and American society – two cultural environments that can stand in an opposition but can eventually unite and form a new lifestyle for a new strong Jewish-American woman (Phoebe in *Mazel*).

6.2 Identity

The formation of identity is complex and there are many perspectives from which we can view the female characters in Goldstein's works. What are the key issues through which they define themselves?

6.2.1 Marriage and Men

In spite of all the feminist theories and claims that a woman should not be defined by her marriage, Goldstein sees the male and the female as two complementary elements that come together to form a desirable unity of two independent beings who yet belong together. Renee (*The Mind-Body Problem*) asks: "Is there something fundamentally wrong and intrinsically unsatisfying about a woman's attempt to define herself through her relationships with men? Impossible." (MBP, 216)

She feels that such thinking is resented by the American society of educated academics and feminist activists. However, she realizes that the female identity is also formed by the relationships that a woman has with her surroundings. To accept her own self, Renee goes through a difficult process of reconciliation with her renowned mathematician husband and with her self-image and self-awareness. Renee is an example of a woman idealist who goes through the painful process of realizing that her relationships with men do not provide the answers to her problems. ("I've always conceived the solutions to my life in terms of "true love"." (MBP, 245)) Such a process is essential for her identity re-establishment and a successful step to a further independence within her marriage.

There is one specific observation to mention in relation to Goldstein's works and her female characters' identities. Her female heroines are very often drawn to men of a superior intellect who are considered geniuses – not just some very educated men, but internationally known and successful personalities (Renee and Noam in *The Mind-Body Problem*, Sasha and Jasha in *Mazel*, Phoebe and Antoine Shahaza in "Strange Attractors"). Such attractions weaken the heroines and work as

a catharsis for their deeper understanding of themselves as women and help them to create their own female identities.

6.2.2 Appearance

The matter of self acceptance of one's appearance plays an important part in the female world. Sometimes it is not even clear what kind of look is desirable in which environment. Sorel (*Mazel*) as well as Renee (*The Mind-Body Problem*) deal with the same issue: although they are Jewish, they look more like goyim, non Jewish people. Even though they are both beautiful women, the Jewish community they were born in had them more or less labeled as those who look different. They need to find their identity as Jewish women who are not seen as such. Sorel goes as far as to change her name to Sasha for career purposes through which she follows her path to further assimilation. Interestingly, Goldstein shows how many Jewish people started using different, non-Jewish sounding names to aid assimilation.

6.2.3 Family

As soon as the heroines understand themselves as women, they need to answer the question of how strongly they feel to be Jewish and how much they want to be American. This is even a harder task in one's identity search. Several important aspects are involved – family, the past, one's community or society, one's own ambitions.

The example of Rachel ("Rabbinical Eyes") shows how family intervention and orthodox Jewish values affect the life of a young woman who needs to make an extremely difficult choice between her family and her husband. As soon as Rachel gives her hand to Luke, a non Jew, who is nevertheless very drawn to Judaism, her family sets a shiva on her, meaning complete ostracism. The loving family that Rachel grew up in is ready to cut her out of their lives on the basis of religious belief. What a horrendous fate for a young woman who, again, is defined by her marriage to a man. Being shut out from her original environment, she needs to recreate her

identity this time in terms of her marriage, her career and a difficult motherhood. The search for happiness is a thorny way for Rachel.

6.2.4 The Past

For Jews the past is one of the very crucial factors in the identity issue. Part of Jewish identity is based directly on the past and it can never be fully omitted. Rebecca Goldstein contemplates this matter and shows the prominent place of the past connected to cultural determiners which for Jews are ineffaceable.

In several carefully chosen examples, Goldstein presents the importance of personal history for her characters. Phoebe (*Mazel*) was raised as the fully assimilated child of a single mother in New York City. As a young adult when she starts carving her place in the world and her identity, Phoebe feels the urge to understand her historical background and the cultural heritage of her ancestors that was not particularly passed on by her mother. She identifies herself with the Jewish tradition to such an extent that she starts observing the Jewish rituals that her mother has never observed. Phoebe's way of being Jewish is definitely affected by the American environment and assimilated upbringing, yet it is an important turn in her identity to include the past and its culture in her own self-perception.

Chloe, Phoebe's mother, marvels at her daughter's change:

"She was startled, of course, when Phoebe seemed suddenly to start taking being Jewish so seriously, insisting on removing it from the level of mythology." (Mazel, 336)

6.2.5. Fraydel

The character of Fraydel (*Mazel*) yet stands apart. She is a unique example of a girl who creates two identities for herself for the purpose of self-defense. While extremely bright and smart, she puts on the face of a crazy girl as she soon finds out that her intelligence is not to be applauded in the society of a Polish shtetl. The choice of a double identity does not prove to be a lucky one. Oscillating between two

identity frames, Fraydel is not happy in either of them and the only way for her to escape is her eventual suicide.

The search for identity is often a difficult process of realizing, finding, revealing and accepting. The female characters of Goldstein's works present various ways to deal with this process with more or less successful results. As Goldstein discusses, the place of oneself in the world is carved out by many factors, the role of the past is one of the most important ones – not only for Jews – and should not be overlooked or diminished.

"It's important that a child know from where she's come, that a golden link of stories fix a child to her past." (Leiba in *Mazel,* 52)

6.3 Education

What opens the doors to freedom more than education? Goldstein sees an education as an essential point at which women are elevated to the same level as men. As discussed in the second chapter, the education input for the female and male members of a Jewish society differs in most aspects. The gender roles in orthodox Judaism have been preserved partly also because of this difference of instruction. The situation changes in the American setting where Jewish women are suddenly given a chance to see more possibilities for themselves and education provides a way to a modern life, an assimilated life. It has been shown that thanks to the fact that Jewish women were left behind in terms of academic education, they sooner found their ways to modern education, which was not bound to their religion. This is where assimilation originated and where emancipation was born.

Very soon, the heroines in Goldstein's novels find out that education brings independence and freedom. It was unusual to talk about intelligence in relation to Jewish women in the orthodox community. Intelligence was attributed to men and there was no one to contradict the word of men. It is a feature of the Jewish-American reality that the women take their education as a serious business and prove to be on the same level of intelligence as their male counterparts.

Goldstein's heroines are educated in law, classical languages, philosophy, mathematics; they give lectures at universities, defend people in lawsuits and fly to international conferences. The author has a strong sense of the independence gained through academic and career achievements. This will of her characters might be seen almost as a rebellion towards Judaism where there is not a place for such ambitions of women.

Renee (*The Mind-Body Problem*) is trying to understand the discrepancy between female and male education. Having been thoroughly influenced by American culture, it is very hard for her to understand the essence of Judaism in which the learning is not meant for women. She is astonished at the concept and for her – an adult educated woman – to accept this is unthinkable:

"For Jews learning is the highest spiritual activity, but one from which women are barred. And what, I once asked my mother, does Judaism offer its females in the way of spiritual experiences? At the top of her list was going to *mikvah*, the ritual bath that's a monthly requirement for married Orthodox women. (For the men: Talmud and logic, while the women try to clean up their bloody messes.)" (MBP, 64)

As already touched upon, the female characters in Goldstein's works are interestingly often attracted to extremely intelligent men. The tension that arises between the female and male intelligence in the specific situations in Goldstein's stories and novels creates a motivation for the women to achieve higher goals, but at the same time gives them a chance to admire, love and look up to their beloved men. Yet, as Renee notices, although her husband is a world famous mathematical genius, his intellect limits him in the practical life. As an analogy to Judaism, their marriage follows a similar track – the man studies and the woman takes care of the rest.

Education is certainly a way to free oneself and reach for more possibilities, however, it is only one of several ways of achieving self-realization for a woman.

6.4 Assimilation

Merely the word assimilation has had a bitter taste to many Jews who came to America to save their lives and the lives of their families from the war and persecution in Europe. The feeling of their Jewish culture being threatened was omnipresent. Suddenly it took a much greater effort to preserve Jewish values and traditions in the new environment where the host culture advocated different but strong values. The gradual assimilation was inevitable.

In *Mazel*, we find a very important note that shows how Goldstein understands the reality of assimilation: "Assimilation was no ideology but simply the fulfillment of the natural processes of history, once the artificial obstacles have been cleared away." (Mazel, 222)

A progressive view of this matter is key for Jews to be able to deal with this problem in a better way: acceptance instead of resentment, understanding instead of turning away.

Just as discussed in the third chapter, the women responded to this process sooner and without fears; it offered things that Judaism forbade. Goldstein complies with this theory and introduces women in her works who are feeding their hunger for those possibilities that their religion kept away from them.

Sorel, who was born in a Polish shtetl and spent her childhood in a traditional Jewish way, is determinedly finding her way to freedom through assimilation. In Warsaw she starts her theater career in a Jewish theater company which later brings her to New York City where she settles down. Her long journey from being a Yiddish-speaking girl from an orthodox Jewish community to an independent English-speaking woman in New York is a symbolic depiction of the historical process mentioned above. As this change took place, Sorel became Sasha and her identity altered in the new environment. Yet, it was her own free choice that she never regretted. She never felt the yearning for her homeland or for the long lost times in Poland, as many of her fellow Jews did:

"*This* was exile? From what? From *Poland*? Sasha had decided, from the very start, that somehow or other she was a born New Yorker." (Mazel, 7)

Sasha chose assimilation herself, therefore she felt safe and comfortable living in this new world where she could continue her life free from the old system.

Rachel, from Goldstein's story "Rabbinical Eyes", also made the choice to live an assimilated life with her husband. However, her decision did not involve moving to another country or continent. She chose to get married to a non Jew which resulted in her involuntary separation from her family. This dilemma is often typical for assimilated Jews – their families resent the assimilation and try to draw the person back to the traditional shelter of a Jewish community life. By taking a decision that is against Jewish values, Rachel had to accept the shiva that her family set on her. Obviously, the step to assimilation is not always made without painful sacrifices. Sasha's case was much easier in this respect. She came to America to find a new life for herself and her child, unlike Rachel, who was already born in America, but her decision meant a great loss of her past for her.

Another example of assimilation, but yet another type of it, is the character of Chloe, Sasha's daughter. She is a rare example in Goldstein of a Jewish woman who does not have a Jewish faith. Chloe was born just before Sasha moved to America with her. As we know, Sasha became assimilated in her new homeland, New York. Thus, Chloe was raised as a fully assimilated child, Jewish values were not passed on and so she grew up more as an American girl. Her involuntary assimilation might have resulted also in her decision to become a single mother, but what is more, her faithlessness drew a thick boundary between Chloe and her mother Sasha, who had her past locked inside her, and also later between Chloe and her daughter Phoebe, who turned back to her Jewish roots and the traditions of her ancestors. Chloe lacked the relation to Judaism, which built an obstacle between her and the two people closest to her. Is that not another burden of assimilation?

The process of assimilation that the American Jews have gone through is definitely a delicate issue. Jews living in other more traditional settlements might perceive this similarly to the Polish Jews in Goldstein's novel *Mazel*.

"There's not enough bread in all of Poland for all the sins of the Jews in America, may the Holy forgive them and may they live to see the error of their ways." (Mazel, 99)

The assimilated Jews in America are seen as something sinful and spoilt. They are accused of not being observant and faithful. It is a very severe judgment from those living in the safely sheltered communities, cut off from all the influence of the outer world.

Assimilation is not just a sweet idea for those who want to take new possibilities or a bitter one for those who resent the loss of Jewish values. Assimilation brought a lot of suffering and pain as well. It has been a challenge for the new arriving Jews and their children. Rebecca Goldstein showed in a clever way what different views of this problem there are – from liberation and freedom to alienation and torn ties.

6.5 Generations

The last major theme to be discussed is the question of generations in the works of Rebecca Goldstein. This subject is especially interesting in the novel *Mazel*, where the readers have a unique opportunity to witness progress through several generations of Jewish women.

The scheme that Goldstein advocates is the following: The original generation is traditionally based and observant. For the female character (Leiba) it is the only reality she can imagine. Her life evolves around the family, household, community and the endless work related to them. Jewish rituals are not even thought about; they are a part of the natural process of her life.

The next generation's conditions are very different. This is caused by historical events that have a strong impact on the life of the new generation. Sorel/Sasha already tastes the life in the city in her youth and is immediately affected by the society that she finds in Warsaw. She meets non-Jewish people and her views of morality and immorality start to change. Her Jewishness changes especially after moving to America, yet she is still very Jewish in her heart.
Goldstein sees this change as a very frequent one that many generations of parents and children had to go through as a fulfillment of the natural process of history:

"All across the former Pale were Jewish parents having their Jewish hearts broken, as sons and daughters broke away from the old ways, made a blind run for the light. [...] The world that now opened up before Sorel couldn't have been more alien to her parents, and yet they said not a word against it, offered up no obstacles to the strange future she was running toward, her arms thrown open to the glowing western sky." (Mazel, 201)

The following generation, represented by Chloe, Sasha's daughter, presents a problem for the Jewish religion

"(Chloe)...had been conceived right in the middle of all that inconceivable history, just as the old world had come crashing down around her father and mother." (Mazel, 335)

This symbolic transition, when the Jewish world had to undergo the change, caused the loss of the Jewish tradition that Chloe has never known. It is hard for her to reach to her ancestors' beliefs as the turmoil has not yet settled and the new life has not been yet established. The unlucky generation of Chloe find themselves in an uneasy situation without a clear relation to the history that is too painful for their parents to share with them.

The last generation in this long string is presented by the example of Phoebe, Chloe's daughter, who was raised the American way without much relation to Judaism, yet the change comes as soon as Phoebe understands that it is essential for her identity to clarify the past and seek her cultural heritage. The Jewish world is calmer again and so it is relatively easy for Phoebe to extract the essence of Judaism for herself and consequently incorporate it in her lifestyle. Phoebe goes back to her Jewish roots, but in her own interpretation.

"Chloe wondered how many of them had chosen for themselves to return to this way of life, just as Phoebe had. She wondered what it was that they saw in these old ways, so at odds with the life and spirit of our times." (Mazel, 331)

Although Chloe finds it hard to understand what it is that the old tradition offers to young Americans, Phoebe does not think about the old traditions, which she does not even know; she thinks about the new views in which her present existence can come together with the Jewish traditions. Her concept of Judaism is not based on the old ways, but rather on the new interpretations.

In *The Mind-Body Problem* Renee also copes with generation problems. She was raised as a Jewish child but goes through a gradual process of favoring the American lifestyle over the Jewish one. Just like Phoebe, she is reaching back to the Jewish past but finds it inaccessible and distant. The understanding of the historical

reality is considerably difficult and there is no other way than to rely on new interpretations.

"...brooding over the worlds out of which we had been shut, the pasts from which we were cut off. There's no going back, I kept thinking." (MBP, 124)

The generations do not always peacefully pass on traditions. There is a large space for mutual resentment and misunderstanding. Renee has been brought up in one way and lives in another. Yet, the unconscious transition of the orthodox Jewish principles gets back at her:

"[...] I had been brought up to believe it is God's way for women to wait on men. [...] So, you see, the assumed division of labor in my marriage smacked too much of an aspect of traditional Judaism I had hated and had hoped to leave behind." (MBP, 135)

The inability to cut off their upbringing and Jewishness forms another challenge that the new generation needs to face and deal with.

Such is the turn from and back to Judaism that Goldstein presents in her works. This rather logical progress is an explanation of a difficult historical situation, which involves the terms previously mentioned in other chapters – assimilation, a change in the female roles, education and career possibilities or identity search. All of them are linked together and in the lives of the generations they take different shapes and degrees of intensity.

7. Allegra Goodman - the prominent themes in her works

7.1 The female within Judaism

Aliegra Goodman, like Rebecca Goldstein, places women at the center of her works, though in a more unobtrusive manner. Although her novel *Kaaterskill Falls* is about a Jewish community where men play an essential part, it is the women whose issues are brought to the foreground. The following examples are mostly based on this novel, which allows for an interesting analysis of the subject of feminity in Judaism and which will be later contrasted with the work of Goldstein.

The novel *Kaaterskill Falls* tells the story of an orthodox Jewish community that Rav Kirshner established in America on the basis of a community that had existed in Germany. "The only real reputation Kaaterskill has is as a summer home for the ultra religious Jews." (KF, 62) The families who stay at Kaaterskill include those of Elizabeth and Isaac and their 5 daughters, Nina and Andras with their two children, Beatrix and Cecil who are not very orthodox and do not stay regularly, and many other traditional Jews who all try to be anxiously observant and true to their religion.

The Jewish community that Goodman presents to us is a much closed environment that refused to be assimilated into American culture. The women are seen to be willingly fulfilling the traditional Jewish roles that were talked about in the second chapter. Their duties all revolve around the family, children, household and community work.

As happens with the Jewish women who are more receptive to the outside and whose life needs to be on a more practical level, one of the main characters, Elizabeth, finds herself facing the female problem articulated by Betty Freidan in her book *The Feminine Mystique*:

"There was a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform, the image that I came to call the feminine mystique."[30]

---

[30] Betty Friedan – The Feminine Mystique, Dell Publishing, 1963, p. 7

Elizabeth, a mother of 5 daughters, has an urgent feeling of unfulfillment and emptiness. She realizes that her role as a woman has caused her to be bound to her family. As soon as her daughters do not require her undivided attention throughout the days, her feelings burst out and she looks for something to give a new direction to her:

"For years she's waited for this. Now that it's happened, it feels strange. [...] She is ravenously hungry. She needs something to do." (KF, 79)

Goodman shows how difficult it is for a traditional Jewish woman to realize that she has an ambition. Elizabeth seeks help by consulting her husband, asking how to suppress the yearning, the urgent feeling for something more.

"That's what it's like when you get a wish. It breeds others." (KF, 190)

However, the man's life in Judaism is very different from that of a woman and it is very hard for Isaac to relate to Elizabeth's wishes and ambitions. Issac's life has not changed while Elizabeth feels the change in her domestic chores. That is why she alone has to fight with her ambitions, which she knows can be hardly supported in their community.

The character of Elizabeth presents a prominent Jewish woman caught in the web of her society where she struggles to find her own identity. The pressure on her is from the outside as well as from the inside. Her wishes and desires clash with the demands and limits of the male-dominated society. The old traditional system that the community has brought from Europe reinforces the traditional roles of both men and women.

Nina is another traditional Jewish woman in the novel. She has come to the community as someone who needed a Jewish shelter. Nina was brought up in Argentina in a non-Jewish school and environment. She searches for a way back to her roots and paradoxically, finds it in this American society of orthodox Jews. Her utter identification with the Jewish values is a unique phenomenon in the novel. Her views seem to be progressive, yet we can see that her husband Andras is much more

open and assimilated. Their marriage provides an interesting insight into the reality of assimilation and anxious clinging to religious values.
It is Andras who understands Elizabeth's wishes:

"Elizabeth," he says, "this is the United States of America. You can do whatever you damn well please."[...] No one has ever put it to her this way. As if she could act without questions and considerations. Without permission." (KF, 271)

Elizabeth fights for her ambition and is allowed to open a kosher store in the community. Before that happens, she needs to have the permission of her husband and then the rabbi. After a year, the permission is taken away from her and leaves her devastated, with a realization that acting without permission is not working in the community. Elizabeth knows that her breaking free from the community system would make her an outcast and her whole family would be lost. This leaves her with unfulfilled ambition and an unhappy fate.

Beatrix is another female character that needs to be touched upon. She and her husband Cecil are somewhat assimilated and although they spend some time in the community during the summers, they make it very clear that their way of being Jewish is not based on the views of the rabbi Kirshner.

Beatrix works on Shabbos, she wears short-sleeved tunics and turns the traditional birth celebration for boys into a girl's right as well. Beatrix is a rebel in the Jewish society, yet Goodman makes it obvious that it is not shameful behavior. On the contrary, she presents Beatrix and Cecil as a very happy couple. When Beatrix is offered a job in England, Cecil follows her, which is something unheard of in Judaism. The community members are surprised but come to realize this pattern can also work, even in a Jewish family.

Goodman's way of presenting the female within Judaism is not a view of right and wrong or possible – impossible. She presents a number of options for Jewish women, however she is well aware of the pressure generated by the community life and the difficulty of changing or escaping from it.

7.2 Assimilation

The theme of assimilation in Goodman's novel *Kaaterskill Falls* is nicely contrasted with the theme of community, which is going to be discussed in the following chapter. It seems almost as if they stood at opposite ends of the existence of Judaism. Also the characters seem to be advocating either the complete preservation of Jewish values, or a strong decline from them, a kind of carelessness.
Interestingly, just as Rebecca Goldstein depicted in her novels, the new generation born in America turns to its Jewish roots and becomes even more Jewish than the immigrants who chose the new country as a place in which to start their lives anew. Such a character is Andras, as opposed to Isaac:

"Isaac was born into the separatist Kirshners in Washington Heights. But Andras is twenty years older, an immigrant from Budapest. He comes from an expansive, assimilated Jewish community that, like Andras's belief in God, has scarcely existed since the war." (KF, 5)

Here the readers encounter two Jewish viewpoints. The new generations take Judaism more seriously and their ties to the traditions are very close. For Nina, Andras' wife, who is twenty years younger than him, obeying the Jewish values and traditions is ful filling. She identifies herself with everything that the community imposes on her and this discrepancy between her views and those of her husband lead to a slight alienation:

"Andras has no patience for this kind of thing, this cringing from the world in little enclaves, this desire to keep the children from outside influences, the building of a European ghetto in America. [...] He came from the Old Country himself, after all, and he chose the new." (KF, 50-51)

For Andras, it is a matter of choice, not wanting to recreate something that was lost. He perceives assimilation as a historical process that is inevitable. First, there were stronger Jewish rituals and then they slowly vanished. Nina lives the

reversed process – first she lived without strict Jewish values and as she recreates her Jewish origin, she arrives at the point where the orthodox community provides the right sense of identity for her.

That explains her anxiety towards the education and upbringing of her children. She accuses Cecil's sister Regina for the education she provides for her children:

"She doesn't mind them studying among goyim. But I, for one, would never take the risk. If you're with the others you forget who you are. Assimilation." (KF, 39)

As we can see, assimilation can be seen as a risk, it is what threatens the real Jewish identity.

Education is again presented as a key to assimilation and also to freedom and independence. Sarah, the wife of Rav Kirshner and a mother of two sons, has greatly emphasized the education for her older son Jeremy. He, who by the law should have studied the Torah and Talmud with his father, was in turn educated by his mother. The modern education that she gave him, made him an assimilated modern man who in the end proves to have Jewish values interiorized nevertheless.

The sensitivity of women and their roles in the community make way for a quicker assimilation. Elizabeth, although she is very much tied by laws of the Kirshner's community, shows the potential to have an ambition and to go beyond the limits of her traditional role. Men seem to be rather preserving their domination and their restricted social behavior:

"Beatrix innocently puts out her hand to Isaac, who draws back. "Don't you shake hands?" she asks.

Quickly Elizabeth shakes her hand instead." (KF, 18)

Aliegra Goodman uses very subtle examples of daily situations to present the differences between men and women, between what is essentially Jewish and what is merely an obsolete tradition.

In the novel *Kaaterskill Falls*, there are several very explicit assimilation ideas that are clearly influenced by the American setting. The fact that a synagogue is said

to be sheltered in a former movie theater is a very nice symbolic analogy of the tremendous decline of traditional Jewish values. At the same time, it shows that the outer representation is no longer important; it is the inner that is truly essential and bears the importance.

As the synagogues change, the place of women within the synagogues undergoes changes as well, the equality of men and women is gradually pursued at many levels:

"We're having a shalom bat," Beatrix told Nina on the phone.
"What is that?" Nina asked uncertainly.
"A welcoming party. Instead of shalom zachar,"Beatrix said. "I thought it was absolutely barbaric that there are welcoming parties for boys but not for girls. We're having a naming too. I suppose you didn't have them in Argentina."
"Is it an English custom?" Nina asked. Girls are always named in shul. Never at home.
"No, I think it's American. Apparently they're quite common now," Beatrix said in her breezy way." (KF, 267)

The American influence on Judaism is inevitable in the sense of the equality between the sexes. Obviously, women are the first ones to be ready and make even religious matters more equal. Beatrix is an assimilated Jew who is not afraid to introduce new ways of the traditional religious rituals. Yet, for Nina or Elizabeth, who are voluntarily or involuntarily bound by the community, such assimilated manners are still unthinkable.

Goodman does not forget to show that the Jewish values and assimilation can very well co-exist in the same society, even in the same person. It is not an exclusive concept, but the way from a closed society to an open one is a long and a difficult one. In the following chapter, the community and its limits are going to be discussed. Assimilation creeps into the community as well and Goodman carefully shows the challenges that the Jewish-American cultures are exposed to.

7.3 Community

The community life Goodman talks about is a very unique topic in contemporary Jewish-American literature. By entering the world of the Kaaterskill community, the reader gains an interesting insight in the lives of orthodox Jews who put effort into preserving real Jewish values in the manner that was common for the original European communities. Rav Kirshner, who came from a German environment and started a new Jewish settlement in American conditions, holds on to the traditional Jewish values and finds many followers among those Jews who also came from Europe or were already born in America but all look for a way to preserve their Jewish values.

As expected, community life is very much affected by American culture and the American lifestyle slowly creeps into the traditions. The new Rav Isaiah, son of Rav Kirshner, strongly feels the threat of assimilation and tries to do as much as he can to avoid the pure Jewish traditions being affected.

His speech shows the desperate need to avoid seeing the reality of assimilation, the denial of the natural historical process that Jewish people in America need to go through inevitably:

"There are those who maintain dealings and friendships with Jews who do not observe Shabbes, or who intermarry or eat treife. What, then, is the message that they send to their children? That these people are still good; that they are still worthy of attention and uncritical friendship. This is what our children learn: that we will tolerate this kind of behavior. Is this the lesson we want to teach them? How then should we explain it? That it is wrong for us, but right for other people? Or that it is wrong for anyone, but that people who do wrong are still worthy of our respect, and of our friendship? Is this what we want to teach? Only consistency will sustain us. Only consistent thoughts and actions will keep Judaism alive." (KF, 225)

Such a speech is truly a vain attempt to preserve the values that seem to be Jewish but have become more of a hateful ideology. This, as Goodman shows through various examples, is a serious problem of the community life. The limits that

are set for the members of the community often come from wrongly interpreted Jewish laws. The basic demands for common respect for everyone have disappeared in the name of an anxious clinging to the values that can no longer survive in American society.

On a smaller scale, a similar ideology is imposed by Nina on her family. Her over protectiveness of her daughter Renee limits the child and is very much unwanted. Nina has difficulties to see that what she wanted for herself as a child is not desired by her own daughter. The time and conditions have changed and the orthodox Jews have sometimes a problem accepting the new reality of Judaism. Just like Nina:

"The world is very big, very dangerous. Full of enemies of Israel and of Jews. [...] Nina wants her daughter to be safe, and to be sheltered by the kind of community she herself had longed for as a child." (KF, 71)

The new social patterns that are getting into the Jewish community through the unavoidable influence of American values are hard for the Jews to deal with. Every novelty is much resented and shunned. Again, it is a woman in such a community who can first see the new horizons and recognize the new opportunities without feeling the threat of losing the Jewish values. The character of Elizabeth serves the purpose of Goodman to show how her female heroine is able to be a good Jewish woman and at the same time try to reach out to a world of new possibilities. Unluckily, Elizabeth, who is able to get a grip on Jewish-American reality, suffers in her position as a member of a male-dominated society. Her ambitions remain a mere peeking through the wall of her role in the community.

"This love of the outside world is a kind of voyeurism for Elizabeth, and realizing that, she is dissatisfied. If she could do more than watch; if she could participate – do something or create something in the shimmering, spinning secular world." (KF, 57)

She is well aware of the limits and although she makes efforts to change her situation and succeeds in opening the store, the new Rav Isaiah takes her license again eventually.

The assimilation seen in the fact that a woman would start something close to a career is undesirable for the community. The traditional female and male roles are threatened and the question that Betty Friedan asks in her *Feminine Mystique* becomes very topical: "Can a working wife be a challenge to the authority of the husband?"[31] Elizabeth needs to face the choice of her own ambition that clashes with the values of the society that keeps her religion alive. As soon as she realizes her situation she is bound to be dissatisfied since it is either a family or her own personal ambitions that she can pursue. Either choice leads to a kind of deprivation.

Although the end of the novel shows the people still living in the community, it is no longer a community of the same values. Even here, in the closed place where people are true to their religion, the American lifestyle starts being visible. It is impossible to cut the community off from all the outer influence and eventually, the signs of assimilation come to the surface.

[31] Betty Friedan – The Feminine Mystique, Dell Publishing, 1963, p. 339

7.4 The Conflict of Generations

The conflict that the parents and children face is never as dramatic in Goldstein's works as it is in Goodman's novels. The readers encounter a radical mother imposing strict rules on her daughter who escapes to her own life of breaking the limits. Nina and Renee's relationship is characterized by a constant tension that grows with each one's desire to "have it their way". Andras tries to mitigate the clash between his wife and daughter by his tender understanding of both.

"Andras sees that Renee is wearing blue jeans like Stephanie. Nina doesn't let Renee wear jeans. She believes religious girls should not dress immodestly like that." (KF, 76)

The traditional behavior that Nina demands from Renee is resented secretly and even results in a personal confrontation. The role models for Renee are not by all means Jewish people living in the community. Her ambitions are strongly oriented towards life outside of the community while Nina's only desire is to preserve the Jewish values and pass them on to her children. This conflict is unlike any other in the works of either Goodman or Goldstein. It is important to see that the process of assimilation can be so dramatic that it leads to generational misunderstanding and a mutual alienation.

In *The Family Markowitz*, a series of stories about a Jewish widow and her two sons in America, Rose needs to come to terms with her son Henry being gay. Later, he changes his orientation and decides to marry a woman who is not Jewish. The resentment of Rose is immense and her realization that her opinion is not taken into consideration is painful. The conflict of generations is rather silent and originates in a lack of understanding that Rose finds in the American world. Her Jewish roots are more or less forgotten, her family consists of assimilated children and the Jewish values are soon to vanish completely. Unlike Nina who faces the conflict in an active manner with the vision of a change, Rose's silent resentment blends with a necessary but painful acceptance of the situation.

Finally, it is important to mention the conflict between a father and son – Rav Kirshner and his son Jeremy. As already mentioned, Jeremy was given a modern education from his mother who opened the door to an assimilated world to him, out of the community of his father. It remains a bitter reality for Rav Kirshner to know that Jeremy, unlike his other son and follower Isaiah, is the more intelligent, educated and capable of the two. The orthodox world of the community is lost to him and his interest is oriented towards American society rather than the traditional Jewish one. The conflict that they face especially just before Rav's death leads to a mutual understanding and forgiveness.

All these conflicts mentioned above have a similar cause – the will of the parents to preserve the values they themselves believe in, the resentment of the offspring and the uneasy step for the parents to realize that the new generation needs to find their own way. Such a theme is not specifically Jewish, however, the shift from the Jewish to the American and the reconciliation of them both gives broader possibilities for such generational conflicts to arise.

7.5 Foils

The last feature it is important to mention is Goodman's frequent use of character foils to show how different the perspectives of one and the same thing can be. Goodman contrasts her characters by introducing complementary ones who bring another point of view and thus stress the complexity of the Jewish-American predicament.

Elizabeth, being an orthdox observing Jewish woman and mother of six daughters, is disturbed and unfulfilled by her situation in the community. The ambitions and yearning she feels brings her to the edge of being an unhappy woman. The limits that she realizes in the Kirshner's community system hold her back, yet they are impossible to overcome without losing her family.

However, Nina, who is in a situation Elizabeth would most likely enjoy much more than her actual life, sees everything from a different perspective. "Nina loves to imagine that, the shelter Elizabeth enjoys the consistency..." (KF, 78)
Nina could easily do the things that Elizabeth imagines doing but she on the contrary is bound to her traditional observant life that she tries to pass on to her children. One can think how much happier these women could be if they changed places so that they could live in a family where a husband would support their immediate needs and the community would feel neither limiting nor too loose.

For Elizabeth, Beatrix is yet another foil. Elizabeth cannot see the answer to her ambitions in Nina's life, but she can find it in Beatrix's ways: "(Beatrix) with her strange sleeveless tunic of a dress, her loose hair, her Oxford ways." (KF, 24) Elizabeth is somehow charmed by Beatrix's presence of ease and composure. Beatrix seems to have a very equal and un-Jewish relationship with her husband Cecil. She is in control of their married life to the point that Cecil follows her to England when there is a good job opportunity open for Beatrix. Beatrix is a "secular Jew" who takes from her religion just the part that enriches her life, the rest that is felt to be limiting is left behind. She is an assimilated Jewish-American woman who rather successfully managed to figure out that the process of assimilation is inevitable for Jews in America and she decided for the Jewish-American lifestyle. In these three female

characters, Goodman shows three different ways of being a Jewish woman in an American setting.

The friendship of Renee and Stephanie reveals another pair of foils. While Renee is restricted by her mother Nina who persistently applies a traditional Jewish upbringing, Stephanie is left with considerable freedom. Although Stephanie is also originally from an immigrant family, she is fully Americanized and her uninhibited approach to life has a significant influence on Renee who is in need of a role model and a friend who would respond to her non-Jewish views.

The education that Renee receives in the Jewish school does not prepare her for a future in American society. Stephanie, on the other hand, feels herself to be a feminist and a rebel. To Renee, this perspective of life seems almost magical.

"Renee's ideas seem unimportant next to Stephanie's agenda. Stephanie talks about the news and the election, inflation, abortion, and nuclear proliferation." (KF, 42)

Renee is lacking the freedom, self expression and growth that a young girl needs. There is a chance for her to gain her individuality not based on her Jewish upbringing as long as there is someone like Stephanie by her side. As soon as Stephanie's family needs to leave the neighborhood, Renee is left to fight for her freedom alone, yet it had made a difference for her to have had Stephanie appear in her life.

Allegra Goodman shows how the characters can be shaped by their counterparts often unconsciously. Assimilation and identity again play an important part in realizing the different perspectives and possible paths for these women, who are all fighting to find a way to happiness.

8. Synthesis

After having discussed the prominent themes of the works of Goldstein and Goodman and having introduced several examples of the specific issues from their novels and stories, let us look at the essential points that are common to these two authors. Although Rebecca Goldstein has been widely known for her academic works in philosophical and scientific fields, her novels and stories from the 90's have shown an important inclination towards Jewish topics and values. It seems she has been gradually concerned with the issue of women and their place within the history of Judaism, society, and their cultural environment.

Aliegra Goodman has looked at the Jews in America more from the perspective of community life and assimilation, which is shown to be more problematic for her characters than for those of Goldstein.

The confrontation of their two viewpoints brings a broader image of the Jewish-American reality as written about in contemporary literature. Although these two authors cannot cover the whole scale of the female approach to the issues discussed – and male writers would probably hold very different and diverse views– Goldstein and Goodman have made a considerable and valuable contribution to contemporary Jewish-American literature.

8.1 Prominent Themes of Judaism and Feminity

The essential criteria for choosing Goldstein's and Goodman's works for this research and analysis are these exact themes of female roles and the perception of feminity in Jewish contexts. As discussed above, most of the recent works of these two female authors include the topics of assimilation, being true to Jewish values and at the same time pursuing personal happiness. Moreover, the female characters of Goldstein and Goodman are central. Leiba, Sasha, Chloe, Phoebe (*Mazel*, "The Geometry of Soap Bubbles", "Strange Attractors"), Rachel ("Rabbinical Eyes"), Renee (*The Mind-Body Problem*), Elizabeth, Beatrix, Nina, Renee, Rachel... (*Kaaterskill Falls*), Rose, Sarah (*The Family Markowitz*) – this cohort of Jewish women and girls gets up on stage to show female vitality, their will to succeed and to fight for the life that they consider worth living, be it academic achievement, family management, an assimilated American life, or a professional career. What mostly they seem to be looking for is the way to unite two concepts –Jewish values and the newly acquired American ones.

Allegra Goodman nicely expressed this attempt to include both views of the Jewish-American situation through her character Elizabeth:

"Naturally, becoming a mother, keeping a Jewish home, is the most important thing. But somehow she can't see it as the only thing for her girls. There must be, there ought to be, something else as well, a second purpose. Perhaps Elizabeth's dreams for the girls are really only what she desires for herself." (KF, 69)

The ambition that goes beyond the Jewish religion and that lures the orthodox Jewish women to assimilate includes modern American education and career possibilities. The seemingly incompatible features of Jewish and American lifestyles – on the one hand traditional orthodox life under the religious laws and a sheitel, on the other the longing for the change, new experience, self-dependence and success – is a challenge that the female characters of Goldstein and Goodman have to deal with. Their will to keep the faith and at the same time reach out for the modern

ways that are at hand is what defines them and makes them the strong characters they really are.

Readers can trace a considerable number of identifiably female themes as well as Jewish themes. Not only there are many female characters, but their concerns are related to gender issues. Being a mother, a wife, a daughter is a rather important matter for these heroines. Rebecca Goldstein lets Renee find her place in an uneasy marriage and go through the process of self-acceptance as an adult woman. The reader encounters also Renee's friend Ava, who wants to look as unfeminine as possible so as to be able to succeed in the male-dominated world. The gender struggle is apparent also in the Jewish households where the girls' main ambition is to find good husbands and become wives and mothers themselves.

There are several issues that can be categorized as both Jewish and modern, such as education, which is emphasized in both Jewish and American societies, though each of these take a different approach to what is proper education (as contrasted in *Kaaterskill Falls* on the example of Renee's and Stephanie's schooling). Identity is a general theme that takes more specific shapes in the situation of Jews in America, as well as in that of any other immigrant and ethnic minorities in the US. The generational conflicts and gender struggles surely appear in any kind of contemporary literature and are not exclusively Jewish. Goldstein and Goodman took these general themes and showed how the religious aspects may affect the situations that any minority might have to face.

Since the two authors let their heroines dominate the stories, their male characters are left in the background to support their wives and daughters and help the writers describe their well-rounded and rich female characters. The male characters might be just as important simply by staying in the background of the stories.

Goldstein and Goodman both choose their characters to be of Jewish origins, living in a more or less Jewish society and to some degree obeying Jewish laws and

values. The beauty of their stories is in the diversity with which the writers show that being a Jewish woman has many different shades. The word "degree" is really pertinent. While Leiba (*Mazel*) or Nina (*Kaaterskill Falls*) need complete fulfillment of Jewish law and the feeling of being an obedient orthodox Jewish woman to have a sense of their identity, Rachel ("Rabbinical Eyes") or Beatrix (*Kaaterskill Falls*) identify with their achievements in modern society without losing the Jewish faith and values that are deeply instilled in them.

All these women are confronted with similar problems and all of them have their own way of being Jewish.

8.2 Preserving Jewish Values

Goldstein and Goodman's characters are not only young progressive people who come to terms with assimilation and their lives in America against a Jewish background. Some characters hold orthodox views and traditional Jewish values that can be easily lost in the metropolitan world of "the melting pot". An example of such a value is modesty, which might be seen to be gradually lost in many, including Sasha, whose theater career that started in Warsaw and then continued in New York meant a decline from traditional Judaism since she was one of " a few women daring, or shameless, enough to lay aside the modesty that is said to be a Jewish woman's special virtue." (Mazel, 178)

The fact that there was something like a Jewish theater in existence points to the modification of Judaism already in Europe and even more in America, where synagogues happened to be housed in old movie theaters. Assimilation, as Goldstein puts it, is a natural process of history and affects most of the characters in the works of these two women authors. It has a deep impact on the new generations that find it hard to understand the thinking and beliefs of their parents as well as the parents who struggle against assimilation and feel the threat of the prevailing American lifestyle that the youth is inclined to accept. Nina is afraid of the bad influence that the education provided in the American schools outside of the Jewish community might have on her daughter Renee (*Kaaterskill Falls*). Similarly, the mother of Renee (*The Mind-Body Problem*) worries about the effects of Renee's philosophical education that might be a threat to Jewish values: "I'm only afraid, Renee, that with all your so-called intellectualizing, you're only going to end up rationalizing doing things you shouldn't even think about." (MBP, 68)

The parents may try to pass on these religious values and rituals and control how thoroughly their children keep them, yet in the end it depends completely on the following generations how the values will be preserved.

Goodman shows the desperate efforts of the Kirshner community to maintain the orthodox life. However, the reader can feel the inevitable change of traditional

gender roles as well as the gradual assimilation that will slowly creep into the lives of the community members.

Nina being so deeply absorbed in her efforts to make the lives of her children and family as orthodox and traditonal as possible does not understand the difficulty of the situation. Her husband knows better:

"Nina wanted Andras to talk to Renee's class about how he got out of Budapest. He wouldn't do it. [...] It's because there is no way for him to convey his experience. It lies within him, a separate place within his present life. [...] You can never fully tell another person what you know. [...] There is no way to transfer memories." (KF, 45)

The problem of being able to communicate the past is felt by both authors. Like Andras, Rose (*The Family Markowitz*) and Sasha (*Mazel*, "The Geometry of Soap Bubbles") also know that the experience of the life in a shtetl or during the war cannot be transfered and therefore they rather decide to spare their children what would sound distant and incomprehensible to them.

Still, there are ways for Jewish values to survive in the new generations. The examples of Phoebe (*Mazel*) or Chana (*Kaaterskill Falls*) illustrate the way in which Judaism is preserved in American society. Yet, we can ask what kind of Judaism? What remains when the traditions and rituals are lost or at least modified? The essential feeling of being Jewish is still alive and as presented in *Mazel*, even those who are not brought up in the Jewish community or with a proper Jewish background can turn back to their roots and start reconstructing their identity, just as Phoebe does. Her will to take up the religion of her ancestors can be almost seen as a symbolic hope for the new generations of American Jews.

Eventually, Jewish values are preserved in an American way, very different from what the Torah used to say and Talmud declared. But as both Goldstein and Goodman imply, the process of changing, reconstructing and re-establishing Judaism in America leads to a new vision and concept of the religion where the original values

remain but the outer demonstration loses its rituals and an anxious clinging to traditional roles. Judaism is no longer only Jewish, but Jewish-American.

8.3 Female Self-dependence

Another theme that includes the female aspect and its ability to tower above religious determination is the female ability to live an independent life. Goldstein more than Goodman talks about this phenomenon and asks questions related to women's ability to survive in the world without the significant intervention of men.

The most self-dependent characters we can find in the works of the two writers are Chloe, Sasha (*Mazel*, "The Geometry of Soap Bubbles"), Renee (*The Mind-Body Problem*) and Beatrix (*Kaaterskill Falls*). Yet most of the other female characters are trying to reach some degree of independence through rebellion, various examples of which are going to be discussed in the following chapter.

All four heroines mentioned above managed to start a successful career in either academic or cultural fields. It is interesting to note that all of them have a weaker inclination towards their Jewish origins and religion as a whole. They all fail to observe the rituals, and even look at them as something senseless and shameful from a gender perspective.

Sasha escaped the bonds of the shtetl and rising war dangers and started a new life in New York where she shook off a fair share of her traditional upbringing. Her marriage to Maurice never led to a family life since he took to traveling while Sasha stayed in New York with their daughter and learned to be the independent mother she needed to be in such circumstances. Leiba, Sasha's mother, had realized that of all her children, Sasha would know best how to fight for herself: "This one will, thank God, always be able to take care of herself." (Mazel, 57)

Her daughter Chloe was born in the turmoil of a starting war and thus she was introduced by Sasha to the new world right from the start. Her independence is demonstrated also by the fact of her free decision to become a single mother:
"[...] she had chosen to become a single mother in 1964. (Who had ever heard the expression "single mother" in 1964?..)" (Mazel, 31-32)

Having been brought up without any religious ties, Chloe stands for the least Jewish woman, her life having been more American than Jewish. Eventually, she is

not able to fully understand her daughter Phoebe who yearns to reconstruct her Jewish identity, and create a family in which she could practice traditional Jewish rituals such as eating kosher food.

Goodman's Beatrix is also an example of "a secular Jew". Beatrix does not keep Sabbath; she is a successful academic who eventually sets off to England, where she originally came from, to accept an interesting job offer. Her husband Cecil seems to be very submissive in their marriage and relationship. When Beatrix decides to move from America, Cecil follows her without any exact job prospect in England. Beatrix's independence goes as far as performing a birth ceremony for her daughter that is unheard of in traditional Judaism.

An extreme example of an independent female character is the controversial heroine Fraydel (*Mazel*). By creating Fraydel, Goldstein has revealed a completely mysterious and rather radical way to live in the Jewish community.

Fraydel, Sasha's siter, never acted like a Jewish girl and got away with her behavior on the basis of her mental state, which was pretended. The fake madness only disguised a bright, analytical mind. "If she had been a boy, they would have called her an *illui*, a prodigy." (Mazel, 127)

The thoughtful girl whose sex designed her for a fate she did not want to accept created her own way of not being dependent on the rules of the Jewish community in which she lived.

Goldstein uses a beautiful metaphor that makes us realize how difficult it might have been for a bright and thoughtful woman to be born into the strictly male-dominated society where orthodox Jewish rules prevail:

"A girl with such a head, he once said, when the child was yet very young, is like the ostrich.
The ostrich, dear husband?
Yes. Like a bird that's been given wings but will never fly." (Mazel, 128)

Fraydel, the flightless bird, symbolically represents the unlucky situation of women who feel the limitations and oppression of their abilities, ambitions and wishes. Fraydel, in her act of madness, does not observe the Jewish traditions and rituals any more than Chloe or Renee do. Based on the examples of Goldstein's and Goodman's heroines, it seems that those female characters who are less religious tend to be more independent and do not feel afraid to reach for success and higher goals.

8.4 Resentment and Rebellion

The topic of resentment of the Jewish orthodox way of life appears in most of the plots that Goldstein and Goodman have constructed. Rebellion is, just like the process of assimilation, a natural reaction to the conflicts of the Jewish and American lifestyles.

Goldstein created perhaps the most rebellious – and maybe also the saddest and the most unlucky – Jewish girl in Jewish-American contemporary literature – Fraydel, who could easily be seen as a symbol of a resentment.

In the previous chapter, Fraydel was described as having rebelled against the Jewish community by pretending to be mentally unstable. Her madness was a clever means of escaping the Jewish ties, since no obedience was expected or demanded of her. Although her action gave her some freedom, it did not result in happiness. Her endless wish for freedom made her a wild girl who, caught in the web of the communal expectations and laws, struggled for her life. Fraydel, in her powerless fight against the Jewish regulations, knows no fear or shame. She approaches the gypsies who camp near the shtetl and takes her sister Sorel to their settlement at night. Later, she runs away. She is indeed the flighless bird that cannot stand not to be able to fly. Her desire to free herself from the determined role that her fate designed for her results in her suicide. She drowns herself just before her wedding should take place, realizing that her life had reached the point of the last cry for freedom.

Interestingly enough, not even this ultimate step of resentment of the Jewish world is understood properly by the Jewish society of the shtetl in Schlutschev. Her suicide, although the Jews traditionally cannot accept such end of life, is linked to her madness and therefore Fraydel's body is buried next to her Jewish ancestors. Goldstein wrote this story in such a way that the misunderstanding is acknowledged by the reader, but not by the Jewish community.

The close, tender relationship of Fraydel and her sister Sorel creates a strength that Sorel uses later in her life so as to stand on her own and pursue a further rebellion through establishing her career as an actress and changing her

name from the Jewish Sorel to the non-Jewish Sasha. The whole concept of a Jewish theater is a very non-Jewish idea. As Goldstein herself says, "Purim is also a day of a theater, the only day of the year on which dressing up and acting out is not only permitted but applauded. On other days of the year, public spectacle is to be avoided." (Mazel, 136)

Sorel is amazed when she firstly encounters the magical possibilities of dance and music performance in the gypsy camp. This experience that her sister Fraydel provided influences Sorel for life, leading to her departure for the US and losing touch with nearly all her relatives and the influences and traditions of her former life. While Sasha proved to be a rebel against her origins, this is not the case with her daughter Chloe. Although we might think that her decision to become a single mother was a very radical and rebellious one, Chloe does not rebel against Jewish values. She does not see herself as a Jewish woman. The resentment that she shows is more against the traditional American views of the family and gender roles.

Another Goldstein rebel is Renee (*The Mind-Body Problem*) who has her own interesting metaphor for rebellion – a cheeseburger.
During her studies, Renee goes through the process of reconciliation with Jewish values in the American environment. Her search for identity includes this well-designed but not actually realized resentment in the form of an unorthodox meal:

"...We walked into a McDonald's and ordered a cheeseburger each. Not just a plain trayf hamburger, you understand, but a trayf hamburger with cheese, meat and milk together. [...] After an hour of sitting and staring shamefaced, we walked out, leaving behind two untouched cheeseburgers." (MBP, 175)

Allegra Goodman's rebellious characters are namely Renee (*Kaaterskill Falls*) and Henry (*The Family Markowitz*).

As seen in the relationship and conflict of Renee and her orthodox mother Nina, the girl feels the pressure of American culture on the one hand and the Jewish community life that her mother insists on, on the other. Thus, Renee is ready to resent Jewish values as soon as she meets Stephanie and decides to be her friend.

Not only does she freely chose to associate with someone who is not seen in Nina's eyes as a proper friend for a Jewish girl, she also starts wearing jeans, which symbolize her resentment. Soon, she quits the boring job in the community and finds a new one in a local, non-community library. Nina's efforts cannot limit Renee for too long and she, almost like Sasha, is bound to escape from the nest she was nursed in by the Jewish community, and succeed in the wider world.

There are several male characters that show a slight resentment, yet never as strongly and radically as the women in the novels and stories discussed. Henry (*The Family Markowitz*) turns out to be gay, but later gets married to a non-Jewish woman. Jeremy (*Kaaterskill Falls*) goes to live out of the community and pursues a modern education and academic career that is not traditionally expected from Jewish men. There are also several male actors and directors in the Jewish theater in Warsaw, where Sasha started her career. Both authors try to emphasize that the themes of assimilation, resentment of Jewish values, or finding identity are not exclusively connected to women. Yet, they present many examples where women take the radical steps towards their future and happiness, while men in their works are not as assertive and resolute.

Rebecca Goldstein and Aliegra Goodman produced many and varied images of resentment and rebellion against Jewish values, rituals and traditions. Ranging from name-changing, acting, feigning madness and being gay, to eating cheeseburgers and wearing jeans.

Resentment towards Jewish values might feel very close to assimilation. Although Fraydel rebelled without an idea of assimilation, there was a referential group of gypsies to which she would have rather belonged. The resentment of the values of one group is conditioned by the existence of another social environment where the rebelling person aspires to move. Thus, such resentment might be seen as one aspect of assimilation and therefore an opposite of the efforts to preserve Jewish values as discussed in chapter 8.2.

By numerous different views from many various angles, Goldstein and Goodman show us how complicated is the process of establishing oneself as a Jew in America or as an American Jew.

9. Conclusion

The Jewish-American situation seen through the lenses of Goldstein's and Goodman's works bring us closer to understanding the challenges the Jews in America have had to face. American culture provides open possibilities and chances that Jews had not been used to. This change starts the process of gradual assimilation in the forms of new educational opportunities, new views of gender roles, a modern approach to life where all people can be appreciated and successful, women not excluded.

The impact of place and culture shapes the face of traditional Judaism, which needs to find ways to retain orthodox ways and keep Jews united against the possible dangers that might come from the outside. Yet progressive assimilation is inevitable and concerns all American Jews, even those who try to seek shelter in the womb of the orthodox communities.

The changes take place especially in the new generations who do not have much connection to the past and Jewish experience on the far distant continent. They create their own version of Judaism based partly on the ways of their parents and partly on what American society offers. American values are gradually taken into consideration and influence the views of the young Jews. The new face of the religion is no longer what Judaism used to look like in the old shtetls.

New rules are introduced into Judaism in the American context – the traditional holidays are adjusted in favor of gender equality, it frequently happens that the Sabbath is not properly observed, the Jewish heritage is not passed on strictly by a mother but sometimes it suffices to have a Jewish father for the child to feel Jewish, conversions to Judaism take place. All such acts would be resented in traditional Judaism. Since Judaism had to come to terms with the prevailing American culture, its rules needed to loosen.

However, the new generations are capable of preventing the loss of Jewish values. Their identities can still be built around the basic moral rules so typical of Jewish culture - an emphasis on morality, education, respect, charity, family unity and awareness of history.

Judaism is evolving into a religion that might seem to have lost some of its important features by being taken to the United States. But maybe it gained some new features that only deepen the essential idea of Judaism. Gender roles need not be limited and yet the complementary roles might be retained. Education need not be exclusive; on the contrary, it might help Judaism to have the female scholars that presently exist.

As discussed in the analysis of the works of Goldstein and Goodman, their Jewish characters are often coping with the fear of Judaism being in danger. Yet, on the other hand, other characters are concerned with retrieving their Jewish roots and come back to the values and traditions that their ancestors were so afraid to lose.

This analysis cannot answer questions about the future of Judaism in America or how American women generally feel about their Jewish origins. This analysis merely presents some research on the female roles within Judaism in the work of two contemporary Jewish-American female writers. The novels of Rebecca Goldstein and Aliegra Goodman are valuable pieces of writing that help us understand the position of Jewish-American women through a number of specific examples that bring us closer to understanding reality as it is.

Bibliography:

Primary sources:

Goldstein, Rebecca: The Mind-Body Problem, Penguin Books, 1993

Goldstein, Rebecca: Mazel, Penguin Books, 1995

Goldstein, Rebecca: Strange Attractors, Penguin Books, 1994

Goodman, Aliegra: Kaaterskill Falls, Dell Publishing, 1998

Goodman, Aliegra: The Family Markowitz, Washington Square Press, 1997

Secondary sources:

Baron-Cohen, Simon: The Essential Difference, Penguin Books, 2003

Chalierová, Catherine: Židovská jedinečnost a filosofie, překlad Marcela Sedláčková, Filosofický ústav AV ČR, 1993

Erikson, Erik H: "Reflections on Womanhood" in: The Woman in America, Beacon Press, 1965, edited by Robert Jay Lifton

Friedan, Betty: The Feminine Mystique, Dell Publishing, 1963

Gilligan, Carol – "In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development" in: Modern Feminism, edited and introduced by Maggie Humm, Columbia University Press, 1992

Goldman, Karla – Beyond the Synagogue Gallery (Finding a Place for Women in American Judaism), Harvard University Press, 2000

Mc Clelland, David C.: "Wanted: A New Self-Image for Women" in: The Woman in America, Beacon Press, 1965, edited by Robert Jay Lifton

Myerhoff, Barbara: "Jewish comes up in you from the roots" in: Women's Studies – A Reader, edited by Stevi Jackson, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993

Parush, Iris – Reading Jewish Women (Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Jewish Society), Brandeis University Press, 2004
Translated from Hebrew by Saadya Sternberg

Rostow, Edna G.: "Conflict and Accommodation" in: The Woman in America, Beacon Press, 1965, edited by Robert Jay Lifton

Chalierová, Catherine: Židovská jedinečnost a filosofie, překlad Marcela Sedláčková, Filosofický ústav AV ČR, 1993

Internet sources:

http://www.forward.com/issues/2001/01.05.11/women6.html
nov 7, 2005

http://www.jwa.org/feminism/_html/index_noflash.htm
april 5, 2006