Orthodox Judaism through the Eyes of Women Characters in Rebecca Goldstein's *Mazel*

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Abstract
This paper deals with the novel by Rebecca Goldstein Mazel, *the main focus of which rests on four generations of Jewish women and their relationship with Orthodox Judaism. Two worlds are put in contrast: that of a shtetl in prewar Eastern Europe and that of a modern Orthodox Jewish community in North America. Sasha Saunders, who was born in the shtetl and has relocated to New York, has abandoned her religion and cannot understand that her granddaughter has decided to settle down in a Modern Orthodox community in New Jersey and thus to go back to the "old ways."*

Keywords
Rebecca Goldstein, *Mazel*, Orthodox Judaism, Jews, women characters

In her novel *Mazel* (published in 1995) Rebecca Goldstein presents a four generations of an Orthodox Jewish community. The book has three settings–Shluftchev, a *shtetl* in Galicia (a place on the border between today's Poland and Ukraine) in 1920s; prewar Warsaw, Poland; and the United Sates in the 1990s. Two temporal settings, one in prewar Eastern Europe and that in postwar North America, are linked by the fate of Sasha Saunders. She was raised in an Orthodox family, and having been affected by the narrow--minded milieu of the *shtetl* and a tragic death of her beloved sister Fraydel, she decided to abandon her Jewish roots and start over overseas. A few decades later, her granddaughter Phoebe returns to orthodoxy–"the old ways" that her grandmother has rejected.[1]

The book bears autobiographical features, as Rebecca Goldstein's father was born in a *shtetl* in Poland and she herself was brought up in an Orthodox Jewish family.[2] As she grew up, she rebelled against the traditional Jewish life. However, Goldstein's rebellion took more of an intellectual form. As she has said, unlike her contemporaries who rebelled "by drugs, sex, and rock and roll" she took "a course of philosophy feeling very wild."[3] In her book, she gives voices to strong women and lets them deal with the orthodoxy on their own.

The key figure is Sasha Saunders, who is "not what you would call a tradition-bound woman. Raised as a child in an atmosphere made unbreathable by piety and ritual, she had taken no small pleasure in breaking the tiresome taboos with as much noise and commotion as she could muster. The soul of discretion she wasn't. And her spirit of rebellion hasn't given an inch over the years."[4] Sasha was born Sorel Sonnenberg to a large family of a scholar. Her mother Leiba was known as a wise woman to whom all the women and even some men of the *shtetl* came for advice. At that time, it was unwanted for women to study, as their primary preoccupation was to be their family and household, though, Leiba, a daughter of a rabbi, had "her head in books" before

1 Rebecca Goldstein, *Mazel* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1995), 338.

2 Ezra Cappell, *American Talmud: The Cultural Work of Jewish American Fiction* (Albany: State University of New York, 2007), 110.

3 Cappell, *American Talmud*, 184.

4 Goldstein, *Mazel*, 19.

she got married.[5] She is an example of an intellectual woman who embraced her role of an Orthodox Jewish wife with ease.

The opposite tendencies are shown among her two daughters. Fraydel, the oldest, is depicted as follows:

> Fraydel had moods. This was Shluftchev's word for all that made Fraydel like no one else. She was as different from all others as the moon is from the sun. And though it was true that sometimes Fraydel's moods were such that she would refuse to talk or even to catch your eye, and a harsh cast settled over her face so that she lost all the softness of a girl, it was also true that there were good moods, just as inexplicable as the bad, with laughter and silly songs and nonsense rhymes spilling forth.[6]

Sasha did not fit into the narrow-minded community of the *shtetl*. Rebecca Goldstein presents the *shtetl* Shluftchev-on-the-Puddle as a place with a persistent habit of the "ancient limiting of women," which can be placed in contrast with the strong women character's selving.[7] The sort of place it was is manifested in the puddle, which can be said to be a tangible product of the *shtetl*'s venom. The puddle in the *shtetl* got larger and smaller, depending on the season of the year. What was striking was the smell that came out of it. To Fraydel it was "the stink of Evil:" she imagined that the smell was produced by all the memories of the *shtetl* which had sunk into it and spoiled.[8] The name itself also has a figurative meaning, too–*shluf* means "sleep" in Yiddish, which is apt for such a torpid environment.[9] Shluftchev is depicted as a little town inhabited by a close-knit community of Orthodox Jews that did not tolerate any deviations from the rigidly observed *halakhah*.[10]

An imaginative and creative girl, Fraydel naturally had to struggle in such an environment. She loved any kind of books and only when she was reading was she satisfied. Such an activity was not appreciated in the *shtetl*, the attitude being that "if a girl must have a book, there was the *Tz'enah Ur'enah*, especially written for women, to teach them a little Torah on Sabbath afternoon. Beyond that, what did a girl need from books? It was from freedom and idleness that all the problems sprang."[11] Other kids in the *shtetl* reacted to her differentness by tormenting her, calling her "*Fraydel, da meshuggena maydel*" - Fraydel, the crazy girl.[12] Her conduct as such was not the problem; it was more of a gender issue. It is said that if Fraydel had been born as a boy her intelligence would have been praised and she would have been called an *illui*, a prodigy.[13] As Helen Meyers puts it: "In Shluftchev, a woman's body grounds a being of genius, and the history of

5 Goldstein, *Mazel*, 93.

6 Goldstein, *Mazel*, 71-2.

7 Janet Burstein, *Telling the Little Secrets: American Jewish Writing since the 1980s*. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 88.

8 Goldstein, *Mazel*, 63.

9 Andrew Furman, *Contemporary Jewish American Writers and the Multicultural Dilemma: The Return of the Exiled* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 96.

10 Halakhah has been described as "the totality of laws and ordinances that have evolved since biblical times to regulate religious observances and the daily life and conduct of the Jewish people. Quite distinct from the Law of the Pentateuch, Halakhah purports to preserve and represent oral traditions stemming from the revelation on Mount Sinai evolved on the basis of it." "Halakhah (Jewish Law)," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed April 14, 2012, http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/252201/Halakhah.

11 Goldstein, *Mazel*, 69.

12 Goldstein, *Mazel*, 56.

13 Goldstein, *Mazel*, 127.

Fraydel's family suggests that becoming of marriageable age is an especially perilous time for one's intellectual and creative life. Like her daughter Fraydel, Leiba used to lose herself in the books she surreptitiously read in the outhouse."[14] Fraydel became attracted to the nomadic way of life of Gypsies and nearly managed to escape with them and save herself. As a response, her mother Leiba arranged a wedding with a crippled boy, hoping that Fraydel would calm down. However, Fraydel sabotaged the wedding by violating one of the rules of the Sabbath and it was called off. Finally she committed suicide by drowning, unable to embrace the orthodoxy of the *shtetl*. There were three gifted women in the *shtetl*: Leiba, Sorel, and Fraydel who represented three alternative possibilities in handling the limitation–accommodation, rebellion, and self-destruction.[15] The *shtetl* can stifle women, but also empower them.[16]

In contrast to Fraydel and Sorel, Chana, the second oldest daughter, is presented. Chana was perfectly at ease with her role. Since her childhood she took the duties of the oldest Fraydel and helped her mother with household chores and took care of younger siblings. To her it came very naturally to be mother-like and put home in her center of attention. Home as such plays an enormous role in the ritual life of Orthodox Jews, as many of their holidays are celebrated in a family circle around the table. Women are supposed to be responsible to make sure that everything is working. In addition, many rules of food preparation connected with *kashrut* (the Jewish dietary law) need to be observed, and for this reason women are partially freed from praying in the synagogue and studying the Torah. Chana, who was becoming a *kalleh maydel*, a girl old enough to get married, keenly awaited the time when she had her husband and all responsibilities of a wife. Unlike Fraydel, she saw marriage as something mystical and right.

After the Fraydel's tragic death, Sorel and her family moved to Warsaw. By this time, Sorel had decided not to let the religious system destroy her as it destroyed her sister; she had chosen to live and to seize the opportunities which she attributed to *mazel*, which means luck in Yiddish. The environment of Warsaw stood in a sharp contrast with that of the *shtetl*. Warsaw was a city with a huge concentration of Jews, almost one third of its population, and besides this, it was "a city of talkers."[17] Sorel became entranced with the city's bohemian atmosphere and cultural life. Without the constant supervision of the community of the *shtetl* she was slowly moving away completely from the religion. She studied, frequented cafes, and enjoyed urban life. Thanks to her aunt, Sorel was introduced to the theatre world and later became a star of a Yiddish stage and she traveled with a theatre company to various cities. The motif of traveling occurs several times throughout the book; Murray Baumgarten indicates how in *Mazel* traveling to new destinations and dealing with different circumstances is a key reason for changes in the characters' personalities.[18] To Sorel, every relocation means greater freedom. She "defies limitation by gender, taking a name, Sasha, that is '[a] man's and woman's name.'" On the other hand, she speaks "like a reflection of unstill water" in the quivering voice "that

14 Helene Meyers, „The Death and Life of a Jewish Judith Shakespeare: Rebecca Goldstein's Mazel." *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 25.3 (2007): 63, accessed September 19, 2012, http://scholar.harvard.edu/rgoldstein/files/shofar_mazel_meyers.pdf.

15 Burstein, *Telling the Little Secrets*, 90.

16 Burstein, *Telling the Little Secrets*, 93.

17 Goldstein, *Mazel*, 206.

18 Murray Baumgarten, "Dancing at Two Weddings: Rebecca Goldstein's *Mazel* between Exile and Diaspora," *Diasporas and Exiles: Varieties of Jewish Identity*, ed. Howard Wettstein (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 80.

had once been her sister's."[19] Nevertheless, the traumatizing experience of her sister Fraydel's death has never stopped haunting her. It has remained her dark secret and except for her husband Maurice she has never told it to anybody. When she finally got to New York, she "decided, from the very start, that somehow or other she was a born New Yorker."[20] Unlike the other Jews, Sasha did not feel as an immigrant there; to her she was not an exile but had finally found a home and could breathe.

Living on her own in New York, Sasha abandoned religious practices, process already begun in Warsaw. According to clues given in the novel, she did not conform to the Jewish modesty law by wearing pants. This act of defiance is forbidden in the *Torah* in Deuteronomy 22:5 : "A woman must not wear men's clothing, nor a man wear women's clothing, for the LORD your God detests anyone who does this."[21] She also violated the *kashrut* by eating shrimp. In Leviticus 11:9-10 it is written that: "Of all the creatures living in the water of the seas and the streams, you may eat any that have fins and scales. But all creatures in the seas or streams that do not have fins and scales–whether among all the swarming things or among all the other living creatures in the water–you are to detest."[22] To Sasha, the driving power of the universe was not God, but *mazel* (luck), which controls people's lives and brings order to the turmoil.

Sasha's daughter Chloe, thus, grew up in a secular environment in Manhattan. Chloe, who has become a professor of classics at Columbia University, knows nothing about Judaism. Regarding Chloe's relationship with religion, Sasha's remarks that Chloe is "nothing but a pagan […] ready to accept anybody's gods."[23] Chloe is a free-thinker, a modern woman who decided to be a single parent in 1960s and who used a man to have a baby–her daughter Phoebe has never met her father. Chloe's sense of being Jewish has always been shaped by the notion that she had no relatives, since they had been killed by the Nazis during the Holocaust. She was left only with family stories, as neither of her parents was practicing orthodoxy; indeed the only reminder of her roots was Yiddish, which she spoke as her first language when she was a child until it was replaced by English. It is after Phoebe returns to Orthodox Judaism that Chloe, now in her 50s, becomes amazed by all the rituals at her daughter's wedding and feels "strangely united" to all the Jews at the ceremony.[24]

Phoebe, too, was raised in a secular environment in New York and became a professor of mathematics at Princeton. "To Sasha, Phoebe is – just as Fraydel had been – truly and literally wonderful: sometimes all you can do is to wonder. Since Phoebe was a little girl, solemnly blowing her soap bubbles for hours on end, Sasha's been wondering. Even now, as a certified grown-up, Phoebe's capable of stunning her grandmother into silence with statements that seem to come of an unplumbable innocence."[25] Both Chloe and Sasha have seen a sort of poignancy in Phoebe which is gone when she begins living in a Modern Orthodox community in Lipton, New Jersey. Sasha even thinks to herself that Fraydel through Phoebe has a second chance, a sort of atonement for Fraydel. While her great-aunt was unable to embrace the life of the *shtetl* and died, Phoebe feels at home within the Orthodox community and her life starts there.

19 Burstein, *Telling the Little Secrets*, 89.

20 Goldstein, *Mazel*, 7.

21 Deut. 22:5 NIV.

22 Lev. 11:9-10 NIV.

23 Goldstein, *Mazel*, 334.

24 Goldstein, *Mazel*, 354.

25 Goldstein, *Mazel*, 18.

The Hebrew term for people who did not grow up according to "the traditional Jewish beliefs and practices of orthodoxy" and later consciously decided to turn to this way of life is *baalei teshuva*, which means "masters of return."[26] According to Debra Renee Kaufman, women who have returned to Orthodox Judaism (*baloot teshuva*) give reasons for their decision such as spiritual emptiness, a lack of meaning in their lives, and "concern about the loss of boundaries in marital, familial, and sexual relations."[27] The exact motivation for Phoebe's conversion is not presented in the novel. However, when she is asked she answers metaphorically with a story of a dead man, saying that everybody "need[s] the comfort of their own kind."[28] To Phoebe, it seems logical to begin keeping *kosher*. This in particular brings a huge shock for her grandmother Sasha, who does not understand why Phoebe, an educated woman, wants to start again with rituals which are primitive and obsolete. Sasha, who loves her freedom and the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the city, considers this taking a step back, especially her granddaughter's decision to live in Lipton, New Jersey: Fraydel's sister calls the Jewish community there "Shluftchev with a designer label."[29] Despite her family's wishes, Phoebe finds peace and, indeed, her own identity in the orthodoxy.

Sasha is stunned by the fact that Phoebe and her husband-to-be Jason live on the same "perfectly egalitarian terms" as Sasha and her deceased husband Maurice used to do, even though the young couple are Orthodox.[30] This is the opposite of what she had seen in the *shtetl* in Eastern Europe; in fact after sixty-years many things have changed. As Helene Meyers puts it: "the 'reshtetlization of America' of which Sasha is so contemptuous is posited as containing the seeds of not only Jewish renewal but also gender renewal."[31] The role of women has changed even regarding religious practices, from which had been excluded from public roles within the community. However, in the United States during the last few decades Modern Orthodox women have started to be included in Jewish communal life, a fact which reflects the growth of women's public roles in most aspects of life in America.[32] Modern Orthodoxy does not consider itself as separatist as it once had; Modern Orthodox Jews "consider themselves to be 'Torah--true Jews'" whose aim is to coexist with the non-Jewish world without compromising their own beliefs.[33] One tenet of the philosophy of Modern Orthodox Judaism has been stated as the vision that the *halakhic* value system must embrace the fullness of life. According to Rabbi Menachem-Martin Gordon, the Torah represents the measurement of life and an all-embracing value standard, thus it is necessary to live life fully so that the whole *halakhic* system can be applied.[34] The Torah functions as life's conscience, and life must be filled with human experience if there would be content therein to be measured by the *halakhah*. Further, if a Jew embraces all aspects of life, she will come across conflicts

26 Debra Renee Kaufman, "Women Who Return to Orthodox Judaism: a Feminist Analysis." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 47.3 (1985): 545, accessed September 19, 2012, http://www.jstor.org/stable/352257.

27 Kaufman, "Women Who Return to Orthodox Judaism," 546-9.

28 Goldstein, *Mazel*, 338.

29 Goldstein, *Mazel*, 333.

30 Goldstein, *Mazel*, 36.

31 Helene Meyers, "The Death and Life of a Jewish Judith Shakespeare," 71.

32 Elie Fishman, "Orthodox Egalitarianism." *Mosaic; a Review of Jewish Thought and Culture* 8 (1990): 1-3. *Feminism and Halakah*, accessed October 22, 2012, http://www.jofa.org/pdf/Batch%202/0009.pdf.

33 Nora L. Rubel, *Doubting the Devout: The Ultra-Orthodox in the Jewish American Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 11-12.

34 Menachem-Martin Gordon, *Modern Orthodox Judaism: Studies and Perspectives*, (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2012), 16.

between her beliefs and the outside world, e.g. her profession; she should not avoid the problem by attempting to escape it, but resolve it according to the *halakhic* principles.[35] As notions of morality have changed in recent years, Jews might decide to contain themselves in communities like Lipton. However, in Modern Orthodox Judiasm women are free study, as is Debby, Jason's younger sister who studies at Stern College, the women's branch of Yeshiva University. Debby is depicted as submissive to her mother Beatrice's constant bossing. Phoebe's mother-in-law can easily fit into the concept of a JAP (Jewish American Princess), which is a stereotype of a Jewish American woman introduced in 1950s by Jewish male novelists. Anna Petrov Bumble characterizes the JAP as a "young upper middle class Jewish woman as a materialistic, conspicuous consumer, spoiled by daddy and looking for a husband to continue the same kind of financial support."[36] Apparently, Beatrice is middle-aged, but she embodies the consumer woman, one without any intellectual depth or spirituality, only a passion for luxury items like designer clothes. On the contrary, Chloe and Phoebe are presented as "women without any detectable vanity."[37]

Rebecca Goldstein portrays four generations of intellectual women and their own introspective examinations they undergo while living in different places. Andrew Furman indicates how "*Mazel* represents Goldstein's ambitious attempt to test out the viability of Orthodox Judaism in three representative Jewish milieus of the twentieth century: the prewar Galician *shtetl* of Shluftchev, the cosmopolitan prewar Warsaw, and the contemporary Orthodox Jewish suburb of Lipton, New Jersey."[38] Sasha has seen the rigidity and narrow-mindedness of the closed, declining community of the *shtetl* in Eastern Europe; a few decades later, her granddaughter Phoebe finds the rituals of Orthodox Judaism spiritually fulfilling. What killed the great-aunt Fraydel brings the great-niece Phoebe to life. Fraydel, whose life was prematurely ended by her suicide, got a second chance through Phoebe to succeed and finally to make peace with orthodoxy. The novel ends on Phoebe's wedding day, when she picks the name Fraydel for her *ketuba* (the marriage contract). This scene can be understood as an allegory of passing on the continuity of Orthodox Judaism in the modern world decades after its interruption by Sasha. The "two Fraydels" meet at this point and the old Fraydel passes her burden to a new Fraydel who is competent to bear it; this act brings reconciliation with the orthodoxy for the two sisters from the *shtetl*, one dead and one still alive. This may be the only way to reconcile the secular world with the world of Orthodox Judaism–through a single individual. At the wedding Phoebe, Chloe and Sasha dance with their arms linked around each other, swirling in a circle which has been closed.

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35 Menachem-Martin Gordon, *Modern Orthodox Judaism*, 17-35.

36 Anna Petrov Bumble, "The Intellectual Jewish Woman vs. the JAP in the Works of American Jewish Women Writers." *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 19 (2000): 26.

37 Goldstein, *Mazel*, 30.

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