

Leo Finkle's Putative Victory

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Abstract:

In my paper I intend to discuss Bernard Malamud's short story "The Magic Barrel" (1958). The rabbinical student Leo Finkle turns to the Jewish marriage broker to find a suitable wife. Is Leo Finkle a schlemiel or not? And will he be able to find redemption?

Key-words: Jewish American identity, assimilation, tradition, schlemiel, redemption

The short story "The Magic Barrel" (1958) brought to Malamud the National Book Award. The first draft of the story was entitled "The Marriage Broker" and, concerning its conception, Malamud said that

The idea for the story itself, the *donnée*, came about through Irving Howe's invitation to me to translate a story from the Yiddish for inclusion in his and Eliezer Greenberg's anthology called *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*. My reading in Royte Pomerantzen provided the six marriage anecdotes—two of which were very important (qtd. in Avery ed. 39).

Malamud liked to prepare more than one draft for each of his works and this is why the final version changed and improved when compared to the first one. Malamud uses Yiddish as a source of inspiration for his characters also. They are stock-characters but, at the same time, original in their behaviour. The protagonist of the short story, Leo Finkle, is a rabbinical student who wishes to marry in order to get a better place after finishing his studies. He is not aware of the fact that he is actually in search for love and not for some material reward that would come with a wife. He calls on the services of a "*schadchen*" (a marriage broker), an institution that has a long history among Jews, as we find out from the brief reference pertaining to how Leo's parents found each other. Not surprisingly, the wedlock did result in a good marriage. In his *A*

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Treasury of Jewish Folklore (1948), Nathan Ausubel describes the marriage broker as an “important functionary in the Jewish community following the largescale massacres of the Crusades and constant flights of persecuted Jewish communities that made normal social life impossible” (qtd. in Avery ed. 136). The *schadchen* performed an important role in the communities of East Europe. After the mass immigration of Jews, the character became more a comic figure than a serious one. As Lillian Kremer affirms: “the butt of satiric humor, guilty of embellishing the physical, intellectual, and social attributes of his clients” (qtd. in Avery ed. 125).

Salzman, the marriage broker of the short story, is described as a typical Jew who smells of fish: “he smelled frankly of fish, which he loved to eat, and although he was missing a few teeth, his presence was not displeasing, because of an amiable manner curiously contrasted with mournful eyes” (“Magic” 124). Beginning with this description, Malamud starts to prepare the reader to find out a terrible truth about Salzman, the father with a wild daughter. Salzman is a real *luftmensch* (a weightless man who lives on air), well-known in Yiddish literature. In Finkle’s eyes, Salzman appears as an omnipresent figure, he sees him even when he is not present. They share one common characteristic, as Abramson contends: “Neither Salzman nor Finkle understands love: Finkle learns about it through suffering; to Salzman it remains a piece of merchandise” (133). Salzman wants to sell a human feeling which is not for sale actually, but which can be attained through learning. Salzman is like an old story-teller who has a magic barrel that would help Leo find the suitable bride. Of course, this proves to be a lie but the magic is certainly there. We are tempted to believe in the existence of this barrel in which the marriage broker keeps the pictures of the girls, but, of course, not all of them could be suitable for a would-be rabbi. Indeed, we find out later in the short story that there is none. The barrel appears “filled with human hope” (Karl 243). Jeffrey Helterman also says that “Salzman believes in the efficacy of his craft” (133). His creed will turn Leo into a believer, and he will actually find his would-be wife because, in Salzman’s opinion, her picture was also in the barrel.

Salzman lies to Leo in many respects, making him a real *schlemiel*. But I think that Leo was an easy prey because he was born a *schlemiel*. Leo does not really know what he wants and, as he cannot define his own wishes, he is unable to find the right bride. From his own

vantage point, none of the girls is suitable for him, one of them is too young, the other is too old, etc., but these are only some excuses. From the Salzman's point of view his "rejects are also imperfect. Too old, or maladjusted, they have not forsaken hope: the marriage broker is the last line of their hopes, their Miss Lonelyhearts" (Karl 244). These would-be brides live in a material world where it is hard to find the right husband or, at least, their fathers think so, in most cases.

We learn from the story that the parents turn to the services of Salzman in order to find a husband for their daughter. Here we can see that the old world values are opposed to those of the new world. In 20th-century America, it was quite unbelievable that there should be someone who could apply for the services of such an agency. Finkle, as an American citizen, would like to marry out of love; he calls on the services of a marriage broker because he wants to be faithful to the old tradition and to his parents, as well. He does not really believe in the institution itself, but tries to behave like a good, obedient son. Salzman's questions about Leo's wishes make him review his life. He seriously starts to evaluate his relationship with other humans and he questions his relationship with God. Leo accepts to meet Lily Hirschorn, one of the candidates who, because of Salzman's lies, thinks that Leo is a very religious person or, more likely, a religious fanatic: "When," she asked in a trembly voice, "did you become enamored of God?" ("Magic" 134). From here on, Leo's nice and comfortable life is broken. He starts to question his whole life and starts to view himself like a human being and not like a future would-be rabbi standing for something that he is not.

He finally realizes that he cannot have a good relationship with God as long as he does not love people: "apart from his parents, he had never loved anyone. Or perhaps it went the other way, that he did not love God so well as he might, because he had not loved man. It seemed to Leo that his whole life stood starkly revealed and he saw himself for the first time as he truly was—unloved and loveless" ("Magic" 135).

Salzman is not only a marriage broker, he is also a father. His daughter, Stella, left them because she wanted to have a different life. She could not live in distress since Judaism could not offer her a life that would have been acceptable in the golden land. As Frederick R. Karl affirms: "Salzman's daughter has escaped from the small, poverty-stricken flat, out from the

world of Judaic law based on deception, disguise, and lie" (244). Her father did not want to show her picture to Finkle, but as through some magic, it got there. The picture raised Finkle's interest and he could not forget it:

Her face deeply moved him. Why, he could at first not say [...] Her he desired. His head ached and eyes narrowed with the intensity of his gazing, then as if an obscure fog had blown up in the mind, he experienced fear of her and was aware that he had received an impression, somehow, of evil. He shuddered, saying softly, it is thus with us all. ("Magic" 138–9)

Leo learns from Salzman that the girl in the picture is his daughter and that she is a whore, a prostitute who is not meant to become a rabbi's wife. But Leo senses, for the first time in his life, an ardent feeling of love. He knows that through Stella, Salzman's daughter, he can become a true rabbi because he can save her. Love can save her from her wicked life and make Leo a true spiritual leader for his people: "love has come to my heart" ("Magic" 143). Salzman questions the reality of this feeling as Leo has seen only the picture of Stella and he does not know anything about her. But Leo proves to be very firm in this respect. Salzman thinks that if there is a human being who can fall in love with Stella, then he can love anybody. This is probably because, in Salzman's eyes, she is lost for the Jewish world and for humanity, in general. But Leo feels that only through this love relationship can he achieve a spiritual turning and find the right path to a valuable human life. This idea brings to mind Abramson's point of view about Malamud's writing:

he greatly admires selflessness and, in particular, the process of inner change and growth that can lead an individual from a limited perspective of total concern with self to one that sees the importance of that self as part of the human condition.... He pushes them [his characters] down to bedrock in order to test them, to make them come to grips with what he feels to be the centrally important facets of life—selflessness and love.(1)

Leo will become a rabbi in a Jewish community and people will come to him for advice and guidance. He needs to undergo a spiritual change so as to become a valuable human being.

Salzman does not want to introduce Leo to Stella but, on Leo's insistence, he finally accepts to arrange a meeting.

Leo's story resembles that of the prophet Hosea, who is sent by God to marry a whore because this is the only way to salvation:

2 When Yahweh spoke at first by Hosea, Yahweh said to Hosea, "Go, take for yourself a wife of prostitution and children of unfaithfulness; for the land commits great adultery, forsaking Yahweh."

3 So he went and took Gomer the daughter of Diblaim; and she conceived, and bore him a son.

4 Yahweh said to him, "Call his name Jezreel; for yet a little while, and I will avenge the blood of Jezreel on the house of Jehu, and will cause the kingdom of the house of Israel to cease.

5 It will happen in that day that I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel. (Hosea 1: 2–5)

Hosea saved his people through his wife, but this is not Leo's case. The Biblical story can be regarded as a prefiguration for Malamud. Leo can save only himself and Stella, not an entire ethnic group. This idea of personal salvation is very different from the teachings of Judaism. Judaism concentrates on the group and not on the individual. But, since Malamud was an American writer, it is quite understandable that he would praise the generally accepted American idea of individualism.

Finally Leo meets Stella and the story ends with "Salzman, leaning against a wall, chanted prayers for the dead" ("Magic" 143). Says Jeffrey Helterman:

Salzman, refusing to accept the magic of his own profession, chants the prayer for the dead signifying that the rabbinical student is lost to the faith. Almost certainly the reverse is true, by trusting in his love for another human being, Finkle has become ready to love God and man, and, therefore, will be worthy to be called rabbi at just the moment that Salzman stops thinking of him as a rabbi. (133)

I agree with Helterman and, as I said before, for Malamud the great human values represent more than any religion, or belonging to an ethnic group. But there are other interpretations of Salzman's kaddish. In Sheldon Hershinow's point of view, "the reader is left with the illogical vaguely unsettling but deeply moving impression that Pinye's mourning chant somehow captures the pain, suffering, and loneliness of life while also welcoming the possibility of spiritual growth" (131). The Kaddish is usually chanted to mourn a beloved dead person, and its central theme is the magnification and sanctification of God's name. I think that Salzman sings it to mourn the dead old selves of Leo and Stella and to thank God for their moral growth. They could be saved through each other and through love. Stella is the wicked daughter who has to be rescued and Leo is the good son without feelings. For Jews, it was important, throughout the centuries, to nurture the importance of feelings over the mind. That is why Leo is left to choose with his heart and save himself and Stella. The figure of Stella is totally different from that of Lily Hirshchorn. Lily appears as a virtuous woman, while Stella is her opposite. But only through Stella can Leo attain a spiritual change.

The final scene of the short story is like a painting of Chagall: "She wore white with red shoes, which fitted his expectations, although in a troubled moment he had imagined the dress red, and only the shoes white" ("Magic" 143). Chagall's paintings "The Three Candles" (1938–1940), "The Tree of Life" (1948) and "Night" (1953) use the same vivid colors. Some critics labeled Malamud as a Chagallian writer but Malamud declared in an interview "I used Chagalleian imagery intentionally in one story, "The Magic Barrel," and that's it. My quality is not much like his" (Stern 60). I think that with this Chagallian imagery—"Violins and lit candles revolved in the sky. Leo ran forward with flowers outthrust" ("Magic" 143)—,the writer suggests that there is future for this couple.

I think that Leo's metamorphosis is the result of Salzman's conspiracy. Leo will be happy only by loving mankind more than before and this will make him a true believer in God. This idea of redemption is suggested in the text by a reference to the eyes: "From afar he saw that her eyes—clearly her father's—were filled with desperate innocence" (143). The eyes are the mirror of the soul; they suggest that she knows the meaning of suffering. Malamud, through the character of Salzman, prevents the story from becoming a tragedy. The comic figure of

Salzman somehow gives the whole story a more laughter-through-tears character than a gloomy one. Salzman is the facilitator of moral transformation, or spiritual turn of the hero. Leo is a schlemiel because he is fooled by Salzman on several occasions, but he will grow into a real man by the end of the story.

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