# Jewish Values and Cultural Transformations: Four Key Questions*

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In this paper, I attempt to answer the following questions:

1. What is a values-oriented literature and what is its antithesis?

2. Values *vs.* indoctrination: what are our choices? Who decides which values to promote? Can we dare to be different?

3. What are the goals and expectations of a values-oriented literature?

4. How does a values-oriented literature fit into the realm of art?

### 1. Values-Oriented Literature

I believe that a values-oriented literature makes distinctions between what is false and what is true, what is good and what is evil. True for whom? Good for whom? For humanity. There are definite consensual values shared by every civilized culture. These have been gathered and defined. They involve all that we commonly identify as "the moral life." They are the injunctions against murder, theft, treachery, the movement toward social justice.

In life as in fiction, three universal goals form the basis for all conflict, and they are often pitted against each other. First is the value of *reverence*—which translates into the need to find meaning in life, the spiritual quest. The second is the quest for *freedom,* including the freedom of individual expression. The third is the quest for *moral truth* or social justice. Scientific truth changes with new discoveries and changing mores. Moral teachings, however, those which move us toward social justice, do not change. A values-oriented literature is one that embraces these issues, does it boldly, and offers life-giving, life-saving, life-enhancing solutions to daily problems, both mundane and catastrophic. Of course, it must do this in an entertaining way. That is what makes writing an art, which I shall discuss later.

Escape fiction concentrates not on genuine conflict involving these values: the search for meaning, for freedom, for social justice. Instead, purely escape fiction concentrates on one dominant goal: pleasure or happiness. Further, it involves that brand of happiness that usually comes from quick physical gratification. Often it is a completely action-oriented fiction, based on conquest, with the pleasure pill also added.

In real life, and in moral fiction, the ultimate quest is not happiness. Happiness may come as a by-product, as a result of living well or of success. But happiness is always a temporary condition. On the other hand, fulfillment of the three moral imperatives toward meaning, freedom, and justice—these bring gratification that is much deeper, richer, and more far-reaching, and this is what a moral, realistic fiction offers.

Happiness literature is an escape literature that leaves little lasting food for thought or growth. This doesn't mean that escape literature cannot also be enriching. Science fiction and fantasy, for example, are fun and usually loaded with values—that is, messages about what it is to be human, about the fight between good and evil, about keeping the human race alive and well.

To be well we must be moral. That is proved in history as well as in fiction. Arthur Miller says it eloquently: "Look for the ultimate relevance—look toward the survival of the race." A values-oriented literature tells the reader, "L'Chaim—choose life."

A values-oriented literature must be based on sound psychological and sociological reasons for the way the characters behave. Values must be based on something outside the writer, a higher authority. For me, it is Torah. As an author, the subjects I choose and the way I present them, the outcome of the story, all stem from my belief system.

### 2. Values *vs.* Indoctrination

The question often arises when educators gather, Do we have the right to indoctrinate children with *our* values? What about freedom of choice? What about conflicts with other cultures?

It is the very fear of committing ourselves to our values that has created the terrible lack of values we see all around us, resulting in an alienated and violent youth. One of my books, *Incident at Loring Groves,* deals with exactly such a situation—where high school children are so immersed in concerns over their own popularity and acceptance that, when they discover the murdered body of a classmate, they choose a conspiracy of silence instead of facing up to their responsibilities to report the crime. Today, violent crimes by youth against other youth are increasing drastically. Another story like my Loring Groves Incident was recently reported in the Canadian press. Kids are committing murder for fun, for excitement, out of boredom. And someone must be responsible to label this kind of behavior for what it is–evil.

Years ago, when I was the guest speaker at a convention of reading teachers, my husband was seated at dinner beside a professor of education. Her specialty was developing methods of teaching reading. My husband, wanting to put some energy into the conversation, asked the professor, "When you teach children to read, how do you deal with the problem of what they are going to read? How do you know that they will read something worthwhile?" The

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professor was aghast. "Why, you're talking about values," she said. "We have nothing to do with that. Values education is up to the home and the church."

And here is the problem, imagining that we can leave the teaching of values to someone else, anyone else, because we are unwilling to lay claim to that right and that responsibility; we're afraid to make a mistake. If we let a false sense of modesty prevent us from teaching values, we can be certain of one thing: someone else will come in and fill the void. If we don't sell the values that enhance and promote life, we can be sure that someone else will sell the implements of death.

Of course, economics always enters into it, as we will be discussing later in our session about book production and sales. Even slavery was deemed profitable, and it was for economic, not philosophical reasons, that the South was reluctant to abolish it. Finally, of course, philosophy won out; later, it was discovered that slavery was not even economical. It is always that way. The higher values of reverence and freedom and social justice will appear to be opposed to physical and material values. But it is not true. The body and the spirit, both of the individual and society, are tied together; where the spirit flourishes, the body thrives.

I wrote a picture book called *All the Cats in the World* that expresses this idea. It is about an old woman, Mikela, who stubbornly goes down steep cliffs every day to feed a bunch of stray cats who live by a lighthouse. She is their sustenance; she derives great pleasure from this self-appointed task. But one day the old keeper of the lighthouse comes out and jeers at her—why would anyone spend good money and time and risk her limbs to feed a bunch of mangy cats? Day after day, the man torments her, demanding explanation, and finally when the man yells down, "WHY DO YOU FEED THOSE CATS?" Mikela screams back, "BECAUSE THEY ARE HUNGRY!" Later, the old man himself feeds the cats; Mikela teaches him a lesson about responsibility. Ultimately the old man and the old woman become good friends—which you might call the spiritual resolution of the story. But first, those cats have to be fed. Body and soul go together. It is when we do the right thing, not necessarily the easy thing, that we find meaning in life—and also happiness.

If my beliefs are different from those of the majority, that is precisely why I must broadcast them. Harriet Beecher Stowe held very different values from the majority. Anne Frank, in that attic in Holland, was certainly in the minority. We have to pay close attention and guard against those who, in the guise of politeness or in the quest for acceptance, would have us go for mediocrity and lack of purpose. We have enough stories about bunnies and pine trees and talking toys to last a lifetime—we need books about real people having real problems and solving them with a mind to reverence, freedom and justice.

### 3. Goals and Expectations

What are the goals of a values-oriented literature?

My goal as an author is to inform; to touch the emotions and thereby to provoke new thoughts, new attitudes; to promote empathy.

The storyteller was the first to recognize the enchantment of the tale where two extremes are pitted against each other. The ancient Greeks, in developing the art of drama, took us deep into that realm of imagination, so deep that for the first time we were actually able to identify and empathize with another person. Drama and its offspring, empathy, are the key to social reform. Without empathy, no social reform is possible. Where do we learn the call to empathy? In the Torah—remember the plight of the stranger, because you were strangers in Egypt. You–put yourself in the stranger's place. This is exactly what a values-oriented literature must do—allow the reader to put himself into the stranger's place, so as to experience his needs vicariously, and then be moved to action.

One big conflict in literature, as in life, is: How can we serve our society and still keep our individuality, our personal values? Many books, especially those depicting intercultural confrontations, explore this dilemma. Of course, people are transformed by their culture, but the question is how to hold on to our core values in spite of cultural distinctions. This question has been dominant since Biblical times, when we were transported to idolatrous Babylon. It is as relevant today, especially for those of us who live in the Diaspora—and whether we ask this question as Jews or as human beings of any other heritage, it is the most important question we can ask. Because unless our values can supersede and overcome cultural practices, we are never acting, but always being acted upon, swayed by every new wind of change, altered by every fad, rootless and confused, divided and weak.

This dilemma is the central theme of my latest young adult novel, *Silver Days,* a sequel to *Journey to America.* In *Silver Days,* Lisa and her family have arrived safely in America. But the problem now is to assimilate without compromising her own identity. Shall Annie, the youngest sister, be allowed to act as an angel in the Easter pageant at school? Various episodes depict the family's conflicts, until at last Lisa learns what compromises she must make and how to define herself as an American, while keeping the essential elements of her own, unique past.

What do we expect of a values-oriented literature? That it will rekindle the flame, inspire readers to make better choices. The fire needs constant tending. Humans are such that our transformations, no matter how profound, do not seem to last. Even the experience at Sinai, unprecedented in its scope, did not last, for the Israelites soon went back to bickering and bad habits We need continual urging and reinforcement and inspiration, and this is what good literature provides.

Colin Wilson (1984), in his book, *A Criminal History of Mankind,* speaks of pity as an emotion which must be kindled through the imagination. He sees two sides of the behavioral coin—creativity and crime. We cannot be deaf to the evil side of our nature, to the criminal within. We must bring that criminal out into the open—and this is where fiction can be very exciting. But, having brought out the criminal, we must proceed to demolish all his arguments, because unless we do, we fail to hear that other essential whisper, the whisper of the soul. Arthur Miller in "The Shadow of the Gods" says: "Look to where the gods ruminate and decide, when you are looking for literary themes. Listen to their voices."

### 4. Values and Art

How does a values-oriented literature fit into the realm of art?

Art is lasting. Art offers catharsis. It stimulates the emotions to provide that catharsis, through identification with the story and the characters. I do not think there is

a dichotomy between literature that entertains and literature that has value. How much we love the *Wizard of Oz, Doctor Doolittle,* and *Mary Poppins* series. They are all the utmost in fun, enchantment, and creativity—and filled with values that have lasted for decades. The problem with literature designed purely for escape is that in large doses it simply becomes boring. Whatever does not challenge the imagination and the intellect ultimately leaves us dissatisfied, with a vague hunger and even anger. That is why pornography becomes more and more explicit, why violence becomes more and more graphic, and finally nothing will do, but the ultimate catastrophe—death. But a truly artistic literature, on the other hand, extols life. And it need not be solemn or stern; in fact, it's sometimes best if the message is delivered in a burst of laughter.

I have written several books that are humorous. One is *The Year of Sweet Senior Insanity,* about Leni Pressman, who during her senior year of high school falls in love and decides to have sex with her boyfriend. Sex is the often-used vehicle toward happiness. What happens in my story is that Leni's waterbed breaks at the crucial moment—leading to a hilarious situation, which ends in a very serious reappraisal of values.

In the story, after the waterbed breaks, Leni's boyfriend, Blair, wants to ignore the problem. Leni knows she must make repairs. Blair wants her to tell her parents a lie. Leni refuses. In the end, Leni decides that family and responsibility are more important to her than Blair's superficial "love."

This is a contemporary story. But can we offer readers universal truths when we delve into such unfamiliar territory as Elizabethan England? Nazi Germany? A remote village in Ethiopia? Of course we can.

In *The Return,* my recent novel based on Operation Moses, the characters are all black. They live in Stone-Age conditions, in a hostile environment. Religiously, they go back to Biblical traditions. They are impoverished, superstitious, and totally unsophisticated about any modern developments. Yet, I dare say that more readers have been able to relate to Desta, the young black Ethiopian Jew, than any other character that I created. Why? Because in the story I deal with feelings that are universal—with the yearning to be with family, that counter-yearning for Jerusalem, and even if you are a Catholic or a Protestant or a Buddhist, you can understand what it means to go on that search. You know what it is like to be all alone in the world, either in actuality or as a metaphor.

I was recently honored with an award for *The Return.* I was both amused and amazed that this award was bestowed by the Catholic bishops of Germany, for the book which "best demonstrates Christian values." When I went to Germany to receive the prize, I met many Catholics, especially the jurors for the prize. At a press conference I was astonished and moved to hear a priest, who is also a professor of literature, expound on the universality of my book. Taking it to his own experience as a metaphor, he said, "As the Jews in this story seek their Jerusalem, so every Catholic in his own heart and mind longs for personal redemption, endures his own desert sojourn, arrives at last in his spiritual home." It was a thrill to hear this priest conjure up so much more in this little book than I had planted there, but that is the beauty of writing from the core of one's feelings and beliefs—that someone else might discover even more in it.

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A values-oriented literature does not necessarily deal with matters of religion; in fact, most often it does not. Furthermore, if questions of theology are too blatantly injected, the reader becomes annoyed. I think we do far better to emphasize our commonality than to split mankind by its differences. In many of my books, there is a scene of reaching out toward other peoples, other cultures, based on my belief in man's universal oneness, the importance of brotherhood.

In *The Return,* for example: Desta is alone with her little sister, walking from Ethiopia to Sudan, awaiting rescue to Israel. Her older brother has been killed. The two girls are starving. They approach a village, try to trade their blue beads for food, but the villagers recognize them as Jews—Falasha—and stone them. Then, Desta and Almaz meet an unfortunate Moslem family and share a meal with them. Their common concerns, once shared, overcome mistrust. Anxiety changes to compassion. This is the kind of awareness that we hope to glean from good literature, a reaching beyond ourselves and to a larger, better alliance.

Thank you, and to all of you, Shalom.

### References

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