

“Progress” and “Return”: The Origins of Isaac Bashevis Singer’s Thought

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ABSTRACT

The winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, Isaac Bashevis Singer, is a peculiar American Jewish writer. He was accredited as the misfit of the misfits under the combined influences of the three conflicting Eastern European Jewish religious sects of his time. These three sects are Hasidic represented by his father, Mitnagdim represented by his mother, and Haskalah represented by his elder brother. “Progress” and “Return” are the two core ideas running through the writings of Singer, contributing to the contradiction and complexity of his thought. In his lifetime, Singer experiences a twisted ideological journey from “Progress” to “Bewilderment” and finally to “Return” of the Jewish tradition and belief.

Keywords: *Isaac Bashevis Singer, Hasid, Mitnagdim, Haskalah*

1. FOREWORD

What was Isaac Bashevis Singer (1904-1991) like as a Jewish writer? Singer was a misfit of the misfits [1] [2]. He embraced western reason, but never abandoned his Jewish faith [3]. As a Jew, he was one of the survivors of the Holocaust who arrived at the United States right before Nazi German’s invasion and occupation of Warsaw. He was a highly talent yet controversial writer notwithstanding a winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1978, the second Jewish American writer to win this honor following Saul Bellow. On the one hand, he was born into a family of Polish rabbis in the 20th century and received the Jewish education in Jewish schools. On the other hand, he fully embraced modern Western thought and scientific reason, read secular literature, and received the enlightenment of Western philosophy. In his lifetime, he had written all about Jews in Yiddish. He was a combination between tradition and modernity. As pointed out by the English scholar Judith Newman, the Jewish tradition clings to him like his own skin -- very familiar, subject to it, scratch it in exasperation, insult it in anger. At the same time, as a believer in his tradition and his harshest critic, Singer, inherited the entire legacy of Hasidic culture [4]. He was questioned by both Jews and non-Jews; he was always on a journey in search of the Jewish God, but he once longed to assimilate into the American society living without conforming to the Jewish law. He embraced American value as an American citizen, but resisted the total assimilation into the

American mainstream society. In a word, he was a man wandering between Jewish tradition and post-modern Enlightenment reason and between Jewish God belief and scientific reason. In his lifetime, he was not only a Jew; he was also the son of the Jewish nation, who devoted himself like Job in the Old Testament to seeking a way out for the Jewish nation. He was good at telling stories to the Jews that there was no escape from modernity brought about by the modern Enlightenment and that and the road of assimilation was impassable. According to Singer, a return to the faith in God was the only way out. He also gave methodological guidance to the Jewish people on how to embrace modern reason in a positive way in their daily lives, while at the same time approaching God in their souls based on the Jewish tradition.

2. THE ORIGINS OF SINGER’S THOUGHT

Singer's works have puzzled many readers and critics alike. Under the profound influence of the conflict and confluence of different Eastern European Jewish sects, his writings include many multifaceted, contradictory, yet innovative ideas and thought. Singer was born to a family where his parents and his elder brother embraced three distinct Eastern European Jewish sects, namely the Hasidic sect represented by his father, the Mitnagdim sect represented by his mothers, and the Haskalah sect represented by his elder brother.

2.1 Singer's secret but firm belief in God was brought

to him by his father's Hasidic sect. Singer's father, Pinchas Menachem, was a devout Jewish Hasidic Rabiej, unsophisticated, poor, pure of heart and devoted to God. All of Singer's father's ideas and life were closely related to Judaism, which he saw as the most fundamental thing about the Jewish people. Pincus lived a life of Orthodox Judaism, who spared no effort to teaching his children Orthodox Judaism.

Even then, the father was one of the few rabbis who took religion seriously and taught his children exclusively [5]. Singer was heavily influenced by Hasidic teachings from his father. Most of his works are, therefore, derived from the ancient Jewish tradition, deeply rooted in Jewish religious life. This is manifested in the following five aspects. First, Singer wrote a large number of works related to Hasidism on the subject matter. Second, he advocated the belief in God, the emotional connection with God through passion, anti-assimilation in the American mainstream society. All of these practices were based on the Hasidic doctrine. The first two aspects are to promote and practice Hasidic religion. Third, Singer was practicing the Hasidic religion by "telling and listening to the story about Hasidic religion itself is engaged in Hasidic religion" [6]. Fourth, mysticism is rampant in Singer's writings. Fifth, throughout his lifetime, Singer experienced a dramatic and twisted journey in search of his belief from suspicion of God, to his bewilderment and search of God, and finally his return to his belief in God. The deep-rooted influence of the Hasidic doctrines from his father was a principal reason leading to Singer's eventual return to his belief in God. Singer's Hasidic influence is evident in "My Elder Sister", "The Magician of Lublin", and other works.

It is important to understand more about the Hasidic sect which exerted dramatic influence on the thought of Singer. Hasid, a sect of the Jewish mysticism, was originated in Poland in the middle of the 18th century. Since then, it has rapidly become the mainstream of the Jewish community in Eastern Europe. The reasons for the rapid development of Hasid are threefold.

1. *Passion*: The first reason resides in the inclusiveness and passion of Hasidic sect. The Hasidic believers were devoted to introducing some new and lively elements into the Jewish daily life while being faithful to the Jewish tradition. The history of the Jewish people was a history of suffering and faith. This was particularly the case for the Jewish people living in Eastern Europe, long subject to envy, hatred, violence and massacre in the 17th century. The Jewish population plummeted in the seventeenth and eighteenth century due to the June 1648 massacre of Jews of Nemyriv, and the 1768 massacre in Uman, more than one hundred years later. In addition to the physical pains, the Jewish residents of Eastern Europe fell into extreme poverty caused by the corruption of the Jewish community, on the

one hand, and the monopoly of the rich and power of the principal economic and production materials, on the other hand. The growing marginalized life of the Jewish people combined with their emotional and psychological trauma caused them to feel inferior, both spiritually and socially. There emerged a strong desire among the Jewish people for a new religious movement with which they could seek spiritual and psychological comfort with regard to asceticism and various superstitious activities. The Hasidic movement was born in respond to this desire. The Hasidic movement features its opposition to asceticism and sentimentality prevalent in traditional Jewish religious practices, seeing these practices as a sign of distrust of God's power and tolerance. The leaders of the Hasidic movement encouraged believers to get rid of the traditional rules and regulations of the traditional Jewish religious practices, and get more involved in these religious activities in a more active manner. According to them, the believers can lead his soul into a state of ecstasy in the form of singing and dancing when conducting religious activities [7]. They believe that these are more authentic expressions to communicate with God and reach the glory of his throne, with passion and pleasure. The positive and optimistic religious sentiments promoted by the Hasidic community helped overcome the inferiority complex of the beliefs of the Jewish community at the time. The ordinary people were able to gain authentic religious experience through breaking the traditional rules and engaging in more positive activities such as through praying to the God.

2. *The universality of the Hasidic movement*. The Hasidic movement was a popular movement with few barriers to entry even to the average people, including the uneducated and the female. This universality led to its popularity with the Jewish public at large. In the 18th century, Jewish rabbis in Eastern Europe mostly engaged in the abstract discussions over Talmud. Religious study become an exclusive activity for the privileged, noble people. These privileged people were required to read the tortuous texts of the Jewish scripture, though. For the less privileged Jews, they had limited opportunity to accept systematic religious education, let alone read these Jewish scriptures. However, the Hasidic movement increased the accessibility of religious activities to even the less educated and the underprivileged people. The Hasidic movement brought the God back to the real world and encouraged people to focus on the real-world experience. The higher accessibility of religious activities managed to bring more spiritual comfort to the Jewish people. The leaders of the Hasidic movement believed that an emotionally charged pray can allow the prayers to communicate with God while achieving and sharing his glory. Therefore, the leaders of the Hasidic movement guided the average citizens with a path to God by simplifying the religious rituals. They brought the religious experience from the religious elite to the common people and formed a mass movement. At the

same time, Hasidic groups spread their teachings to the masses through popular means such as oral legends and fables, erasing the boundaries between knowledge and intelligence, and popularizing mysticism among the general public. In addition, the saint system was also established during the Hasidic movement. Under this system, the saints were both the spiritual leaders and problem-solvers for their believers. All of these religious practices helped won a large number of new adherents in this new religious movement.

3. *The emphasis of spiritual devotion to the teachings of God to preserve the appeal of the Jewish tradition:* In contrast to the Rabbinic Judaism's emphasis on the Torah and the use of human intelligence to study and connect with God [8], the Hasidic view is that ritual and law are not the essence of religion and that one cannot approach God through religious studies to gain more religious knowledge due to the limitation of the human intelligence as compared to God. Hasidic emphasizes the direct, spiritual experience to connect with and communicate with God and the use of mind to feel his existence. Hasidic particularly attaches great significance to praying to God, believing that praying based on genuine devotion and sincere faith can bring people close to God and make a better connection with him. They believe that only the sincere praying to God through emotional engagement and obedience to the will of God instead of through human intelligence and religious study can help one to share and enjoy the glory of God. Sincere praying can not only purify and elevate the soul of the prayers, but also bring the Gospel of God to the world. Through praying, the prayers can have a more integrated spirituality in relation to God. Therefore, the immanence and transcendentalism as well as emotional input and spiritual experience can overcome different barriers, so that everyone is able to connect and communicate with God through praying activities.

The Hasidic school is the most important and influential source of Singer's thought. In the meantime, Singer was influenced by Mitnagdim with his mother as a representative. Although Singer had to admit her mother in actuality, he had always been emotionally inclined toward her father's religious ideas [9].

2.2 Mitnagdim, represented by his mother Bathsheba, is a more rationalist Jewish sect. Mitnagdim refers to a group of Eastern European Jews who faithfully inherited the tradition of Jewish reason [10]." In more particular, it is a Jewish sect that opposes the Hasidic. Mitnagdim pays attention to independent thinking and opposes superstition and authority, especially against the fanatical religious spirit of the Hasidic sect. They believe that the only way to communicate with God is through eternal knowledge. They oppose religious fanaticism that can lead one astray. According to them, reading the Torah is the only way to communicate with God. Mitnagdim accuses the Hasidic sect of ignoring the transcendental

nature of God, falling in the trap of pantheism, violating the dichotomy of truth and falsehood in the Jewish tradition. Mitnagdim accuses the Hasidic set of being obsessed with ecstasy, enthusiasm and intoxication while neglecting prayer itself.

Singer's short story, "Why the Geese Shrieked", focuses on the clash of ideas between his parents embracing these two divergent religious sects. Through this memoir-style novel, we can see that Singer was influenced by the religious ideas of both his parents. As discussed, while Singer tended to accepting his mother's point of view, cognitively, he was clearly leaning toward his father and the Hasidic religious ideas, emotionally. The conflict between the Hasidic and Mitnagdim is also reflected in "The Magician of Lublin", in which Yasha is both a believer in Jewish mysticism and an active participant in scientific reason.

2.3 Still another major religious sect with enormous influence on Singer was Haskalah represented by his elder brother Joshua. The word "Haskalah" refers to "enlightenment" or "Jewish enlightenment". Similar to the European Enlightenment that preceded it, Haskalah's emphasis is on religion and tradition. Specifically, Haskalah opposes the authority of rabbis. It advocates changing the traditional education model of Talmud to a more secular one. Haskalah also encourages the dissemination of scientific knowledge and living a more modern lifestyle that would allow Jews to engage widely with their society, choose new careers and pursue new fields. Haskalah marked the revival of the Jewish nation and the beginning of the "modernization" of Jewish life and thought [11].

The Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelsohn was one of the pioneers of the Haskalah movement influenced by the European Enlightenment. As Zhang Qianhong and Ai Rengui conclude in their book *The Jewish Culture*, Haskalah was the fruit of the European Enlightenment with Mendelsohn as one of its intellectual successors of European Enlightenment [12]. Mendelsohn advocated measuring religion with rational yardstick, advocating freedom of belief and reconciliation of religion, advocating separation of politics and religion, calling for social equality and expecting to clarify human nature [12]. Rationality, the core of the European Enlightenment, was taken by Mendelsohn as the principal spirit of Haskalah. He encouraged studying the Jewish society through rationality. This movement promoted the rise of the Jewish scientific movement and further liberated the Jews from the established religious constraints. At the same time, the more objective and rational culture created by the European Enlightenment provided a more favorable external condition for the rise and development of the Haskalah. The toleration policy proposed by the pioneers of the Jewish Enlightenment enabled the Jews to enter European society to study and learn the modern culture and knowledge.

It was under the influence of the European Enlightenment that Haskalah, a group of Jewish Enlightenment thinkers, launched a series of activities in the hope of integrating Jews into the European society while creating conditions to escape Jews from their long-standing cultural isolation [13]. In order to make clear the fallacies, falsities and irrational traditions in Judaism and to adapt the Jewish nation to modern life, Mendelssohn criticized the traditional Judaism and advocated the elimination of some outdated laws and bad practices, Mendelssohn proposed a bold reform of Judaism to showcase the unique charms of Judaism and let Judaism become a more open and inclusive religion. Mendelssohn and Maskiels called on Jews to escape from their cultural isolation to absorb new things and thought to make the Jewish nation a more vibrant one. To enable Jews to better learn European Enlightenment, Maskiels, drawing from the western educational experience, learned traditional Jewish culture and secular curriculum simultaneously. At the same time, he advocated a more modern lifestyle to better integrate the Jewish people into modern European life.

In the history of Jewish history of civilization, the revival movement of the Jewish nation is an extremely important ideological movement. It is a symbol of the Jews entering the modern times, which has a far-reaching influence on the modern Jews especially the European Jews. The Jewish revival movement is actually made up of two seemingly separate but closely related parts, the Haskalah and the Zionism. Singer's elder brother was heavily influenced by the Haskalah, which then influenced Singer's conception of modernity. The religious thoughts between a Haskalah brother and a devout Hasidic father were conflicting with each other.

3. CONCLUSION

To sum up, the thought of Singer was influenced by the orthodox Hasidic, the rationalist Misnagdim, and Haskalah symbolic of the Jewish Enlightenment.

First, Misnagdim is more similar to Haskala in terms of their more positive attitude and recognition of the Western reason. This was why Singer tended to agree to Misnagdim and Haskala represented by his mother and elder brother respectively. Under the combined influence of these three sects, "progress" and "return" become the core ideas of Singer's writing, both of them are related to Singer's spiritual life. The tension and conflict between them enriched the thought of Singer to become more contradictory, complicated, and diverse.

Secondly, the conflict between the God belief of Hebrew civilization and the scientific reason of Greek civilization constitutes the driving force of Singer's works.

In addition, Singer's thought is the integration of Hasidic mysticism of his father, the Jewish enlightenment of his elder brother, and the wisdom and reason of his

mother. On the surface, Singer's thought looks grotesque, bizarre and contradictory, but all of these are threaded with the initiative of Singer, as the son of the Jewish nation, to seek a way out for the Jewish nation when the entire Jewish nation were faced with the conflict between tradition and modernity and between rationality and religious belief.

When faced with these conflicts, Singer made a determination to return to the Jewish tradition and belief. In his lifetime, he had been searching for a way out for the Jewish nation in the conflict between tradition and modernity. The thought of Singer has surpassed merely conforming to the tradition of Talmud. His answer was to return to the God's belief from the perspective of redemption. Singer's proposed solution for the Jewish people was to embrace modernity in their daily lives, but still firmly following the path of religious Zionism in their faith and soul.

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