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From Jewish-American Princess to the *Tikkun Olam*: the Case of Herman Wouk's *Marjorie Morningstar*

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a critical reevaluation of Herman Wouk's *Marjorie Morningstar* (1955), challenging readings that reduce the novel to a celebration of cultural conventionalism and stereotypes. It argues instead that Wouk presents a complex portrayal of American Jewish identity in the 1930s – a decade marked by rising awareness of the Holocaust and its profound impact on Jewish self-perception. The novel captures the reawakening of a long-dormant communal consciousness, previously eclipsed by the forces of assimilation. Through the protagonist's journey from youthful rebellion to a thoughtful reconnection with her religious and cultural roots, Wouk explores the tension between modernity and tradition. This return is framed through *Tikkun Olam* – "repairing the world" – a central Jewish ethical principle grounded in personal responsibility and communal engagement.

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KEYWORDS: Herman Wouk; *Marjorie Morningstar*; Jewish-American Princess; Jewish Mother; *Tikkun Olam*.

Published in 1955, Herman Wouk's *Marjorie Morningstar* was the first novel on Jewish themes to gain popularity with a general audience in the United States. With over 190.000 copies sold, it "became the top grossing work of fiction of the year" (Prell 1999, 144) and went on to sell over 1.7 million copies in the next decade (Sicherman 2010, 193). The story even made it to Hollywood, with a popular film version, released in 1958, starring Natalie Wood and Gene Kelly. At the time of its appearance on the national literary scene, *Marjorie Morningstar* was amply reviewed both by the general press and by the Jewish one, with a reception that was mixed at best. It, in fact, ranged from *The London Spectator*'s enthusiastic description of Wouk's story as one of "almost Middlemarch length" showing "all of George Eliot's seriousness" (Gordan 2012) to *The New York Times*' harsh definition of it as a "565-page journey from mediocrity to mediocrity" (duBois 1955, 21). Interestingly, the novel caught the attention of such highbrow Jewish intellectuals as Leslie Fiedler (1966, 151-153) and Norman Podhoretz (1956, 186-188), who attacked Wouk for championing what they felt were an array of outmoded bourgeois values, especially in his representation of American Jewry. In that respect, Wouk's reputation intensified with the fanfare surrounding the book's publication, which earned him the *Time Magazine* cover picture. The accompanying anonymous cover story, in fact, established the author as the national "spokesman for conformity" (Shapiro 1996, 334) for his alleged rebellion against a cultural panorama "dominated by skeptical criticism, sexual emancipation, social protest, and psychoanalytic sermonizing" ("The Wouk Mutiny" 1955, 48-52). Subsequent scholarship on *Marjorie Morningstar* has been limited, with most studies reiterating familiar critiques of the novel's moralism and conventionality (Raphael 1984, 66). Only a few exceptions have recognized its "significance and contemporaneity […]" in portraying the distinctive struggles of "modern American Jews […] toward their own America" (Litvak 2002, 163).

This paper seeks to redress that imbalance by offering a more comprehensive and nuanced critical engagement with *Marjorie Morningstar*, aiming to do justice to its literary and cultural significance. It is, in fact, my contention that the author, a Bronx-born child of Jewish immigrant parents with a strong religious background (Beichman 2017, 15), had too keen a perception of the shared history and tradition behind him to limit himself to a sterile celebration of conventionalism such as the one ascribed to his novel. Indeed, in my view,

Marjorie Morningstar showcases the author's historical sensibility – a skill proven by his 1951 Pulitzer-winning World War II novel entitled *The Caine Mutiny* – by recapturing the spirit of New York Judaism during the 1930's.

At the time, with full-fledged immigration having ended in the 1920s (Hingham 1975, 43–58), a generation of foreign-born Jews had already put down roots in the New World, and a new U.S.-born generation was gaining momentum. These circumstances led American Jewry to choose the path of acculturation, by negotiating a newly secularized identity infused with the typically American values of material success and upward mobility. Yet, the Depression played a detrimental role in the process. As Beth Wenger aptly put it, in fact,

> when the Depression arrived, young Jewish men and women stood at a crossroads between the vibrant immigrant world of their parents and the search for a new American way of life forged against the backdrop of New York's urban landscape. Raised to believe in America as a land of opportunity and security, young Jews of the 1930s encountered instead a society of limited possibilities, growing anti-Semitism, and social and political turmoil. (1996, 9)

These dynamics often led to crises in the Gramscian sense: American Jews ended up feeling trapped in a cultural and spiritual "interregnum" (Gramsci 1971, 276), where the ancient values of tradition were necessarily being pushed to the background, while the "promise of Jewish life in America seemed more tenuous than ever" (Wenger 1996, 9). What dramatically influenced the course of their path in the United States was the outbreak of World War II – more precisely, the threat of annihilation posed by the Nazi's virulent antisemitism. As national consciousness of the Holocaust's horrors deepened, the event came to exert a profound influence on American Jewish identity formation. It catalyzed a resurgence of collective consciousness – a deeply rooted communal 'tribal' ethos that had been largely suppressed under the pressures of assimilation and the allure of American cultural integration (Trachtenberg 2023, 35–56). As Harold Ribalow aptly observed, "suddenly, these marginal Jews discovered that they were indeed Jewish, no matter how deviously they had previously argued against their Jewishness" (1957, 47).

This phenomenon is vividly illustrated in *Marjorie Morningstar*, a Bildungsroman in which the protagonist – a beautiful young woman in her prime

– embarks on a transformative existential journey, a path the author depicts with a keen eye, a touch of romance, and an exquisitely satirical hand. She moves from a youthful rejection of her Jewish heritage, often manifested through the behaviors associated with the so-called "Jewish-American Princess" stereotype, to a mature, reflective embrace of her religious and cultural roots. Her complex negotiation of identity, a process shared by many American Jews of the period, culminates in a thoughtful embrace of a deep sense of responsibility at the core of Jewish tradition.

This ideal is best captured by the concept of *Tikkun Olam* (Sherwin 43-58), Hebrew for "repairing the world" (Kahane 2012, 428), a Mishnaic notion which, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, took on renewed significance, particularly within American Jewish thought (Krasner 2013, 64). Confronted with the moral rupture of the Shoah, many Jewish thinkers reinterpreted *Tikkun Olam* not solely as a mystical or liturgical tenet, but as a comprehensive moral imperative. This post-Holocaust evolution of the concept emphasized a collective responsibility that extended beyond the Jewish community to encompass universal ethical engagement. As noted (Roskies 1999; Schacter 2009), the Shoah heightened Jewish commitment to social justice, interfaith cooperation, and atrocity prevention, rooting these efforts in a redemptive ethical tradition shaped by prophetic heritage and historical memory.

1. The origin of a stereotype: from the Jewish Mother to the Jewish-American Princess

In the 1950s, despite the presence on the U.S. literary scene of Jewish women writers the likes of Grace Paley and Tillie Olsen, who took a keen interest in representing the complexities of the female universe, both Jewish and gentile, the Jewish-American literary landscape was dominated by male authors, most notably by the then-newcomers Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth, who examined the experience of their co-religionists in the United States from an overtly androcentric perspective. In this light, it comes as no surprise that the coeval representations of Jewish womanhood were largely based on elaborations, albeit high-profile artistic ones, of stereotypical literary figures: the Jewish mother and her daughters, the JAPs, an acronym for the aforementioned Jewish-

American princess.

The Jewish mother is descended from the *Yiddishe mama* of the *shtetl*, the much-loved "bread giver" celebrated in 1920s' literature for her unwavering, at times stoic, attachment to her family, an attitude that made her an unsurpassed model of abnegation. Unlike her progenitor, the Jewish mother is an "American phenomenon" (Reguer 1979, 41, qtd. in Dundes 1985, 457). She emerged in the post-World War I United States, a time when American Jews – having attained a degree of economic success through a combination of tenacity, initiative, and business acumen – began to leave behind the crowded, impoverished urban neighborhoods for more comfortable lives in suburban residential areas (Prell 1999, 142–143). This period also witnessed a profound cultural shift in American society, marked by the aftermath of the war and the ratification of women's suffrage in 1920. New attitudes toward femininity, independence, and public life began to take hold, reshaping both the perception and self-conception of women. These shifting gender norms also impacted Jewish life in America (Prell 1992, 347), most notably altering women's roles within the family. The traditional male breadwinner was gradually eclipsed by a new familial dynamic in which the woman assumed a more dominant position. The once-formidable Jewish patriarch gave way to a silent, if not entirely invisible, husband and father figure, whose primary role was reduced to ensuring his family's material comfort (Prell 1999, 143).

While the post-World War Jewish mother shares her forebear's attachment to her offspring, she lacks the *Yiddishe mama*'s idealism and strict observance of the Law. Being fully assimilated, the Jewish mother, in fact, sheds the Old-World moral values of her upbringing – among which are a supportive and communal ethos, the cult of education, and a disdain for the material dimension of existence – and grows into a voracious social climber who projects her own ambitions onto her progeny. A highly manipulative parent (Prell 1999, 143), not only does she teach her children the typical values of the American dream – with an emphasis on individualism and upward mobility – but she pressures them to achieve the economic well-being she never had. Yet, in contrast with her Yiddish predecessor, who focused her hopes on the firstborn son – whom she envisioned as a respected biblical scholar – she sets her "impossible expectations" (Prell 1999, 143) on her daughter. These dynamics give rise to the Jewish-American

princess, a materialistic, demanding and self-centered creature (Dundes 1985, 461), who expects the men in her life, first her father and then her husband, to cater to her every desire. As Julie Baumgold acutely observes: "A princess is made by only one thing and that is her mother. Her mother telling her that she is beautiful… that she is precious, the thing that the man has to earn and deserve (Baumgold 1971, qtd. in Dundes 1985, 461-462).

Before it rose to national fame in the 1950s (Baumgold 1971, in Baum et al 1976, 254), the JAP stereotype appeared, in embryonic form, in the fiction of Eastern European exiles. Take, for example, Anzia Yezierska's novel *Bread Givers*, published in 1925 (Bélinki 1992, 23-26), in which Sara Smolinski's stepmother shows some of the distinctive traits of the Jewish-American Princess. This phenomenon is evident in some passages of the novel in which the woman, recalling the golden days of her youth, paints a nostalgic portrait of an existence which she, herself, does not hesitate to call "princess-like". What she particularly regrets are the comforts to which her late first husband had accustomed her, including an expensive wardrobe and a host of servants "more courteous than some schoolteachers" (Yezierska 1925, 263). In this light, the new Mrs. Smolinski demands that Sara and her sisters take responsibility for supporting both her and their father, the elderly invalid Reb. Upon the daughters' sharp refusal, though, the stepmother vehemently complains, claiming what she believes to be a right acquired by marriage: "He told me that his daughters would put together enough money to keep him in comfort. And that is why I married" (Yezierska 1925, 264). For his part, Reb Smolinski, accustomed to the Old-World privileges of the *Porush* – the prestigious pious scholar supported by the women of his family and community – demands that his current spouse, like his late wife Shena, shoulder the burden of family livelihood and domestic work: "The vulture!" [...]. "What do you want from me? I should go to work! Should I bring her money?" [...] (Yezierska 1925, 266). The new wife, on the other hand, heedless of the common Jewish tradition, and in perfect harmony with the "progressive ideals" (Jillson 2004, 5) of upward mobility underlying the American Dream, explains that she married to "improve" herself: "Alas! All I ask of you is to be a man like other men. Pay the rent. Give me bread. Buy me a decent dress. That's why I got married" (Yezierska 1925, 267).

2. Marjorie Morningstar: From Jewish-American Princess to the Tikkun Olam

While Philip Roth is generally credited with perfecting the stereotypes of the Jewish Mother and the JAP in his 1959 collection *Goodbye Columbus*, and with masterfully deconstructing them, ten years later, in his ground-breaking book *Portnoy's Complaint*, the primacy of their introduction into post-World War II Jewish-American literature is to be ascribed to *Marjorie Morningstar*. The novel introduces a typical 1930's Jewish household in New York City, where a generation from the Old World and one born and raised in the new one dwelled under the same roof. The Morgensterns, Marjorie's parents, migrated to the U.S. in their teens and spent years toiling in the sweatshops to make ends meet. Following in the footsteps of many fellow immigrants, her father rose from the proletariat to an entrepreneurial position in the feather import business, while her mother, having internalized the then-current "middle-class notion of proper gendered behavior in a marriage" (Wenger 1996, 37) abandoned paid labor to be a homemaker. In that respect, their Americanization is complete, with only their accent giving their Old-World origin away.

Their firstborn, Marjorie, leads the carefree life of a 17-year-old Jewish-American princess, who enjoys the power of her blossoming youth and attractiveness, while dreaming of starring on Broadway with the stage name of Marjorie Morningstar. Like many of her peers in the 1930s, she attends college, but her reasons to acquire an education are not so much to build a career, as they are to increase her chances of upward social mobility through marriage. Unlike the previous generation of Jewish women, who had their nuptials arranged by their families, their descendants are, in fact, allowed to choose their husbands. Accordingly, while Marjorie desires romance, she is also acutely aware that her ideal partner must be a co-religionist capable of providing her with a life of middle-class comfort and affluence. Thus, when her first boyfriend, Wally Wronken – who genuinely loves her but lacks financial means – gives her a ring, Marjorie, though moved by the gesture, does not hesitate to express her aspirations for a more materially secure future. Cognizant of the need to attract the "right" kind of man, she devotes considerable attention to her appearance, frequently purchasing expensive clothing with little regard for the financial strain

this places on her father, who works long hours in a cramped, poorly ventilated office to support her lifestyle. In that respect, while Mr. Morgenstern often tries to persuade his daughter to moderate her desires by calling her attention to the harsh reality of the then-current economy, Mrs. Morgenstern is, instead, "the person who understands Marjorie best and who often functions as her best and most supportive friend" (Barack Fishman 1992, 248). Being endowed with some of the traits of the *Yiddishe mama* – above all wisdom, devotion, and overprotectiveness – and with the social-climbing ambitions of the Jewish Mother, Rose Morgenstern

> was carried away by her daughter's flowering beauty – the girl seemed to grow prettier every week in the sunshine of success – and by the mood of springtime, and by the parade of handsome well-dressed boys gathering in Marjorie's wake. Satiric though the mother's attitude was toward Marjorie, her daughter really rather dazzled her. At seventeen, Rose Kupperberg had been a Yiddish-speaking immigrant girl toiling in a dirty Brooklyn sweatshop, dressed in real rags. As she watched her daughter burst into bloom on Central Park West, her own lonely miserable adolescence came back to her, and by contrast it seemed to her that Marjorie was living the life of a fairy-tale princess. She envied her, and admired her, and was a bit afraid of her, and drew deep vicarious delight from her growing vogue. (Wouk 2020, 44)

For instance, when Marjorie gets an invitation to ride in Central Park with some friends – among which is one of her first love interests, Sandy Goldstone, a fine-looking young man who, to Mrs. Morgenstern's sheer delight, is also the heir to a retail empire – she does not hesitate to wear a brand-new fashionable horseback-riding outfit to impress him, even though, having had only three lessons, she is clearly not ready for such a challenge, let alone in an expensive attire. In this case, while Mr. Morgenstern objects to Marjorie's choice on both safety and economic grounds, Mrs. Morgenstern takes the opposing view. In the spirit of the Jewish Mother's mission she, in fact, keeps her eyes on the (proverbial) prize – i.e., the prospect of a handsome and rich husband for her daughter: "a girl needs clothes […]. Don't forget one thing. She gets the man she loves. She gets what she wants […]. That's the right way" (Wouk 2020, 14).

At the beginning of the novel, in May 1933, the family has just relocated from the Bronx to Central Park West, an upper-middle-class Jewish neighborhood which, at the time, was called the "gilded ghetto" (Wenger 1996, 94). Lulled by the siren voice of capitalism, Marjorie revels in the "sense of luxury" (Wouk 2020, 4) of her new home in a fashionable twin-towered apartment house significantly called "The Eldorado", one of the "finest Art-Deco structures in the city" (Ruttenbaum 1986, 118). From her perspective, the building, designed by architect Emery Roth, stands as a mark of her family's successful assimilation into the American way of life:

> Marjorie loved everything about the El Dorado, even the name. "El Dorado" was perfectly suited to an apartment building on Central Park West. It had a fine foreign sound to it. There were two categories of foreignness in Marjorie's outlook: high foreign, like French restaurants, British riding clothes, and the name El Dorado; and low foreign, like her parents. By moving to the El Dorado on Central Park West her parents had done much, Marjorie believed, to make up for their immigrant origin. She was grateful to them for this, and proud of them. (Wouk 2020, 4)

Though comfortably integrated into a middle-class American lifestyle, Mr. and Mrs. Morgenstern have not forgotten their roots and, while not strictly observant, have raised their two children, Marjorie and Seth, to respect the main pillars of the Jewish tradition, such as major festivities and the basic precepts of *kashrut*. Yet, the secular pull of acculturation is very strong in Marjorie; as was then typical of the new generation of Jews born and raised in the United States, she, in fact, feels no sense of connectedness and belonging to the religious tradition, so much so that she never goes "to temple except to a dance" and "has forgotten any Hebrew she ever knew" (Wouk 2020, 12).

Particularly relevant to the scope of this article is Marjorie's apparent detachment from the plight of the global Jewish community – large segments of which, by the time the narrative unfolds, face imminent danger at the hands of the Nazis. Despite her evident awareness of the ongoing persecution of European Jewry – made explicit in the novel when she writes a school play that reimagines the biblical story of Jael and Sisera in the context of Nazi Germany (Wouk 2020, 47) –Marjorie exhibits a form of youthful self-absorption. Wouk intentionally critiques this attitude by satirizing her through two pointed misuses

of Nazi analogies, highlighting the disconnect between her personal concerns and the larger historical crisis. The first one concerns the quotas system for Jewish admission, then imposed by most elite private universities, which force Marjorie to attend classes at the local school, where there are no barriers to her enrollment. In her frustration, she describes Hunter college as "a concentration camp of... would-be co-eds forced by lack of money into the mold of subway grinds" (Wouk 2020, 56). The second one happens on a sneak excursion to South Wind, the adult summer entertainment camp where the protagonist hopes to learn the ropes of the theatrical craft. As she trespasses upon the property without permission, she feels "a little as though she were treading on a village green in Nazi Germany" (Wouk 2020, 113).

Despite being free spirited, adventuresome, and flirtatious with her many suitors, Marjorie retains the "Jewish idea of respectability" (Wouk 2013, 430), a moral code that, following tradition, prevents girls from engaging in premarital sexual activity. This rule of conduct will be severely put to the test upon meeting her first serious love, Noel Airman, a bohemian artist and a libertine who, as he jokingly warns Marjorie at the beginning of their relationship, goes around eating "little girls" (Wouk 2020, 226) like her. From his perception, in fact, Marjorie's moral values epitomize bourgeois respectability, what he satirically personifies as "Shirley":

> The respectable girl, the mother of the next generation, all tricked out to appear gay and girlish and carefree, but with a terrible threatening solid dullness jutting through, like the gray rocks under the spring grass in Central Park. Behind her, half the time, would loom her mother, die frightful giveaway, with the same face as Helen's or Susan's, only coarsened, wrinkled, fattened, with the deceiving bloom of girlhood all stripped away, showing naked the grim horrid respectable determined dullness, oh God… I affected Shirley the way whiskey hits an Indian. She knew I was bad for her, but I drove her crazy... Shirley doesn't play fair, you see. What she wants is what a woman should want, always has and always will – big diamond engagement ring, house in a good neighborhood, furniture, children, well-made clothes, furs – but she'll never say so. Because in our time those things are supposed to be stuffy and dull she'll tell you the hell with that domestic dullness, never for her… she's going to be somebody. Not just a wife. Perish the thought. She's Lady Brett Ashley, with witty devil-may care whimsy and shocking looseness all over the place. A dismal

> caricature, you understand, and nothing but talk. Shirley's a good girl, while Lady Brett was a very ready hand at taking her pants off. To simulate Lady Brett, however, as long as she's in fashion, Shirley talks free and necks on a rigidly graduated scale, which varies from Shirley to Shirley, but not such a hell of a lot. (Wouk 2020, 172-173)

According to Noel, "Shirley" embodies the archetype of the Jewish-American Princess – spoiled, controlling, and intent on dominating first her father and later her partner. She is portrayed as the inevitable precursor to the pretentious and domineering Jewish Mother. In this framing, Noel depicts "Shirley" not as an individual but as the embodiment of a transgenerational trajectory, suggesting that young Jewish girls are destined to replicate their mothers' traits: "Oh God, Marjorie, the dullness of the mothers! Smug self-righteousness mixed with climbing eagerness, and a district attorney's inquisitive suspicion" (Wouk 2020, 30). Through this perspective, Noel reduces the contemporary generation of Jewish-American women to a tired stereotype, effectively dismissing the notion that they might evolve into active, socially engaged citizens. Instead, he characterizes them as mere consumers, defined by appetite rather than agency.

Yet, by having someone like Noel as the spokesperson to the "Shirley" theory in the novel, Wouk seems to be committed to deconstructing it. The character, I argue, epitomizes the condition of many young Jews during the Great Depression, who were striving to put their origins behind them and, at the same time, looking to fill the void left by the renunciation to their tradition. These dynamics often led to a moral and cultural disorientation – what Gramsci, in his definition of crisis, aptly described as "morbid symptoms" (1971, 276) – a phenomenon which Wouk once again renders with finely tuned satire.

The firstborn of a wealthy and influential German-Jewish family, Noel has changed his real name, Saul, to the French term for "Christmas", a supreme sign of apostasy driven by the all too frequent phenomenon of Jewish self-hatred. Yet, the Americanization of his family name, Ehrmann, results in the involuntary English translation of the Yiddish and German neologism *Luftmensch*, the impractical idealist from the Yiddish tradition. An "Airman" in word and deed, Noel is a fickle would-be intellectual who moves from doctrine to doctrine, and

from theory to theory, time and time again. Among his many volte-faces, the most ridiculous happens when, after spending his whole adult life as an apostate, he is invited to a Seder at Marjorie's place. Against all expectations, the function – culminating in a tragicomic family brawl – not only fails to reinforce Noel's belief in secularism but instead provokes in him the irrational conviction that he might become a *Baal Teshuva*. He envisions himself enrolling in a theological seminary, studying intensively, mastering Hebrew, and, after "two years of the most fanatic work", achieving consecration as nothing less than "the biggest thing since Moses, and better" (Wouk 2020, 330). Yet this renewed infatuation with Judaism proves predictably short-lived. Noel continues to drift through life as a *Luftmensch* – a charming figure devoid of any substance.

Marjorie and Noel meet at South Wind, which she experiences as "a new clear world, a world where a grimy Bronx childhood and a fumbling Hunter adolescence were forgotten dreams, a world where she could at last find herself and be herself – clean, fresh, alone, untrammeled by parents […]" (Wouk 2020, 205). Within a few weeks of working together on a local theatrical production, charismatic Noel has Marjorie wrapped around his little finger and gets to keep her so for the better part of seven years. It is, in fact, he who first introduces her to the bohemian milieu of the Greenwich village, induces her to break Judaism's laws of *kashrut* by persuading her to eat ham – the last bastion of her religious observance – and eventually, much to her later regret, to violate her own values of sex conduct by sleeping with him out of wedlock. Their affair, a destabilizing seesaw of abandonment and returning, precipitates Marjorie's estrangement from her roots and restricts her horizon to only hoping that he, someday, will overcome his disdain for bourgeois life and eventually marry her, settle down with a real job, and move to suburbia to raise a family with her.

As Noel pursues success as a playwright, Marjorie works side by side with him, encouraging him to bring his first Broadway production to completion. When his show closes, after less than a week, following catastrophic reviews, he blames his own failure on her and proceeds to break up with her in a heinous farewell letter announcing his definitive departure for Paris. Broken-hearted but determined to win him back, Marjorie boards a ship to France to chase after him. As she crosses the Atlantic toward Europe in 1939, Marjorie encounters an enigmatic compatriot who will profoundly alter the course of her life. As their

friendship develops, Marjorie learns that the man, Michael Eden, a fellow Jew, is engaged in a covert mission to rescue as many Jews as possible from Germany before the Nazi regimes' genocide machinery is fully operational. With remarkable insight, he warns her, "Hitler is going into the skeleton-manufacturing business in a year or so... […] Jewish skeletons. Nothing can stop it. […], there is nothing in sight for them but to manure the German ground" (Wouk 2020, 511). The disclosure is an eye-opener for Marjorie, who eventually comes to realize that

> outside that limited world, outside her perpetual tug of war with Noel, outside her girlish dream of becoming Marjorie Morningstar, there was, there always had been, a roaring larger world in which men like Mike Eden moved; by chance, blindly pursuing Noel, she had stumbled into this larger world and it scared and excited her. (Wouk 2020, 499)

The sudden irruption of historical reality into Marjorie's coddled, princess-like life ultimately puts *Luftmensch* Noel in the right perspective, showing up the shallow insubstantiality of his philosophical theories. In this light, it is no wonder that, after reuniting with him in Paris, Marjorie rejects his long-awaited marriage proposal and leaves Europe a changed woman. Not long after her return to America, she, in fact, definitively renounces her ambitions to an artistic career and gets engaged to lawyer Milton Schwartz. The exact opposite of Noel both physically and psychologically, her fiancé upholds traditional Jewish values and inspires Marjorie to do the same. As she reconnects with her moral code of "Jewish respectability", though, she dreads telling him about her past affair with Noel. When she, reluctantly, reveals him the truth, she is relieved to learn that, despite his initial shock and grief, he is willing to take "her as she was" (Wouk 2020, 553).

Interestingly, on their wedding day, Marjorie views the ceremony from Noel's perspective, noting the "tawdry mockery of sacred things, a bourgeois riot of expense, with a special touch of vulgar Jewish sentimentality", to the point of eventually pronouncing herself a "Shirley, going to a Shirley fate, in a Shirley blaze of silly costly glory" (Wouk 2020, 556-557). Being an intelligent woman, Marjorie cannot but perceive the irony in the fact that her choice apparently

confirms the destiny that Noel had predicted for her. Yet, upon closer examination, the reality turns out to be different.

After the wedding, Marjorie and her new husband set up a strictly *kosher* home and move to a Jewish suburb in Mamaroneck, where she, following the birth of their two children, goes on to build a productive existence as a "regular synagogue goer, active in the Jewish organizations of the town" (Wouk 2020, 562-563). With the family being the heart and core of Israelite life, her choice is a far cry from being a "Shirley-like" unconditional celebration of bourgeois conventionality. Even though, as an adult, Marjorie is no longer the bubbly, confident, and rebellious Jewish-American Princess that used to charm her admirers, she is certainly much more than the "dull and boring…dull, dull as she can be, by any technical standards" woman that emerges from the entry in Wally Wronken's diary (dated fifteen years after Marjorie's wedding) which concludes the novel (Wouk 2020, 562).

3. Conclusions

The androcentric perspective epitomized by the male characters of Noel and Wally – who both pursued Marjorie but never got to marry her – disregards the full value of her contribution to the continuity of her people, a mission that becomes even more urgent in the wake of the Holocaust. Thanks to her choice, the communal roots of Judaism ultimately triumph as she, after her brief but dramatic brush with the dawning Holocaust in Europe, chooses responsibility towards millennia of Jewish history and tradition over the seductive lure of the American way of life. The path of orthodoxy, social activism and commitment that her life has taken, not only differs greatly from that of her own mother – who, though with the best intentions, focused exclusively on her family – but characterizes as a willful commitment to the preservation and transmission of the Jewish past in the American Diaspora, a purposeful recommitment to her heritage rooted in the ethical imperatives of *Tikkun Olam*.

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