

Boy on the Temple Roof | Shalom Carmy

Authors

Young Rabbi Binder has opened the floor for a “free discussion” period at the afternoon Hebrew school housed in the synagogue, where the minimal Jewish education he dispenses to postwar Jewish boys is a prerequisite for their bar mitzvah ritual. As usual, most of the kids are indifferent, even to the topic of Jewish sports heroes. Ozzie Freedman, the son of a widow and a chronic troublemaker, sees an opening. He impulsively asserts that an omnipotent God could have a son by a virgin—if he wanted to.

The rabbi, a man of not inconsiderable stature, slaps him (perhaps unintentionally). The boy runs from the room, up the stairs and onto the temple roof, locking the door behind him. His fellow students stream out onto the pavement in front of the synagogue. A crowd gathers. The rabbi, now anxious about how this will reflect upon him, makes every effort to get Ozzie down to safety. By and by, the rabbi sows alarm among the spectators by dropping a hint about possible suicide. The fire department is summoned. When they arrive, Ozzie threatens to jump. The firemen wearily drag their net from one side of the building to the other, waiting for the whirling boy to make up his mind. Down on the pavement Mrs. Freedman, his wearied mother, pleads with her son not to be a “martyr” against the gleeful clamor of Ozzie’s classmates, who are stimulated by the idea of his becoming a “Martin.” The boy on the roof, we are told, now experiences Peace and Power. He exacts a high price from the multitude looking up at him: At his command they confess the possibility of the virgin birth and subscribe to religious tolerance as he instructs them. Only then is he ready to descend to them.

As a child, I relished Philip Roth’s early story “[The Conversion of the Jews](#)” for its humor. The humdrum session unpredictably yet plausibly bursts into a farcical fiasco. A boy provokes uncomprehending and extravagant reactions when grownups fail to understand his thoughts. An unthinking mention of suicide escalates a routine classroom skirmish into a blazing confrontation.

I also detected insecurity at the heart of the story. The Hebrew school inculcates a minority culture more preoccupied with defining its divergence from the majority religion than in propagating its own truth. The tepid attitude to full-bodied Jewish adherence struck me then as typical of American Jews who were more committed to ethnic solidarity and secular American acculturation than to passion for God and Torah study.

These childhood reactions were perhaps colored by my own youthful assumptions about Judaism and America. Yet in this story, I sensed an adult culture anxious about itself and its children, and consequently anxious not to offend its children. Rabbi Binder, Mrs. Freedman, and the chorus of onlookers were ready to compromise religious principles under pressure. More interesting, though, they caved as a result of the emotional blackmail of a child who, they had convinced themselves, was liable to kill himself if they did not acquiesce to his demands. I was a child myself. I had gazed upon the fortress-like solidity of the adult world in its

various guises. Yet Roth's story suggested there was something shaky about that imposing authority. We were dependent on the adults, true, but they seemed more worried about catering to us. I say this not out of lack of sympathy for the understandably discomfited Rabbi Binder, his competence unexpectedly exposed to public scrutiny, nor to make light of Mrs. Freedman's pain as the single parent to a troublesome son. I mean that these sad, hilarious characters, exposed by a child to be powerless, were emblematic of a larger social phenomenon.

Christian readers of this story will recognize Roth's humorous reworking of the temptation of Jesus in Matthew 4:1–11 (with parallel in Luke 4:1–13). Satan offers Jesus worldly power in return for his allegiance. He tempts the hungry Jesus to turn stones to bread, but Jesus declines because "man does not live by bread alone." Satan then brings him to the pinnacle of the temple and urges him to trust in the saving power of God and leap, but Jesus refuses to test God. Finally, he offers him power over the kingdoms of the earth, to which Jesus replies that only God is to be worshipped. Milton's *Paradise Regained* and Ivan's Grand Inquisitor fable in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* explore variations on this story, with its opposition between boundless mundane success, on the one hand, and fidelity to God and the things of God, on the other hand. In Dostoevsky, the confrontation between the loving integrity of Jesus and the Inquisitor, who advocates the authoritarianism that delivers to human beings the security and satisfactions they crave, becomes an allegory for the fundamental choices confronting modern Western civilization.

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Roth is not Dostoevsky. Nonetheless, he illuminates the drama of temptation from his own sardonic perspective. Ozzie, the fatherless son, like Jesus, stands on the roof of the temple. He cannot turn stones to bread. Does he believe that he can leap from the roof unharmed, protected by the providence of God? Can he dominate and dictate to the adults congregated below? He can, and he does. Roth inverts the Gospel story: The boy on the temple roof embraces temptation rather than rejecting it. In the name of tolerance, but under the influence of his everyday helplessness, he wields weapons of coercion. He does not become lord over all earthly powers, but for the brief moments when he threatens to jump from the roof of his neighborhood temple, he has dominion over his small community.

Though I was a child, I thought I knew how my parents would respond in the unlikely event I tried a similar strategy. My father would have firmly and politely told me that I was not the boss of him and could not compel him to express assent to what he regarded as false. My mother would probably have sweetened the message with the promise that someday as an adult I could do as I pleased. That, presumably, would

have ended the episode, precisely because I knew that their convictions and integrity were not to be trifled with.

Back then, could the rabbi and Mrs. Freedman have stood their ground? There is no reason to think that the adamant, unbending rabbi in this modern-day fable would have been more successful than Roth's rabbi. But if the attempt had been made, and Ozzie's commands were not obeyed, the ethical-religious focus would have shifted decisively. Whether the story continued with the boy's surrender, his defiant leap, or left the reader in suspense, the burden would have shifted from the child to the adults who refused to do as he told them.

Perhaps Roth intuited that the adults of the 1950s were not prepared to carry that moral burden. I can imagine a Jewish Flannery O'Connor continuing a version of the story in which the adults held firm. She would populate it with a chorus of liberal clergy, social workers, and hectoring editorialists angry at the fanaticism of religious folk upholding their convictions. Nowadays, some would ask whether insensitive, wrongheaded people of that sort have the right to raise children at all. The state ought to step in and do something about it . . .

I am not sure how the beleaguered adults would defend themselves in such a case. They might fall back on rugged American individualism: *My family, my castle, where parents rule* (Ozzie needed a father to set him straight). Or they might stand on religious conviction: *If God is with us, no secular power can dictate to us*. To many readers and teachers of Roth's "Conversion of the Jews," both responses are equally benighted. Unless we wish to fall in line with their outlook, we must think beyond the story Roth left us. Literature rarely provides us with guaranteed solutions to our problems, but it can force us to consider possibilities we might otherwise have failed to confront.

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