



## Foreword to Prayers for the Living

By Tova Mirvis



When a recent move required me to pack and unpack all my books, I took it as an opportunity to reassess my literary real estate. I flipped open worn paperbacks to long-beloved first sentences, to see if I still valued them as I once did. I rediscovered books that had gone unread, obstructed behind other books. I spread stacks of books across the living room floor, spending an impractically long time plotting out possible ways to order them, in search of a sort of personal Dewey decimal system. I paid careful attention to who might do well living next to whom, as though at night, while the inhabitants of my house slept, these books might slip out and engage in fervent, perhaps heated conversation with their neighbors. I situated the books I love in prime real estate; other books were sent to the outer-neighborhood shelves. In the Jewish part of town, a selection of Yiddish writers gave way to the great American Jews; Israelis resided one shelf away, and to assuage my discomfort at shelving Jews only with Jews, these clusters were interrupted by a row of favorite novels, their primary link to one another only the fact that I love them most of all.

I read *Prayers for the Living* the same weekend this arranging took place, asking myself: *Where does this book fit in the landscape of American and American Jewish fiction?*

*Prayers for the Living* could live happily next to Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* for its intensity and scope; in its portrait of familial unraveling, it would make a fine neighbor for Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road*; with its rendering of immigrant experience, it ought to dwell in proximity to Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers*; its rich

descriptive power suggests that it would share space well with Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*. *Prayers for the Living* is a novel with the weight of legend, the feel of myth. In this story of the rise and fall of Manny Bloch, a rabbi turned business mogul, Alan Cheuse explores the shedding of tradition and the return to it; the travails of the immigrant; and the complexities of success, which brings its own burdens. The novel asks a dazzling array of questions about living a life of the spirit or of the world, about order and randomness, about the long shadow of the Holocaust, about silence in the face of injustice, and about families connected and estranged.

At the heart of this book is Minnie Bloch, mother of Manny, grandmother of Sarah, whose voice is supple and rich and utterly commanding. She speaks in a Yiddish-inflected, Jewish mother's voice that is funny and endearing; it feels familiar without veering into stereotype. It is a voice that moves seamlessly from the quip to the deepest emotional registers, and that it can do so in the space of a sentence or two speaks to the ability and necessity, in life both on and off the page, to live in humor and sadness at once. As Minnie says, she has arrived at an age when "we can eat and weep at the same time."

Some of what Minnie tells is based on recollected conversation. Some information is based on letters her son Manny sent while away at school, and other information is gathered on the sly, for which Minnie expresses no apologies. Reading the private writings of her daughter-in-law, for example, she says, indignantly, "What do you mean you don't want to snoop? This is not snooping, snooping is something else. This is learning."

The narrative is so sure-handed, so seamless, that the question of whether Minnie is to be trusted as a narrator seems a matter of small consequence. There is little distinction between knowing and creating, and I can imagine Minnie looking me squarely in the eyes and with a shrug of the shoulders silencing such a silly inquiry. A mother knows, she would surely say to me. In this book, a mother occupies a hallowed space, and a grandmother even more so.

But Minnie is more than just a well-informed matriarch. In her role as omniscient narrator, she places herself on par with an all-powerful divine figure. She casts the story of her own life in mythic terms as well, telling how, when she was a young woman in

Europe, her parents chose for her a scholarly bridegroom who, in her olfactory estimation, smelled like “a dead dog.” Unwilling to marry him, she ran to the river where she happened to meet Jacob, “a bulky-bodied, hairy-chested, strong-armed man.” She chose the man of the field over the man of the book. “Because if until then my life was just the story of a country girl, here it becomes poetry. A miracle takes place!”

This is a novel of immigration, and Minnie lives within a dual world—between then and now, here and there, which is perhaps the way an immigrant always lives. “We are an oceangoing people,” says Minnie, and in her telling too, she crosses repeatedly between the Old World and the New. The young girl who arrives is ever present in the old woman our narrator, and the New World which she once sought eventually becomes as well. In the elegiac, grand, and evocative style used throughout the book, Minnie says:

I wanted freedom and escape and a life with a man I wanted and who wanted me, and that was the American part beginning right there in the old country, and it was there when we sailed here, and it was present, of course, when we arrived here—get up in the apartment and look out the window . . . and you can see the lights of the very place where we arrived, the same pier itself and the buildings nearby, little pinpoints of light now down below in the city dark, like stars in a sky turned upside down and become the ground we walk on—that was our destination, and this, right now, this was what we sailed toward, and here we have arrived, after lightness, this dark, after young days, this age, a New World? a country of the old.

Newly arrived in a still-new and untarnished America, Minnie’s husband Jacob, a “dreamer and hardworking peddler all in one” decides, as did so many immigrants, to work on the Sabbath, setting into motion one of the central questions of the novel: Is it possible to be both “rich and blessed”? If you work on the Sabbath, a rabbi tells Jacob, you will wander, and your son will wander. “I’m going to wander up to Union Square, that’s where I’ll wander, so I can sell enough bananas to buy this boy a winter coat,” Jacob tells the rabbi in one example of the irreverent humor that flavors the book. And then, as happens in the sinner’s worst nightmare: the God whom you defy is indeed watching over you and, with an outstretched arm, punishes you for your transgression. In

the case of Jacob, the punishment comes in the form of a toppled milk cart, which crushes him to death while his son Manny looks on. “The way a life breaks. The way life goes. The pieces. The pattern. What happens next,” Minnie agonizes, as she recalls her husband’s demise.

Young Manny begins to study with the rabbi, who tells him, “Your father died like a goy and you’re helping to make him a Jew.” The father’s dilemma is visited on the son: “Did he want to live a life dedicated to study? Or did he want to live a life in which he could use the talents he inherited from his father? . . . He heard a voice in his head telling him, both! Choose both!” Whether he can in fact choose both is one of the novel’s central questions, along with others that probe what it means to live a Jewish life. Is Jewish law to be lived in a vacuum, away from the world? Does the rabbi reside on high, upon a dais such as the one on which Manny stands as the book opens on Yom Kippur? In the biblical rendering of Yom Kippur, the high priest wears a red thread that turns white, sin expunged, holiness affirmed; in this Yom Kippur, the rabbi stands on the podium, experiences a vision delivered by a bird, and he falls and he falls.

But even as this dichotomy is framed, the book argues with the division between the world of the spirit and the world of the everyday. *Prayers for the Living* revels in the messiness of life, with descriptions and sensibilities that are rich with smells and sounds and spills, a book stained with ejaculations, with milk and blood and tears. Not even God is left unsullied. Add Minnie Bloch to the list of biblical figures that argue with God. In her hands, God is not a being who watches from on high but a character who can be invited, say, to the diner, to share a nice bowl of soup before being taken to task over dessert. In wrestling with the Holocaust, Minnie posits the idea that “God looked the other way. But with what was He so busy that He could blink and lose so many of His chosen people? You think He was like me and was having trouble with His eyes?” Absent the theologian’s lexicon, she nonetheless asks necessary questions about Jewish law and observance. She understands that Jewish law, which is grounded in mundane detail, doesn’t adhere to this dichotomy of life of spirit or life of mind. She recognizes a Judaism that isn’t sealed away in hallowed study halls, but one that is pockmarked by life’s realities. “I’m saying that the rules they change and twist and bend and that’s life—

the rules live, too, and the rules change, like people change, and if I don't understand it I can at least understand that I don't understand it."

And yet, even as she is willing to argue with God, or usurp him, some of her prayers are as raw and wrenching as any imaginable. She wrestles with God as a bereaved wife, as someone with her eyes open to history. But most forcefully she speaks as a mother. "I make this silent request of you, God, whoever You are, wherever You are—a burning bush, a naked back, a cry in the night, a great big white, flapping, winged bird. Whoever. Whatever. Dear God. Please keep my children from harm."

This last sentiment—*please keep my children from harm*—is uttered in varied ways throughout the book, even as it proves ultimately to be a futile plea. No one can be kept from harm here, because to live is to be inevitably harmed. "Fathers and daughters! What a story, an old story, *ach*, and a bitter one, bitter, bitter, bitter," Minnie laments, about her ostensible subject. For the story of Manny and his daughter is indeed bitter: there are small slights and grand betrayals, love that turns to hatred and still the wish for a renewal of that earlier love. But at its center, this is a book that casts as mythic the power of the mother and grandmother. "It's the mother's arm the person in pain wants holding around them," Minnie says. "From the first it has been that way and it will be that way to the last. And if I'm sounding like the Bible that's because such things are in the Bible, and if they're not they should be."

Whether a son might balk at hearing his mother cast herself as the truest love of his life matters little; any narcissism she exhibits feels forgivable. Minnie belongs to a long and storied cast of Jewish mothers, but while she shares many of the presumably worst qualities attributed to this group—she too can be called intrusive, overbearing, self-centered—Cheuse wrests open these words to find the empathic center. If Portnoy's mother was skewered for an intrusion borne of consuming anxiety, Minnie's intrusiveness seems forged primarily of love. If Minnie comes off as controlling, it is only out of a desire to steady her family's careening lives.

Even as she assumes omniscient control over the book, steering the reader through the story's swells like an all-powerful ship's captain, she grapples with what even she does not know of her child:

You wash his clothes, you mend his clothes, you make his bed, dust his dresser, comb, when he's little, his hair, make him wash his face, make sure he has a little sweet here and there . . . and what do you know? You know nothing. Dark. Darkness. Like in the middle of the night. In the middle of the day. In the bright early morning. Dark, dark, dark.

And then something happens, and it's like lightning in the storm. It lights up, darling. You see everything, but only for a second.

This is as beautiful and as pained a description of motherhood as I've read.

The other women in the novel have their own tragedies to bear. Florette, the rabbi's mistress, is a Holocaust survivor who speaks "with that slight Old World accent, the Austrian frosting on her American cake" (which, according to Minnie, he is attracted to because it reminds him of her own European accent). Maby, Manny's wife, is hospitalized in a psychiatric institution where her veins are "churning with drugs, ropes to bind her in the hospital of sleep." The tragedy of the mother is revisited on the daughter Sarah, who sets out to destroy her father. "She didn't have any weapon to use against him except her life, and this, like a terrorist's bomb, is dangerous both to the one who carries it as well as to the one who is the target."

Minnie isn't blind to her son's failings and to the way he is being corrupted. But she is all-forgiving, slow to anger, compassionate, and filled with mercy; she is a creator who spares her creation from the harshest judgment. If the redeeming power in this novel is motherly love, the corrupting powers are business and money and greed. Manny rises higher than his father could have imagined. What a distinctly American story, and an American Jewish story—the fruit peddler's son who rises to own an entire banana-producing country. But as always, there are no simple stories of arrival or success. Manny chooses to pursue business full time and does so after hearing a voice, which in this novel is rendered in biblical terms even when that voice is advising him away from rabbinic life. "*Manny*, it says, and if sound can have a light, it's a bright light in the middle of the darkness that surrounds him, like a burning bush in a dark meadow. . . . "*Manny, you must do what you must do*," this voice tells him and here, it's not the voice

of God but the voice of Manny's father Jacob who is telling him to take a new road and put all of himself into his business.

The new world to which he ascends baffles Minnie: "All the time, oh, all my children always in motion, in cars, going up and down in elevators, and in airplanes." Minnie sees the danger that her son faces, the temptation of money, as he and his brother-in-law take over one company after another. But here is where Manny begins to slip away from her—he listens politely but will no longer heed her word. "He was the same person only changed, changed by the heat of his life, darkening, no doubt, darkening, darkening, but the same person nonetheless."

All the characters here are darkening, darkening, and all the characters are damaged—and if there is redemption here, it is in the act of telling a story that is ruthlessly authentic and unsparing. This is a novel, in the end, about the ways our lives inevitably crash into one another. One of the great wisdoms of the book is to know that these are not accidents that intrude into an otherwise ordered life, but that life itself is a series of accidents. *Prayers for the Living* offers a vision of harsh beauty and for its wrenching honesty, for its simultaneous intimacy and wide scope, for the power of its soaring language, it deserves to live among the great novels of Jewish American experience. It is a book that bears the weight of something old, yet feels new and utterly alive at the same time.

—Tova Mirvis