

## **WRESTLING WITH ANGELS: Tony Kushner and the Struggle for the Soul of America**

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Tony Kushner's epic play Angels in America is less than 20 years old but in a sense it has already stood the test of time. Part I was titled The Millennium Approaches, and part II, Perestroika, both eras long since past. The social crisis at the center of the play—the AIDS epidemic that meant swift and certain death for thousands of gay men in the 1980s—is now happily somewhat out of date. Yet Mike Nichol's 2003 HBO production of the play was compelling enough to win the Emmy award for best miniseries.

That suggests the play contains some enduring themes and will open itself to multiple interpretations and ranges of meaning. Indeed, reviews and articles published in the last few years examine the play not only as a “gay fantasia on national themes” (its subtitle), but also within the context of Anglo Saxons in literature (Allen J. Frantzen, Before the Closet: Same-sex Love from “Beowulf” to “Angels in America”), race, medieval mystery plays, and even the importance of nursing in AIDS care (“Angels in America” rightly places nursing at the center of AIDS care.)”

And yet...

The play's opening scene is at an Orthodox Jewish funeral, with a moving tribute to the Jewish immigrants who came to America at the end of the previous millennium. The Rabbi tells the assembled mourners that the deceased was “...not a person but a whole kind of person, the ones who crossed the ocean, who brought with us to America the villages of Russia and Lithuania—and how we struggled, and how we fought, for the family, for the Jewish home, so that you would not grow up here, in this strange place, in the melting pot where nothing melted.” The rabbi tells the surviving children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, “You do not live in America. No such place exists. Your clay is the clay of some Litvak shtetl, your air the air of the steppes—because she carried the old world on her back across the ocean, in a boat, and she put it down on Grand Concourse Avenue, or in Flatbush, and she worked that earth into your bones, and you pass it to your children, this ancient, ancient culture and home.” (Angels 16)

The play's closing scene is in Central Park, at the fountain of Bethesda. Louis tells the story of “this angel, she landed in the Temple square in Jerusalem, in the days of the Second Temple, right in the middle of a working day she descended and just her foot touched earth. And where it did, a fountain shot up from the ground.” (Angels 279)

The fountain went dry when the Temple was destroyed, Prior Walter says. Hannah adds that the fountain will flow again when the capital-M Millennium comes—prompting Louis and Belize to get into an argument about the Zionist implications of the story and the rights of Palestinians to the West Bank and Golan Heights. (Angels 279–80)

In between, two characters—one living, one dead; one fictional, one historical—say Kaddish for the historic, monstrous, gay, Jewish Roy Cohn. (Angels 256–7)

The fact that these three scenes anchor a work that continues to be thought of and described as “a gay play,” or “a socialist play” or “a play about Mormons” supports the central thesis of this conference: “Jewishness has not been recognized as an ethnic identity in the arts. Jewish difference, once the material for anti-Semitic exclusion from the canon, has been absorbed by critical culture to such a degree that in this multi-cultural era, Jews have been curiously absent from multi-cultural discourse.”

Above and beyond these references to Jewish religion and culture, Angels in America includes an extended reference to the story of Jacob: The protagonist is repeatedly visited by angels, (Angels 125, 170–189, 250–252) wrestles with one of them, (Angels 252) injures his hip (Angels 137) and not only sees a ladder ascending to the heavens, but climbs it (Angels 250–252). At the end of the story, the protagonist has, like Jacob, been transformed, and has become the leader of a new group of chosen people—a multiracial, multiethnic, intergenerational group newly chosen for the new millennium.

And yet...and yet...the protagonist who is cast in the role of the new Israel is not Jewish. Kushner goes to great, great lengths to make this protagonist as Waspish as possible. He is a character named Prior Walter who is the thirty-second consecutive generation of Anglo Saxons to bear the name (Angels 92). The details of his heritage are discussed by other characters, and reinforced by visitations by two earlier Prior Walters, both of whom died of earlier plagues (Angels 91–95). Prior Walter is surrounded by characters whose cultures—Jewish and Mormon—have provided them with a thorough background in the details of the Jewish Bible. Interacting with those characters, Prior Walter shows his own lack of knowledge, eliminating the possibility that his experiences are simply hallucinations emanating from his own subconscious but are indeed from the “threshold of revelation.” (Angels 40)

A simple interpretation might be that Kushner, who has called himself “guiltily aware” of “an assimilationist penchant” (Thinking 70) is saying that Jews—American Jews, at least—have, through their assimilation into American culture, become unchosen, have de-selected themselves, in effect. In the eulogy at the beginning of the play, the Rabbi notes that one of the deceased’s grandchildren is named Eric (Angels 16). Ben balks at being asked to say Kaddish for Roy Cohn not only because Cohn was a monster but also because he himself is an “intensely secular Jew” (Angels 256) who won’t be able to remember the prayer—and confusedly inserts lines from the Kiddush before the spirit of Ethel Rosenberg appears to lead him through the rest of the prayer. Cohn himself provides the best possible example of the dangers of assimilation—he is someone for whom access to power has become the ultimate aphrodisiac, for whom Nancy Reagan on speed dial provides ultimate meaning (Angels 51).

Prior Walter is a gay male whose Kaposi’s sarcoma marks him permanently as an outsider. He refers to AIDS as “lesionnaire’s disease” (Angels 27). Assimilation is no longer an option, which qualifies him, at a minimum, to provide a prophetic voice for the new millennium.

That interpretation works, but it seems a little too pat, a little too simple, for the sprawling epic that is Angels in America. A more satisfying insight comes from a careful look at one more episode from the Biblical story of Jacob, the primary episode both in chronology and in importance. In Bereshit, Jacob, having bought his older brother Esau's birthright, tricks his elderly father, Isaac, into giving him also Esau's blessing:

And his father Isaac said unto him: 'Come near now, and kiss me, my son.'

27 And he came near, and kissed him. And he smelled the smell of his raiment, and blessed him, and said: See, the smell of my son is as the smell of a field which HaShem hath blessed.

28 So G-d give thee of the dew of heaven, and of the fat places of the earth, and plenty of corn and wine.

29 Let peoples serve thee, and nations bow down to thee. Be lord over thy brethren, and let thy mother's sons bow down to thee. Cursed be every one that curseth thee, and blessed be every one that blesseth thee. (Bereshit)

The birthright, we're told, is of little value to Esau—he trades it for a bowl of red lentil stew. But Esau bitterly bewails the loss of his blessing:

"And he said: 'Is not he rightly named Jacob? for he hath supplanted me these two times: he took away my birthright; and, behold, now he hath taken away my blessing.' And he said: 'Hast thou not reserved a blessing for me?'"

Told that there is no blessing left for him, Esau vows to kill his brother Jacob.

Kushner somewhat sheepishly credits Harold Bloom with the translation of the Hebrew word for "blessing" that "subsequently became key to the heart of Perestroika": "more life." (Angels 288).

The monstrous Mr. Cohn introduces the notion of the paternal blessing, imposing his blessing, unasked, on the young closeted gay Mormon who was his protégé:

Roy: Did you get a blessing from your father before he died?

Joe: A blessing?

Roy: Yeah.

Joe: No.

Roy: He should have done that. Life. That's what they're supposed to bless. Life." (Angels 214).

Dying of AIDS, Cohn does not desire more life for himself; he wishes instead to see the effects of his life—his values—passed on to a new generation. This blessing is a straw dog—a false blessing that sets up the climax of what I might call the play's theological subplot.

In summary, the theological subplot goes like this: Prior Walter, dying of AIDS, is visited by an angel who tells him that G\*d became horrified by the out-of-control forward progress of history sometime around 1906—the year of the San Francisco earthquake—and decamped, leaving the universe to be run by a committee of angels (Angels 170–182). The angels, overworked and over their heads (“they have no imagination, they can do anything but they can’t invent, create, they’re sort of fabulous and dull all at once” Prior tells Belize [Angels 175]) want to give G\*d’s job back. Seeing Prior Walter as a victim of evolution’s worst side effects, they have designated him their prophet. They want him to convince human beings to stop progress, freeze things in place, in the hopes that G\*d will return to a more stable and orderly universe:

Angel: *YOU HAVE DRIVEN HIM AWAY! YOU MUST STOP MOVING!*

Prior: (Quiet, terrified): Stop moving.

Angel (Softly):

Forsake the Open Road:

Neither Mix Nor Intermarry: Let Deep Roots Grow;

If you do not MINGLE you will Cease to Progress;

Seek Not to Fathom the world and its Delicate Particle Logic:

You cannot Understand, You can only Destroy,

You do not Advance, You only Trample. (Angels 178)

Prior Walter flatly refuses the angels’ request. Instead, climbing the ladder to heaven, he demands: “Bless me anyway. I want more life. I can’t help myself. do.”(Angels 266).

“More life.” It means something very different to Prior Walter than it does to Roy Cohn.

Bloom’s translation of “blessing” is elsewhere quoted as “more life into a time without boundaries.” That fuller translation adds some elements that are crucial to what Kushner is about: into time without boundaries.

In his essay “American Things,” Kushner recalls how his values were formed during his childhood in a liberal Jewish household. The Freedom Seder was the center of his family’s Passover observance, linking the causes of oppressed peoples everywhere and wishing freedom for all. Kushner writes, “The true motion of freedom is to expand outward....The truest characteristic of freedom is generosity, the basic gesture of freedom is to include, not to exclude” (Thinking 7).

For Kushner, “more life” is only a blessing if freedom and inclusion come with it. His ambivalence about assimilation can be traced to the way in which assimilation—as Roy Cohn’s example demonstrates—often means being less free, denying parts of oneself or one’s heritage in order to fit in, and becoming exclusionary of others once one’s own inclusion has been secured.

For all its sadness and sickness and suffering, Angels in America is essentially a comedy and a romance. In the final scene, the four characters who have survived to a happy ending are those who have chosen freedom and inclusion, and we see them in a loving relationship in which all are connected while none are paired off. They have

found, as Kushner writes in his essay “Copious, Gigantic and Sane,” “love, in other words, that Great Ineffable that breaks through our hermetically sealed worlds of private pain and disgrace and self-hatred, that unites us with others, that makes us willing to give up even life itself for more connection, more strength, more love” (Thinking 52–3). Belize, the militant drag queen, has been able to forgive and bless and even pity his enemy, Roy Cohn. Hannah Pitt has left the confines of Salt Lake City Mormonism for the freedom and vastly improved hair and makeup of Manhattan. Louis has found the courage to be loyal to a suffering friend. Prior Walter has been living with AIDS for five years. All have been blessed not merely with more life, but more freedom, more love, wider boundaries. Prior Walter has accepted a prophetic role that is the opposite of the one the angels had in mind for him:

Prior: This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come.

Bye now.

You are fabulous creatures, each and every one.

And I bless you: *More Life*.

The Great Work Begins. (Angels 280)

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