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Adia Mendelson-Maoz

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The Question of Polygamy in Yehoshua's *A Journey to the End of the Millennium*: Two Moral Views—Two Jewish Cultures

Adia Mendelson-Maoz
The Open University of Israel

This article deals with A. B. Yehoshua's novel *A Journey to the End of the Millennium*, published in 1997, in which he goes back to the year 999 C.E. and describes the complex relationships between the Jewish communities of North Africa and Ashkenaz. With the issue of polygamy as its background, the novel builds a vibrant, rich picture of these two Jewish communities and raises issues of contemporary relevance. In this article I will present the overt and covert aspects of the struggle between the two cultures and suggest two perspectives for reading the struggle: the first focuses on the debate over polygamy through an elaboration of two distinct moral approaches—deontological-Kantian ethical theory, and Aristotelian morality. The second presents a link between the novel and Yehoshua's work and views, focusing on issues of Jewish identity and the relationships between East and West in Israeli society.

A. B. Yehoshua's *A Journey to the End of the Millennium*¹ vividly depicts a fracture point between North African and Ashkenazi Jewry. In 999 C.E., on the eve of the millennium, the merchant Ben Attar goes on a journey to the countries of Ashkenaz. He is accompanied by his two wives, his Muslim partner Abu Lutfi, and Rabbi Elbaz, whose son joins them too. Ben Attar seeks to meet his nephew Abulafia and his new wife so he can try to persuade her to give up her repudiation of the custom of polygamy.

¹A. B. Yehoshua, *A Journey to the End of the Millennium—A Novel of the Middle Ages*, translated by Nicholas de Lange (first ed.: New York: Doubleday, 1999; Harvest ed.: San Diego: Harcourt, 2000). The quotations were taken from the 2000 edition.

After years of business cooperation among Abulafia, Ben Attar, and Abu Lutfi, Abulafia has married a woman from Worms in the Rhineland. Her dislike of polygamy is so strong that she asks her husband to sever the family business ties. Ben Attar, who sees nothing wrong in having more than one wife, decides to go on the long journey, taking his two wives with him, in order to meet this fair-skinned, blue-eyed woman, and to make the case for polygamy.

The novel, which is replete with realistic breadth as well as allegorical layers, describes the journey from the south northwards in colorful detail. The encounter between the men of the south and the north highlights the sharp contrast between the two cultures at a time when North African Jewish culture was highly developed whereas the Jews of Christian Europe were provincial. This network of contradictions between the people of the south and those of the north (or between east and west) lies at the heart of the novel.

The polygamy controversy is intertwined with the overt and covert struggle between the two cultures, which differ in character, in lifestyle, and in their approach to the Scriptures. But the struggle reflects not only a cultural gap, but also divergent moral world-views.

In this article I will suggest two perspectives for reading the struggle between the cultures. The first focuses on the debate over polygamy through an elaboration of two distinct moral approaches—deontological-Kantian ethical theory and Aristotelian morality. I shall present Ben-Attar, the southern Jew, and Rabbi Elbaz, who is taken along in order to argue the issue from the religious point of view, as embodying a tolerant and particular moral approach with Aristotelian characteristics. In contrast, Abulafia's wife, Esther-Minna, and the Rabbis of Ashkenaz take a strict and uncompromising stand, with Kantian deontological reasoning. The second perspective presents a link between the novel and Yehoshua's work and views, focusing on issues of Jewish Identity and the relationships between East and West in Israeli society.

Between Two Jewish Cultures

The sharp contrast between the two cultures is revealed as soon as the ship carrying Ben Attar and his entourage reaches the outskirts of Paris. As I describe below, the gaps between the two cultures turn into overt confrontation.²

²On the gaps between the two cultures see also: Dorith Hope, "From Divided Clarity to Unifying Secret—Reading A. B. Yehoshua's *A Journey to the End of the Millennium*," in Ziva Shamir and Aviva Doron, eds., *Essays on the End of the Millennium—Reading A. B. Yehoshua, A Journey to the End of the Millennium* (Tel-Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuchad, 1999), pp. 128–129 [Hebrew].

At the first glimpse we discover the difference between the exuberant North African culture and its restrained Ashkenazi counterpart. The south is portrayed as a land of sun and golden sand, a land of light, of smells, spices and colors—the people of the south wear bright robes (187). In contrast, the north is described in drab colors and gives an impression of poverty and gloom. The house of Esther-Minna and Abulafia is dark, and the Jews' Alley in Worms runs “among the small bowed houses resting on huge rough-hewn piles” (180); its people wear “dark robes” (187).

The southern culture thus represents sensuality and the northern restraint. Similarly, the two cultures differ in their attitude towards sexual desire: the men of the south are described as possessing an active sexual drive and the women as sensual and fertile, whereas men and women of the north are withdrawn. Ben Attar feels duty-bound to satisfy the sexual needs of his wives, and Rabbi Elbaz does not suppress his desires. He remembers his own wife and even finds himself lusting after other women. In contrast to Ben Attar's wives, whose clothes and bodies radiate sexuality, Esther-Minna, withdrawn and barren, symbolizes the people of the north. When Ben Attar and his wives arrive in Worms, the men and women are separated from each other and all are given black clothes to wear, in an attempt to stifle sexuality.

Another difference between the south and the north rests upon the relations between the Jews and their neighbors who follow other religions. The people of the south show sincere tolerance towards the adherents of other religions, but in the north the Jews live in isolation from others. Ben Attar takes with him on his journey a Jewish Rabbi, his Muslim business associate, a number of other Muslims, and a pagan. Despite their religious differences, they appear to accept each other's faiths, and even sympathize with them. A good example is the relationships between the Muslim Abu Lutfi and Ben Attar. Abu Lutfi agrees to join his associate Ben-Attar on a journey which to him personally is a matter of utter indifference. He does not understand why the people of the north refuse to allow polygamy, nor does he see any reason why Ben Attar should have to go on such an exhausting journey, with his wives, to prove that he is right. Despite these reservations, he joins his partner and supports him on his journey. He is happy when his partner triumphs and grieves at his loss. Northern culture, on the other hand, is inflexible. The millennium is poised like a gray cloud over the heads of the Jews, so that the apostate physician from Verdun says:

Yes, she will live, [referring to Ben-Attar's wife] . . . but they [the local Jews] will not live, and he indicated the forms of the seven Jews who were arranging their bedding beside the large wagon that had brought them from Metz . . . it would be the duty of the Christians, when they discovered at the end of the millennium

year that the Son of God was not coming down from heaven to save them, to kill those Jews who refused to convert to their faith. (242–43).

The relations between Jews and Christians in the north are characterized by lack of cooperation, mutual suspicion, alienation, hatred, and fear.

Accordingly, the character of the faith and the attitudes of the Rabbis differ. For the southerners the Jewish religion stands at the center of their being, but it does not stand in opposition to their emotions and desires. Rabbi Elbaz, whose wife has died, decides to take his son with him on the journey, rather than to leave him in the care of his family:

But the rabbi has insisted. After enduring the death of his wife, he was not willing to face further parting. And when he beheld the boy's limbs filling out in the light of the sunshine and the azure sea, his skin growing dark and smooth, and his happy, eager sharing in the work of the ship, he knew that he had been right to obey his own instincts rather than hearken to his family and friends. But once in each day, at the time of the evening prayer . . . he read a psalm or two with him, lest he forget that there was dry land beyond the vast deep.

At first the rabbi had thought to study some simple texts of Mishnah and Talmud with the boy, but once the sea journey had aroused such powerful poetic feelings in him, he had postponed rational studies until they were on shore again (59–60).

Rabbi Elbaz is willing to forego the study of the Mishnah with his son because he realizes that there are different kinds of things his son can learn during the journey, which he couldn't learn elsewhere. The same intuition guides him, when the smell of the sea arouses his sensual instincts and incites him to write poetry:

For the rabbi, the mere fact of writing a poem was something wonderful; he had never imagined that he himself would be able or eager to do such a thing. But during the previous week six lines had put themselves together, all in Hebrew, following the meter and rhyme scheme that had been brought to Andalus from the east by Dunash Ben Labrat (26).

Rabbi Elbaz is described as a man who “does not let the Scriptures take over his life.”³ He combines a commitment to the study of the Scriptures with the senses, the love of beauty, and the needs of society.

In the same spirit, the people of the south are very flexible in their attitude toward their religious obligations. They find creative solutions to the problems they encounter in practicing their religious duties during the journey. Thus,

³Aviva Doron, “To the Jugs Full of Flowers,” in *Essays on the End of the Millennium*, p. 91 [Hebrew].

for example, when the second wife becomes ill they are forced to spend the Day of Atonement in a town with no Jews in it, in the vicinity of the physician who had converted to Christianity. They try to get together a quorum of ten men for prayer, by paying some Jews from the nearby city to come over. But since they are still one man short they decide to make the young pagan a Jew for one day. According to Jewish law this is not acceptable, but in those circumstances it appears to be a reasonable solution, and they accept it without any pangs of conscience.

Contrary to the flexible attitude of the people of the south towards their faith, the northerners are all eaten by feelings of guilt for not having fulfilled their religious obligations properly:

The great strength of the Jews of Worms was that they never considered their justice perfect, and that during the ten years since she [Esther-Minna] had left her kinsfolk and her friends, they had exerted themselves constantly to improve and perfect it (182–3).

Rabbi Kalonymos, son of Kalonymos, the founder of the community, is described as a “black robed personage” (74) who argues that “true faith requires meticulous preparation” (74). Esther-Minna and her brothers grew up in the home of Jewish scholars, whose deep faith and commitment to Torah learning was such that they “were sometimes so carried away by a discussion of a biblical text that they forgot to lay the table for supper” (90).

The conflict in the novel between north and south arises out of the marriage of the northern Esther-Minna with the southern Abulafia. Esther-Minna feels that she cannot reconcile herself to the custom of polygamy, which she finds repellent. Her rejection of polygamy, like her barrenness, symbolizes the position of the Ashkenazi community: This community is so strict that it not only regulates the life of its members, but also seeks to dictate the same rules to other communities. For this reason, the rejection of polygamy can lead to a ban on the southern community.

Between Two Moral Views

Dalia Ophir claims that the conflict between East and West corresponds to the conflict between Dionysus and Apollo: the southerners live in a Dionysian manner, whereas the northerners represent Apollonian behavior:

The Dionysian pole is represented by the figure of Ben Attar, the sensual man of the Orient, and the Apollonian pole by Esther-Minna, the barren, severe widow

whose personality and appearance resemble those of Christianity: gloomy . . . rationalistic, with a tendency towards asceticism and a strict morality.⁴

According to Ophir the differences between south and north can signify moral distinction: the behavior of the southerners is sensual, unrestricted, and unregulated by moral norms, while the behavior of the northerners represents obedience to norms and to a strict morality.

Here I would like to present a different perspective: in my opinion the southerners are not immoral or lascivious. They do not let their desires overcome their logic, thought, or faith. Rather, they hold a morality that is imbued with decency, tolerance, and friendship, as well as courage. They live a balanced life in which morality certainly has a place but is defined differently than in the north.

The conflict between the two communities is thus not one between morality and sensuality, but between two opposing doctrines of ethics. As I will show, the people of the north operate within a deontological-Kantian ethical approach, whereas Ben Attar and his fellow southerners adopt an Aristotelian morality. Thus the encounter between north and south, the harsh debate, the judgments given in two court trials, and the final, narrative verdict all have ethical implications.

I will briefly define the two moral perspectives used in my discussion. The deontological approach from the Kantian school of thought attempts to answer the moral question: what is it proper for a man to do. Actions are considered morally worthy if they are done from good will. This approach discusses situations of moral conflict, in which a person is required to act according to a moral duty—"an act has moral worth if and only if it is done from the motive of duty."⁵ It sets universal imperatives that operate as a maxim; any rational agent should act according to them. The deontological approach does not leave space for desires and interests with regard to the moral action. The action should be clean of any personal inclinations, motivated only by the moral duty.

The Aristotelian approach is a teleological one. It attempts to answer the questions: how one should live and what is the good life. This approach presents the individual, his behavior, and his striving for self-fulfillment and

⁴Dalia Ofir, "East and West in A Journey to the End of the Millennium," in *Essays on the End of the Millennium*, p. 168 [Hebrew].

⁵Barbara Hernan, *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 1.

improvement of his virtues. The goal of the theory is to guide a person to be good, to act in a virtuous manner, to have a good and happy life. Morality, according to this approach, is tested not in the context of a single action or situation, but in that of a human life in general.

The two approaches, the Aristotelian and the Kantian, are, in effect, two perspectives on the comprehension, presentation, and solution of moral issues. They are living perspectives, active and evolving, and are still discussed in modern controversies.

Kantian deontological theories (and Utilitarianism or “consequentialist” theories) that formulate moral rules based on human rationality, were produced by the enlightenment and modern thought, or, as Martha Nussbaum calls it, “Western rationality,”⁶ which try to set aside any irrational, emotional, and personal aspects in moral behavior. This attribute is a major weakness of the theory, according to Aristotelian and Neo-Aristotelian philosophers, as well as of other theories that emerge in post enlightenment and post-modern thought. Thus, for example, in 1958 Anscombe launched an attack on these theories, claiming that their notion of laws and duties can be approved only in a society that believes in God, and thus are not relevant any more.⁷ In her opinion, ethics should be related to human flourishing, and specifically give an account of human virtue. Another example is Bernard Williams’ work, which has offered striking arguments for the significance of the personal in moral thought based on the role of integrity in human activity and character.⁸

I argue that in Yehoshua’s novel, the debate between the two cultures and the issue of polygamy may be linked to the philosophical debate discussed above in an illuminating way. That is, the moral reasonings employed by the northern and the southern communities stem from different traditions of morality—the first is rigid; rational and clear, it aims to find general maxims that fit everyone. The second is more particular as it strives for personal virtue, which goes along with the process of human flourishing and fulfillment.

In Yehoshua’s book, the Jewish community of Ashkenaz wants to formulate general regulations. It prefers to fetter itself with laws and rules that will

⁶Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge* (New York & Oxford.: Oxford University Press, 1990). See also: Martha Craven Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

⁷G. E. M. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” in Roger Crisp and Michael Slot, eds., *Virtue Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, [1958] 1997), pp. 26–44.

⁸Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

protect its members from even the remotest possibility of deviation from the religious norms. It seeks a systematic solution to the issue of polygamy, one that will be binding for all Jews. The philosophical approach represented by the people of the north is rational. It possesses a deontological-Kantian character, defining moral duties and religious obligations.

The people of the south, on the other hand, are not driven by any desire to find the right rules by which to live. For them religion and moral loyalty are bound up with the individual and his life, and the question of polygamy is thus intimately connected with the family that wants to implement it. The philosophical approach represented by the people of the south is thus Aristotelian.

Ben Attar is a man of virtue, in Aristotle's and Maimonides' sense: he is honest, courageous, and fair. He chooses to take a second wife when he realizes that his financial successes have made it possible for him to afford two households. He tries to treat each of his two wives fairly and equally: "[E]ach act of love with one of them involved an anxious concern for the other" (19). He is equally supportive of both in adversity: he feeds his second wife when she is ill, changes the route of the journey for her sake and looks after her, without ignoring his first wife. However, Ben Attar does not treat both of his wives exactly in the same manner. For example, the sensual description of his sexual practice proves not only his duty for the two women, but also his awareness of their individual personalities: his tone of speech and the contents of the conversations, as well as the temperament of the sexual interactions, characterize the unique nature of each relationship. In his behavior, he demonstrates that one can love two women to an equal degree but in a different manner.

Ben Attar is also a virtuous businessman. Every year he divides the profits of the business with his two partners, his nephew Abulafia and Abu Lutfi the Muslim. He makes sure "to scrutinize honestly the share of each of the partners in the labor that had been expended and the profit that had been made" (13). He determines the effort each of them invested in the business, adds to them and takes away from himself: "but as the candles on the table burned down, he would realize that he had been so carried away by sympathy for his trusty friends that he had neglected his own share" (13). Only after much vacillation, "was his mind at peace, and he unbarred the heavy door, unshuttered the window, and feasted his eyes on the pleasant afternoon light filtering through the trees, composing himself after the struggle that had divided his soul against itself in pursuit of justice" (14). In his behavior, Ben Attar exemplifies the virtue of justice defined as fitting what each gets to what he merits.

Ben Attar shows a great deal of friendship towards his business associates. He helped Abulafia overcome a personal crisis: his wife committed suicide, and he was left with a traumatized daughter. He felt stifled within his

community. He wanted to go on a journey to the Land of Israel, but Ben Attar thought it would be better if he continued working and kept himself occupied. Ben Attar made him a business partner and thus managed both to maintain the important family tie and to enable his nephew to live away from his community. Ben Attar also looked after Abulafia's daughter in the south, and later brought her with a nanny to the north. Ben Attar's relations with his other partner, Abu Lutfi, are marked by friendship too. As I mentioned before, they are loyal to each other, support each other, and solve disagreements in a peaceful way.

Ben Attar thus cannot be said to be guided blindly by his instincts. Indeed, he pursues happiness and does not repress his desires and emotions, but he aspires to combine those with moral behavior. He feels equally committed to both wives, to his family and to the ones close to him; he tries to live a good life, to be virtuous and to attain happiness. He craves justice and wishes to mediate the conflict; and he is willing to undertake a very difficult journey in order to accomplish this.

The disparity between north and south or between the two ethical approaches is reflected by the two trials that take place in the course of the novel. The trials lead to the final decision and the narrative closure. The first trial is held near Paris at Villa Le Juif, where Rabbi Elbaz tries to overcome the repudiation of polygamy by "a speech woven not out of texts of the sages but of the wisdom of life" (293). He refuses to have the scribes, specializing in writing scrolls of the Law, stand at the head of the tribunal. He insists that the judges be selected from men and women among the common people:

It would be proper to make do with the spirit of the ancient sages, which was the true spirit that could transform, say, the whole congregation of simple, good-hearted Jews into a public tribunal that might judge and save either the plaintiff or defendant, as was stated in so many words in the book of Exodus: to incline after the multitude (119).

The judgment procedure at the Villa Le Juif is formed according to the concept of the community court, which was common, as Ronen Shamir claims, in many Jewish communities.⁹ This court, "a special rustic law court" (116), rules in favor of Ben Attar and his wives, having been convinced by Ben Attar's own personal example. The community court favors tolerance, flexibility, kindness, and friendship. It sees no need to formulate rigid rules.

⁹Ronen Shamir, "But who will be the Judges?"—Law, Literature and Memory," *Iyunei Mishpat*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (2002): 511–522.

Ben Attar's virtues stand at the heart of the southerners' arguments in favor of polygamy. Rabbi Elbaz does not limit himself to the perspective of Jewish religious law; rather, in his arguments in favor of Ben Attar's polygamy, he considers the particular person involved. He was hired to defend the custom of polygamy, but does not consider his task to be detached from Ben Attar's family. In fact he takes Ben Attar's character, and his relations with his wives, to constitute crucial evidence against a sweeping rejection of polygamy:

He could already see in his mind's eye the living, colorful presence of [Ben Attar's] two wives in this gloomy, dark house, gradually wearing down the opposition, not by means of an unexpected proof-text or casuistry but simply through the naturalness of the triangular love relationship, which would flow in its full humanity before anyone who tried to cast a slur on it (90–91).

For the people of the south, polygamy is a legitimate option, as long as life itself demonstrates its viability:

Surely no exegetical sophistry, no well-known biblical tale, no ancient parchment could deflect a clear, new, right decree that was demanded by the circumstances and endorsed by great luminaries (95).

The arguments which Rabbi Elbaz adduces against the rejection of polygamy are derived from Ben Attar's personal life. At the first trial Rabbi Elbaz opens his speech with a presentation of Ben Attar's special relationship with his nephew, describing his generosity and his virtuous character. Then he presents a justification of polygamy on three levels. On the first level he presents evidence from the Biblical text:

Frankish Jews, distant and strange, why are you so amazed? Why are you so alarmed? With all due respect, read in the rolled Scripture to whose holiness we are all in thrall and you will discover that the great patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, each had two, three or even four wives . . . but if you object that these ancients were greater and mightier men than we, and able to discern between good and evil, then open the book of Deuteronomy, and there, not long before the end of the book, you will find the verse "if a man have two wives . . ." Any man. Everyman (133).

On the second level he presents a psychological argument. In the mind of every man with a single wife, so he claims, there is a second woman: an ideal model, the woman of dreams. The existence of a real flesh-and-blood second wife changes the man's attitude towards his first wife. The first wife does not have to compete against a feminine ideal which she cannot hope to reach, but to live beside another actual woman, who herself is not perfect.

On the third level Rabbi Elbaz refers to Ben Attar himself: "he is a loving man, a philosopher and sage of love, who had come from far away to declare

publicly that it is possible to have two wives and to love them equally” (134). Rabbi Elbaz thus goes from the general proof (the Bible) to a specific instance, claiming that Ben Attar’s life provides the evidence of a successful polygamy.

In contrast to the particular and personal approach used by Elbaz, with its focus on character traits and on human psychology, as derived from real life, the Ashkenazi Jews take the complete opposite view. For them the confrontation with Rabbi Elbaz is an intellectual competition—“they are excited at the news of the arrival of a learned virtuous rabbi” (90), who will engage in debate with them until he is defeated. The people of the north perceive the debate as one of principles, rules, and regulations. They consider any discussion of Ben Attar’s life as irrelevant. They demand a rational and fundamental solution.

The success that Ben Attar and Rabbi Elbaz gained in the first trial does not help them in the second one. After the ruling in the first trial Esther-Minna asks Abulafia for a divorce. She feels that she cannot abide by the ruling and wishes to break off her relationship with him because of her defeat. Here again Esther-Minna’s rigidity stands in contrast to the tolerance of the southerners. The latter, after hearing her position, are prepared—despite their initial victory—to continue their journey and present their case again, this time to Esther-Minna’s own community in Worms.

Rabbi Elbaz knows that the “speech that has captured the hearts of emotional, tipsy Jews in the Île de France would not succeed with these sober-minded Jews of the Rhineland, who were now scrutinizing the new rabbi from Seville over their prayer shawls” (186). And indeed the people of Worms have a different approach, which is reflected in the second trial, for which they set a single judge, Rabbi Joseph son of Kalonymos, a member of the founding family. In addition to Rabbi Elbaz’ testimony the judge asks to interview the women. Following his talk with the women he comes to an opposite verdict, and decrees a ban.

Why does Ben Attar lose his case in the second trial? The answer lies in the testimony of his second wife. She, like his first wife, supports polygamy wholeheartedly. But she also expresses her hope that the custom be extended further:

Not only was she willing to be subjected to dual wedlock, she herself wishes to contract a dual marriage. Having no complaint against the first wife, whose patience and kindness she had learned to appreciate during the long shared journey by sea and land, she was experiencing a mounting envy of husband who had two wives to himself while they had one husband between them. (210)

Kalonymos, who is interrogating the woman, is surprised at her answer. He cannot hide his curiosity:

A second husband? like whom, for example? And while he was still regretting his unnecessary question, the young translator was already relaying the answer . . . "Like you my lord, like you, for instance . . ." (211)

The second wife presents the possibility of expanding the institution of polygamy to include polyandry as well as polygyny. Her testimony makes Kalonymos realize how important it is to maintain the new prohibition: "*Duplication inevitably leads to multiplication, and multiplication has no limits*" (211).

The testimony of the second wife makes it impossible for the judge to arrive at a verdict in favor of polygamy, mainly due to his moral approach. Rabbi Elbaz presented the case for polygamy from a practical point of view, in which experience and reality are examined and then norms of behavior are formulated accordingly. For Rabbi Elbaz any man who is capable of treating two wives fairly in practice deserves to be allowed to possess two wives. But the community of Worms treats norms of behavior as fundamental moral laws, in keeping with the Kantian categorical imperative that "[o]ne should act according to a maxim which she wants to become a universal law."¹⁰ The essence of morality according to Kalonymos point of view, links to the Kantian approach in which man is morally good, "not so far as he acts from passion or self-interest but so far as he acts on an impersonal principle valid of others as well as for himself." Thus if we wish to test a maxim of an action "we must ask whether, if universally adopted, it would further a systematic harmony of purposes in the individual and in the human race."¹¹

According to this reasoning, approving polygamy means to approve any case of multiple partners in marriage. Is it possible to want polygamy to be a universal law? Kalonymos realizes that if he were to permit a behavioral rule that would enable a man to marry more than one wife, such a ruling would have general validity: it would make it possible for a man to have more than one wife, and for a woman to have more than one husband. This would undermine the institution of the family. Thus despite the fact that the second wife's support of polygamy and polyandry stems from her own positive experiences and from her satisfaction with her own family unit, the universal law that could be derived from her position would lead in the opposite direction, to the destruction of the family.

¹⁰Immanuel Kant, The First Formula of Universal Law, in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, translated by H. J. Paton (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1948), Chapter 2, pp. 51–52.

¹¹H. J. Paton, "Analysis of the Argument," in *Immanuel Kant: Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, The First Formula of Universal Law, p. 31.

Kalonymos sees his verdict as establishing a universal law. Thus he cannot permit polygamy in one case and forbid the same custom in other cases. As in Kant's deontological methodology, he cannot permit any action that he cannot "will as a universal law." Therefore no particular case of polygamy, be it ever so successful, can change the verdict in any way.

Between the Novel and Yehoshua's Views

A. B. Yehoshua is one of the prominent authors in the contemporary Israeli literature arena. Writing for over four decades and publishing not only dozens of novels and short stories but also nonfiction books with essays on cultural, social, and political issues, Yehoshua is an involved writer. In an interview he declared that

[t]he artist in Israel—and in Zionism in general—was very much involved in what you will call the national activity, the national spirit. . . . A writer has his duty first of all to do a fine literature that will touch the individual, that will speak on the behalf on the individual.¹²

In his book *The Terrible Power of a Minor Guilt*¹³ Yehoshua asks for a moral and ethical reading of literature. Although he does not interpret his own literary works in his essays, Yehoshua's vision asks for such a reading of his text.

A Journey to the End of the Millennium, as we saw, deals with moral issues. It does so by going back a thousand years and presenting a distant imaginary historical conflict. The novel can be seen both as a historical novel and as an allegorical novel. In both cases, though, we should look for the connection between the text and the question of Jewish identity and Israeli society.

In a talk given by Yehoshua at the opening panel of the centennial celebration of the American Jewish Committee in 2006, he expressed his views regarding Jewish identity and the question of the Diaspora. There, he claimed that "our Jewish life in Israel is more total than anywhere outside Israel." His words surprised American Jews who find themselves, under Yehoshua's argument, non-total Jews who "change countries like changing jackets." While

¹²A. B. Yehoshua in an interview with David Wiley, "Talking about his Generation," *The Minnesota Daily*, May 5, 1997.

¹³A. B. Yehoshua, *The Terrible Power of a Minor Guilt* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

trying to defend his view, Yehoshua said that “I think this is common sense. If they were Goyim they would understand it right away.”¹⁴

Although Yehoshua’s words came as a surprise, this view is not new. It is evident already in his early writing. In his 1980 book of essays *For Normality*,¹⁵ in trying to define the terms Jewish, Zionist, and Israeli, he reaches the same conclusion.

The view about the totality of Jewish life in Israel may stem from Yehoshua’s attempt to explain antisemitism. Yehoshua presents the tension between the definition of the Jewish people which stresses the unity of all the Jews and the fact that the actual Jewish life in the Diaspora, in different places, is enormously varied. He claims that this tension between unity and variety is one of the origins of antisemitism. Since the Jews in the Diaspora have different identities, they are perceived as devious, as people who wear different dressing, and so you cannot recognize them. At the same time, although their identity is evasive, they tightly belong to a strong imaginary and virtual community.¹⁶

This abnormality of the Jewish identity, according to Yehoshua, is well expressed in *A Journey to the End of the Millennium*, which presents an interaction between different Jewish cultures. The Diasporic aspect of the two Jewish communities is evident in the text through the elaborated way by which Yehoshua describes the interaction between the Jewish people and the Muslim and Christian communities. The two Jewish communities, as I showed, have a different life-style and a different attitude toward the Holy Scriptures, different religious practices and moral perspectives. Although in both communities the Jews are clearly distinct from the Goyim around them, they are influenced by the norms of the Goyim. The Muslim world, its sensuality and its family norms transfer to Ben-Attar’s Jewish identity; Christian asceticism is part of the Askenaz Jewish identity. Yet, despite these differences and the geographical distance, both communities feel they belong to the same Jewish people. Hence, the heart of this historical novel seems to be the tension between unity and variety.

By his attack on American Jews “for changing countries like changing jackets,” Yehoshua means that in the Diaspora Jewish people give new and lo-

¹⁴Nathan Guttman, “A. B. Yehoshua Sparks Uproar in US,” *The Jerusalem Post*, May 4, 2006.

¹⁵A. B. Yehoshua, *For Normality* (Tel-Aviv: Schocken, 1980), p. 126 [Hebrew].

¹⁶A. B. Yehoshua, “An Attempt for Understanding the Grounds for Anti-Semitism,” *Alpayim*, Vol. 28 (2005): 11–30 [Hebrew].

cal meaning to their Jewishness that is specific, and therefore evasive. According to Yehoshua, the Jews who live a Jewish life in Israel can solve the problem of Jewish identity and the problem of antisemitism, since in Israel people live among Jews, are governed by Jews, join the army of the Jews, are judged by Jews and punished by Jews. They cannot choose to be Jews, and they face their Jewishness all the time.¹⁷

However, in contrast to Yehoshua's vision, the tension between the different Jewish cultures has not disappeared in Israel. This tension between unity and variety of Jewish identities is part of the Jewish life in Israel of today. Specifically, this is manifested in the controversial relationship between Ashkenazi Jews, who represent the west, and the Sephardi Jews, who represent the east, within Israeli society. Many of Yehoshua's works in general, and this novel in particular, indeed deal with this issue.

Yehoshua is a Sephardi Jew. His father's family is a Sephardi Jewish family that lived in Jerusalem for five generations. His mother came to Jerusalem from Morocco during the 1930s. Yet, even late in the 1980s his ethnicity had not found an echo in his writing. Although Yehoshua is a very involved writer, only in 1987, with his book *Five Seasons* [Molcho], did he present a Sephardic protagonist who tries to overcome his German-born wife's death. *Mr. Mani*, a conversation novel published three years later, describes the genealogy of a Sephardic family from the eighteenth century to our time. In this genealogy Yehoshua presented an alternative history—the non-European classical history of the Jewish people.¹⁸ This is the history of Jews who lived in the land of Israel for centuries, under Muslim ruling. Their attachment to the land is, as Nancy Berg claims: "not political, ideological, or interchangeable, rather it is organic."¹⁹ Their struggle for Jewish identity stands in opposition to the European identity and is not defined as anti-Arab. In most of the conversations, Mr. Mani stands in front of a western European opponent—Hagar from the Kibbutz, the German Soldier, or the Ashkenazi Zionist. Yet, in most of the conversations we don't hear the voice of Mr. Mani himself.

A Journey to the End of the Millennium can be read as an allegorical text presenting a new stage in Yehoshua's writing about the Sephardi or Eastern

¹⁷A. B. Yehoshua, "A Homeland Class," *Ha'aretz*, May 11, 2006. [Hebrew]

¹⁸In English: *Five Seasons* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), *Mr. Mani* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

¹⁹E. Nancy Berg, "Sephardi Writing: From the Margins to the Mainstream," in Alan Mintz, ed., *The Boom in Contemporary Israeli Fiction* (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press, 1997), p. 132.

Jewish culture. A short time after the publication of the book, Avraham Balaban claimed that in the novel the reader finds himself identifying with moral norms that are far from his beliefs.²⁰ In this novel Yehoshua chooses to empathize with Ben Attar's community by adopting the Sephardi side in the cultural debate. The narrator describes at length the personality and the life-style of the North African Jews. He presents them as virtuous people, honest, sensitive, loving, and caring. Although the modern reader cannot tolerate polygamy, the book makes this tradition look legitimate as it appears to be a natural part of the Jewish life in the North-African community.

When Yehoshua was asked to comment on his book, he mentioned a visit to Morocco in 1950 (Morocco was then under French governance), when he was 14 years old. Visiting his mother's family, he was overwhelmed by the views, the beaches, the colorful and prosperous way of life, and the nature of the relationships between Jews and Muslims.²¹ (What has happened to this wonderful culture with its deep and gloried historical roots?)

The conflict in the novel, and especially the nature of the solution in the text, can be understood as an allegory of the conflict between East and West. Following Andrew Gibson and Fredric Jameson we can see the ethical binary of right and wrong as a variant of the western hegemony over other cultures.²² This intuition may explain Yehoshua's resolution of the novel.

After their defeat and ban in the second trial, Ben Attar and his companions decide to leave Worms immediately and return to their ship, docked at the outskirts of Paris. The second wife is pregnant and feels sick. Her health fails rapidly and she soon dies. Her death brings about a (violent) resolution of the issue, since as a consequence, Ben Attar is left with a single wife. After the northerners defeat the men of the south, and after the death of the second wife, the friendship with Esther-Minna and her community is renewed. The ban is immediately withdrawn. The pain of the second wife's death unites everyone.

Ironically, the death of the second wife solves the problem by enforcing monogamy. When the trial disallows polygamy, the narrative seems to endorse

²⁰Avraham Balaban, "Between Two Women," *Yediot Achronot*, February 28, 1997, p. 28 [Hebrew].

²¹A. B. Yehoshua, "I Was Drawn to the History," *Panim*, Vol. 6 (1998) [Hebrew].

²²Andrew Gibson, *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel* (London and New-York: Routledge, 1990); Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 114–117.

the verdict, symbolically translating it into a death penalty. In this way, monogamy has been dictated tragically and violently. The victors are the northerners and their deontological approach. This is the first victory of the West over the East—and this victory presages a change in the balance of power between north and south. During the second millennium the Jews of the north will become stronger and dominant, will consider themselves as enlightened, and will try to impose their own beliefs, regulations, and tradition on the entire Jewish world. Further, this colonialist approach is part of the history of Israel—the Ashkenazi Jews, the hegemony in Israel, used to perceive the Sephardi Jews as primitive, to de-legitimize their culture, and to discriminate and exclude them. The violent end of the novel emphasizes the brutality and cruelty of Western Jewish cultural colonialism.

Yehoshua states that he is striving for a dialogue between Jewish cultures and communities.²³ The text not only shows the brutality of this fight, but also acts as a lament for the North-African Jewish culture. The southerners are defeated in the confrontation between the two sides; however, as I suggested above, the narrator clearly sympathizes with them and considers them victims, to a certain extent, of an overly rigid monistic ruling.²⁴ The victory of the people of the north is a victory of those who are afraid they may fall into temptation and therefore stifle every expression of emotion and desire. It is the victory of those who insist on obeying inflexible rules even at the price of repudiating their own relatives and loved ones. This is a victory with a high cost. As Alan Mintz phrased it, “[I]n Israel of today, the novel implies, the gifts of Sepharadim—vividness, vitality, and generosity of spirit—are vitiated by the need to be confirmed by the culture of what was once the North and is now the West.”²⁵

To conclude, *A Journey to the End of the Millennium* presents a debate between two Jewish communities. It can be read as a new variation on the ethical conflict between two moral approaches, deontological-Kantian ethical theory from the heart of Christian Europe, and Aristotelian virtue ethics from the Mediterranean atmosphere. The novel can also be read as referring to the question of Jewish identity in the Diaspora as well as in Israel of today.

This article is an extended version of a talk I gave at the Colloquium for Jewish Studies, University of California, Davis in June 2003.

²³Yehoshua, “I Was Drawn to the History.”

²⁴See also: Kalderon Nisim, “Two Languages,” in *Essays on the End of the Millennium*, p. 140 [Hebrew].

²⁵L. Alan Mintz, *Translating Israel* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001), p. 190.