Every Home Is Borrowed Anyway

Karen Alkalay-Gut

THE ROAD TO FEZ
Ruth Knafo Setton

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I first discovered Isaac Bashevis Singer in 1960 when I was fifteen. It was part of my little rebellion against the proper Judaism I had encountered in my youth, and I was thrilled to learn that he'd been invited to speak at the local Yiddish Culture Club. The invitation had been extended solely on the basis of his growing international reputation in English translation, before anyone in the group had actually become familiarized with his works, and he read from the only novel that had been published in English, Satan in Goray. At the reception afterward, my mother—who was chairing the evening—passed up all the scholars and Yiddish intellectuals in the room and brought him over to the corner where I was sitting. With great disdain, she plumped him down next to me and snarled, "Here. She appreciates your writing!"

I suspect the same kind of shock Isaac Bashevis Singer gave to the Yiddish community in the United States when he first began his climb to fame awaits the general Jewish community now with Ruth Knafo Setton's first book, *The Road to Fez.* Incest, adolescent obsessions, love charms made with menstrual blood, all manner of superstitions, martyrs worshipped by both Muslims and Jews—are these things that should be exposed? But Ruth Knafo Setton, in *The Road to Fez*, is raising issues that, like Singer, questions and expands the concept of what is a Jew, what is a citizen, what is a culture, what is an exile, what is a human being, what is reality.

On the wall of the living room of Brit Lek's grandparents' house in Morocco hangs the brass key to the home they left in Toledo. It has been

over 600 years since the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, yet the family still treasures the hope that one day they will return. There is probably no house left, and there is really nothing stopping them from going back to Toledo, but it is the abstract desire for a home that characterizes this book. *The Road to Fez* is a book filled with keys, keys that open doors to multifarious rooms of varying degrees of reality and possibility.

Brit Lek, raised in a small town in Pennsylvania as a "Christian from Paris" but born a Jew in Morocco, has returned to her country of birth at the age of eighteen to visit the grave of Suleika. Saint to both Muslims and Jews, it was Suleika who answered her late mother's prayers for a child after all other methods of conception failed. Her grandmother tells her:

We brought Suleika flowers and a platter of couscous. I remember seeing two Arab women— a mother and daughter—praying at her grave. The daughter couldn't have a baby either. ... Then we left, but Sheba wasn't with us. I turned back and saw her holding onto the tomb with both hands, crying.... When we got back, she told me she was going to have a girl, that Suleika had given her a girl who would be born in October—and you were, on October 1st. What a rich world we live in, t'bark'allah.



Detail from cover

The melding of Arab and Jewish culture here, concluding with the praise of Allah from the mouth of the Jewish matriarch, is one of the bases of the rich world that childlike Brit seeks in her magical trip away from the sensible, catagorized American existence she has known.

But Brit is also on another quest. Devastated by the death of her mother (a fall from a ladder while peeling off wallpaper), Brit renews and intensifies her love for her mother's younger brother, Gaby, becoming spellbound by him, searching for the key to his room and his heart. In the same way that the brass key on the wall represents an ancient longing that reaches far beyond the individual family, Brit's quest for her uncle's key delineates far more than her individual search for love and identity. This is not just another American coming-of-age story in a foreign country, a case of Huckleberry Finn and Isadora Wing meeting Lawrence Durrell and Paul Bowles. For no matter how personal, specific, sensual, and erotic this journey is, it is also at every moment political, religious, and racial. Her search is for the borders of self, of sequence in time, plot, and music, and the breaking of all limits: personal, racial, and artistic.

When Delacroix became enamored of the seductive ladies of Morocco in the nineteenth century and asked permission to paint them, he found only the Jewish girls willing to disclose their sensuality to him. It is this face of Oriental Judaism that Setton emphasizes, the manifestly erotic hunger that is in part the longing of the stranger for identity and recognition. Setton alternates narrators—Brit and Gaby tell their stories using the same imagery—and interweaves other narratives of Morocco as well: historical accounts by witnesses at the decapitation of Suleika, tales of family history, diverse personal versions of the history of Suleika, etc., together with experiences of immigration to the United States and memories of Morocco. This rich patterning has the effect of arabesques in her tapestry of exile and desire, as Brit's seemingly adolescent obsession with "being seen" by her alternately devoted and despising

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uncle becomes a paradigm for the search for an identity of passion and depth as well as the borders of self.

What is selfhood, what is Arab identity, and what is Jewish identity? In the West, the Jews of the Orient are suspect as Jews by the Ashkenazi, the Eastern European Jewish community, but persecuted for their Judaism in the Arab world. Was Suleika, revered as saint both by Muslim and Jew, a convert to Islam who recanted? Was she a Jew who refused to convert? Was she a rebellious child or a devoted daughter? Does she have powers, or is all of the mystery of the Orient here a function of self-deception? And who is Brit? Named after an ancestor who was said to have killed herself on the night before being forced to take the veil, Brit's own religious identity is less clear, just as her sexual proclivities are vague and varied. Conceived through a female saint, and only incidentally by her father, Brit's intimacies transcend gender borders. The haunting cover photograph of The Road to Fez, by the noted artist Shirin Neshat, introduces the theme of the sexual duality and dialogue with its full-faced image of a man covered with text and a clear superimposed profile of a woman. But Brit, who comes to Morocco having loved both male and female, is introduced to gender definitions and distinctions very different from those of her American upbringing.

Novels about cultural identity tend to attempt positive and clear definitions, creating a concept of self through oppression by the other. It would have been easier for Setton to follow the model only of the persecuted minority, and indeed anti-Semitism frames a number of the key events. But the multicultural nature of the very identity of the people of whom she writes demands a more inclusive, and therefore more hopeful, vision. Rather than either/or, the vision of *The Road*

to Fez seems to be not only/but also. Despite the fact that nothing is resolved, nothing proven, and nothing changed, the very grappling is so honest that in itself it provides a resolution, or at least another key.

Karen Alkalay-Gut teaches at Tel Aviv University. Her latest book of poetry, High Maintenance, has just appeared from Ride the Wind Press in Calgary.