Clowns without Makeup: An Analysis of "The Tumblers," by Nathan Englander

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Digest

This analysis of "The Tumblers" in Nathan Englander's *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges* focused on the tense relationship between the outside world and the isolated Jewish community from Chelm when they come into contact with each other. Englander uses history and fantasy in a way that renders the characters both recognizable to us, as well as clearly fictional. They represent the blurred line between devoutness and absurdity, which parallels the description of the Nazis' actions throughout the story. "The Tumblers," revolves around the so-called 'magic' act of making people disappear. Nathan Englander's similarly enchanting achievement is making characters come alive through words on a page.

Englander composed "The Tumblers" in the style of a classic tragedy featuring Mendel as the story's protagonist. Mendel's journey of self-knowledge takes place despite incredible obstacles, although his development into a complex character does not save him from the inevitability of his death. He is murdered because of something far beyond his control—his Jewish identity, which proves to be his weakness as a tragic hero.

In the first chapter, I discuss "The Tumblers" through the lens of a Wise Men of Chelm narrative, as these stories typically involve this community of fools working through challenges of everyday life despite being bewildered by the outside world. By using these elements of traditional folklore and cultural repertoire, Englander builds a sense of nostalgia for his readers.

Next, an examination of gallows humor and Holocaust literature shows that Englander used fantastical circus imagery and black humor in order to highlight both the absurdity and the humanity present in a word overtaken by madness. The complete dehumanization of the Jews by the gentiles is highlighted by their cruel, mocking laughter, while the Mahmirim make laugh in order to retain some semblance of their humanity in spite of the Nazis' efforts. Englander's use of gallows humor allows the reader to unite with the characters in the story as emotional beings, connecting us to the crucial nature of the human spirit that can rise above horror and suffering.

In the final chapter, I discussed the Rebbe as a paradigm of rabbinic authority, beginning with an exploration of different forms of rabbinic literature as a way of establishing a basis of literary tradition. In "The Tumblers," the Rebbe serves as a guide for the Mahmirim as they are thrust into the secular world, earning his authority through his inherent goodness and morality. The Rebbe represents an old world vision of rabbinic leadership, also contributing to the reader's sense of nostalgia since rabbis serve such a different role in modern life.

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Introduction

Born in 1970 in Long Island, New York, Nathan Englander was raised in an Orthodox Jewish community in West Hempstead, New York. Since his first collection was published in May of 1999, Nathan Englander has been known throughout the literary world for his short stories. His use of colloquial language and direct expression generate a strong effect on his readers, as I demonstrate in the body of this thesis. Englander's essays and short fiction have been published in a variety of high profile newspapers and magazines, such as The New York Times, The New Yorker, The Washington Post, The Best American Short Stories, and The Atlantic Monthly.[1]

Critics around the world have taken note of Englander's detailed prose and commanding themes. His wit has been compared to that of Phillip Roth and Saul Bellow, while others have likened his depth to Isaac Bashevis Singer's and recognized similarities to James Joyce and Flannery O'Connor.[2]

His first major publication, *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*, is a collection of nine stories about Jews, both Orthodox and secular, traditional and contemporary, humorous and depressing, as they negotiate between their religious identities and the challenges of the modern world. The book was an international bestseller,

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[1] "Nathan Englander - Bio." *Nathan Englander*. Hop Creative. Web. 20 Sept. 2011. <http://www.nathanenglander.com/bio/>.
[2] ibid

translated into more than a dozen languages since its initial release, and reprinted thirteen times within its first ten years.[3]

Despite these flattering comparisons, Englander maintains his individuality when it comes to his writing. In an interview with The Atlantic, he asserts that he merely writes about what he knows, which is why his stories center on Orthodox Jewish themes.

He explains, "I grew up on Long Island, in a Jewish ghetto. Of course I went to the mall and had TV, but I lived in a kind of isolation: I had an old-country experience when it comes to thought. I went to the same school, a Yeshiva, for thirteen years, and I got a right wing, xenophobic, anti-intellectual education. I was a very naïve, sincere child. I didn't know anything but my own small world, so I asked questions. At a school like mine, when you asked too many questions the rabbi gave you a box on the ear. I started looking elsewhere for answers.

In a nutshell, I'm no longer religious because of my religious education. It was a gradual process. I had questions for about a dozen years before I touched a single light switch on the Sabbath. It wasn't until I got to Israel for my junior-year abroad -- when for the first time I saw cultural Jews -- that I got nonreligious. I had the

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[3]Bures, Frank. "For the Relief of Unbearable Pressure: A Profile of Nathan Englander."*Poets & Writers*. May 2007. Web. 18 Dec. 2011. <http://www.pw.org/content/relief_unbearable_pressure_profile_nathan_englander_0>.

standard *shtetl* viewpoint: either you're religious or you're a bum. I had no idea that you could be a functioning cultural Jew. I didn't even know that was a choice."[4]

This brief autobiographical statement provides readers with a glimpse into Englander's personal history, which has plainly influenced the stories in this collection. Englander's personal struggle between Jewish tradition and modernity plays out in every single story in the book, from the Orthodox rabbi who makes most of his yearly income by playing a department store Santa during the holidays, to a typical New Yorker who suddenly realizes that he is a religious Jew in the back of a taxi, much to his wife's dismay. The constant interplay between the outside secular world and the insular nature of religious communities—something particularly relevant to Englander's own life--serves as the foundation for these stories. They are about the balancing act of existing in two worlds when they rub up against each other.

My analysis focuses on the second story in the collection, "The Tumblers." The brilliance of Englander's writing can be seen through his blending of fantasy and historical reality, developing characters that toe the fine line between piety and lunacy. What makes "The Tumblers" such a unique story in this collection, however, is its structure. In this introduction, I intend to illustrate exactly how Englander composed "The Tumblers" in the style of a classic tragedy, setting the tone for the entire narrative.

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[4] "Worlds Apart: A Conversation with Nathan Englander." *The Atlantic*. Facts & Fiction - 99.03, 3 Mar. 1999. Web. 13 Nov. 2011. <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/unbound/factfict/ff9903.htm>.

One scholar of classical drama writes that a tragedy has the following characteristics: the drama is based on events that have already taken place, with which the audience is already familiar, the protagonist is a person of noble stature, the protagonist has a weakness, and, because of it, suffers a downfall, because the protagonist's fall is not entirely his own fault, the audience may end up pitying him, the fallen protagonist gains self-knowledge, the audience undergoes a cathartic purging of emotions, and the drama usually unfolds in a short period of time.[5]

"The Tumblers" takes place during the Holocaust, a major historic event familiar to Englander's audience. The characters in the story are also recognizable to readers familiar with the Jewish central European literary tradition. While it would be easy for Englander to manufacture emotion in his readership, seeing as the characters are nostalgic for many and the Holocaust is deeply poignant for most, he allows his setting and characters to speak for themselves. The author does not tell the reader what to feel, but abides by the traditions of a tragic drama in order to create a familiar setting in which his story can unfold.

In the story, our main character, Mendel, is a typical protagonist. His actions, thoughts and sufferings are the focal point of the story, as the reader experiences the horrors that his community must endure through his eyes. This central character is key to the structure of the story serving as a tragic drama.[6]

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[5] Bowra, C. M. "Sophocles on His Own Development." *American Journal of Philology* 61.4 (1940): 385-401. Web. 14 Mar. 2012.
[6] Knox, Bernard M. W. *The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy*. Berkeley: University of California, 1983. 1.

Mendel is introduced by way of his grandfather, who was somewhat of a celebrity in their city of Chelm. Not only was Gronam known throughout the town as someone with great wisdom and practicality, but tales of his antics had traveled all over the globe. In this way, Englander ensures that Mendel is known as a protagonist of noble birth—Gronam was as much of a superstar as Chelm had to offer.

The protagonist's weakness in "The Tumblers," through no fault of his own, is that he is Jewish. This is the essential part of Mendel's identity that leads to his pain and anguish, something that he has absolutely no control over. What is so heartbreaking about this realization is that this irrepressible 'weakness' did not just lead to Mendel's death, but that being Jewish led to so much persecution, murder and suffering in the real world as well. Mendel does not ask to be Jewish, nor is it possible for him to overcome this aspect of himself. The reader understands this from the beginning of the narrative, but Mendel does not.

At the beginning of the story, Mendel is portrayed as extremely trusting and optimistic. He is good natured and simple, and even as his people are driven out of their homes, thrown into a ghetto, starved and filthy, Mendel maintains his trouble-free demeanor. Even as Mendel ventures outside the confines of the ghetto on command of his Rebbe, seeing that "potatoes were treated as gold, and a sack of gold might as well have been potatoes," he views this upheaval as a positive sign that his grandfather's silly upside-down logic is being taken seriously by the outside world.[7]

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[7] Englander, Nathan. *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*. New York: Vintage, 2000. 28-29.

When he detours on his way back to the ghetto to see what used to be his house before the Nazis displaced him, Mendel still behaves with good-natured piety in a situation that would enrage and depress others.

Even under threat of deportation, Mendel believes the Nazis' lies about sending the Jewish community to a farm, stopping to daydream about eating the idyllic ducks roaming around in this new fantasy home. Instead of worrying about what deportation might actually mean, Mendel buys into the vision of a better future.

When we meet Mendel, he strikes the reader as a character with little depth. He constantly succeeds in seeing each situation he encounters in the best possible light, is no simple task during a time of such turmoil and suffering. From the beginning, the reader is invested in Mendel's future as the central character of the story. This characteristic, however, is not Mendel's weakness as much as it represents his opportunity for growth as the narrative moves forward.

As the story progresses, Mendel becomes less naïve, beginning with his internal realization that times were simpler before the Nazis' invasion. Challenges that had seemed insurmountable to the Wise Men of Chelm prior to the outbreak of war now appear simple to Mendel, which demonstrates that he is developing into a more complex character.

His demeanor changes when a child in the group is brutally murdered, and for the first time, Mendel's thoughts turn dark. Englander writes, "Mendel did not bump

into [Yocheved] again, though he would, until his death, wish he had."[8] The grief and regret that Mendel experiences during this short episode transform him into a multifaceted person. Before this, Mendel is portrayed as generally joyful and positive, but now he begins to experience a multitude of emotion.

Mendel begins to take a leadership role within the group after this turning point, serving as the conduit between the secular world and their insular community in a way that their leader is unable to do. He learns to take control in the community's time of need and understands how vital his role is in the potential survival of his people, which is another sign that Mendel embodies what it means to be a tragic hero.[9]

Perhaps most importantly, while Mendel idealizes the situation in that he agrees to participate in the acrobatic charade purposed by the Rebbe, he does not cling to a fantastical hope that their actions will save the group from death at the hands of the Nazis. On the way back from one of his trips to gather information from the gentiles on the train, Mendel contemplates escape through suicide.[10] This tragic desperation on the part of the story's hero comes across to the reader, who has been a witness to Mendel's transformation from carefree simpleton to a complex character in the midst of a great crisis. Instead of choosing to abandon his people and release himself from his suffering, Mendel chooses to remain true to his identity. His self-

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[8] Englander, 35.
[9] Knox, 15.
[10]Englander, 45.

knowledge allows him to face death with a strength and courage that he did not exhibit at the onset of the narrative.

As the story progresses and Mendel's naivety falls away, he knows that the Mahmirim are going to die. During the process of self-discovery, he realizes that the part of himself that cannot be changed is the same thing that the Nazis want to destroy—his Jewishness. He and his people are going to be killed because of an essential element of their being that they cannot help. Despite this realization, Mendel does not run. He never gives up on the Rebbe, thereby remaining true to his Jewish identity until the bitter end. What makes this story such a poignant tragedy is that unlike Oedipus, Mendel's weakness is not something that he has brought upon himself; rather; the world inflicts this pain upon the Jews.

The mark of a tragic ending, according to Knox, "rules out the future which might serve to lighten the murk and terror of the present—it makes no reference to the eventual deification of the tortured, poisoned hero who raves in agony on the stage."[11] "The Tumblers" rules out any option other than the most horrific ending for the Mahmirim because of the tragic nature of the story. What makes the ending so powerful is that despite the reader knowing what must come next for the characters, Englander leaves their last moments up to their imagination.

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[11] Knox, 4.

The Use of Chelm Imagery in The Tumblers

The Wise Men of Chelm may be among the most recognizable folk characters in the Jewish tradition. Set in an Eastern European town, the Wise Men of Chelm narratives typically involve a community of good-natured simpletons working through challenges of everyday life. Their solutions to these problems are often humorous and unrealistic, as the people of Chelm lack common sense. These stories portray a town perplexed by the world around them.

In this chapter, I will explore the implications of Englander's choice to compose 'The Tumbers' using the Wise Men of Chelm as his main characters. Beginning with a the history of Wise Men of Chelm stories, I will present an overview of Jewish folklore as it relates to 'The Tumblers.' This overview will allow me to illustrate the importance of nostalgia in this narrative, demonstrated primarily through the use of Chelm imagery throughout the piece. I will then consider the frame of cultural repertoire when analyzing Englander's literary intentions, both through the evocative elements of folklore, as well as through insider knowledge of rabbinic tradition and language.

In conclusion, I intend to illustrate the role reversal between the Wise Men of Chelm and the Nazi soldiers, flipping a typical Wise Men of Chelm story on its head. The Chelmites, widely known as disorganized fools prove themselves to be highly methodical and responsive to authority, while the Nazis are portrayed not as highly efficient machine-like soldiers, but rather as somewhat chaotic and immature.

Englander's use of the Wise Men of Chelm creates a frame of reference that speaks to a specific group of people in a particular way. Through the use of cultural repertoire, the author speaks to Jews who understand the nature of the residents of Chelm. By presenting them in this context, Englander forces his readers to develop new and different ideas about fantasy and reality, building upon their own knowledge in this unusual context.[12]

While the Wise Men of Chelm narratives may be fictional and timeless, Chelm exists in Eastern Poland near the Ukranian border. There are records of Jews living in Chelm from the fifteenth century, although many believe that there has been a Jewish presence in the town since the twelfth century. The city was dominated at the time by Orthodox Jews, and was also home to sages and a yeshiva.

For a city that valued Jewish learning, its reputation in folklore seems unfounded, thought to be the result of a rivalry between Chelm and Zamosc, another small town located south of the town. The people of Zamosc, a center of Jewish scholarship and a focus of the haskalah in the nineteenth century, considered the people of Chelm to be less intelligent—even backward—compared to themselves. The enlightened scholars from Zamosc wrote literature for popular consumption, and took the

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[12] Iser, Wolfgang. *The Act of Reading: a Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980. 68-70.

opportunity to mock the people of Chelm through their stories. Since then, these tales have become a treasured part of Jewish folklore.[13]

Wise Men of Chelm narratives have been composed by a wide range of authors over the past few centuries, from "The Fools of Chelm and Their History," by Nobel Prize winner Isaac Bashevis Singer, to "The Heroes of Chelm," by Shlomo Simon and the animated short film, 'Village of Idiots.'[14] These stories appeal to a wide range of people who view the citizens of Chelm as a way to connect to their heritage through humor and folklore.[15]

In 'The Tumbers,' Nathan Englander's main characters are Wise Men of Chelm. From the very beginning of the story, Englander is counting on the fact that his readers will understand who these people are, opening the piece with what seems like a typical Chelm narrative. Never does the author explain that these people live in a fictional village at an indeterminate time, and that Chelm stories have been woven throughout Jewish folklore for centuries. Englander assumes that the reader is aware of these stories, and is writing to a select group of people who will be nostalgically connected to these iconic villagers.

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[13] Krakowski, Stefan, and Aryeh-Leib Kalish. "Chelm." *Encyclopaedia Judaica.* Ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. 2nd ed. Vol. 4. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007. 588-589. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Web. 1 Nov. 2011.
[14] Janasowicz, I. "The Myth of Chelm in Jewish Literature." *History of the Jews in Chelm.* Ed. Leah Z. Davidson. 45-52.
[15] Jurich, Marilyn. "Once Upon a Shtetl: Schlimazels, Schlemiels, Schnorrers, Shadchens and Sages—Yiddish Humor in Children's Books." *The Lion and the Unicorn* 1.1 (1977): 9.

Seeing as Englander does not have to create this sense of nostalgia between his characters and his readers, he instead builds up sentimentality within the story.

The citizens of Chelm are presented as isolationists, going to great lengths to ensure that nobody comes in or out of the town. It soon becomes clear to the reader that these fictional characters exist in Europe during World War II. The Nazi party confined the Jews of Eastern Europe to ghettos, and despite The Wise Men's stated desire to remain segregated, they are forcibly removed from the world around them.

There is a disparity between what the reader knows to be true and what the Chelmites present as the reason for their seclusion. It seems as though the people of Chelm's insistence that their isolation was a choice is as a reaction to their imposed separation from society by the Nazis. The Jews understand this by the time food becomes scarce and illness takes hold within the Nazi-guarded ghetto walls. They are no longer permitted to participate in daily life.

Englander divides the people of Chelm into two subgroups: the Students of Mekyl, and the Mahmir Hasidim. Both of these groups are named according to Jewish tradition. When discussing levels of observance, the Talmud describes people in terms of their adherence to Jewish law. Mahmir, translated as severity, implies a higher level of observance than mekyl, which means permissiveness. While both groups follow the Jewish law, the Students of Mekyl are described as being more of a relaxed group. The Mahmirim, on the other hand, are much more strict with their religious observance.

Englander names these groups with great intention, drawing upon the wisdom of sages to label folkloric characters. This naming presents the Chemites as more human—more real—as they are labeled by their practices the same way that Jews have been labeled for centuries. Once again, Englander speaks to a population that comes to this story with a level of Jewish knowledge. If a reader does not know the meaning of these words, the story still makes sense; however, those who understand the author's selection will find deeper meaning in the actions of the Mahmirim and the Mekylim.

Despite their differences, the people of Chelm are defined by their humanity. From the outset of the story, the reader is introduced to the characters and places by name. We meet Mendel, our main character, and are immediately told of his grandfather, Gronan, whose actions were so funny—so Chelm-like—that stories of him spread to the four corners of the earth. He was an isolationist too, and so the reader is able to understand how this mentality had been passed down in Chelm from generation to generation.

Chelmites used backwards logic in order to avoid accepting any sort of change, seen through Mendel's recounting of his grandfather's actions in the town. Instead of welcoming new people, customs, and foods into the city, the people of Chelm denied their existence while enjoying products from a black market that they pretended was not there. When they temporarily ran out of sour cream, they renamed water 'sour cream' to avoid ruining a religious festival. When the people of Chelm begin to experience the effects of the Nazi regime, they refused to acknowledge the change,

instead renaming their fear, hunger, and filth with positive words such as 'freedom' and 'hope.'

These examples demonstrate the denial that the townspeople employ when their system is threatened by outsiders or hardship. Englander has chosen to use these characters precisely for that reason. They are so insular and set in their ways that an intrusion from the outside doesn't seem real to them. They spend the beginning of the story refusing to recognize the severity of their situation, just as they have about other unpleasantries that have befallen Chelm in the past. This point in the story represents the intersection between the Chelm genre and Holocaust literature, where humor fades away and the gravity of their situation is revealed to the reader. Replacing harsh realities with more pleasant words cannot fill children's bellies or comfort terrified families.

One case in point is the description of the black market once the people had been forced into a ghetto. Just as the people of Chelm switched the meaning of sour cream with that of water during a minor crisis many years back, the meaning of the words 'potato' and 'gold' are switched after food becomes extremely scarce. Mendel recognizes that "potatoes were treated as gold, and a sack of gold might as well have been potatoes," and although Chelm did not make this change, Mendel is happy to see that his grandfather's common sense had been embraced outside of the ghetto walls.

The reader is with Mendel when he slips out of the ghetto to procure food for a community intentionally stricken with hunger, stopping on his way back to visit

what used to be his home before he was dispossessed. Mendel notices the details of his house and his lawn, and the reader is there with him is there when he catches a fleeting glimpse of the person now sleeping in his very own bedroom. Instead of feeling angry of vengeful about being forcibly displaced, Mendel is comforted when he hears a rooster's call. He takes it as a sign that nature is functioning correctly, after mistaking the call for the sound of a bullet, a cry for help, and a siren.

This relief instead of rage, both in having to spend a fortune for rotting potatoes and in finding a stranger living in his home, is key to understanding why Englander chose the people of Chelm as his story's protagonists. Here, they are not fools, making silly pronouncements in their attempt to solve life's daily problems. Instead, they are people desperately trying to retain a sense of humanity in a world turned upside down. Mendel is grateful that he heard the rooster because to him, it symbolizes normalcy in what has become a chaotic, confusing state of affairs. The sirens and calls for help aren't expected noises for Mendel to hear, and it's unnatural for him to know what a bullet sounds like. But the rooster's crow is what Mendel is supposed to hear early in the morning, and it makes him feel better.

The rooster is a reference to Jewish text, as Mendel is comforted by the traditional call to morning prayers. True, everything in Mendel's life has been turned completely upside down, but the rooster's crow symbolizes that God's creation and God's law are still viable. For Mendel, the rooster's crow is a vindication of his Rebbe, whom he now knows is not completely detached from the world. With this confirmation that God's work is still functioning, the Rebbe's credibility is

maintained. It is not the world that has been turned upside down; rather, humanity itself has gone mad.

Mendel makes it back inside the ghetto and finds it crawling with people and activity. When he asks a young girl if the circus has come to town, clearly foreshadowing the future for the Mahmirim, we realize that the ghetto is not usually this alive with movement. He finds out that the Jews are to be deported, supposedly sent to live on a farm, and begins to joke. This element of humor in the face of harsh reality defines Wise Men of Chelm stories. The use of humor in Jewish storytelling is widespread. While no author can claim that the Holocaust was an amusing moment in Jewish history, Englander's decision to include Chelm imagery in The Tumblers provides him with the flexibility to merge elements of narrative and history into something altogether unique.

In her article, entitled "After Such Knowledge, What Laughter," Sidra Ezrahi states that, "what is at stake in the reinstatement of laughter *after* Auschwitz, is not the fidelity of a comic representation *of* the [Holocaust] but the reinstatement of the comic as building block of a post-[Holocaust] universe."[16] Mendel's wisecracks about different styles of cooked duck are not intended to mock the grimness of the situation. Rather, this comic relief serves to help ground the reader in the humanity of Englander's characters.

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[16] Ezrahi, Sidra DeKoven. "After Such Knowledge, What Laughter?" *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14.1 (2001): 287.

As the Jews prepare for their departure, they are instructed by the Nazis to only bring their most essential items. The Students of Mekyl are instructed to pack everything they might need for an unfurnished summer home, while the Mahmir Rebbe decrees that nothing should be considered essential aside from undergarments.

This distinction between the two groups speaks to their understanding of their own religious identities. At a time when Jews are being targeted because of their blood and religious beliefs, one group is comically attached to their material possessions. While there is an implication that Mekyl made this announcement to ease the fear seeping through the village, his ruling is absurd and marks his followers as indulgent. Packing more 'things' assuages the dears of the Students of Mekyl, illustrating how connected the identities of these people are to their material possessions. They need their trappings to define who they are.

Conversely, the Mahmirim leave everything behind, including their ritual objects, their clothing, and even their hair. These are nothing more than accoutrements, and the Mahmir Rebbe understands that his followers are secure enough in their religious identity that possessions are immaterial. Without their ritual fringes and modest apparel, without the items and objects that traditionally represent religious Judaism, they are still pious and observant Jews. They hold fast to their identities despite losing everything else.

The Wise Men of Chelm imagery makes the distinction between the two groups of Jews more powerful. The reader expects their actions to reflect a literal

interpretation of the command, as most of their blunders in other stories present them as literalists. Each group does indeed take the instruction somewhat literally, but the differences in their interpretations illustrate the profound dissimilarity between these two sects.

Ezrahi presents a connection between the carnivalesque and the catastrophic as seen through classic Jewish texts. Without touching on modern narratives or folklore, she discusses the Book of Esther as a paradigm for this narrative balance. In the Book of Esther, readers are caught between the fantastical world of hedonistic, self-indulgent behavior and a heroine who participates in the system, and the overhanging threat of government-imposed genocide.[17]

The narrative incorporates dark humor into the text, from the drunken king picking out the prettiest young woman in the kingdom to replace his uncooperative wife, to the king's evil advisor trying to rid the land of Jews because of an isolated incident. The story is so compelling that it is difficult to reconcile the pageantry with the overhanging threat of genocide.

Even the rituals associated with Purim are festive, full of costumes and drinking. Instead of focusing on Haman's desire to rid Shushan of its Jews and the government's willingness to satisfy his request, the holiday celebrates the Jews' survival.

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[17] ibid, 288-289.

In The Tumblers, the humor present in the Wise Men of Chelm imagery does not celebrate the triumph of the Jews over evil forces. Rather, this comedy serves to rejoice in these people's humanity. In the face of evil and a world gone mad, the humor inherent in the people of Chelm's mannerisms and behavior marks them as different from those around them. We are not celebrating their victory, but rather their existence.

The humorous Chelm imagery continues as the Mahmirim board the wrong train, thereby avoiding an implicit trip to a concentration camp. Not to move past the fantastical nature of Chelm folklore, it is a train filled with circus performers, who think that the ragged, skinny, shaved group of people in their underwear must be a quirky group of acrobats.

Englander pairs the visual humor of the group being mistaken for performers with the terror of the situation, much like the connection in the Book of Esther. The line between comedy and tragedy becomes increasingly blurred as the story moves forward.

In typical Chelm narratives, the behavior of its citizens is considered absurd. Here, while the Mahmirim make 'costumes' out of buttons and scraps, practice doing somersaults down the aisles of the train, and cry 'hup hup hup' to prepare for a performance as professional acrobats, the ridiculous conduct is no longer silly—it's an anxiety-filled real attempt to save their own lives.

Mendel learns about the 'magic trick' which turns trains filled with Jews empty again, leaving only 'the traditional puff of smoke,'[18] from a woman providing him with alcohol during the train ride. The lines between fantasy and reality are distorted once again. This magic trick is no trick at all, and the reader begins to understand that the Mahmirim and the Nazis have traded places.

The Mahmirim are living with the reality of what is happening, frantically trying to preserve their identity while remaining alive. The Nazis are living in the fantasy world that the reader typically associates with Chelm, where people are so worthless that they magically turn into smoke. The citizens of Chelm who once seemed ridiculous are now heartbreaking and human. The Nazis' actions against Jews, which once seemed mechanical and organized, is now absurd and horrifying, reducing mass murder to a magic trick.

When the train stops and the Mahmirim must perform their preposterous show in front of a house full of the soldiers who would see them all killed, terror overtakes the Jews who suddenly begin to see how nonsensical their plan had been. They are ashamed of their makeshift costumes and of their act, and understand that this episode is likely to be their last.

Mendel expresses his crippling terror at the efficiency of the operation. Coming from perhaps the least efficient village in folklore, the machine-like operations of the military are overwhelming. The Rebbe forbids tears from being shed, and the

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[18] Englander, 40.

Mahmirim obey him one last time, beginning their performance despite their paralyzing fear.

The Mahmirim have been forced from their homes, starved, shoved into a world that seeks their death. Through their panic and dread, they manage to stay alive, to remain true to themselves, and to put forth an unbelievable amount of effort to save themselves through their preparation of an 'act.' By this time, the reader knows the Mahmirim. We know their names, we know their individual strengths and weaknesses, and we know how efficient they are. They obey their religious leader without question, and are extremely adept at following orders. The efficiency that Mendel fears from the Nazis is much more clearly exhibited in the behavior of his own people.

The people of Chelm are typically presented as comic, but here, Englander turns them into heroes. He uses Chelm as the foundation for this story, but his version of the Wise Men of Chelm is the different from those we find in folklore. The Mahmirim appear naked before God, made in God's image, stripped of their religious paraphernalia as they move forward into a world that would have them murdered. They shed themselves of their clothes, their hair, their possessions, and their surroundings at the beginning of the story, and they go to their graves at the end in a similar fashion.

The Wise Men of Chelm characters were chosen by Nathan Englander in order to create a piece of literary fiction that is both historically-based and nostalgic to a particular group of insiders. The author's use of such well-known folkloric imagery

forces his readers to understand the horrors of the Holocaust in a different context. Through my analysis, focusing on the Chelm imagery and rabbinic references in the story, we can see the transformation of the Chelm characters from dim-witted simpletons to individuals who capture the essence of humanity.

Gallows Humor and Holocaust Literature

There is a complex relationship between prose and the Holocaust. The history and personal narratives of Holocaust have permeated Jewish literature (and have certainly influenced non-Jewish literature) since World War II. From writers such as Bernard Malamud and John Hersey, who published in the decades following the Holocaust, to Jonathan Safran Foer and Art Spigleman's more recent publications, this event remains central to the collective memory of Jewish literature.

The magnitude of the Holocaust needs no creative embellishment—in fact, it is impossible to overemphasize the horror that its victims experienced. Some authors, such as Nathan Englander in 'The Tumblers,' instead compose Holocaust literature in an absurd way for the purpose of capturing the madness of the time. As Lillian Halevy, Belgian Holocaust survivor stated, "It's nice to laugh in order not to cry."[19]

In an article by Stephen Feinstein, the author discusses the Nazis' use of sadistic humor throughout the Holocaust. From the labeling of Theresiendstadt as the 'old age home for the Jews,' at the Wannsee Conference in 1942, to the posters and signs in various ghettos promoting good health and hygiene, humor was used by the Nazis as an expression of their dominance and control over the Jews. But the Jews' use of black humor comes from a different place.

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[19] "Art from the Concentration Camps: Gallows Humor and Satirical Wit." Journal of Jewish Identities no. 2 (July 2008): 53.

The Holocaust is clearly not a laughing matter, though it seems as if humor was a method of resistance against the suffering, starvation, pain and death that the Jewish people experienced at the hands of the Nazis. John Morreall, an expert on tragedy and comic relief with regard to religious studies, notes that during the Holocaust, humor served three functions. He writes, "First it was its critical function: humor focused attention on what was wrong and sparked resistance to it. Second was its cohesive function; it created solidarity in those laughing together at the oppressors. And third was its coping function: it helped the oppressed get through their suffering without going insane.[20]

In Sigmund Freud's 1927 essay, *Humor*, he explains that, "The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world." Also referred to as grotesque satire, this form of laughter evolves from the absurdity of a horror-filled experience. Englander's story exemplifies this particular form of satire.

In 'The Tumblers,' Englander creates a set of circumstances in which gallows humor plays out in a times of crisis. In the beginning of the narrative, the Nazis are referred to merely as 'invaders,' which fits in with the folk elements of the Wise Men of Chelm stories. The city of Chelm is suddenly turned into the Ghetto of Chelm, and the troubles of the outside world seep into this isolated community.

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[20] ibid, 54.

As the reader begins to understand the historical frame in which the story takes place—that the people of Chelm are starving, filthy, sick and suffering—Englander breaks even the most intense imagery with moments of absurdity. Despite the fact that the soldiers had seized his home, Mendel is happy that the backwards wisdom employed by his grandfather is being put to good use. Increasing efforts to dehumanize these people lead to reactions of genuine humanity, which serves as the foundation for the story's black humor.

This thread of gallows humor woven throughout Englander's narrative is strengthened by repetitive circus imagery. The circus is the ultimate expression of the absurd, where natural order is challenged for the amusement of an audience. The use of this particular image throughout the story parallels the absurdity of the Holocaust, where madness became the norm.

Kurt Gerron's *The Town that Hitler Gave to the Jews* is the only film produced inside an operational concentration camp--Theresienstadt. The piece was filmed and produced in 1944 by the German Ministry of Propaganda with the intention of proving to the International Red Cross that Jews were being treated well inside the camps. While the film shows healthy smiling Jews actively participating in daily life, it was all a farce. When the film was completed, most of the cast was sent to Auschwitz, along with the director.[21]

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[21] Troller, Norbert (1991). *Theresienstadt: Hitler's gift to the Jews*. University of North Carolina Press.

Just as Gerron's film presents levity in place of reality, a circus provides patrons with the opportunity to escape from everyday life. Animals are dressed like people, pageantry is presented as normalcy, and the audience delights in the death-defying tricks by acrobats and performers. The appeal of spending even a small amount of time in a fantasy world relates both to the Nazi propaganda project and the imagery present in 'The Tumblers.'

The author uses horror as the backdrop for the ironic and cynical comedic elements of the story. As soon as the reader realizes that the story is set during the Holocaust, it becomes clear that the characters in 'The Tumblers" are going to die. Although this is clearly a work of fiction, which is particularly obvious because the characters are Wise Men of Chelm, the reality of the Holocaust is that most of the people faced with extermination were in fact exterminated. Once the Mahmirim board the train, they are literally being transported to their death, and any forward motion in the story brings them closer to their demise.

This sense of impending doom as the horror of the narrative unfolds affects the way that readers interact with the story. We do not want the story to move forward, as every word on the page brings the final conclusion. The Mahmirim are unable to escape, hurdling forward in time and space toward what can only be their death. While the reader is able to recognize the gallows humor found throughout the story, we also realize that the humor cannot be truly funny in such an intensely tragic situation. Because of this face, the absurdity is jarring for the reader, not permitting him to truly experience the pain of the story until after it ends. The reader is left

having to come to terms with what he read, as the humor interferes with the intensity of the horrors of the Holocaust.

In the beginning of the story, Mendel mentions the delight of the townspeople when the circus arrived in Chelm, despite the fact that they tried to remain completely isolated from the outside world. When he returns to the ghetto after a mission to procure food for his starving community, the city is alive with noise and activity—something out of the ordinary considering their situation. Mendel's thoughts immediately return to the circus, believing that only something wonderful could break the somber mood inside the ghetto.

There is a sense of magic involved in a circus that is discussed later in the chapter as a way to explain the unexplainable, and the same imagery is used here in order to justify the lively movement inside a place that is dying. The citizens of Chelm are already living in a fantasy world, albeit not one of joy and laughter. These people exist within the confines of the Nazis' desire to humiliate and eradicate them, and their community is intended to be nothing more than a temporary holding place.

The circus represents a different type of fantasy world. Instead of inducing suffering and degradation, it brings out vivacity and joy in those who participate. Mendel knows that things in the ghetto are not returning to the way they were before, but he hopes that the increased level of activity is a sign of something positive—an escape from their present existence, only possible through a feat of magic.

During the liquidation of the ghetto, the Mahmirim find themselves on a train car not designated for Jews. They accidentally end up on a train meant for showmen

and performers. The only reason that the Jews weren't immediately destroyed is that they reminded the group of a sad, pathetic bear who entertained the masses with his passivity and laziness. The Jews are permitted to live awhile longer because they drudge up memories of a performing animal whose only purpose was the amusement of others.

The gentiles laugh out loud at these poor people, finding humor in these starved 'clowns without makeup.'[22] Again, the non-Jews are unable to comprehend what they are actually seeing. Instead, they find a way to make light of the Mahmirim, seeing them as entertainment instead of human beings. They are not concerned with the well being of the group, and find the whole situation rather amusing.

Not only are the Wise Men of Chelm presented as fools, but like circus performers, everyone else in the narrative views them as figures of entertainment. The gentiles on the train decide that the Jews must be acrobats, as their clothing is ragged and bland, they are exceedingly skinny, and they have the right build for the high wire—a dangerous balancing act.

This example of humor in 'The Tumblers' illustrates the complexity of Englander's work. The humor in this section of the story is not derived from the group of Jews, nor will many readers find their predicament to be funny. Rather, the outsiders are the ones who express joy—or at least amused curiosity—in watching the situation unfold. The gentiles' cynical view of the Mahmirim is not funny to the reader, but

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[22] Englander, 36-37.

Englander uses their amusement to illustrate how little these people think of our group of protagonists.

Clearly, the Jews are not acrobats. They were, however, participating in an incredibly dangerous balancing act, whether they knew it initially or not. Just as performers in a circus often pretend that they have no idea what about their act is so amusing, the Jews are blissfully ignorant at that moment as to the reason behind their temporary reprieve. The humor in this moment rests on the fact that the Jews may be totally unaware that the gentiles on the train are laughing them at. At this point, the Mahmirim are not performing—they are no circus act—but the story is primed and ready for ensuing situational absurdity.

The gallows humor in 'The Tumblers' highlights the humanity of the citizens of Chelm by ridiculing both the perpetrators and victims of the Nazi atrocities, leading the reader to question the existence of evil. Englander's story stands out because it deals with the desperation of a particular group of Jews in a grotesquely comedic way. Even through the suffering of the Jews and the absurd lengths they go to in an attempt to remain alive, everyone else in the story is laughing at them.

Mendel only realizes that the Nazis are exterminating Jews after a discussion with a gentile performer on the train, who explains the 'unmatched feat of magic' with regard to the Jews—that trains depart full of Jews, and, with a sleight of hand trick, the Jews disappear. This woman who has taken a shine to Mendel explains, "For a moment, the magician stands, a field of Jews at his feet, then nothing...the train sits empty. The magician stands alone on the platform. Nothing remains but the

traditional puff of smoke. This trick he performs, puff after puff, twenty-four hours a day."[23]

Another circus trick. Magical sleight of hand. The woman is not confused as to what is happening; rather, she marvels at the sheer magnitude of this incredible act. She cannot fathom the reality of what the Nazis are doing to the Jews, since the German machine is unlike anything that the world had ever experienced before. Instead, this woman perceives mass murder as an act of magic. This gentile woman serves as a symbol for the majority of Germans, who were able to separate themselves from this heinous mass murder system by explaining it away. Here, it is seen as a fantastical trick, although it is clear that the woman is disturbed by what is happening. The illusion is a defense mechanism as much for the performer as it is for the Nazi machine.

When Mendel runs back to report to the Rebbe about the magic trick awaiting them at the end of the train ride, the Rebbe doesn't buy the story for a minute. He is terrified about what might happen to the Mahmirim when the train stops, and he decides that the group must impersonate acrobats in an effort to preserve their lives. They have to play into the outside world's perception of them if there is any hope of their continued existence. While nobody believes that this is actually magic, the overarching feeling of fantasy protects all parties from truly dealing with the present situation.

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[23] Englander, 40.

The readers know that the Jews' attempt to pass themselves off as acrobats will fail. We watch them struggle through crippling fear in order to give themselves the slightest chance of survival. This struggle is what humanizes this ragtag crew of people. As they fight for their lives, the reader learns their personal stories, what makes each one of these characters an individual with strengths, weaknesses, families and friends. We see them care for each other, sometimes at their own expense. It is the intrinsic black humor in the story as they navigate their new role in the world is part of what humanizes these people from Chelm.

Mendel decides that the secret to convincing other people that they are indeed acrobats is simple. It doesn't take skill, any real organization, training or professionalism. Instead, they employ the same magic that the Nazis use—sleight of hand and perception. Individual talents become the routines, despite the absurdity of these talents, such as walking like a crab or showing off double-jointed arms, and the group begins to learn more about each person trapped on this train with them. When acts fall flat, the people don't despair; rather, they laugh to avoid their fear.

This laughter serves as a release for a community under terrible strain. Their amusement at Mendel falling from a luggage rack does not deter them from continuing their work, but keeps the Mahmirim "giddy at the change God had given them," to become uncondemned, free people again. The fact that the Mahmirim think they may have even the slightest chance of pulling off this ruse is absurd. But laughing at their ridiculous attempts to become overnight acrobats is no less absurd

than being persecuted, forced from their homes and town, and driven onto a train by soldiers with the purpose of exterminating them.

Instead of using the absurdity of their actions to break the tension of the narrative for the reader, this section of the story is a form of protest against the Nazis. For example, when Raizel the widow asks Mendel to acquire string, needles, and anything that might be helpful in terms of maintaining their acrobat farce, she states that their current 'costumes' won't be sufficient. Even though their dingy underwear is their reality, Raizel understands that their garments are nothing more than costumes designed to help them play their part for the Nazis.

The author aims to both amuse the reader and appeal to the reader's indignation at the humiliating depths to which the Jews must go for even a chance of survival. Englander and his characters become part of the satire through their actions and attitudes in place of expressing outrage at the situation. His systematic comparison of the people of the people of Chelm and the gentiles signifies an unmistakable juxtaposition of victim and villain.

The group practices their act through their prolonged anxiety, the threat of death present at every moment. In Creative Evolution by French philosopher Henri Bergson, he writes that, "The whole of humanity is one immense army galloping beside and before and behind each of us in an overwhelming charge to be able to beat down every resistance...even death."[24] Here, it is this tremendous desire to

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[24] Bergson, Henri, and Arthur Mitchell. *Creative Evolution*. New York: Modern Library, 1944. 286.

remain alive that overpowers the adversity and fear threatening the Mahmirim. Even as Mendel considers suicide, throwing himself off the train in "faulty acrobat form"[25] to stop the constant pervasive peril he finds himself in, he cannot leave his people. He returns to taunts and jests at his expense in order to remain a part of the humanity that his people represent.

As the Mahmirim desperately prepare for what we can only assume to be their final performance, there is a real relationship between them and the reader. Defined by Emmanuel Levinas as a theory of narrative ethics, he posits that despite the intervening role of reason, narrative situations create an immediacy and intimacy, framing inflammation in a way that connects the storyteller and listener, author and text, and reader and character.[26] The helplessness of others, embodied in these characters, is what makes the reader feel so linked to the Mahmirim. Readers are forced to come to terms with their otherness before another's helplessness—in this case, a group of characters. This creates a situation in which a narrative produces an ethical effect on someone experiencing the text.

In "Hup, Hup, We Must Tumble," Adam Zachary Newton extends Levinas' concept of ethical narrative to the link between reader and the schlemiel. Taken out of his mythical time and place, the schlemiel serves as a humorous character caught between the real and ideal. His illogical behavior invites the reader to "[see]

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[25] Englander, 45.
[26] Hup! Hup! We Must Tumble: Toward an Ethical Reading of the Schlemiel. Mfs Modern Fiction Studies, 54, 1, 95. Frakes, J. C. (2007)

inwardness from the outside" through his inner and cultural conflicts with the outside world.[27] These characters function differently in their own world than normal people do, and yet in this extraordinary setting, their humorous and creative way of life serves a positive purpose.

In this Holocaust narrative, the Mahmirim remain committed to their philosophical and religious ideals. The comic nature of their response to evil does not diminish the reader's respect for them; rather, their form of fighting back strengthens the connection between reader and character. Englander, throughout the story, exemplifies the shame of the Jews' survival. The common image of Jews during the Holocaust as being lambs to the slaughter is made explicit in 'The Tumblers,' although Englander turns the image on its head. These Jews do not go quietly to their death, but are also not equipped with the skills to change their fate. The Mahmirim are trapped between reality and idealism, and the reader feels the pain of their failure as they fight for survival.

Englander's story is different than others that have attempted to turn historical fiction into parable. The Mahmirim are relegated to the place of performers in the eyes of the Nazis and gentiles on the train, but even so, humiliation was not the ultimate goal of the final solution. This Holocaust narrative is so powerful because it focuses on nostalgia, forcing the reader to come face to face with the tragedy of the position that the Mahmirim are in. We are pushed into heartbreak, despite the already difficult subject matter, which leads to a kind of emotional overload.

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[27] Frakes, 97.

As the group frantically prepares for their final performance, the reader hopes that the story will stop in its tracks. We know that as soon as the train reaches the station the Mahmirim will have to face their fate, and the reader knows what that fate will be.

During the last section of the story, the Wise Men of Chelm are brutally shoved into the real world. The comedy ends for the Mahmirim, and from here until its conclusion, there is no lighthearted banter or silly circus imagery. The immediate lack of humor shocks the reader, as he realizes that there may be no happy ending to the tale. Connections between characters and readers that have been built up throughout the story now magnify the feeling of dread for both parties.

From the moment they step off the train, the Mahmirim are ridiculed for their costumes and lack of familiarity regarding acrobatics, and the knowledge of their impending death overcomes the group. They feel like imposters, and their sense of despair is overpowering. Again, Englander pushes the reader to experience sentimentality through his description of the last moments of the Mahmirim. They think of their freedom, and of the places in Chelm that they loved before their right to exist was called into question. What they have lost—the blank spaces in their lives—become part of the reader's experience. They are tender toward each other, choosing to comfort instead of giving in to their fear.

When the curtain rises, the absurdity returns to 'The Tumblers.' Instead of the humor coming from the Mahmirim, the Nazi soldiers laugh and laugh at the

performers who are "as clumsy as Jews."[28] They are tickled by the Jewish ballet and cry out for more. The comedy in the narrative transitions from being an endearing quality of a very human community to being a disgusting display of cruel callousness. We feel the outrage that the Mahmirim do not express, as the process of dehuminzation of the Jews by the Nazis is complete.

This atypical narrative pays tribute to the humanity that was decimated during World War II. Englander's literary representation of catastrophe is triumphant in terms of ethical narrative. The old, ragged Wise Men of Chelm, dressed as circus performers, leap into the surreal fantasy world created for them by the author. Completely unable to handle the truth, they resist, continuing to perform even as their disguise falls away and their deaths are imminent.

Although they see despair in the mirror, they also see their future. Having learned acrobatic feats and new knowledge about themselves and each other, they must tumble in the darkness. The story involves a rueful humor—an ironic type of laughter at the human condition—as the Mahmirim laugh to retain their identity while the Nazis and gentiles laugh as a form of cruelty. To the Nazis, these Jews are not people; rather, they are objects of humor. It is therefore simple for them to murder the Mahmirim, who serve no purpose after they are finished entertaining the group of soldiers.

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[28] Englander, 54.

None of the elements of fantasy or dark humor rewrites the horrors of the Holocaust. Death is always waiting for the Mahmirim once the curtain rises. They are instead written to provide a continual act of revolt based on faith in God, as discussed in the following chapter. These particular facets of the narrative are a protest against the rampant inhumanity during the Holocaust. The gallows humor allows distance from these events that actually permits the reader to become more intimate with the characters in the story, connecting us to essential elements of the human spirit that can take place in moments of great trauma.

Narrative and Rabbinic Authority

The authority of rabbis to make Jewish determinations and influence their communities can be traced all the way back to the Talmud, a compilation of written documentation of rabbinic discussion relating to Jewish law, history, customs, ethics, and philosophy. These texts have served as the foundation for a tradition of rabbinic literature that continues through the present day.

In this chapter, I will discuss the wide spectrum of rabbinic stories as an introduction to different elements of rabbinic authority. Through this exploration, I intend to provide the reader with a basis for understanding the Rebbe's role in 'The Tumblers' as a guide for his people as they attempt to navigate through a world that had been previously unknown to them.

The Talmud contains a multitude of rabbinic stories, composed or edited by rabbis between 200-700 CE. Before this time, much of Jewish tradition was presumably passed down orally. However, according to tradition, the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and subsequent exile of many of the Jews from Israel in 70CE meant that tradition and stories had to be preserved through the written word. The two major centers of scholarship at the time were located in northern Israel and in the Babylonian region of the Persian Empire, with the sages from each locale producing a version of the Talmud.[29]

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[29] "Talmud." *Jewish Encyclopedia.* 1906. *Jewish Encyclopedia.* Web. 20 Feb. 2012.

Rabbinic texts often present themselves as follows--daily life holds an unlimited number of opportunities for obedience to God, whose desires are both explicitly expressed and implied in Scripture.[30] While many rabbinic documents contain short narratives, they are often integrated into the ongoing structure of exhibition and argument. These narrative sections may serve as examples or precedents, as shown below.

There are many different types of stories found in the Talmud, including the broad categories of legal text, known as *halacha*, to the nonlegal, known as *aggadah*. Other examples include case studies, etiological tales, anecdotes and legends. *Halachic* stories are intended to provide future generations with rulings on a particular aspect of Jewish living without paying too much attention to irrelevant details or an exciting plot. On the other hand, *aggadic* stories are often sophisticated and vibrant, detailed and complex. Some are allegorical, others symbolic or meant as parables, and yet others may simply be stories intended for popular consumption in a time when oral tradition and storytelling was certainly a means of entertainment. These types of stories often take the form of biblical commentary interacting with biblical narrative.

Rabbinic texts reference a reality outside of written narrative. Rabbis who are known to have actually existed are shown talking to each other, to their followers, and even to historical figures, and readers are also provided with an image of what

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[30] Samely, Alexander. *Forms of Rabbinic Literature and Thought: An Introduction.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007. 3-4.

these rabbis said or did. Some of the narratives present a rabbi making a halachic decision, thus creating a kind of precedent for future generations. Others are tales of conflict and challenge, usually also involving an exemplar leading the way in moral behavior. In another kind of tale, which directly relates to "The Tumblers," rabbis are challenged by prototypical outsiders, such as the Roman emperor, the 'philosopher,' the Roman matron, a potential convert, the Epicurean, and others. These stories often reflect the challenges and confrontations between rabbis, representing the Jewish community, and the outside world.[31]

In his book, Rabbinic Stories, Jeffery Rubenstein explains that many of the texts that feature rabbis in the Babylonial Talmud are presented as legal precedents, reporting on a rabbi's actions when confronting an unclear situation. For example, Rubenstein shares a popular anecdote about a particular rabbi. He writes, "Once the sons of Rabban Gamaliel returned from a wedding feast. They said to him, 'We have not yet recited the *Shema*.' He said to them, 'If dawn has not broken yet, you are obligated to recite it.'"[32]

This concise account answers a question about how late one should recite the *Shema*, building upon a biblical imperative to recite the prayer without any specifics when it comes to exact time. There are a few different versions of this precedent, but the assumption behind them all is that what a rabbi says becomes the law. Rabbis are the authorities when it comes to Torah, and so it is only natural that they

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[31] Samely, 97-100.
[32] Rubenstein, Jeffrey L. *Rabbinic Stories*. New York: Paulist, 2002. 5-7.

are looked to for advice when laws seem unclear. These rulings were passed down through the generations through these *halachic* stories, and many of today's rabbinic practices can be attributed to these stories.

In the *aggadic* category, the rabbi is most often presented as a moral paradigm, although there are certainly exceptions to the rule. Just as students learned Jewish law from the rulings and teachings of their mentors, individuals acquired knowledge regarding ethical behavior by watching their rabbis interact with others. In the same way that ritual practices and customs were transmitted from teacher to student, rabbis' virtuous activities have been preserved through this form of written tradition.

Certainly, rabbinic literature is not limited to Talmudic text; rather, rabbis in positions of authority can be found throughout Jewish stories. In the following story, based on a tale by I.L. Peretz in the 19th century, a rabbi embodies what it means to be an ethical person, his treatment of others taking precedence over ritual observance.

> The rabbi of Nemirov had a strange habit. Every Friday morning he vanished and was gone for hours. Then suddenly, just in time for Shabbat, he would reappear. No one knew where he went. A whisper went among his disciples that the rabbi actually ascended to heaven for a few hours, communed with God, and returned.

One new student, a bit of a skeptic, could not stand the mystery and desperately wanted to know where the rabbi really went each Friday. One Thursday night in winter, the young man sneaked into the rabbi's house. He climbed under the rabbi's bed and waited there all night until the rabbi awoke just before daybreak. The rabbi dressed himself in old, dirty clothes, the clothes of a woodsman. Taking an axe and a large bag from a hook on the wall, out he went.

The young man followed as the rabbi went deep into the woods. At one point the rabbi stopped, and chopped and split as much fire wood as he could put into the bag. He then continued into the woods, the young man following quietly behind. Eventually the rabbi came upon a rundown shack, and knocked on the door. A strained woman's voice called from within, "who's there?" The rabbi replied, "The woodcutter. I see no smoke coming from your chimney. You need wood. You must be cold."

"I am," the woman said. "But I am a poor, sick woman. I have no money to pay you."

"Don't worry," the rabbi answered. "I'll lend you the money you need."

"But I don't know when I can pay you back."

Again, the rabbi said, "Don't worry yourself, you'll pay me when you can pay me."

The young man saw the rabbi enter the house, and heard the sound of wood being unloaded and stacked. A few minutes later a curl of smoke began to float upward from the chimney. The rabbi left the house, axe in hand, and headed for home.

The young man followed him back to town. He could, of course, tell no one of what he had seen. But from that Shabbat on, he prayed at the rabbi's synagogue and studied at the rabbi's table. And ever after, when some disciple would remark on the Rabbi of Nemirov's Friday habit of ascending to heaven, the young man would quietly respond, "Im lo ma'alah mizeh" – if not higher.[33]

As the reader can see, the rabbi in this story plays a different role than Rabban Gamliel did when he answered a question about the timing of the recitation of the *Shema*. Here, the Rabbi of Nemirov proves himself to be a man of high character by caring for another person, treating her with dignity and respect. He does not earn this reputation by preaching wonderful sermons, or by praying harder than anyone

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[33] Pollack, Harold. "Rabbi Calls Out From the Shtetl: "Raise Medicaid Reimbursement Rates"" *The Huffington Post* 30 Sept. 2008.

else, but by serving as a role model for future generations. He shows readers that interpersonal relationships can be just as holy as religious ritual.

Through his goodness, the rabbi earns the authority he has over his community. Here, he is not revered because of his knowledge of religious ritual, but rather the people's realization that the rabbi represents morality. Anyone is capable of studying and learning, but the rabbi exemplifies what it means to be a quality human being. It is for this reason that his followers accept his power.

Hasidic stories and parables became popular in the 18th century as the movement gained momentum in Eastern Europe. Many of these stories involved elements mysticism, magic and the supernatural. Storytelling gained new value within Hasidism as a form of worship, and images of the Rebbe as divine intermediary could be found throughout the texts.[34] Rebbes in these narratives showed their followers how to connect with God, serving as signposts and guides for others seeking increased levels of spirituality in their own lives. For example, the following story illustrates the role of the Rebbe in Hasidic narratives:

> A story of the Baal Shem Tov, Hasidic founder, represents this:
> The saintly prayers of the Baal Shem Tov and his close circle were unable to lift a harsh Heavenly decree they perceived one New Year. After extending the prayers beyond time, the danger remained. An unlettered shepherd boy entered and was deeply envious of those who could read the holy day's

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[34] Altmann, Alexander, Alfred L. Ivry, Elliot R. Wolfson, and Allan Arkush. *Perspectives on Jewish Thought and Mysticism.* Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Harwood Academic, 1998. 381.

> prayers. He said to God "I don't know how to pray, but I can make the noises of the animals of the field." With great feeling he cried out, "Cock-a-doodle-do, God have mercy!" Immediately, joy overcame the Baal Shem Tov and he hurried to finish the prayers. Afterwards, he explained that the heartfelt words of the shepherd boy opened the Gates of Heaven, and the decree was lifted.[35]

The Rebbe, here the Baal Shem Tov, explains to his community that joy and authenticity take priority about doing things the 'right' way. He is able to interpret God's actions for his followers, who are no less valuable than the Rebbe. We can understand this point through the lowly shepherd's role in the narrative, as he is able to undo God's decree when even the Rebbe falls short. The Gates of Heaven open because of the words of this boy, also showing a mystical side of storytelling that is not nearly as prevalent in traditional rabbinic literature.

This type of story is important to note because the Baal Shem Tov's works together with a layman in order to be a successful leader for his people. He is not threatened by the shepherd's accomplishments; rather, he experiences joy that his people's sufferings are over. The Rebbe's authority is strengthened by his willingness to share in the responsibility of caring for his community.

The complexities of rabbinic authority play a key role throughout Englander's book, and 'The Tumblers' is no exception. The Mahmir Rebbe is introduced to the reader

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[35] Schochet, Jacob. *The Great Maggid; the Life and Teachings of Rabbi Dov Ber of Mezhirech.* Brooklyn: Kehot Publication Society, 1974.

as "the most pious of them all," immediately after the people of Chelm begin to lose their faith in God. This intentional juxtaposition of the people's loss of faith and the Rebbe's interception sets up his character as a moral and spiritual compass for his people. He steps in to reaffirm God's place in the ghetto during a low point in the community's morale. Through his behavior, we can view the Mahmir Rebbe as parallel to the Rebbes in traditional Hasidic stories, as well as connect him to the pious figures found in Talmudic texts.

The Rebbe sends Mendel to leave the ghetto to procure food for the people, which is an act punishable by death. He does not ask Mendel to risk his life to find potatoes, and Mendel responds by doing exactly what he is told. This short exchange demonstrates the clear hold that the Rebbe holds over Mendel and his other followers. He speaks and they obey without question.

The next time we meet the Rebbe, he is making decrees regarding the liquidation of the ghetto. The reader learns that his followers are few, numbering fewer than twenty, and that this small community is described as zealous in their dedication to Jewish law and ritual. His next act, after sending Mendel outside of the ghetto, is to instruct his loyal followers that they were to bring nothing with them to the deportation. While the Jews had been told to bring only essentials with them to the train, the Rebbe reacts against the of the other citizens of Chelm, explaining to his group that everything except for long underwear should be considered adornment.

What is shocking about this particular pronouncement is that the Rebbe asks the Mahmirim to cut their hair, shave their beards and ritual fringes, and remove their

clothing. These instructions are traumatic for a community used to adhering so strictly to Jewish law, which extends to issues of modesty and hair. The image of Feitel, "his hand shaking, the tears streaming down his face, [cutting] at his beard, bit by bit, inch by inch," is a graphic example of how difficult the Rebbe's orders are for some of his followers.[36]

Others have no difficulty with their Rebbe made the pronouncement. The women, in particular, who have spent their entire adult lives covering themselves from hair to ankle, feel no shame at exposing themselves because the order came from their leader. Here, his authority extends so far as to protect his people from feeling humiliation and embarrassment at their situation. For the reader, who knows that these were key elements in the systematic dehumanizing of the Jews by the Nazis, the Rebbe's power is all the more meaningful.

This is proof that the Rebbe's authority over the Mahmirim, while it may be based in scholarship and ritual, is not limited to issues of religious observance. Deciding how much to pack for deportation seems like it would be out of his realm, but as the Rebbe, nothing is beyond his expertise. He is the person that the Mahmirim look to for answers, particularly when the situation is new and confusing. Like the rabbis and Rebbes in older rabbinic literature, he both sets the example for people to follow, and interprets their traditions to meet the needs of the moment.

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[36] Englander, 33.

As the group prepares to board the train, the Rebbe refuses to permit them to share a cattle car with the other people of Chelm, whom he considers to be heathens.' Instead, he leads them toward a tunnel, away from the 'current of Jews,' toward a dark tunnel so that the Mahmirim can occupy their own car. Mendel is frightened, and the reader learns that he is scared that they will be killed before reaching the relative safety of the tunnel; yet, again, he believes in the Rebbe's ability to navigate through this world full of invaders for the benefit of the community. He is their guide, and despite any hesitation, the Mahmirim believe fully in his ability to protect them and show them the way.

Englander presents the tunnel as a symbolic representation of the biblical Red Sea. Just as Moses led his people through the sea as they as a way to escape the shackles of slavery in Egypt, the Rebbe leads the Mahmirim toward this dark, dangerous passageway in order to escape the certain death that awaits them if they do nothing. Despite the immediate risk, the Mahmirim follow him because of their respect for his authority.

The death of Yocheved, a child among the Mahmirim, affects the characters and the reader in a profound way. She pauses along the way to the safety of the tunnel, frozen by the sight of her sweet, beloved uncle being tortured and beaten by soldiers as they force him into the train car. We are with Yocheved as she recalls her love for this man through childhood memories, which enhances the nostalgic connection that Englander builds between character and reader. When the Rebbe

calls to the child from the tunnel, it is clear that he understands the danger that she finds herself in.

Yocheved is shot in the throat by a sniper just before she is attacked by a large, terrifying dog. Englander writes, "The bullet left a ruby holy that resembled a charm an immodest girl might wear," connecting Yocheved's murder to something unholy. Yocheved is modest, living her daily life under the authority of her faith and her Rebbe. The bullet is the object out of place in her life, and Englander uses the brutal image of her death to mark the separation between the holy and the profane.

The reference to Sodom emphasizes Englander's point, as Mendel is basically punished with a lasting image of the young girl's death for turning back at the sound of the shot. The others know better than to look behind them, having learned from the stories of their religion. The Rebbe is among those who do not turn back. Like the parallel if the tunnel to the Red Sea, Sodom illustrates who the Mahmirim are compared to the Nazis. They are goodness, and the Nazis are evil. They are God's chosen people, while the Nazis have rejected morality in favor of madness.

Even through his choice of Yocheved's name, Englander subtly reinforces this point. Yocheved is the name of Moses' mother in the Torah, who gives birth to and saves the greatest prophet that the Jewish people have ever known. Because of her, the Israelites are freed from Egyptian slavery and led through the desert to the Promised Land. In 'The Tumblers,' Yocheved is just an innocent child who has yet to reach her full potential—in a better time, she could have been so important to the Jewish people, or have grown up to change the world as the biblical Yocheved did.

Instead, she is murdered and mutilated. Her people cannot even bury her, since stopping would mean certain death for others. Even during enslavement, the biblical Yocheved was able to change the fate of the Jewish people because of her strength and bravery. Englander's Yocheved is not given that opportunity, thanks to the absurd evilness of the Nazis.

While he serves as the translator for the people between *halachic* law and their everyday life, the Rebbe is in a position where he constantly has to negotiate. He stands unequivocally for the strictness of the law. However, the Rebbe not only has to negotiate with the outside world when it comes to remaining ritually observant, but is also constantly battling with his own people who are exposed to secular society, and who may not be able to realize *halachic* rules as strictly as they should.

This story presents rabbinic authority as a constant negotiation with the outside world. It is anything but an absolute, but is a tension between faith in the religious rules and the need to offer a personal example on one hand, and the reality of the world on the other. The Rebbe is a true example of rabbinic authority, as he provides his community with guidance while allowing for flexibility when necessary. This idea contributes to the nostalgic element of the story. The Rebbe represents authority in a way that does not exist in today's world. Our desire to follow a leader who embodies what it means to be moral and decent drives our attraction to this charismatic character.

What makes the Mahmir Rebbe such an incredible leader is his inherent goodness. The Rebbe does not have a mean bone in his body. He does not hold grudges, as

seen through his relationship with Mendel. He is not jealous or bitter, and the reader never sees him wish others ill, despite what he and his followers are going through during the narrative. What makes rabbinic authority so special here is that relying on laypeople for support does not diminish the Rebbe's power. On the contrary, his authority is reinforced because of his willingness to accept the advice of flawed characters like Mendel.

When the Rebbe learns about the extermination through Mendel's foray into the secular world, he announces to the group that Mendel's words are true. Despite Mendel's predilection toward ritual leniency, the Rebbe sees Mendel as one full of the spirit of God, and that takes precedence over his flaws. Like other Hasidic stories, character is extremely important. Mendel is not thrown out of this group because he drinks too much, or does not observe the law perfectly. He is celebrated because of his joy and fervor.

The Rebbe declares to the group that they have absolutely no options save one—to come up with an acrobatic routine in order to survive. He looks to Mendel to help him guide the people as they prepare their act, although he steps in frequently to provide his people with support and supervision. For example, when the Mahmirim express delight in the second chance they might have, the Rebbe reminds them that their predicament does not excuse them from their religious obligations.

Mendel and the Mahmir Rebbe begin to share authority over the Jews.
Before the deportation, the reader can safely assume that none of the Mahmirim (including the Rebbe) had been outside of Chelm, and while the

Rebbe continues to act as the religious signpost for the group as they prepare for their performance, Mendel is the one sent out to interact with the secular world. Even the Rebbe looks to Mendel to help come up with their routine, since he seems to have a greater ability to move between worlds than the other Jews.

From the moment they begin to train, it seems as though the circus performance represents the adherence to a different kind of ritual. The circus is an escape from civilization, much like prayer and religious ritual. In a circus, boundaries are eliminated between animals and men, men and women, even the laws of gravity are challenged. Thrust into an unfamiliar situation, the reliance on this new type of ritual for survival is something that the Rebbe is capable of leading. He may need help deciphering the correct way to implement these new rituals—for example, Mendel instructing the group to say 'hup hup!' throughout the performance—but The Rebbe is able to renew his role as a strong, confident leader.

Mendel briefly considers his options as he returns from one of his meetings with a gentile performer, thinking about the possibility of escape or even the comforting permanence of suicide. Englander does not spell out the reason that Mendel decides to head back to the Mahmirim, but the Rebbe's declaration that tumbling was the only option for his people has something to do with it. He chooses to abide by his Rebbe's decision rather than escape, and to remain connected ideologically to the Mahmirim by doing so. Even when he is not present, the Rebbe's words greatly influence the behavior of

his followers. This confirms the Rebbe's role for the Mahmirim as their guide toward righteous behavior. Mendel chooses not to abandon his responsibilities toward his people, instead adhering to the Rebbe's commands even at personal cost.

Before the train arrives at the station, the Rebbe gathers his people together for morning prayers. He explains to the group that, "More than one kind of dedication is required if [they] are to survive this ordeal," before ensuring that the rituals were in place for services. The Rebbe's words inspire the Mahmirim, who, facing the uncertainty of death, pray with full strength. It is doubtful that the group would have prayed together that morning without the leadership of their Rebbe, but in doing so, these people reconnect with the divine at a critical moment.[37]

When the train stops, Mendel is the one who interacts with the outsiders, continuing to act as the intermediary for the Mahmirim as he has since the beginning of the story—from journeying outside the ghetto, to scrounging information from the other passengers on the train. Mendel may act as the intermediary between Mahmirim and strangers, but it is the Rebbe who responds to the theological question posed by one of the Mahmirim.

Backstage before their performance for the Nazis, the curtains and pulleys astound the Mahmirim, who comment that the theater reminds them of the bowels of the earth. They feel as if they are trapped in a giant machine in

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[37] Englander, 49.

which there is no place for them. Machines may represent modernity and progress for most, but the Mahmirim understand that modernity has gone mad in their time and place. Feitel wonders aloud, "Which one to pull for rain, and which for a good harvest?" Feitel's questions are a direct reference to Jewish liturgy, in which Jews pray to God for various blessings multiple times a day. Instead of answering or ignoring Feitel's remarks, the Mahmir Rebbe responds with, "and which for redemption," which is one more blessing in the Jews' daily prayers.[38] The Rebbe knows that the only escape for the Mahmirim is salvation, achieved through their deaths. Should they remain alive, the community would be ensnared in the cogs of the Nazi machine. Death would allow them to move on.

In his book, *Confronting Vulnerability*, Jonathan Wyn Schofer discusses impending death as it relates to the role of the rabbi. He explains that rabbinic sources present a tension between two views toward death. On one side, death is a difficult and complex bodily process—rabbis mourn other people who have died, do not enjoy the body's decline leading up to death, and do not personally want to die before their time. On the other hand, many rabbinic passages deal with death in relation to God's judgment. Death brings a shift in the relationship between God and man, since death means

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[38] Englander, 51.

that a person can no longer perform the commandments, repent for their sins, or transgress against God.[39]

The Rebbe in 'The Tumblers' is caught between these two tensions. He is presented both as the leader of the Mahmirim, therefore dealing with their own fear as they approach the finality of death, but also as one of them, having to manage his own terror. As the authority figure for his people, the Rebbe is stuck between his own internal struggle and alleviating the communal pain of the Mahmirim to the best of his ability.

The Rebbe is considered to be the religious authority among his followers, but like many of the Rebbes in rabbinic literature, sometimes they do not have all the answers. He is frightened of their probable impending death, like the rest of them, and it is Mendel who provides momentary comfort for the community. Just as the shepherd boy in the Hasidic tale does what his Rebbe is unable to do by expressing his love of God in a different way, Mendel gives the people permission to convey love to each other. He does so with a kind word and a simple touch, even though his action goes against Jewish law, as men and women who are not married are not permitted to come into close

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[39] Schofer, Jonathan Wyn. *Confronting Vulnerability: The Body and the Divine in Rabbinic Ethics*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2010. 23.

contact with each other.[40] Again, Mendel's intentions outweigh the laxity in ritual observance, and the Mahmirim benefit.

The Rebbe's last actions in the story are as protective as possible. Instead of permitting his followers to collapse in terror and grief, he refuses to accept their sense of defeat. He encourages these people by using his authority, ordering them to keep practicing in an effort to take their minds off of what is sure to be their final performance. Englander ensures that the reader is aware of the love behind the Rebbe's deeds. The Rebbe fulfills his role as moral conductor for the Mahmirim, helping them meet their end with as much dignity as possible. As the guide for his people, both literally and figuratively, the Rebbe connects 'The Tumblers' to a chain of literary tradition. Rabbinic literature often combined elements of narrative and history, and Englander continues the convention with a very human portrayal of a religious leader in an impossible situation.

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[40] Rambam, Hilchos Issurei Biah 21:1 and Even HaEzer 20:1.

Conclusion

This analysis of "The Tumblers" in Nathan Englander's *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges* focused on the tense relationship between the outside world and the isolated Jewish community from Chelm when they come into contact with each other. Englander uses history and fantasy in a way that renders the characters both recognizable to us, as well as clearly fictional. They represent the blurred line between devoutness and absurdity, which parallels the description of the Nazis' actions throughout the story. "The Tumblers," revolves around the so-called 'magic' act of making people disappear. Nathan Englander's similarly enchanting achievement is making characters come alive through words on a page.

Englander composed "The Tumblers" in the style of a classic tragedy featuring Mendel as the story's protagonist. Mendel's journey of self-knowledge takes place despite incredible obstacles, although his development into a complex character does not save him from the inevitability of his death. He is murdered because of something far beyond his control—his Jewish identity, which proves to be his weakness as a tragic hero.

In the first chapter, I discuss "The Tumblers" through the lens of a Wise Men of Chelm narrative, as these stories typically involve this community of fools working through challenges of everyday life despite being bewildered by the outside world. By using these elements of traditional folklore and cultural repertoire, Englander builds a sense of nostalgia for his readers.

Next, an examination of gallows humor and Holocaust literature shows that Englander used fantastical circus imagery and black humor in order to highlight both the absurdity and the humanity present in a word overtaken by madness. The complete dehumanization of the Jews by the gentiles is highlighted by their cruel, mocking laughter, while the Mahmirim make laugh in order to retain some semblance of their humanity in spite of the Nazis' efforts. Englander's use of gallows humor allows the reader to unite with the characters in the story as emotional beings, connecting us to the crucial nature of the human spirit that can rise above horror and suffering.

In the final chapter, I discussed the Rebbe as a paradigm of rabbinic authority, beginning with an exploration of different forms of rabbinic literature as a way of establishing a basis of literary tradition. In "The Tumblers," the Rebbe serves as a guide for the Mahmirim as they are thrust into the secular world, earning his authority through his inherent goodness and morality. The Rebbe represents an old world vision of rabbinic leadership, also contributing to the reader's sense of nostalgia since rabbis serve such a different role in modern life.

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