Literary writing by its very nature is, for the most part, an individual sport. But what is so very interesting about the fictional characters of my Jewish literary heroes is that they exude both otherness and aloneness.

Nathan Zuckerman, one of the most misunderstood characters in all of American literature, is often assumed to be Roth's fictional alter ego (Zuckerman appears in nine of Roth's 27 novels). But I do not share that assumption; I believe Roth is infusing Zuckerman with his own otherness and aloneness. In my favorite of the Zuckerman novels, *The Counterlife*, the most moving moments are when Zuckerman is alone — especially when we are alone with him, deep inside his psyche, as he tries to come to terms with his otherness and his individualism. He is loyal to his fellow Jews and yet he must be even more loyal to his individualism. After reading Zuckerman declare, "I don't have to act like a Jew — I am one," I feel like cheering him on as he challenges the collective whole.

In Shwartz's masterpiece, the profound and haunting short story, "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities," the nameless narrator sits alone in a movie theater literally watching the long ago courtship of his own parents unfold on the screen before him. When the narrator shouts at the screen, "Don't do it. It's not too late to change your minds, both of you. Nothing good will come of it, only remorse, hatred, scandal, and two children whose characters are monstrous," there is, of course, no response; his celluloid parents do not hear him or his desperate warning. The first time I read this story, I had an almost physical reaction of personal identification; me, the lifelong movie junkie, seeing myself sitting in a movie theater, the place that has served as my personal synagogue of refuge, alone and confronted by the origin of my otherness. Our nameless hero is both like and not like his parents. He is the other of otherness, and he knows it. His individualism frightens him, but we know it will be embraced.

What these Jewish-American characters represent is what their literary Jewish-American authors deplore. Cute, adorable Jewish families might exist in Broadway musicals, but not in the world most of us live in. Though I may have wanted to adopt Joel Fleischman's humorously quirky Jewish parents in CBS-TV's "Northern Exposure," I certainly didn't get them. Neither did Pinsky, whose own mother didn't attend his or his brother's bar mitzvah. In "Growing Up Jewish," a video on bigthink.com, he reflects: "I didn't have a nice old Jewish mom and dad...like most people, they were weird."

All Jewish writers (myself included) share the burden of being unfortunate individualistic dreamers. We are born into a collective people and are both blessed and cursed with an inner otherness all our own. That is because we have artistic temperaments; we are freaks in disguise. And so my Jewish literary heroes are in the end not so different from the characters they create. In a religious and ethnic culture that often encourages the collective and the wished-for-life over reality, they challenge that collectiveness with not just their own fierce individualism but also the individualism of their characters. I want my Jewish literary heroes to be crafting characters that get under people's skin. If they fail to do that, they aren't really doing their job.

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Toward Intentional Spiritual Communities

SID SCHWARZ

America has become a society that breeds spiritual malaise. Among the chief causes of this malaise is the erosion of our country's civic fabric. One need only think back to the weeks following the 9/11 tragedy to recall the overwhelming sense of American common purpose: Residing in the heart of every American, that commonality made us feel as though we were part of a grand social venture that was unique and unparalleled in the history of the world.

But we also live in a moment when technological advances make the American predisposition to rugged individualism — noted in 1835 by Alexis de Toqueville — ever more consuming. I fear for this society whose predominant cultural message is: Get what you want, when you want it, no commitments, no obligations.

Given that the operative ethos of Jewish communities for centuries has been a belief in collective responsibility and mutual support, the Jewish community faces ever-greater challenges to counter an American cultural message that is moving in the exact opposite direction. One example of the Jewish community trying

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to adjust to a new cultural reality in America is the attempt to reimagine synagogues without dues structures. While I admire the willingness of synagogue leaders to take the risk of such experiments, the jury is out on whether this strategy will prove to be wise or folly. No less a risk is being taken by the Jewish program of the moment, Taglit-Birthright Israel. Is making the program free a brilliant strategy for attracting Jewish young adults or will it haunt us well into the future by conveying the message to Next Gen Jews that someone else will pick up the tab for their eureka experiences?

Now seems to be the time for Jewish leaders to be bold enough to declare Judaism radically countercultural. For more than 100 years, the prevailing ethos of American Jewish life was the claim that Judaism and Americanism were value-aligned. It was the natural case statement for a minority immigrant community desperate to "make it" in American society. But today, according to the 2013 Pew Forum U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, Jews are the wealthiest faith community in America. We are not exactly worried about "making it."

The question today is: Can Judaism be made relevant to Jews who have everything? The only way we can answer that question in the affirmative is to create communities that offer American Jews what America cannot give them.

Twenty-five years ago, I served as the founding rabbi of Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation in Bethesda, Md. We hoped to create something other than a limited liability suburban Jewish congregation. While the programs and services of suburban congregations met the needs of many American Jewish families (though that number is now dwindling dramatically), many congregants who were serious about their spiritual journeys did not find their needs met by synagogues. We wanted a community that would make demands on its members and, in turn, would aspire to engage the mind, touch the heart, and expand the spirit of all who came into our orbit. The language for what we sought to do was not part of the lexicon of the American Jewish community, but it needs to be. It is about creating "intentional spiritual communities."

Several principles guided our effort. The most important three continue to resonate in any conversation about building community:

Creating an organizational culture of participation and empowerment: We were very intentional about tapping the gifts of our members and then creating an environment in which people took leadership in every imaginable area of congregational life, from social action to leading services to teaching courses to overseeing lifecycle needs. As people heard about this culture of participation, more people of talent joined our community.

Mission, Mission, Mission: We spent a lot of time discussing and articulating why we existed. Few of our members ever thought they would join a synagogue. In our first few years, we developed a "Statement of Principles" that articulated guidelines about Shabbat, *tzedakah*, voluntarism, social justice, and much more. More than 80 percent of the community participated in the process of studying these issues and shaping the documents. Those documents, and what they represented, then became the magnet of what drew others to the community. If a family just wanted to pay dues and have a child become bar or bat mitzvah a few years down the road, then we were *not* the right synagogue for them, and we said so!

Serious Judaism: We were not going to offer "Jewish lite." We made demands on people's time and money. We offered a community of fellow travelers that came together on Shabbat and at other times for people who wanted to explore what it meant to create and belong to a true spiritual community; that was precious enough to attract a lot of people.

Synagogues will no longer have the exclusive franchise on meeting the spiritual needs of Jews. The growth of intentional communities built around themes — such as environmental stewardship, prayer and spirituality, food justice, social responsibility, and simple living, as well as a conference sponsored by Hazon (hazon.org) focusing on this burgeoning terrain — underscore that Jews are ready for a fuller engagement with Judaism and with community that is authentic and spiritually serious.

The existential question that drives American Jews today is not about social acceptance or material success. It is about whether they can find a sense of purpose in a society that has become so radically individualistic. At a time when old paradigm synagogues are shrinking and closing, it is time to create communities that help Jews become more socially conscious, more spiritually aware, and more fully human. When we do that, we will open the door to a Jewish renaissance in America.

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