

And Here We Are

Reassessing One's Jewishness in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Here I Am*

Mémoire réalisé par
Alicia Lambert

Promoteur(s)
Prof. Véronique Bragard

Année académique 2017-2018
**Master [120] en langues et lettres modernes, orientation germaniques, à finalité
spécialisée en langues des affaires**

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1. Introduction

In the aftermath of the Holocaust, many Jewish people cherished the hope that the establishment of the State of Israel would offer a place of safety for their community. After World War II, many of them fled away from anti-Semitic Europe to join Israel and they started to work on building a new home in the Middle East. In the following years, they rescued and welcomed Jewish people from all over the world with the aim to build a safe Jewish homeland. Furthermore, many Jewish people made Aliyah, which means that they left the Diaspora to immigrate to Israel. However, the dream to establish a safe community place is far from fulfilled as the country has been involved in perpetual conflicts since its creation. As I am writing this dissertation in May 2018, Israel is celebrating its seventy years of existence as well as its fourth victory in the Eurovision Song Contest. Whereas this should be a time of festivity, May 2018 marks one of the darkest moments in the country's history.

On 14 May 2018, while Israel was celebrating the opening of the U.S. embassy in Jerusalem, Palestinian protesters were killed by Israeli gunfire at the Israel-Gaza border. They came to demonstrate against the U.S. embassy's relocation from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and what they call "Nakba day" (the "Day of Catastrophe") which "commemorates the displacement of Palestinians when the Israeli state was founded" (Sommerlad 2018). Though they were unarmed civilians, they were shot by Israeli soldiers and, subsequently, 58 Palestinian protesters died and more than 2,000 of them were injured. Many newspaper articles describe this day as the Gaza "massacre" and emphasize how the event has been condemned by numerous countries, governments and American Jews.

Over the last few decades, concerns about what Jeffrey Goldberg called an "American Jewish-Israeli Jewish divorce" have grown considerably in the Jewish community (McCarthy 2018). The American and the Israeli Jewish communities have developed divergent values and, as a result, as stated in Maltz's article for *Haaretz* (2018), "[y]oung and liberal American Jews have been increasingly turning away from Israel". In the context of the recent events in Gaza, the Jewish community has been further divided. The Gaza massacre "has prompted a new round of protests by progressive Jewish-American groups who object to the relocation of the US embassy to Jerusalem – and who lump the Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu administrations together

as enemies of peace in the region” (McCarthy). Besides, American Jewish organizations like IfNotNow, Jewish Voice for Peace, J Street or Jews for Racial and Economic Justice have “begun to step up protest activity” (McCarthy). Ethan Miller, a spokesman for IfNotNow, and Rebecca Vilkomerson, the executive director of Jewish Voice for Peace, have denounced the fact that this violence was committed “in [their] name” (McCarthy), that is, in the name of Jewish people. This demonstrates the growing distance between Israel and a few liberal American Jews, who do not want to be associated with the violence that Israel perpetrates.

However, even if many young and liberal American Jews condemn Israel’s political actions, most of them still feel attached to the homeland it embodies and want it to continue to exist. The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 was perceived as more than essential after the atrocities of the Holocaust, and, since that moment, most American Jews have been supporting the Zionist cause. Besides, they share cultural and historical connections with Israeli Jews and many of them have relatives or friends living in Israel. Consequently, they are faced with a great dilemma: how can they express constructive criticism about Israel, without risking denying its legitimacy? Some Jewish people are afraid that criticizing Israel would threaten its existence. For American Jews, it is difficult to determine how they should support the State of Israel, especially because of the geographical distance that separates them.

Although many Jewish-American writers have discussed issues related to Jewishness in their novels, few have addressed this debate. However, an increasing interest in Israel can be observed in recent American Jewish literature. In *Here I Am* (2016), Jonathan Safran Foer explores some of the dilemmas faced by American Jews. Foer, an American Jewish writer often described as belonging to the so-called third-generation Holocaust authors, has shown much interest in Jewishness in his fiction. His first fictional novel, *Everything is Illuminated* (2002), deals with the intergenerational transmission of Holocaust trauma. The story is divided into two narratives, one of which tells the story of the protagonist’s family in Trachimbrod, a Jewish shtetl. The other narrative relates the story of his journey to Trachimbrod, which he undertakes with the hope of finding the woman who is supposed to have saved his grandfather during the war. Codde analyses the novel as an attempt to “access, recreate and artistically represent (or ‘re-present’) such a traumatic past that is by definition inaccessible” (62). In his second fiction, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) Foer discusses 9/11 but also many other forms of trauma and how

languages can express suffering and memory. His last work, *Here I Am*, is probably his most Jewish novel. In addition to demonstrating that the Jewish characters are still influenced by the Holocaust trauma, he examines many other issues related to the Jewish identity. The novel demonstrates that younger American Jews struggle to define their Jewishness because the older generations of their family and the Israeli Jewish community have a different understanding of what being Jewish means.

Foer started to write *Here I Am* more than ten years ago and published it in 2016, prior to the events explained above and Trump's election. Nevertheless, Foer already explores the growing anxieties about Jewishness and Israel among American Jews. *Here I Am* can also be described as a domestic novel, since it deals with the possible divorce between the protagonist Jacob and his wife Julia. This domestic story is interrupted by a dystopian plot when Israel is faced with a geographical and political crisis. Foer creates metaphors to link those two different plots, which brings attention to the fact that the situation in Israel can be compared to the divorce, since the distance growing between Julia and Jacob is comparable to the one growing between the State and American Jews. In *Here I Am*, as the result of Israel's political actions, American Jewish characters are faced with doubts and gradually feel less attached to the State.

This dissertation aims to examine how Foer represents the relationship between American Jews and Israel in *Here I Am*. The first chapter presents a theoretical framework that introduces the history of Israel and the Jewish Diaspora, as well as their relationship. This chapter first considers the emergence of the Jewish Diaspora and the roots of the notions of Chosen People and Promised Land. It traces the evolution of Zionist movements and the impact of the Holocaust on the establishment of Israel, which led to a new division within the Jewish community: Diasporic Jews versus Israeli Jews. The second part of this chapter examines Jewish identities and the fact that they are particularly split, since the various Jewish communities have different definitions of Jewishness. Particular emphasis is put on the differences between American and Israeli Jews and the question of who is living an authentic Jewish life. Finally, the United States-Israeli relations and the attitude of American Jews towards Israel's political actions are discussed. The last section also briefly introduces Jonathan Safran Foer's opinion on those matters.

The second chapter of this dissertation analyses the way the Promised Land has been depicted in American Jewish literature since the establishment of Israel in 1948. First, attention is

given to the fact that American Jewish authors from the second half of the twentieth century rarely mention Israel, while a few contemporary authors now demonstrate a sudden interest in this topic. The work of Philip Roth is discussed in depth because he is one of the only Jewish authors of his generation who have engaged with issues related to the Israeli State. Moreover, in their reviews of *Here I Am*, several critics have compared Foer and Roth because they both create some debate about Israel in their novels. Finally, the last section discusses how American Jewish characters define their Jewish identity by comparing themselves to Israeli Jews. To describe the portrayal of Israel in American Jewish literature aims to determine whether Foer's novel follows or breaks with this literary tradition.

Finally, a detailed analysis of Foer's *Here I Am* examines the different strategies that Foer developed to introduce Israel in the story, while the action is always set in America. The second section of this final chapter is devoted to the way the characters' identities are depicted in the novel. Foer presents several forms of Jewishness and split identities. His novel emphasizes the differences between American and Israeli Jews, whose Jewish heritage appears to have evolved in different directions. Through his protagonist Jacob, Foer seems to attempt to reassemble the different values and Jewish elements that he considers as important. After focusing on how Jacob's Jewish identity is represented in the novel, the way Foer portrays Israel is discussed. Building on the forms of home represented in the novel and the biblical meaning of "Here I Am", the third section concentrates on the characters' conceptions of home and homeland, and the way they perceive their allegiance to Israel. *Here I Am* rejects the idea that Israel is the ultimate Jewish homeland, since the characters demonstrate that Jewish people can find a home in different countries. The last section of this chapter analyzes how the dystopian aspect of the novel is foregrounded, thereby highlighting the different warnings Foer seems to give, namely about the influence of the media, the possibility that Israel could be destroyed, and, more importantly, the fact that the relationship between American Jews and Israel could further deteriorate if Israel acts inhumanely.

In recent interviews, Foer has been quite critical towards Netanyahu's government. By examining the way Israel is depicted in *Here I Am*, the present dissertation aims to demonstrate that Foer, without questioning the legitimacy of the State of Israel, attempts to express criticism of its recent development. He reasserts the values that are important to him as an American Jew and highlights how they contrast with Israel's behavior. He argues that, though American Jews still feel

particularly attached to Israel, the emotional distance between them and the State is increasing. His novel's conclusion is not optimistic about the future of the Jewish community, since he depicts the Israeli State as continuing to perform inhumane actions in the near-future. As a result, at the end of *Here I Am*, the relationship between American Jews and Israel has further deteriorated and the Jewish community has become even more divided.

2. Israel and the Diaspora

Today, Jewish homes can be found in every part of the globe, since the Jewish population is dispersed in North America, South America, Europe, Australia, Asia and Africa. According to a Pew Research Center survey conducted in 2012, there are about fourteen million Jews around the world, more than four-fifths of whom live in Israel and the United States. Israel is the only country where a majority of citizens are Jewish, but America's Jewish population is the same size as in Israel. Israel and America's Jewish populations each represent around 41 percent of the global Jewish community and consequently, they are the two largest Jewish populations in the world. Those two groups share a similar size, and both consider themselves as Jewish, but differences can be noticed in the way they describe their Jewishness and their attitude towards Israel.

This chapter provides a theoretical framework that briefly introduces the history of the Jewish Diaspora and the State of Israel in order to understand how the Jewish community became dispersed all over the world. The first section examines the different elements and events that led to the establishment of the State of Israel. Then, the fact that the American and Israeli Jewish communities have divergent definitions of Jewishness is discussed. Finally, the last section analyzes the relationship between the American and the Israeli government, as well as between American Jews and Israel.

2.1. Towards the Establishment of Israel

For many years, Jewish people were spread all over the world with no land. In his book *Israel in Exile: The History and Literature of the Sixth Century B.C.E. Society of Biblical Literature*, Albertz explains that, already in 732 and 722 B.C.E., some Israelites were forced to leave their homes as the result of the Assyrian conquest of the northern Kingdom of Israel (2). Those northern tribes “have left almost no trace in subsequent tradition; plainly they were largely assimilated or else linked up with the Judean exiles” (Albertz 2). Therefore, the appearance of a Jewish diaspora, defined as “the dispersion of the Jews beyond Israel” by the Oxford Dictionaries, started only later. The exile of Judah to Babylonia in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E. (Porten 608) marks the beginning of the diaspora that still exists today. Other episodes of persecution forced Jewish groups

to leave their lands and find another home again and, consequently, Jewish people became dispersed all over the world.

The famous myth of the Wandering Jew has reinforced the view that Jews are people in exile. A passage in the Bible relates the story of a Jewish shoemaker who was cursed by God to wander the earth for eternity because he insulted Jesus on the way to Crucifixion: “You will be a restless wanderer on the earth” (*New International Version*). The myth, that first appeared in early modern Europe in the thirteenth century, became largely widespread and popular in the seventeenth century (Woolf 22). It soon became more than a biblical source and was frequently used as an artistic motif in literature, theatre, painting, in addition to becoming a popular metaphor. According to Woolf, the Wandering Jew is “both a figure of Christian myth and a reasonable metaphor for the historical experience of the Jews in the Diaspora” (27). By condemning him to eternal exile, God banned the Jewish shoemaker from his home. The history of the Jewish Diaspora also involves the idea of “forced dispersals from homelands” and “a desire to return to some constructed notion of home both on earth and in heaven: a landscape of perfection to which return is a spiritual as much as geographic reality” (Woolf 26).

Central to the Jewish belief is the return to the Promised Land, which God promised to Abraham and his descendants. The Messianic concept implies that at his arrival, the Messiah will bring the Chosen People back to the Jewish homeland and will restore Jerusalem. This idea of a Chosen People is a biblical concept based on Exodus 19:5, in which God selects the children of Israel as his people: “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be **my treasured possession** (my emphasis)” (*New International Version*). For many years, the Jewish community kept faith in the belief that God would ultimately end their exile and give them back the Jewish homeland.

As explained in Vernoff’s essay entitled “Hope”, Judaism implies a reciprocal relationship: the Jews chose God and God chose the Jews. This is also a relationship of mutual faithfulness, as God will faithfully lead Abraham, and Abraham will faithfully follow Him (Vernoff 417). Vernoff explains that, therefore, their relationship does not involve only faith, but also hope, that arises from people’s active actions. Both faith and trust are needed to “redeem the world”. According to Vernoff, if a good balance between those two elements is ensured, there is trust, but if not, trust can be threatened. If faith and hope lose their “reciprocal equilibrium” it can create problematic

situations, since an excess of faith may lead to a “passive waiting for the divine initiative” and an excess of hope may lead to “impetuous and ill-advised action” (Vernoff 419). Over the course of history, the Jewish community has experienced numerous moments of great suffering. The fact that God was not able to intervene and save them even during their darkest periods has greatly challenged their faith in His actions.

In the twentieth century, the Jewish people faced what was probably the most difficult obstacle to their faith: the Holocaust. Subsequently, some of them started to question God’s power and existence, and this period was sometimes described as a gap period during which God simply did not exist. More importantly, the Messianic concept became much disputed. After one of the most horrific genocides humankind had ever known, many Jews felt the urge to build the Promised Land by themselves. For many years, they had accepted the fact that they had to suffer before being finally redeemed, but for many of them, the Holocaust could not be merely another test from God. They lost faith in the arrival of the Messiah but kept hope in creating a Jewish homeland where no anti-Semitism could follow them. As a result, Zionist movements grew rapidly, and combined with Europe’s guilt, this accelerated progress towards the establishment of Israel in 1948.

In his essay “The Wandering Jew” (2018), Michael Woolf discusses the relationship between anti-Semitism and longing for the homeland. He argues that the myth of the Wandering Jew influenced the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe because Jews “were seen as residing in the major European cities without belonging to specific nations” (21). Consequently, “[e]lements of this identity resonate with a form of parodied cosmopolitanism (even an extreme version of the ‘flâneur’) that became connected with the Jews, particularly in the twentieth Century, by those who distrusted and hated them” (21). As a result, Jewish history has been marked by anti-Semitism and numerous episodes of persecution that forced them to flee away from home. This created “the cycle of expulsion and temporary integration that characterized Jewish historical experience” (Woolf 24). According to Woolf, Jewish history demonstrates that “for the Jews, home is not a permanent place or a haven of security” since in many places, “it offered only temporary rest” (26). He believes that, “[i]n these circumstances, the yearning for home, call it Jerusalem, Zion, Israel or wherever, becomes a defining characteristic of a people for whom mobility was a necessity for survival, less a going towards than an escape from”.

Already before the Holocaust, many Jewish voices expressed a longing for the Jewish ancestral homeland. Among them is of course Theodor Herzl (1860-1904), who is considered as the founder of Zionism, the movement that aims to re-establish a Jewish homeland. It is true that the history of this political movement started with the publication of Herzl's pamphlet *Der Judenstaat* in 1896, followed by the first Zionist congress in 1897 (Laqueur XXV). However, Zionist ideas had already emerged in the 1880s and 1890s, as a result of "the spread of modern antisemitism" and the French Revolution that marked the beginning of Jewish emancipation in Europe (Ibid).

There existed a pre-Zionist movement called "Hibbat Zion", "the ideology and movement whose aim was the national renaissance of the Jews and their return to Erez Israel" (Cohen 542). The term "Zionism" was then used publicly for the first time in 1892 by Nathan Birnbaum (Laqueur XXV). This term was created from the word "Zion", which was often used as a synonym for Jerusalem in Jewish history and was "intended to express a political orientation toward Erez in place of the prevailing philanthropic approach" (Cohen 539). At first, Herzl "used it to denote philanthropic-supported small-scale settlement" but then, he made his political orientation more explicit and "began to stress the importance of the 'Zionist' Congress to be distinguished from the Hibbat Zion movement" (Cohen 540). Herzl's Zionist movement was more political than the Hibbat Zion, since he was looking to establish a Jewish national state rather than helping to develop the country through Jewish settlements. After Herzl's establishment of Zionism, "[t]he Hibbat Zion societies merged with the Zionist Organization [...] although some of them continued their formal existence until World War I" (Cohen 542). Zionism grew and became a worldwide movement that led to the publication of numerous works discussing this topic and the creation of "dozens of federations and political parties" (Laqueur XXVI).

Zionism became an important aspect of traditional Judaism and it was considerably discussed in America as well. Along a minority of Zionist writers, some American Jews strongly opposed Herzl's Zionism in its beginning, such as early Jewish settlers. In his article "Promised Land(s): Zion, America, and American Jewish Writers", Rosenfeld explains that many of them were "German Jews who had become successful prominent citizens and were in the vanguard of the anti-Zionist opposition" (115). In 1897, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations even claimed in a statement: "We are unalterably opposed to political Zionism. The Jews are not a nation, but a

religious community. Zion was a precious possession of the past ..., but it is not our hope of the future” (Rosenfeld 115). Their statement emphasizes that “[t]he mission of Judaism is spiritual, not political. Its aim is not to establish a state, but to spread the truths of religion and humanity throughout the world”. They also add that America, which they called “the home of religious liberty”, is the place where they “have aided in founding this new Zion” (Ibid). According to Rosenfeld, this message is typical of its time in “its denunciation of Herzlian Zionism and its affirmation of America as the true promised land” (116). This view started to change in the 1930s, and after the Holocaust, most American Jews showed sympathy for the Zionist cause, even if some opposition could still be found. Rosenfeld argues that even if attitudes towards the establishment of the State of Israel changed, the idea that “America is our Zion and Washington our Jerusalem” (115) has persisted among American Jews.

2.2. Jewish Identities

Jewish identities are particularly fragmented, since there are historical and modern divisions within Judaism. Jewish settlements in Europe led to the formation of two distinct groups: the Ashkenazi and the Sephardic Jews. Today, the term Ashkenazi is “identified with, and denotes in its narrower sense, Germany, German Jewry, and German Jews (‘Ashkenazim’), as well as their descendants in other countries”, as explained in *Encyclopedia Judaica*. Sephardic Jews, by contrast, are identified with “descendants of Jews who lived in Spain or Portugal before the expulsion of 1492” (Campeas et al. 292). Woolf underlines that there are different distinctions between those two Jewish groups and that “broadly, the first distinction is geographic and historical, factors that led to differences in custom and worship” (23). Despite its dispersion, the Jewish community has stayed connected thanks to “a written tradition, a land myth, and a shared sense of history” (Woolf 23) but the different groups have developed their own characteristics. The members of the diaspora have lived in various countries throughout the world and the events and culture they have been surrounded with have unavoidably influenced them. This is the case of the American Jewish community, whose history can be traced back as far as 1654, when “twenty-three Jewish women and men landed in New Amsterdam” (Diner VIII). More than three hundred years of common history with America and the assimilation process they have gone through have shaped their community identity. After seventy years of independence, Israeli Jews have also developed their own characteristics and do not always share the same beliefs as American Jews.

2.2.1. Two Divergent Jewish Communities

In 2013, the Pew Research Center carried out a major survey among American Jews to determine their attitudes, beliefs, and practices. In its report, Pew emphasizes the difficulty in answering the question “Who is a Jew?”, since being Jewish is a matter of religion as well as ancestry, ethnicity, and cultural background and “Jews (and non-Jews) may disagree on where to draw the line”. Within America alone, there are different Jewish movements, such as Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Jews, in addition to secular Jews. The results of the Pew survey highlight that depending on their age or the movement they belong to, American Jews may have a different definition of Jewishness. For example, Orthodox Jews tend to give more importance to religious aspects, and for Jews by religion, caring about Israel is more important than for secular Jews.

The Pew Research Center conducted a similar survey in 2016 that focused on Israelis. The results reveal that Israel is a religiously divided society because of major differences between Israeli Jews and Arabs and, perhaps more surprisingly, among Jewish people as well. Besides, the survey highlights a few significant differences between Israeli and American Jews. The American respondents surveyed in 2013 and the Israelis ones surveyed in 2016 received similar questions, which allows an easy comparison between their answers. The first chapter of the 2016 Pew report, “Comparisons between Jews in Israel and the U.S.”, discusses the differences that could be highlighted. Though showing some close connections, the two groups disagree on topics such as political ideologies and religious identities.

With regards to political ideologies, the comparison of the surveys leads to the conclusion that American Jews are more liberal, while Israeli Jews are more likely to describe their ideology as in the center or on the right. Among American Jewish participants, 49 percent claim to be liberal and 29 percent moderate, while only 19 percent of them describe themselves as politically conservative. Israeli Jews, by contrast, are less likely to situate themselves on the left of their country’s political spectrum. A majority claim to be in the center or on the right, and only 8 percent of them situate themselves on the left. As highlighted in the Pew essay, “[t]hese two political spectrums (liberal/moderate/conservative in the U.S. and left/center/right in Israel) represent different constellations of views on political, economic and social issues in each country” (46).

Additionally, the Pew surveys highlight that American Jews generally appear to be more open to non-Jewish people. Inter-marriage is more frequent in the United States than in Israel and they are also more likely to develop a friendship with people of other faiths. This can be explained by the fact that Jewish people represent only a small minority of the adult population in America and therefore come more easily in contact with non-Jewish people. Israeli Jews, by contrast, represent four fifths of the national population and are more likely to have a circle of friends composed of only Jewish people. Pew Research Center explains that “it may also speak to the integration of Jews into the proverbial melting pot of American society”. Compared to other American religious minorities, such as American Mormons and Muslims, for example, Jewish Americans appear to have more friends who belong to other religious centers.

In addition to different political ideologies, American and Israeli Jews have divergent religious identities. In general, American Jews tend to be more secular. In recent years, a large number of them engaged in religious switching, which means that they stopped identifying with the religious movement in which they were raised. The 2013 Pew survey reveals that “one-in-five Jews (22%) now describe themselves as having no religion”. This means that “[t]he percentage of U.S. adults who say they are Jewish when asked about their religion has declined by about half since the late 1950s”. Even among religious Jews, “most of the switching is in the direction of less-traditional Judaism”, e.g. from Conservative Judaism to Reform Judaism. Pew also highlights that becoming atheist or agnostic is a general tendency in America. The decrease in religious faith among American Jews can be compared to Americans as a whole, since one in five belong to the religious “nones” in the general public and “religious disaffiliation is as common among all U.S. adults ages 18-29 as among Jewish Millennials”. In Israel, by contrast, religious switching is quite rare, and Israelis are more likely to identify Judaism as their religion, even secular Jews.

As opposed to Israeli Jews who give preference to more traditional kinds of Judaism, American Jews embrace more liberal versions. The 2013 survey shows that the Reform movement, a less traditional form of Judaism, is still the largest Jewish movement in America. As explained by Pew in their report, Israeli Jews can be divided into four categories that differ from the more formal institutionalized movements known as “Conservative”, “Reform”, or “Orthodox”: Haredi, which corresponds to “ultra-Orthodox”, Dati (“religious”), Masorti (“traditional”) and Hiloni (“secular”).

Most Israeli Jews identify with either ultra-Orthodox, religious, or traditional denominational movements.

Besides, the surveys demonstrate that Jewish people tend to be more religiously observant in Israel. This involves eating kosher food products, believing in God, attending synagogue, going to religious services and observing Jewish rituals. They are more likely to light Shabbat candles, attend a Passover Seder, or fast on Yom Kippur, for example. In both countries, Orthodox Jews are unsurprisingly more religiously observant than secular Jews, but a particularly interesting result is that even the latter generally show more religious involvement in Israel than in America. This is however not the case with regards to two aspects: not more than two percent of Israeli secular Jews consider religion as very important in their lives and many of them never go to synagogue. Apart from these exceptions, Israeli Jews, including secular ones, are more religiously observant than American Jews.

According to the Pew report, this can be explained by the fact that “Jewish observance is more ingrained in daily life in Israel than it is in the U.S.”. As a result, it is easier to respect Jewish rules in Israel than in America. For instance, American Jews meet difficulties in observing Sabbath and Jewish holidays because they have to go to work or school, while many Israeli businesses and services close during these events. Another example involves the fact that it is easier to purchase kosher food in Israel. Carol Kuruvilla, who discussed the Pew results in her article “American And Israeli Jews Are Strongly Connected But Sharply Divided” in *Huffington Post*, agrees with this explanation. In her words, “[s]ome of these differences in observance could be due to the fact that Judaism is an integral part of Israeli society and politics — while in America, Judaism is a minority religion”.

The Pew reports also studied the way the participants define their Jewishness. They reveal that the “number of Americans with direct Jewish ancestry or upbringing who consider themselves Jewish, yet describe themselves as atheist, agnostic or having no particular religion, appears to be rising”. Even non-believing Jews say that they are proud to be Jewish and have a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people. Moreover, almost half of them stress that being Jewish is very important to them. Therefore, even among non-religious Jews, Jewishness is perceived as an important part of their identity. This demonstrates that the conception of Jewish identity is changing in America. According to Pew, nowadays, “U.S. Jews see being Jewish as more a matter of

ancestry, culture and values than of religious observance”. Even among religious Jews, more than half of them agree with this view.

Overall, to believe in God is not perceived as being necessary to be Jewish anymore. American Jews describe the following elements as the most essential ones to what being Jewish means to them: “remembering the Holocaust”, “leading an ethical life”, “working for justice and equality”, “caring about Israel”, and “having a good sense of humor”. Elements like “observing Jewish law” or “eating traditional Jewish foods” appear to be less important. Moreover, most of them agree that believing in God is not essential to being Jewish, even some Jews by religion. This change in the way they describe Jewishness is particularly noticeable when the different generations are compared, since a lower number of members of the younger generations identify as Jewish on the basis of religion.

Israelis show similarities and differences with American Jews in their conception of Jewish identity. More than half of them agree with the fact that Jewishness is mainly a matter of culture and ancestry. Moreover, in both countries, the majority believe that a person can be Jewish even if they work on Shabbat or do not believe in God. However, Israelis seem to give more importance to religious aspects. While only 15 percent of American Jews believe being Jewish is mainly a matter of religion, 22 percent of Israelis still think this is the case. Israeli Jews also describe observing Jewish law as more essential to the Jewish identity. As for American Jews, they are more likely to consider personal and social responsibility as essential to what being Jewish means to them. For example, they emphasize intellectual curiosity, good sense of humor, the importance of working for justice and equality and leading an ethical and moral life.

1.2.2. The Question of Authenticity

The fact that both groups have developed different definitions of Jewishness led to the question of authenticity. As explained above, Israeli Jews mostly embrace traditional forms of Judaism, while American Jewry has seen an increasing religious shift towards more liberal forms. When asked to choose which international stream of Judaism they identify with, roughly half of the Israeli participants opted for the Orthodox one. The 2016 Pew report explains that, rather than demonstrating their personal religious beliefs or practices, their identification with this movement has “more to do with a recognition of Orthodoxy as the oldest and most traditional kind of Judaism,

or perhaps with Orthodox rabbis' key role in Israeli public life" (49). This demonstrates again that Israeli Jews give preference to more traditional kinds of Judaism. Moreover, as already stated, they give more importance to observing the Jewish law and have more possibilities to express it. Faced with those differences, American and Israeli Jews started to question who is living the right and authentic Jewish life.

In America, traditional Orthodox Judaism has significantly been replaced by Reform Judaism. The latter implies a more liberal form of Judaism that better meets the demands of contemporary life. Although it was born in Germany, it is in America that this "first modernist movement in Jewish life" grew and became particularly significant (Freehof 62). The movement involved adjusting to the "cultural, political and social conditions of the new age" (Ibid). For a Reform Jew, ethical and moral aspects of Judaism are more important than elements related to ceremonies, rituals, clothing, and so on. This corresponds to the general view among American Jews today, as highlighted by Pew.

In the beginning, in Europe, the Reform movement was quite controversial and was not directly accepted, because it went against what Orthodox Jews believed to be laws determined by divine authority. Reform Judaism led to modifications and innovations, and "some of the changes made Jewish life look more Christian, the organ music, the new synagogue architecture, the regular sermon, the eating in the same restaurants with non-Jews" (Freehof 65). This also involved, among other things, giving up the Jewish traditional way of clothing or working on Shabbat like other members of the society. Many of them tried to avoid being physically distinguished as Jews and did not want to maintain a lifestyle that was not compatible with America society. The common criticism against Reform Judaism was the fact that it denied God's command, that is "the biblical prohibition to imitate the Gentile world" (Ibid). Today, the Reform movement has grown and does not generate much controversy anymore. Even if it may still go against ideas of traditional Orthodox Jews, Reform Jews are generally accepted.

As underlined by Rubin-Dorsky in his article "Philip Roth and American Jewish Identity: The Question of Authenticity", Amos Elon explained that the early Zionists rebelled against the "medieval exclusiveness of Jewish life" and they wanted the Jewish people to become "a more 'normal' people, a 'people like all other peoples'" (qtd. in Rubin-Dorsky 82). This would allow them to "enjoy the benefits of a national identity without the disruption, harassment, and

persecution that had marked their lives in exile” but still “they would know and appreciate themselves as Jews” (Rubin-Dorsky 82). Amos Elon emphasizes that with normalcy, Zionists meant “assimilation on a collective basis” as opposed to “[cease] to be oneself” (Ibid). Even when going through “acculturation” the Jews should remain “authentic” (Ibid). In America, the strong assimilation that took place in the hope of avoiding anti-Semitism and being part of the community can lead one to wonder if they managed to keep their Jewishness in their quest for normalcy, or if they ceased to be themselves. The strong assimilation that occurred among American Jews led to some criticism accusing them of adapting themselves to the gentile world at the expense of their Jewish identity. For example, in his book *The Vanishing American Jew: In Search of Jewish identity for the next century* (1998), Dershowitz argues that “American Jewish life is in danger of disappearing” (1) because of assimilation, intermarriage, and low birth rates.

As a response to those accusations, some American Jews have emphasized that, despite adapting to the American lifestyle, they have kept Jewishness as an essential part of their identity. As explained by Diner in her book *A New Promised Land: A History of Jews in America* (2003), because Jewish people “came in constant waves of immigration over more than three centuries” in America, “they constantly learned and taught each other how to adapt to the new environment” (viii). There, “[t]hey had to adjust some of the demands of Judaism, an ancient tradition, to American values” (Diner viii). Diner underlines that “Jews, as new American, had to constantly think about how to be Jewish and American at the same time” (ix). Therefore, in her view, becoming American does not mean to stop being Jewish. In his article “Acts of Assimilation: The Invention of Jewish American Literary History”, Kramer agrees with this statement. He explains that Jewish American history “was by and large a narrative of successful acculturation, [...] a narrative of cultural or behavioral assimilation that nevertheless strategically stopped short of structural or complete assimilation” (561). According to him, American Jews became “comfortable in both roles”, becoming “*like* other Americans but they did not cease being Jews who associated socially with other Jews, who contributed to American institutions but also set up their own” (561-652).

As stated above, Rosenfeld argues that many American Jews believe to have found their Zion in America. After the Great Depression, America was a place where financial success could be achieved. The country offered economic opportunity that “had no match in any of the other places

they had lived or to which they immigrated” (Diner xi). Many Jewish people were attracted to America because “they learned of it as place where people with few resources could, with hard work, make a good living” (Diner xi). When they immigrated, those Jewish families “had been poor in Europe and they came to America to find for themselves and their children a better future” (Diner ix). There, they first worked as peddlers or in the garment industry but later, they started to own stores or have prestigious professions, including teachers, doctors, lawyers or accountants (Diner ix). They seized the American dream, escaped poverty, achieved financial success and built a new life in a place that they started to consider as home and offered them the possibility “to fulfill their dreams of living better than they had in their old homes” (Diner ix).

Moreover, most immigrants had been faced with anti-Semitism in Europe and found comfort and relief in America. Today, it is true that American Jews generally think that several other minority groups, such as gays and lesbians, Muslims, or African-Americans, face more discrimination than they do, as highlighted by the Pew survey. However, anti-Semitism is still a reality in America, since 43 percent of them think they face a lot of discrimination, and 15% say that they have “been called offensive names or snubbed in a social setting because they are Jewish” (Pew). Nevertheless, when Jewish immigrants arrived in America, discrimination against Jews was far less common than in their former homes since the country had not known the long history of anti-Semitism that took place in Europe. There, “the government, except in the very earliest years of the colonial era, presented no obstacles to their practice of Judaism” (Diner ix). Apart from some exceptions, the American population did not show any hatred against Jews and Judaism either (Diner ix-x). Furthermore, America was a place of “personal discovery and unimaginable adventure” (Rosenfeld 114). In their new land, they could enjoy freedom, which had always been a cherished value in Jewish life (Borowitz).

It could also be argued that assimilating to a liberal democratic lifestyle has influenced American Jews’ perspective on Israel. To consider equality as one of the fundamental values of democracy challenges the notion of the Chosen People. As stated by Morris Raphael Cohen in his attack on Zionism, “[a] national Jewish Palestine must necessarily mean a state founded on a peculiar race, a tribal religion and a mystic belief in a peculiar soil”, which stands in sharp contradiction to America that “stands for separation of church and state” and “the free mixing of races” (qtd. in Rosenfeld 123). In the 1960s, many Jewish people joined the Civil Right Movement

and fought against racism. In *The Counterlife* (1986), written by the American Jewish author Philip Roth, Nathan Zuckerman actually praises “America’s pluralism and tolerance” (Furman 639) and in Roth’s *Operation Shylock* (1993), the protagonist explains that Israel’s Jewish exclusiveness “was one of the reasons he didn’t want to live there” (Rosenfeld 125).

Today, despite the establishment of Israel, many American Jews made the decision to remain in the Diaspora. Taking into consideration the many opportunities America offered to Jewish people after the war, the assimilation process, and the liberal and democratic values they have grown up with, one can easily understand why many of them do not consider Israel as the only Jewish homeland. It could even be argued that, for the reasons just mentioned, America was sometimes idealized as the new Promised Land among American Jews. Moreover, the Holocaust led them to appreciate even more the liberties and quality of life that they enjoy in America. As explained by Kramer, “[w]ith the destruction of European Jewry and with the State of Israeli still in swaddling clothes, a budding appreciation of, and confidence in, their privileged place in democratic America emerged among American Jews” (560).

Among Israeli Jews, some struggle to understand why a Jewish person would prefer to stay in America rather than joining them in the Promised Land, which they consider as the only real Jewish homeland. The Pew Research Center also demonstrates that Israelis are more likely to believe with certainty that God gave Israel to the Jewish people. Moreover, there is considerable support for immigration and almost all the Israeli participants in the survey believe that Jews around the world should have the right to make Aliyah. This can be explained by their fear of anti-Semitism, as almost three quarters of them believe that it is increasing around the world. To quote an example, Golda Meir even declared:

I have always believed that Zionism means Jewish emancipation in every sense, including the spiritual and cultural, so that a Jew who creates cultural values may do so as a free man. It may be assuming on my part, but I believe that there is no Jew in the galut creating as a free man and as a free Jew. Only a Jew in Israel can do so. (Rubin-Dorsky 79)

In the eyes of some Israeli Jews, Israel is the only place in which a Jew can live an authentic Jewish life, and a Jew who decides to stay in the Diaspora is not a good Jew.

Herzl's Zionism, however, did not involve a purely Jewish state but a state that respects three imperatives: firstly, "full participation in the civic and political life of the nation without a corresponding absorption into its cultural life", secondly, "freedom from antisemitism", and finally, "a transformation of the Jewish soul, a renaissance and regeneration, so to speak, of the Jewish creative spirit" (Rubin-Dorsky 83). Rubin-Dorsky argues that American Jewish life meets the first two criteria as well as the last one, because a reconstruction of the Jewish identity is now taking place within the American Jewish community. This reconstruction consists of "an exploration of origins, an engagement with the present, and a willingness to ask difficult questions about our professions and purposes for the future" (Rubin-Dorsky 86). Rubin-Dorsky believes that this can be observed in American Jewish literature, namely in Roth's fiction about Israel, which will be discussed in further detail in the second chapter of this dissertation.

In 1946, Sartre defined authenticity as "having a true and lucid consciousness of the situation in which one lives, in as assuming the responsibilities and risks that it involves, in accepting it in pride or humiliation" (qtd. in Rubin-Dorsky 90). At the time when Sartre wrote this definition, that meant to define themselves as a Jew even when being denigrated and discriminated. According to Rubin-Dorsky, in the contemporary American context, the authentic Jew is the one who chooses to "declare and define himself or herself as a Jew [...] within the limitless possibilities offered by a noncoercive, nonrepressive society" (91). Therefore, "[t]he choice of authenticity, in America, is always a moral decision, precisely because the social and political realms do not provide Jews with intractable problems to be solved" (Ibid).

Those different arguments illustrate the emergence of a need to reaffirm the authenticity of Diasporic Jews and their lifestyle. After more than three hundred years of history, the American Jewish community has undergone significant changes as the result of assimilation. Today, most of them give less importance to observing religious law and have become more secular or liberal. This led to some criticism from Israeli Jews who still favor traditional forms of Judaism. Such criticism has been increased by the fact that many American Jews decided to remain living in the Diaspora rather than joining Israel, that some Israeli Jews believe to be the only authentic Jewish homeland. As a result, American Jews felt the need to reaffirm that their Jewish identity, though being considerably different from the Israeli Jewish identity, is still authentic

2.3. United States-Israeli Relations

Since its creation, Israel has maintained a close relationship with America. Already in 1948, the United States demonstrated much support for the establishment of the State of Israel (Sharp 2010 1). Michael Oren explained that there is a continuity in “U.S.’s historic commitment to Israel’s security” (61). According to him, over the years, this relationship “has been maintained and enforced” (Ibid). This commitment is displayed at many levels, from military to political support. America has also provided Israel with economic assistance on several occasions, but they mostly give them military assistance. In his report *U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel* published in 2018 by Congressional Research Service, Sharp explains that “Israel is the largest cumulative recipient of U.S. foreign assistance since World War II” and they have been provided with \$134.7 billion in “bilateral assistance and missile defense funding”. As a result, “U.S. military aid has helped transform Israel’s armed forces into one of the most technological sophisticated militaries in the world” (Sharp 2010 1).

The American-Israeli alliance also involves some political support. For example, the United States has used its veto several times to defend Israel’s interests. Moreover, they play an important role in establishing peace in the State of Israel. The US government attempts to organize peace negotiations between Israel and the countries it comes in conflict with. However, Sharp underlines that “[t]he use of foreign aid to help accelerate the Middle East peace process has had mixed results” (Sharp 2010 1). According to most analysts, foreign aid is “tangential to solving complex territorial issues and overcoming deeply rooted mistrust sown over decades” (Sharp 2010 1). Today, America’s greatest challenge is Israeli-Palestinian peace and their involvement in the conflict has not always had a positive impact. Some Arabs have been critical of U.S. assistance because they emphasize that supporting Israeli arms purchases “indirectly causes suffering to Palestinians” (Sharp 2010 1).

Despite the significant support America has demonstrated towards Israel, the 2016 Pew survey highlights that many Israelis believe this is not enough. It is interesting to note that this is also one of the topics on which Israeli and American Jews tend to disagree. In America, most Jewish people “see the level of U.S. support for Israel as about right”. In Israel, by contrast, about half the Jewish population believe that the American government is not supportive enough. It is important to

remember that American support has been mostly provided with regards to security issues rather than economic problems. When asked about the biggest problems Israel is facing today, American and Israeli Jews agree on the fact that security is one of them. However, Israeli Jews give equal importance to economic problems, while only one percent of the American participants mention it. According to Pew, this indicates “that Israeli Jews and U.S. Jews have different perspectives on life in Israel”.

Though the United States generally considers Israel as a reliable partner, “there have been occasional differences over Israel's settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip” (Sharp 2010 1). Sharp explains that even though the United States has never “acted unilaterally to cut Israel’s military or economic grant aid”, they have “reduced loan guarantees to Israel in opposition to continued settlement building” (1). In the last decades, the American government has repeatedly encouraged Israel to stop those settlements because, in their view, they provoke indignation among Palestinians and consequently hinder peace negotiations.

In spite of the America’s attempts to stop Israeli settlement building, the prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared that Israel will never abandon the West Bank settlements (Lazaroff). In his article “As Biden Visits, Israel Unveils Plan for New Settlements” published in *The New York Times*, Bronner discusses Biden’s discontent about Israel’s decision to establish 16,000 new housing units in East Jerusalem in 2010. Netanyahu’s actions are quite paradoxical because he has claimed that he aims to organize peace talks with the Palestinians and wants to keep a good relationship with the United States but has continued to make decisions that create discontent among both the American and Palestinian government. According to Bronner, this can be explained by the fact that “when he formed his coalition, he joined forces with several right-wing parties, and has since found it hard to keep them in line”. Bronner explains that it is not the first time that Netanyahu is influenced by the more nationalist or conservative ministers who are part of his right-wing-religious coalition. In 2017, the premier accepted further settlement construction projects and according to the Israeli press, he accepted those plans “to satisfy his right-wing base” (Cortellessa, “Trump”).

In 2016, the Obama administration chose to abstain from voting on the United Nations Security Council resolution that demanded “an immediate halt to all Israeli settlement construction in the West Bank and East Jerusalem” (Cortellessa, “Choosing”). Later, the American government

refused to use their veto and thereby let pass the resolution. This contradicts the principles Obama had set in his speech in the UN in 2011, namely that “peace will come not through UN resolutions, but only through direct negotiations between the parties” (Ibid). This shift in the Obama administration’s policy demonstrates their strong disagreement with Israel’s settlement policy. US Ambassador Samantha Power emphasized that “[t]he settlement problem [had] gotten so much worse [...] that it was now endangering the two-states solution” (Ibid). She also added that the settlements trigger acts of terrorism from the Palestinians and that, therefore, “the vote did not diminish the United States’ unparalleled commitment to Israel’s security” (Ibid). Obama’s predecessors had also been critical of Israel in the past. Reagan, for example, condemned “Israel’s air strikes on an Iraqi nuclear reactor” and Bush abstained from voting on “a draft resolution at the Security Council condemning Israel for demolishing Palestinian homes in Gaza amidst the Second Intifada” (Ibid).

Under Trump’s leadership, the United States has not been very critical of Israel. This year, “[t]he Trump administration publicly distanced itself from Netanyahu on one single occasion”, that is, “when it put out a statement denying Netanyahu's claims that he was discussing settlements annexation with the administration” (Tibon). Trump said that the settlements complicated making peace and questioned “whether Israel truly wants peace with the Palestinians” (Cortellesa, “Trump”). According to a report published by Axios in April 2018, Trump has reaffirmed those statements during a phone call with Netanyahu (Swan). After learning that the premier had approved plans for further settlement building, Trump is alleged to have openly asked him if he actually cared about Peace (Cortellesa, “Trump”). Apart from this statement and the phone call, Trump “has not criticized Israel for building in the West Bank” and “has given Israel total public backing in light of recent events on the Gaza border” (Tibon). Moreover, Trump had “previously denounced the Palestinians for what he sees as their unwillingness to negotiate, but he [had] largely refrained from criticizing Israel” (AFP). Compared to his predecessors, Trump has proven to be more tolerant towards the Israeli settlements and has largely supported Israel’s decisions and actions.

It is interesting to note that American Jews generally agree with their government on the fact that Israel’s settlement policy is an obstacle to peace. As demonstrated by the Pew surveys, they are also critical towards the settlement construction. The results found that most American Jews

believe that it hurts Israel's security rather than helping to improve it. In Israel, by contrast, most Jewish people believe that settlement building is actually helpful, and they are less likely to say that it hurts Israel's own security interests. Stokes argues that those differences of opinion between Israeli Jews and American Jews "are a reminder of the divergence in perspectives between Washington and Tel Aviv on issues involving Israel and the peace process".

The two Pew surveys highlight a few additional elements about the relationship between American and Israeli Jews. They show that there are some close connections between those two communities. Three quarters of Israeli Jews "feel they share a common destiny with U.S. Jews" and many of them believe to have "some" or "a lot of" things in common. Moreover, they both visit each other's countries. In both groups, most participants also say that they "feel a special responsibility to care for fellow Jews in need around the world". Besides, though being separated from it by an ocean, American Jews feel particularly attached to the State of Israel. Most of the American Jewish participants believe that to care about Israel is an important part of what being Jewish means to them.

Although both Jewish communities share a strong emotional attachment to Israel, they have divergent opinions about its government and its future. According to the 2013 survey, many American Jews believe in the possibility of peace thanks to a two-state solution. The "two-state solution", as opposed to the so-called "one-state solution", involves the creation of an independent Palestinian state and an independent Jewish state that would peacefully exist side by side. The Jewish population of the United States appears to be even more confident than the American general public about the possibility that this could be achieved. This stands in opposition with the general view among Israeli Jews. They are less optimistic about the two-state solution because many of them do not believe that an independent Palestinian and Israeli state can be in peace. The participants' opinion about this topic often reflects their political ideologies. As a matter of fact, Israelis who describe themselves as being on the left as well as liberal Americans are more likely to say that they believe it is a workable solution. Consequently, this view is not popular in Israel, where the left represents only a small minority of the Jewish population, as opposed to America, where Jewish people are predominantly liberal.

Yossi Klein Halevi, a senior fellow at Jerusalem's Shalom Hartman Institute, believes that the divergence of opinion between American and Israeli Jews "is due to differing life experiences"

(qtd. in Kuruvilla). He explains that Israel is strongly connected to the military and, there, the army is seen as an extension of the society. All Israelis have been in the army and have then seen their kids following the same steps and, as a result, they all love the military. Halevi argues that young American Jews, by contrast, do not know the army, which explains their different perceptions on the military. Besides, in an interview published by the Pew Research Center, Halevi explains that “Israelis live in the least hospitable region on the planet, not only for Jews, for everybody”, whereas “American Jews live in the most welcoming society, the most hospitable society that Jews have ever known in 4,000 years”. According to him, this leads to a situation in which they “need to develop opposing strategies for coping”, that is that Israeli Jews “need to be the toughest kid on the block” while “American Jews need to be flexible”.

In America, Jewish people show mistrust towards the Palestinian as well as the Israeli authorities. Only 38 percent of them believe that the Israeli government is making a sincere effort to establish peace with the Palestinians. In Israel, however, more than the half is confident about the fact that their government is making a sincere effort to achieve peace with the Palestinians. Though they disagree with regards to Israel, both American and Israeli Jews are highly skeptical that Palestine is making a sincere effort to achieve peace and only a few trust their government. Again, the participants’ opinions on this matter reflect their political ideologies, since the right is more likely to trust Israel and distrust Palestine, and the left is more likely to do the opposite.

The results are also tied to the age of the participants. In “The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment”, Peter Beinart asserts that “young Jewish Americans are identifying with Israel less strongly than in the past and are more apt to question, criticize and oppose Israeli government policies” (Oren 62). The Pew survey confirms that, though people feeling some emotional attachment to Israel can be found in both groups, younger generations appear to be less attached to Israel than older generations of American Jews. In his article “Safran Foer’s New Novel Explores Divorce Between Liberal Jewish Americans and Israel”, Strenger explains that “voices like Peter Beinart have been warning for years” that the fact that younger American Jews do not have the deep connection to Israel that their parents had “is exacerbating with Israel’s continual disregard of liberal values, and by its creating facts on the ground that make a future implementation of the two-state solution impossible”.

Under Trump's leadership, foreign aid from America has led to the creation of some tensions with the Palestinian government. While the United States had always declined to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and most of the world considers it as occupied territory, Trump decided to announce Jerusalem as the Israeli capital in 2017 (Landler). This led to serious problems with the Palestinians who also claim Israel as the capital of their future state. Trump's decision was highly criticized by many people, including Arab and European leaders who stressed that "[a] way must be found through negotiations to resolve the status of Jerusalem as a future capital of both states" (Landler). The Palestinian authorities reacted by saying that they would not take part in any peace talks involving the US administration until this decision is reversed (AFP). Since Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, "the Palestinians have refused to engage with his administration, accusing it of being biased toward Israel and of completely adopting the positions of Netanyahu" (Tibon) and Palestinian officials have "discredited their capacity to act as honest mediators in any potential peace talks" (Cortellessa, "Trump"). The recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, in addition to Trump's decision to move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, led to the Gaza massacre on May 14, when Palestinian protesters were shot by Israeli soldiers.

In 2017, Trump also created even more anger among Palestinians by claiming that peace "did not necessarily have to entail Palestinian statehood" (Beaumont). Trump emphasized the importance of establishing peace and finding an agreement that both parties agree with, but "implied his administration had no -preference when it came to the final -geography of the region as part of a -permanent Middle East peace agreement" (Beaumont and Borger). By saying so, he adopts a very different stance from what the US argued under Obama's leadership, namely that there was no alternative to the two-state solution. As a response to Trump's claims, Palestinian officials emphasized that the one-state solution would be catastrophic since "the only alternative would be a single democratic state for Jews, Christian and Muslims together – or an 'apartheid' state that would be 'a disaster and a tragedy for both Israelis and Palestinians'" (Beaumont). Today, it is also quite unclear whether Netanyahu still plans to stand by his commitment to the two-state goal.

The year after the publication of *Here I Am*, Jonathan Safran Foer also expressed some critical judgement about Israel's actions in the press. In an interview with the Swiss Jewish weekly

Tachles, he openly shared his thoughts about Israel and criticized the decisions of Prime Minister Netanyahu. As explained in the article “Jonathan Safran Foer: My Israeli friends want to raise kids elsewhere” published by *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, Foer believes that, under Netanyahu, “Israel has increasingly removed itself from the rest of the Western world, which has already led to academic boycotts, among other things”. The author explained that, as a result, many of his Israeli friends do not want to raise their kids in Israel anymore and are “becoming ‘tired’ of living there”. According to him, Israelis “love their country and would die for it, but they no longer want their children to grow up there”. Foer declared that “[i]f Israel becomes even more fundamentalist, like its neighbors, it will be at the cost of the dream many Jews have had in establishing the State of Israel and still have today” (“Jonathan Safran Foer: My Israeli friends want to raise kids elsewhere”).

The *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* article also mentions that, the same week, Foer criticized Netanyahu’s leadership again in an interview for the Milanese newspaper *Repubblica daily*. He claimed that Netanyahu will “jeopardize Israel’s existence”. According to him, Netanyahu “is contributing to the formation of a one-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict over a two-state solution”. Foer shares Obama’s view, namely that the two-state solution is the only possible one. In the same interview, Foer underlined the risk of apartheid for the Palestinians if the one-state scenario is realized and also expressed some criticism about Trump. He said that his attitude “against minorities and journalists ... seems terrifying” (“Jonathan Safran Foer: My Israeli friends want to raise kids elsewhere”).

Foer started writing *Here I Am* more than ten years before making those claims. When the novel was published, he did not believe that Trump could win the elections and therefore could not expect that the US would change its attitude towards the one-state solution. In his article “Author Jonathan Safran Foer on Israel, Trump and why America can show Europe the way”, Goring explains that when he asked him about what might happen to Jews in America under Trump’s leadership in an interview for *Herald Scotland*, Foer said that it would not be good for anybody but that he thought it was “extraordinarily unlikely, verging on impossible, to imagine that he would win” (Goring). He was quite hopeful about America’s future: “Unlike in a lot of the rest of the world, the demographics are hopeful. Everything is skewing liberal, whereas the impression of Europe from America is the opposite, that things are beginning to skew to the right” (Goring). Already at that

time, he expressed some criticism about the Middle East, stressing that there, however, “everything is skewing to the right” (Goring). Though *Here I Am* was published before Foer publicly criticized Israel under Netanyahu’s leadership and Trump’s decisions that complicated negotiations with the Palestinians, the novel already expresses some concern about the future of Israel, which will be further discussed below.

3. Israel in American Jewish Literature

In spite of the importance of Israel in Jewish history as well as the major events that preceded and followed its establishment, American Jewish literature has been quite silent about the connection between American Jews and Israel (Rosenfeld 111). Only a minority of works have focused on Israel as a central theme, before and after the establishment of the State. Today, a few contemporary American Jewish authors, including Jonathan Safran Foer, have shown more interest in that topic. This chapter analyses the way Israel has been depicted in American Jewish literature since its establishment in 1948. The first section discusses American Jewish authors from the second half of the twentieth century, with particular emphasis on the work of Philip Roth and how he engaged Israel in his novel. Also, the recent interest in Israel among younger American Jewish authors is mentioned. The second section analyzes the way Jewish identities have been represented in American Jewish literature. Attention is given to the fact that authors have discussed the commonalities and differences between American and Israeli Jews, as well as the question of authenticity.

3.1. Engaging Israel in American Jewish Fiction

In the second half of the twentieth century, American Jewish literature had established itself as an important part of American literature thanks to critically acclaimed and widely read authors such as Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth, who dealt with a broad range of varied topics that “draw upon Jewish experience in defining their subject matter and developing their fictional voices” (Rosenfeld 118). Rosenfeld observes that, though there has been time enough for a “significant literature” about the State of Israel to develop, in fact “no such literature exists, and not for lack of creative activity on the part of Jewish writers” (112). Those authors rarely mentioned the Promised Land in their novels and when they did, they did not really engage with the topic and favored issues related to their double identity as American Jews.

As argued by Rosenfeld, within the major American Jewish novelists of the postwar period of the twentieth century, “it is Roth and almost he alone who has shown the most intense interest in engaging Israel in his fiction, and this only in his most recent books” (Rosenfeld 120). With regards to Israel, three of his novels are worth mentioning: *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969), *The*

Counterlife (1986), and *Operation Shylock* (1993). The other major American Jewish writers of that time, by contrast, avoided discussing the Promised Land in their work. Among them, only Saul Bellow showed a similar interest in engaging with Israel in novels such as *Mr Sammler's Planet* (1970), *To Jerusalem and Back* (1979), and briefly in *The Bellarosa Connection* (1989) (Ibid).

Three years after the end of World War II, the State of Israel was created and aimed to become a home for the Jewish people. But could Israel be the ultimate homeland in the eyes of every Jew? In 1912, the American Jewish author Mary Antin published her autobiographical novel *The Promised Land*. Interestingly, this title does not refer to Israel, but to America, where she settled with her family after emigrating from Russia. Like many other American Jews of her generation, she idealized America and its heroes, and started to perceive this country as her own Promised Land (Rosenfeld 113). Rosenfeld argues that the idea that “America is our Zion” led many American Jewish authors to overlook the topic of Israel and, as a result, only a few novels of the post-war period discuss Israeli issues.

According to Rosenfeld, the absence of Israel in American Jewish literature testifies to a lack of interest in the Promised Land. In his view, it would be more present in their work if those authors had worried about it and loved it as much as other Zionists did. This does not lead to the conclusion that most American Jewish authors were opposed to the establishment of Israel, but this demonstrates some indifference. Further, Rosenfeld lists different hypotheses to explain this absence. Firstly, simple ignorance or not feeling able to describe a place they do not know well. Secondly, the fear of not being regarded as acceptably “mainstream”, as happened to other Jewish writers who “cut themselves away from the mainstream of American writing” (121). As a result, American Jewish writers were probably afraid that, if they engaged with Israel in their novels, they would be seen “first and foremost, as ‘Jewish writers’ and not, in consequence, as writers otherwise to be taken seriously” (Rosenfeld 122). Last but not least, Rosenfeld explains that the absence of Israel in their fiction could be explained by a disbelief in Israel as their Zion, in most cases because they locate the Promised Land in America (Rosenfeld 121-122). In Rosenfeld’s words, instead of “a compelling literature that implicates Israeli reality at its core” we have “either silence or something that resembles an ongoing quarrel over two conflicting versions of ‘the Promised Land’” (112).

“Mainstream” American Jewish writers have shown a strong tendency to avoid discussing purely Jewish matters such as Israel and favored themes related to their American experience. This involves problems of double identity, marginalization and assimilation, among others. As a result, the following question could be raised: is “American Jewish fiction” really *Jewish*? In other words, is this classification to refer to the works of those authors still relevant, or could it be simply described as American literature? This is a complex question because American Jewish literature is quite difficult to describe as the members of this tradition have dealt with a broad range of different topics and genres. In 1977, Irving Howe classified it as a form of “regional literature” because similarly to other regional writings, it “possessed a distinct thumbprint, what Howe called its ‘inescapable subject’” (Furman 633). In the case of American Jewish writers, he described their inescapable subject as “Europe and the immigrant experience in America of marginality and alienation”. The presence of these recurrent themes is one of the elements that legitimize to distinguish those works as a distinct kind of American literature, namely “American *Jewish* literature”.

In 1977, Howe believed that “American Jewish fiction [had] probably moved past its high point”, as he thought that “life after the immigrant experience of marginality and alienation would prove too sterile and unrecognizably Jewish to inspire a new wave of American Jewish literature” (qtd. in Furman 635). In other words, there would not be any more *Jewish* American literature, but only American Jewish authors writing American fiction, without any recognizable Jewish elements. At the end of the twentieth century, a few authors, including Roth, finally moved the plot of their novel to Israel. Furman argues that by doing so, they participated in creating a new “distinctively *Jewish* American Jewish literature” because they deal with essentially Jewish themes such as Israel (636). He interprets Israel as the new inescapable subject which allows to define American Jewish fiction as a different kind of regional literature: “Israel, as Kremer acknowledges, represents one of these ‘more essentially Jewish’ themes; for we now enjoy a surge of American Jewish fiction on Israel, the new, practically inescapable subject to which I’ve been alluding” (636).

At the end of the twentieth century, a few scholars shared the view that a richer American Jewish literature about Israel would emerge in the following years. In 1993, for example, Sanford Prinsker predicted “a new renaissance of Jewish-American fiction about Israel in the next decade” (qtd. in Furman 637). Furman also argues that Philip Roth’s *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock*

“suggest the directions in which we can expect it to go in the not too distant future” (652). In her article “Exodus and Homeland: The Representation of Israel in Saul Bellow's *To Jerusalem and Back* and Philip Roth's *Operation Shylock*”, Lehmann discusses the way American Jewish authors have explored the question of contrast and commonalities between American and Israeli Jews. She also believed that this topic would be further addressed in representations of Israel in contemporary American Jewish literature. Those assumptions appear to be correct, as more American Jewish authors, including Jonathan Safran Foer, have indeed engaged with this topic recently. The way Foer has depicted Israel and the purposes it serves in his novel *Here I Am* (2016) will be discussed in further detail below.

Lehmann believes that *To Jerusalem and Back* and *Operation Shylock* are the most important American Jewish works “that laid the foundations for contemporary depictions of Israel in American Jewish literature” (79). However, she argues that the themes addressed in those two major novels are less visible in the work of younger writers who were “born into a more assimilated Jewish environment and simultaneously a more exuberantly multicultural one” (93). She illustrates this point by mentioning Joanna Spiro's short story “Three Thousand Years of Your History” in which the protagonist's voyage to Israel “only serves to accentuate her rootlessness” (94), rather than also affirming a Jewish identity shared with Israeli Jews.

In recent years, more American Jewish authors have engaged with the topic of Israel, but still from a very American perspective. With *Here I Am* (2016), Jonathan Safran Foer enters this tradition. Interestingly enough, he is not the only American Jewish author to show a sudden interest in Israel recently. His ex-wife Nicole Krauss deals with similar themes in her last novel *Forest Dark* (2017). *Forest Dark* is a story “about home, about home falling apart, and about searching for a new home” (Sela) and “what it means to be Jewish in the diaspora” (St John Mandel), which could perfectly describe *Here I Am* as well. Besides, like Foer, Krauss confronts her characters with Israel in their spiritual quest. In *Forest Dark*, the protagonists decide to go to Israel in the hope to find a more spiritual home, but instead of solving their existential crises, Israel ultimately disappoints them.

Another point of evidence that shows that Israel has received a particular interest recently is the publication of Dalia Rosenfeld's *The Worlds We Think We Know* (2017), filling up the library shelves with a third book dealing with Israel in only one year. Her novel focuses on “living in the

presence of absence” (Comminos), which has of course been a major topic in Jewish fiction as exile represents a significant part of Jewish history. Clark, in his article “*Here I Am* by Jonathan Safran Foer review – self-expression in the Jewish diaspora” published in *The Guardian*, also described *Here I Am* as a novel about diaspora and “the elasticity of its numerous possible meanings, and of the pain caused by both the presence and the absence of the homeland it invokes”.

If it can be said that American Jewish writers have been slow to engage with the topic of Israel, it is even truer for giving a perspective to the Arab. When Roth “creates thoughtful voices openly skeptical of Israeli policy on the Westbank” (Furman 638) in *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock*, he initiates a new turn in American Jewish fiction. Previous stories about Israel were told mostly, if not exclusively, from the perspective of Zionist characters. In *The Counterlife*, the simple fact that the protagonist Nathan Zuckerman is skeptical of Israel is already unusual. However, according to Furman, the absence of an Arab voice strengthens the stereotypes of the Arab and valorizes the Jewish perspective. *Operation Shylock* is the first American Jewish work in which a “significant Palestinian character” (Furman 638) is created: George Ziad, Roth’s Palestinian university friend, who accuses Jews of taking advantage of their victim status to legitimize their barbarism. Furman justly points out that this only Palestinian voice represents an extreme view. While he stands for a counter-voice for the radical Jew, there is still no moderate Palestinian view. In addition to introducing Palestinian arguments in his work, Roth imagines different episodes that “call into question how humanely Israel treats the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories” (Furman 649). Furman concludes that the fact that “both hawkish Zionists and Palestinian militants can use the novel as grist for their antithetical mills betrays the tensions that increasingly plague thoughtful American Jewish writers as they engage Israel in their work” (Furman 650).

Since the publication of *Here I Am*, Jonathan Safran Foer has been compared with Philip Roth on several occasions. Like him, he belongs to the few American Jewish authors whose novels introduce conflicting voices about Israel and create some space for debate and discussion. According to Scott, in his article “Invented Disaster and the American Jewish Experience” (2016), *Here I Am* belongs to the small tradition of “novels dealing with the competing claims of Zionism and what Roth’s manic mouthpiece Moishe Pipik called Diasporism” in *Operation Shylock*. Foer reacted to this comparison, claiming that “[i]t’s an easy thing to see, even if it’s not there” (Weinman 58). Weinman explained the comparison between the authors by the fact that *Here I Am*

is a novel “examining the inescapability of Jewish identity even for people who feel assimilated”, a recurrent theme within Roth’s work. He adds that “that type of novel—isn’t as common as it used to be” (Ibid) and that, consequently, “[t]here may be a hunger for that kind of story” (Ibid). Foer may contest a strong resemblance with Roth, but one cannot deny that they tackle similar themes, namely the American Jews’ problems of identity and more precisely, their relationship to Israel.

3.2. Searching for Identity

As explained above, American Jewish authors have favored themes related to their experience in America. They have discussed problems resulting from their Jewish identity, which is described as leading to difficulties to adapt themselves to the society they live in. As a result, the American Jewish identity is presented as being fragmented between two conflicting parts, to be American and Jewish. According to McClymond in his article “*The Chosen: Defining American Judaism*” (2007), in most mainstream American Jewish works, the American and Jewish lifestyles are represented as not compatible, and to embrace the first one means becoming secular and rejecting the second one.

Problems of double identity are a central theme in Chaim Potok’s novel *The Chosen* (1967). In *The Chosen*, Judaism is presented as “an arena that had to be integrated with mainstream American life” (McClymond 9) and the novel’s central question is “how to deal with your Jewish identity when you face a secular world?”. In the novel, there is a multiplicity of American Jewish identities and those different groups have “different understandings of what it means to be Jewish” (McClymond 18), but they are all Jewish. Via the characters of Danny and Reuven, Potok opposes two different Jewish traditions: the liberal Orthodox Jews and the Hasidic Jews. While Hasidic Jews were often viewed as a “throwback to the past” (McClymond 4), in *The Chosen*, they also want to assimilate. In the same way, the liberal Jewish characters also want to assimilate and keep their Jewishness. Therefore, in Potok’s view, assimilation has nothing to do with faith. Both groups embrace elements from the secular world but never consider renouncing their Jewishness. Instead, they try to find a way to combine their two different identities.

The “voyage to Israel” became a recurrent theme in a few novels dealing with the search for identity of American Jewish characters. Rather than discussing issues related to the State of Israel, authors have focused on the relationship between Israeli and American Jews in order to define the

American Jewish identity. In both novels, a confrontation between the American Jewish protagonists and Israel allows the authors to consider the commonalities and differences between American and Israeli Jews as well as the question of authenticity.

3.2.1. Commonalities and Differences

In the post war period, there was a strong tendency among authors to discuss internal American Jewish issues such as assimilation and the consequential problems of double identity, i.e. being both American and Jewish. American Jewish authors of that period repeatedly presented the Jewish and the American identity as being difficult, if not impossible to combine. As a result, American Jews have been repeatedly depicted as having a fragmented identity, which can lead them to go through profound existential crises. The opposition between Diasporic and Israeli Jews adds a further dimension to this fragmented identity, as their communities have “different understandings of Jewishness” (Lehmann 78). Being confronted with the Israeli Jews also raises awareness about the fact that they have “different languages, different senses of nationality, and different cultural practices” (Lehmann 78). Consequently, the Jewish identity itself also appears to be fragmented. Not only do contemporary American Jews struggle to find a good balance between their Americanness and Jewishness, but they also have to reinterpret and understand what exactly this *Jewishness* means.

To move the action to Israel has enabled American Jewish authors to explore their protagonists’ definition of identity and Jewishness. Today, to borrow Howe’s words, American Jews “define themselves not only by looking toward Eastern Europe and the Lower East Side of New York, toward the dimming ‘world of our fathers,’ but also by looking toward Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights” (Furman 636). In their greatly secular world, the assimilated American Jews sometimes question what it means to them to be Jewish and to be confronted with Israel gives them the opportunity to explore this part of their identity. Those stories, though partially or fully located in Israel, can still be described as being strongly American. As noted by Lehmann, “American Jewish authors choose to focus on the relationship between the two, rather than considering Israel in isolation” (78).

In novels dealing with Israel, even when mentioned only briefly, the State plays a crucial part in the protagonist’s quest for identity. This confrontation allows them to consider the question

of contrast and commonalities between American and Israeli Jews. Lehmann observes that the comparison between America and Israel in fiction can lead the protagonist to two contrasting revelations: “an affirmation of Jewish commonality and community” versus a “sense of distance as Americans” (78). In other words, if the protagonist feels at home in Israel and recognizes their own values in Israelis’ lifestyle, they will start to believe in the existence of a universal Jewish identity shared by every member of the community, regardless of their status as Diasporic or Israeli Jews. By contrast, if a conflict arises between American and Israeli Jews, it will only reinforce their sense of American nationality and obscure their definition of Jewishness. In this kind of fiction, the distance between America and Israel is either reinforced or narrowed. To illustrate this point, Lehmann analyses Saul Bellow’s *To Jerusalem and Back* and Philip Roth’s *Operation Shylock*. In *To Jerusalem and Back*, Bellow describes an American Jewish protagonist who is first highly critical towards Israel. As a secular American man, he is skeptical of the nation’s religious aspect as well as its strong focus on the past. Eventually, without losing his sense of American nationality, he reconsiders his former criticisms and starts to idealize Israel that seems “realer” (Lehmann 82) to him and denigrates America, that “has become a place he associates with death and sterility, in contrast to the vitality and intensity he associates with Israel” (83). At the end, the protagonist “begins to identify with an international Jewish community” (Lehmann 84) and “his sense of his own commitments and allegiances had shifted and is no longer restricted by nationality” (Lehmann 85).

Though using highly different methods, *Operation Shylock* leads to a similar conclusion. In his earlier novel *Portnoy’s Complaint*, Roth’s protagonist Alex does not find any affirmation of Jewish commonality and community. During his brief journey to Israel, to be confronted with Israeli Jews makes him aware that he has a double identity and is more American than he thinks, though he believed he was exclusively Jewish, which he despised. In *Operation Shylock*, the protagonist also celebrates his American belonging, mostly thanks to the freedom he can enjoy there, as opposed to Israel where there is more censorship. In contrast with Bellow’s protagonist in *To Jerusalem and Back*, Roth – the character – does not become more critical of America. The American Jew is even called “the truly liberated Jew” (Roth 353). However, Lehmann argues that there is also “a final commitment to an international Jewish community” (93). The novel offers different voices, different stances, different views on Israel and the relationship between American Jews and Israel, which makes it highly complicated to reach a conclusion on Roth’s position. At

the end, however, the protagonist is asked by the Israeli authorities to delete the last chapter of his book because it contains confidential information. Faced with this dilemma, he is told to follow his Jewish conscience. Even if the American part of his identity stresses the importance of freedom of speech and despises this kind of censorship, he ultimately decides not to publish it. According to Lehmann, this demonstrates some affirmation of his belonging to a universal Jewish community.

3.2.2. The Authentic Jewish Life

Rosenfeld underlines that American Jewish authors often mention Israel with the aim to allow a comparison of quality of life between America and Israel (122). By doing so, they attempt to determine who is living the good Jewish life, the American or the Israeli Jew. As already mentioned, American Jewish literature has repeatedly discussed the problems of double identity for American Jews. In those works, the members of this community are faced with both a secular and religious world, and those two different lifestyles appear to be mutually incompatible. As explained by McClymond, “the trend in Jewish American literature at this time was to present a monolithic Judaism in opposition to mainstream culture; one could not be traditionally Jewish and American. Becoming the latter seemed to require rejecting the former” (9). This echoes the concerns expressed above about the fact that assimilation in America leads to a loss of their Jewish identity.

The emergence of a need to reaffirm authenticity of the Diasporic Jew can also be observed within American Jewish literature. To move the action to Israel allows writers like Roth to oppose American Jewish characters to the so-called authentic Jews in Israel and compare their different ideas and values. It allows them to create space for debate, to construct dialogues in which conflicting voices can come together, and to imagine the different reactions they could have in specific contexts. In Israel, the American Jewish protagonists are challenged to reflect on their Jewishness. When being confronted with Israelis’ strong nationalism and passion, their own lives can sometimes appear small and meaningless to them. The author’s challenge is then to prove that American Jewish life is no less valuable or authentic than the Israeli Jewish one.

Rubin-Dorsky argues that Roth’s last two novels about Israel, *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock*, “illustrated if not quite proved” that “America has finally become a legitimate homeland for Jews” (79). In those works, Roth represented America as “a country where Jews are

living meaningful, creative Jewish lives, and where their actions and deeds in the world reflect their Jewish identities” (Ibid). Moreover, both novels demonstrate that “Jews can be deeply committed to the values, aspirations, and meanings embodied in Jewish history while at the same time remaining loyal to American institutions that ensure democratic freedom” (Rubin-Dorsky 79-80). According to Rubin-Dorsky, for all these reasons, America can be a legitimate homeland for Jews and assimilation to their new country does not prevent them from being Jewish. Consequently, Roth “offered ways of conceiving of American Jews as the moral and spiritual equivalents of Israeli Jews” (96).

Their family history, including immigration to America, represents a big part of the characters’ identity in *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock*. This stands in sharp contrast with the protagonist of Roth’s later book *American Pastoral* (1997) as he has “[n]o ethnicity, no heritage, no entanglement” and shows “no irony, no mockery, no wit, no irreverence, none of the traditional defense mechanisms that characterize (urban) American Jews as interesting people” (Rubin-Dorsky 97-98). According to Fein’s theory, a true sense of exile can never be ended, even in a safe place, “because the world remains fundamentally impaired, disordered” (Rubin-Dorsky 81). Therefore, the Jew will never feel at home, and always feel in exile, even in the Promised Land and his task is “to heal and repair” (Ibid). Exile represents a big part of Jewish history and therefore identity. Rubin-Dorsky believes that “exile as a defining Jewish principle has become manifest to American Jews – perhaps only recently” (81). In that view, their exile in America and its consequences, as well as their capacity to repair and build a home in that country, are elements that make them authentically Jewish, despite the criticism they have received about their choice to remain living in the Diaspora.

In *The Chosen*, Chaim Potok demonstrates that there are also conflicting views on Jewish identity within America only, where traditional and liberal Jews live side by side. Therefore, McClymond concludes that the crisis the characters are facing does not arise from assimilation, but is a crisis within the Jewish community itself, which results from a conflict between two different traditions of Judaism. Both Hasidic and liberal Jews think they are living the right Jewish life: the first group thinks that they are modern and sees the others as fanatics, while the second one thinks that liberal Jews are not true Jews, not because of assimilation, but simply because they are “not Jewish enough” (McClymond 10). As explained by Potok in an interview, one group represents

“the Eastern European aspect, which prefers to turn inward and not confront the outside world” and the other represents the “Western European more objective scientific aspect [...] that is not afraid to look at the outside world that produces scientists” (qtd. in McClymond 11).

To summarize, the criticism expressed about assimilation in America has found different responses in American Jewish literature. Chaim Potok, for example, demonstrated that assimilated Jews do not necessarily reject their Jewishness and that even extremely traditional Jews have sought to assimilate in their new country. As noted by Rosenfeld, novels like *Operation Shylock* and *The Counterlife* belong to “an ongoing American-Jewish polemical literature about Israel, one of whose primary aims is to reassert the American identity of the American Jew and thereby to reconfirm the New World choice of the immigrant ancestors” (126). American Jewish authors have attempted to present the American Jewish identity as still being fundamentally Jewish and authentic, although they adapted to their new society.

4. Jonathan Safran Foer's *Here I Am*

Before the publication of *Here I Am* in 2016, Foer spent two years working on a comedy TV show for HBO. This show entitled *All Talk* was supposed to be “about a Jewish family in Washington, D.C.” and the tone was expected to be “politically, religiously, culturally, intellectually and sexually irreverent” (Grossman). Although famous actors like Ben Stiller and Alan Alda were already cast, he ultimately decided that he did not want to be a showrunner and cancelled the show (Grossman). Nevertheless, he wrote a novel that corresponds to the way *All Talk* is described above. Foer himself acknowledged that he “borrowed several plot elements from ‘*All Talk*’, but another piece of the puzzle came from a family trip he took to Israel” (Grossman). *Here I Am*, in addition to dealing with a Jewish family in Washington, considers issues related to Israel.

Here I Am follows the Blochs, an American Jewish family living in Washington D.C., for no more than six weeks during which they are hit by two different crises. The first one is domestic, since it deals with the possible divorce between Jacob and his wife Julia, and their fear that it would destroy their family. The couple has had three sons, Sam, Max, and Benjy, and they are afraid that their separation may have a negative impact on their psychological development. The second crisis happens in Israel when a violent earthquake hits the Middle East. This crisis is first geological but soon becomes political, which leads to the threatening destruction of Israel. In the middle of those crises, the characters are constantly faced with duty and dilemma and therefore have to make important decisions.

As was already the case with his first fictional book *Everything is Illuminated*, there are many similarities between Foer and his protagonist. Like Foer, Jacob is an American Jewish writer who grew up in Washington D.C., has been writing a TV show, became a father, and is going through a divorce. In her article “‘*Here I Am*, an American Divorce Novel Inside an Israeli Dystopia” published in *Haaretz*, Ruth Margalit makes a link between the divorce occurring inside the novel with the one outside the fictional world, i.e. between Jonathan Safran Foer and the author Nicole Krauss, with whom he had two children. She argues that the novel “may have inadvertently benefited” from his own divorce, in which he deals with the marriage of Jacob and Julia that is falling apart and describes “status-confirming material comforts and the privileged claustrophobia

they can generate”. Foer himself claimed that “[his] divorce didn’t affect the plot of the book at all” but he is sure that “it informed emotions that are being expressed” (Lev Grossman).

With regards to Israel, Foer also seems to share his characters’ attachment to the country. In an interview with *Time*, he explains that “[i]t’s a place [he] do[es] feel a special connection to” and stressed that he “do[es] love being there” (Goring). However, again like his characters, he sometimes questions this connection: “The nature of connection has obviously changed over time and will continue to change. I also feel some connection which I feel as much as a question mark as I do an exclamation point. It’s something that I wrestle with” (Goring). The book is not autobiographical, but probably conveys quite accurately some of Foer’s feelings and ideas.

4.1. Introducing Israel in a Domestic Story

Though *Here I Am* and Philip Roth’s work discuss similar themes, Foer uses distinct strategies than Roth to introduce Israel in his novel. As noted by Ari Hoffman in his article entitled “Chabon, Safran Foer, and the Great Jewish American Novel”, Foer “never actually moves the action of the novel to Israel”. Instead, the action is set in America, more precisely in Washington D.C. and most of the time within the Blochs’ home. During the six weeks of events that the novel depicts, none of the Bloch family members actually go to Israel. At some point, Jacob considers joining his Israeli cousins to fight on their side but eventually decides to stay. In this way, the novel differentiates itself from the literary tradition of American Jewish characters going on a quest to Israel in search of meaning and identity. Without ever leaving America, Foer develops different strategies to discuss the way the American Jewish characters perceive Israel and their duties and responsibilities towards it.

In the first part of the novel, Israel is introduced through the use of flashbacks. A few memories allow one to understand how their family has become fragmented after the Holocaust, when one side of the family decided to move to America and the other to Israel. In addition, to go back in time enables the narrator to describe a few episodes about the characters visiting their family in Israel and America. Those are the only parts of the novel when Jacob and his father come in direct contact with Israel. This helps readers to understand the way the Israeli and American cousins perceive each other’s countries.

Furthermore, Israel is introduced thanks to the abundance of dialogues in the novel. The Blochs discuss all the time and, consequently, *Here I Am* involves long stretches of dialogues. Irv, Jacob's father, is obsessed with the State of Israel and tends to politicize everything. He dedicates a significant part of his life to debating Israeli issues, as he regularly writes polemical articles about it on his blog, and sometimes even takes part in late shows or appears on the news. Besides, the novel emphasizes that Jacob and his sons are also interested in debating Israeli issues. As a result, Israel is occasionally mentioned during the Blochs' family discussions

Then, the arrival of new characters in the story, the Blochs' Israeli cousins, enables Foer to further explore the relationship between American Jews and Israel. The Israelis, Tamir and his son Barak, arrive in Washington D.C. to attend Sam's bar mitzvah, which results in a direct confrontation between the two sides of the family. The cousins are compared in both physical and mental terms and considerable differences between them are highlighted. Again, the dialogues are significant, as they bring Tamir and Jacob to compare Israel and America and to debate about the question of the homeland.

Finally, Foer introduces a dystopian plot through the threatening destruction of Israel. The reader is aware that Israel is facing a crisis since the beginning of the novel, as the narrator declares in the opening line: "When the destruction of Israel commenced, Isaac Bloch was weighing whether to kill himself or go back to the Jewish Home" (3). Though eventually becoming an important part of the novel, this storyline is not developed until much later. After no less than two hundred fifty pages of a realistic domestic story, the dystopian plot is finally revealed: a devastating earthquake hits the Middle East, which leads to a major geological crisis in the region. As a result, the State of Israel is left fragile and vulnerable and is afraid that the neighbouring Arab countries would take advantage of the situation. The geological crisis soon evolves in a political crisis opposing Israel and its neighbouring countries.

Apart from an eleven pages long report of the evolution of the war in Israel for fifteen days, the reader never receives any more information than what is available to the characters living in America. This includes the information shared by the media and their correspondence with the family members who stayed in – or went back to – Israel. Information about them is revealed based on what they communicate to their cousins through telephone, text messages, e-mails or online chatting. As a result, the reader follows the events happening in Israel from a very American

perspective. The Israeli dystopia enables Foer to make Israel an important part of the Blochs' daily conversations, while the action never leaves Washington D.C. This allows Foer to explore the attitude of the characters towards Israel, the way they perceive their duties and responsibilities as American Jews, as well as the influence of the media.

Critics tend to agree on the fact that *Here I Am*, written more than a decade after Foer's first two fictions, "marks a departure from Jonathan Safran Foer's usual style" (Wagner). The novel first appears less experimental and more realistic than his previous works. In an interview, he confirmed the fact that his style has changed: "I used to be enamoured of a certain kind of style, the big exuberant experimentation. Now I'm interested in a precision, smallness, domesticity" (Weinman 58). Mermelstein confirms that "'*Here I Am*' dispenses with the postmodern narrative tricks" that Foer used in his other novels, but instead "replaces them with joyless prose about joyless people". He also calls the novel a "592 pages of upper-middle class realism". Preston believes as well that the novel "sees Safran Foer moving away from the playfulness and experimentation of his earlier works" and calls it "a surprisingly old-fashioned, realist novel of ideas". Furthermore, Wagner describes *Here I Am* as "a hyperreal observation of the minutiae of family life which is truthful and often heartbreaking". This highly contrast with Foer's previous abundant use of postmodernist techniques.

Though Foer goes back to a more realistic style and initially focuses on domestic themes, he ultimately reverts to the post-modern tradition that was typical of his two earlier fictional works. Like *Everything is Illuminated* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, Foer's third novel is again a fragmented text. As explained by Menaker, *Here I Am* "continues the narrative approach" of Foer's two previous post-modernist novels "both of which also offered a collage of conflicting accounts and extranarrative documents". For example, extra narrative documents include the introduction of a report about the war in Israel, as well as a full chapter dedicated to Jacob's TV show script. He devotes much of his time to writing a show about his family, mostly to a complementary part called "The Bible". This part aims to give some explanations to the actors about the way they should impersonate the family members and a few extracts can be read in chapter seven, which is entitled "The Bible". Therefore, though showing less postmodernist elements than Foer's previous works, *Here I Am* still belongs to this tradition. Kidd also notes that Foer makes "a postmodern literary point" in the following sentence: "An image is what it is. A text

could be anything”, showing thereby some agreement with the postmodernist idea that a text has no universal meaning.

The different elements mentioned above, such as different accounts, extra narrative documents, as well as flashbacks, interior monologues, dialogues, virtual games, and text messages, are brought together through the use of a literary technique called montage. According to a definition provided by the Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism, montage is “the assemblage of disparate elements into a composite whole often by way of juxtaposition” (Barndt et al.). The term was first used to refer to a technique used in filmmaking and photography, and was later extended to other artistic fields, including literature. In literary works, “montage provokes unmediated clashes between genres and styles, often featuring non-narrative fragments from various sources such as newspaper clippings, slogans (whether commercial, political, or religious), or popular songs” (Barndt et al. 2016). With regards to language, it “[breaks] down traditional syntax and semantics in the process. It favors ambiguity, irony, and paradox over narrative unity or totality” (Barndt et al. 2016). Besides, it is also “a central device in the modernist city novel’s attempt to capture the multi-layered life-worlds of the 20th-century metropolis in Europe and the USA” (Barndt et al. 2016).

In his review “‘*Here I Am*,’ Jonathan Safran Foer’s Tale of a Fracturing Family”, Garner describes the novel as “a disrupted text about disruptions”. Jacob’s messages from his hidden phone, for example, repeatedly interrupt the narrative:

And then, on her day off, wanting only to get as far away from her life as possible, she found herself trampling a desire line home.

it’s enough when i say it’s enough (60)

According to Garner, montage “can seem a useful response to the decentralization of culture brought on by technology, the internet, maybe even the science behind the Large Hadron Collider”. In other words, to use montage permits a representation of a world of immediacy. Our life is constantly interrupted by information coming from other places thanks to the evolution of the media and communication devices. In Foer’s novel, technology undeniably represents a major part of the Blochs’ everyday life. Sam and Max keep using their computer or iPad to play games or watch videos and their parents unsuccessfully attempt to bring them away from their screens. Even

their younger son, Benjy, who is only five years old, already shows some attraction to the Internet. It appears to be a considerable part of life in Israel as well, since the Israeli characters are also particularly interested in technology and emphasize that their country is really high-tech. As explained by Sharp, there was indeed a “rapid expansion of Israel's hi-tech sector in the 1990s (sparked partially by U.S.-Israeli scientific cooperation)” (2010 1). Because technology is omnipresent in their lives, television, phones, or any other technological devices keep interrupting the characters or the narrator, which illustrates the way it sometimes interrupts us in real life as well.

Friedman calls montage “Foer’s favorite method of describing a situation” because he uses it incessantly. According to him, as a result, “[c]onversations, scenes, even different worlds overlap and interpenetrate” in *Here I Am*. Friedman explains that, for example, “Sam’s physical world is interrupted by life in his virtual world Other Life”:

> Is this thing ever gonna start?

Sam was brought back to the other side of the screen by a knocking. (69)

Similarly, “within Other Life, the stream of text conversations interrupt and ignore one another and Sam” (Friedman). This can be noticed in the following fragment:

> Today Samanta becomes a woman.

> There’s more than one way to open a window.

> She’s having her period?

> Imagine thousands of phones washed up on the beach.

> Love letters in digital bottles.

> Why imagine? Go to India.

> Today she’s becoming a Jewish woman.

> I’m on an Amtrak, too!

> A Jewish woman how?

> More like hate mail.

> Let’s not figure out if we’re on the same train, OK? (63)

In addition to virtual dialogues and family discussions, different accounts, extra narrative documents, text messages as well as flashbacks and interior monologues overlap in the novel.

Friedman explains that Sergei Eisenstein, the Russian film director and theorist, defined montage as “an idea that arises from the collision of independent shots [in which] each sequential element is perceived not *next* to the other, but on *top* of the other”. In his view, this is exactly what Foer does, “introducing one subject and then cutting away to another before joining them both with a punch line of collocation”. Because of Foer’s constant use of montages, the various plots found in the novel become intertwined. No matter how unrelated two topics may appear, Foer always finds a way to connect them. As explained by Menaker, all the characters are faced with different dilemmas, and the different “plot threads” appear and disappear through the novel but Foer always finds a way to reintroduce them thanks to a next chapter, a paragraph, or sometimes even simply a sentence or a word. A noticeable effect is that it is impossible for the reader to forget about the Blochs’ domestic problems, as Foer insistently goes back to them. Equally, he constantly goes back, in one form or another, to the topic of Israel, which is therefore always present in the reader’s mind as well.

Friedman argues that, through using montages, the author “does succeed in breaking down the dichotomies of Jew or American, Israeli or Jew, domestic or epic, dog or man”. By finding a way to link them in the text, it is possible to find some connection between all those seemingly different experiences. Foer manages to associate elements that appear to be totally different, such as a tragic event in Israel and a domestic crisis. Friedman believes that one of the ways he destroys those oppositions is “by bringing into question the multiple levels of reality that he presents”. For example, Friedman mentions the experiences “lived” on Other Life, or the UN Model school trip Sam takes part in: “Neither of these ‘games’ is real, but neither is it all game either: their fictions are deeply felt”. Sam and Max even refuse to call Other Life “a game”: “‘It’s not a game.’ Max says ‘It’s a community’” (161). The boys also insist on the fact that Sam does not “play” Other Life but “lives” it and Sam believes to have “fake friends” at school, and “real friends” in Other Life (80), which is described as “real unreal life” (366). For Sam, Other Life is as real as non-virtual life, since it generates real feelings and emotions. Moreover, the narrator highlights that Other Life, just like life, “was happening even when no one was present” (245) and there are even a few moments when real and virtual worlds meet: “It was always dusk in Other Life, so once every day the ‘other time’ corresponded to the ‘real time’ of its citizens” (62).

Foer goes even further in blurring the line between the real and virtual through different narrative techniques. Samanta, Sam's avatar, is personified and sometimes becomes the center of focalization. Samanta's actions are described in a way that makes her appear as another person than Sam: "While Sam waited on the bench outside Rabbi Singer's office, Samanta approached the bimah" (14). Max also emphasizes that the avatar and Sam are not the same person:

"Which one is Sam?"

"None."

"Which is Sam's person?"

"His avatar?" (162)

Besides, the narrator describes what Samanta, and not Sam, sees and feels in the game:

Samanta looked up.

[...]

She looked out upon the congregation of avatars. They were trustworthy, generous, fundamentally nice unreal people. (87).

Furthermore, in the beginning of the novel, Sam describes his mind with words from computer technology: "He could have said that, but he didn't. He also could have explained why nothing was as it seemed. But he didn't. Instead, he just took it, as he always did in life on the crap side of the screen" (5). The fact that virtual terms can be used to describe real life conveys the message that there is no clear line that separates virtual and non-virtual reality and that elements that first appear binary may share some similarities.

In summary, in contrast with Roth, Foer discusses Israel without ever moving the action there. He manages to do so thanks to the use of different literary strategies such as metaphors, dialogues, the introduction of news reports, text messages, chats, interviews, flashbacks, and a dystopian plot. All those elements are brought together thanks to a literary technique called montage. This allows Foer to suppress the opposition between apparently opposed elements, such as Jacob's family problems and the Israeli crisis. As a result, Foer blurs the line between the different plots of the novel and, consequently, issues related to Israel and the events happening in the Middle East keep coming back in the reader's mind.

4.2. The American Jewish Identity

4.2.1. Choosing Between Identities

It could be argued that the technique of montage is also used to convey the characters' torn identities. The fact that *Here I Am* assembles distinct elements by way of juxtaposition reflects the way the characters feel about their identities. In particular, Jacob has developed a split identity and struggles to find a way of assembling elements that appear complicated to combine, such as being both Jewish and American, for example. In fact, each of the Bloch family members is facing an identity crisis. Jacob is experiencing a major midlife crisis and questions every part of his identity while Sam, in the middle of puberty, is also dealing with a plural identity. Scott observes that he "literally – which is to say virtually – splits himself in two, living much of the time as and through a female computer-game avatar named Samanta". Additionally, Isaac is considering killing himself, Julia is feeling unhappy in her marriage, Max is going through an existential crisis as well, and Benjy is a young kid who incessantly questions the world, in addition to going through some strange eating habits phase. It can be concluded that each member of the family, regardless of the generation to which they belong, deals with a split identity.

One common element between the different characters is the fact that their identity is defined by the feeling of being both *Jewish* and *American*. In Foer's novel, the development of a sense of Americanness among the Blochs can be traced back to Isaac's arrival in America. At the end of World War II, Isaac and his brother Benny Blumenberg left Europe on different boats, bringing one of them to America, and the other to the newly established state of Israel. The two brothers had left their Galician shtetl together, where their parents and five other brothers perished at the hands of the Nazis. To avoid their fate, they hid in a hole for more than two hundred days and lived in forests. Their immigration is the ending point of years of fear and survival, and the starting point of a new life for both of them, though in different places.

The first brother, Isaac, began a whole new life in America under the name "Isaac Bloch". The novel emphasizes that Isaac is extremely thankful for America's hospitality, which is the place that enabled him to rebuild a family, despite the Nazis' attempt to destroy it:

German horticulturalists had pruned Isaac's family tree all the way back to the Galician soil. But with luck and intuition and no help from above, he had transplanted its roots into the sidewalks of Washington, D.C., and lived to see it regrow limbs. And unless America turned on the Jews – *until*, his son, Irv, would correct – the tree would continue to branch and sprout. (3-4)

Full of gratitude, Isaac and his family adapted to their new country and started to feel American. The narrator explains that Isaac learned English and started saving, and his son, Irv, grew up in Washington D.C., where he learned the rules of baseball, among other American elements. Isaac is depicted as idealizing the land that welcomed him and keeps reminding the next generations of it: “Everything was something never to remember, or never to forget, and what America had done for them was retold and retold” (220). Jacob, Irv's son, also grew up listening to his grandfather's stories of America's glory. Some years later, it was his turn to raise his children in America, and together with his wife Julia, they raised them in a secular Jewish family. When he talks with his family, Jacob makes many references to American films, producers, actors and athletes, or even politicians: “The only time in his life he impersonated Nixon: ‘I am not a crook!’” (55) . Consequently, the readers are brought to acknowledge that American culture has become a significant part of the characters' identities.

Their identity is highly complex and involves more aspects than being only American and Jewish. In the chapter “The Bible”, Jacob underlines that his father, Irv Bloch, was “the first person in [their] family to have “an ‘English name’ and a ‘Hebrew’ name”” (486). This illustrates the double identity of the Bloch family members. But according to Jacob's next words, their conception of self cannot be reduced to two fragments of identity only, which leads to dilemmas: “The farther we got from Europe, the more identities we had to choose between” (486). Besides their American Jewish identity, the family's Galician roots are also highlighted on several occasions. In addition to being faithful to their Jewishness, their Americanness and their family roots, the characters are also faced with the duty of being a parent, a husband or a wife, a (grand)son or a (grand)daughter, the owner of a pet, having a job, values, ideologies, and everything else that belongs to their identity.

Jacob is particularly torn by the “many identities they have to choose between”. His identity is divided between being both American and Jewish, but also being Isaac's grandson, Irv's son, Sam, Max and Benjy's father, Julia's husband, Argus' master, and so on. Because he does not

manage to be wholly present for all of them at the same time, he has the feeling that he constantly has to choose between the different parts of his identity. In Scott's words, he is a man who is "perpetually stuck in the middle". This is actually a problem that he attempts to overcome with the help of his psychologist, who calls this phenomenon "binary thinking" (193). This means that Jacob always tends to consider only two options and thereby creates a false dilemma, since in reality, there can be more options. The comment "Why so binary?" interrupts the text a few times in the novel as if the psychologist's voice kept coming back in Jacob's mind: "Did everyone win, or did everyone lose? Why so binary?" (222). By extension, this could also apply to his problems of identity: why would one have to choose between two parts of their identity, such as being a father or a husband, or being Jewish or American?

Foer's use of intertextuality plays a considerable role in describing Jacob's identity crisis. Menaker (2016) notes that, though containing similar post-modern techniques than Foer's two earlier fictional works, *Here I Am* "draws more explicitly from older sources". The author uses sources such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Homer's *Odyssey*, but the most obvious and important one is the Bible. The title "Here I Am" comes directly from an episode of *The Book of Genesis*, in which God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. This intertextual reference directly highlights the central theme of the novel: duty and dilemma. As a matter of fact, Abraham is confronted with a terrible dilemma because he has the duty to obey God but also to protect his son. To choose one of them would mean to abandon the other, since any decision he makes would imply to either disobey God or to sacrifice his son. In *Here I Am*, Jacob is faced with duty and dilemma all the time, having to stand for someone at the expense of someone else or himself. Moreover, as highlighted by Scott, this is not restricted to Jacob only, since "[t]he novel as a whole takes this theme of duty and dilemma and applies it to many situations". For example, Sam is confronted with the dilemma of going through his bar mitzvah or not, Isaac hesitates between moving to the Jewish home or killing himself, and Julia does not know how to reveal her separation to her children.

The portion of the Torah which deals with the Binding of Isaac is the one that Sam decides to "read" at his avatar's virtual bat mitzvah. He explains that while most people assume Abraham's test is to sacrifice his son, he believes that the test is actually the way he answers when people call him. When God said "Abraham!", Abraham responded "Here I Am", and when his son, Isaac, said

“My father!”, Abraham also responded “Here I Am”. To answer God and Isaac’s calls, Abraham directly used a statement, rather than a question. Not even once did he ask “what do you want from me?” before saying “Here I Am”. Therefore “[w]hatever God needs or wants, Abraham is wholly present for Him, without conditions or reservations or need for explanation” (102), as well as for his son. However, Abraham’s full commitment is contradictory because it is impossible to show commitment for both God and Isaac, since God asks him to sacrifice his son, and Isaac wants to survive.

In an interview for Penguin Books UK, Foer explained that Abraham’s full commitment is particularly problematic for Jacob because he does not know how to “reconcile his needs and the needs of others or the needs of his children and his wife”. In other words, unlike Abraham, he does not manage to be wholly present for everyone at the same time. His lack of determination is epitomized by his reaction when Sam gets into troubles at school. The first chapter describes Julia and Jacob’s meeting with Rabbi Singer, during which they discuss a list of racist, anti-Semitic and misogynist words written by Sam. Both Julia and Jacob wish they were doing something else: “They didn’t want to be there. No one wanted to be there” (5). This sentence highlights again the theme of duty since, as parents, they have the moral obligation to be there for their son, even if they wish they were doing something else. However, they fail to be wholly present for Sam because they refuse to believe his claims of innocence. This is the first dilemma Jacob is faced with in the novel. He wants to stand up for his son but is forced to choose between his identity as a father and a husband and decides to support his wife’s decision, who believes Sam is guilty and should apologize. To be fully committed to both of them at the same time proves impossible.

As explained by Sam, while Abraham successfully passed the test, his parents did not. When they learned about his troubles at school, they did not tell him “Here I Am”, but asked “What did you do?” (103) instead. Consequently, they failed the test. The question “What did you” highly contrasts with the statement “Here I Am”, since it is past-oriented and demonstrates some uncertainty. “Here I Am”, by contrast, expresses assertion and is oriented towards the present and the future. In his novel, Foer seems to argue that in a way, the Jewish community acts like Sam’s parents. They keep looking back at the past and question what has happened to them, instead of focusing on the future. There is also considerable uncertainty about the Jewish identity, since they have different definitions of Jewishness. As explained above, different groups coexist within the

Jewish community and they have different responses to what being Jewish means to them. In *Here I Am*, this finds expression in the way Jacob questions the Jewish part of his identity. His personal identity crisis reflects the larger Jewish identity crisis.

Jacob, in addition to struggling to reconcile his needs with the ones of his family, is also faced with the difficulty of being committed to his Jewishness and to Israel as a nation. As highlighted by Scott, *Here I Am* “asks how an individual person—a man, to be precise—can exist in two realms at once, in the broad, rushing stream of collective history and in the kiddie pool of his own special qualms and urges”. It asks how someone can be fully committed to their family, as well as their religion, their nation, their political ideas, and their personal values. Managing to be committed to his Jewishness is particularly challenging for Jacob because he often questions what being Jewish exactly means to him. As highlighted in Scott’s review, this is also the case of many modern American Jews:

For modern American Jews, bred in an atmosphere of religious pluralism and consumerist freedom of choice, the question of what it is to be Jewish grows more complicated with every generation. Does the essence of Jewishness dwell in religious observance or ethical questioning? In obedience to Jewish law or a taste for certain jokes and foodstuffs? In reverence for your parents or rebellion against them? And while we’re at it (deep breath, heavy sigh, clenched teeth): What about Israel?

Jacob’s conception of Jewish identity is further complicated by the fact that his father and his Israeli cousins have a different definition of Jewishness than him.

In her article “Here I Am? Jonathan Safran Foer’s Reflection on the American-Jewish Identity” published in *The Cornell Daily Sun*, Lindenfeld observes that Jacob “could most accurately be described as secular”, which is also the case of most American Jews, according to her. She explains that this can be concluded by different elements, such as the fact that Jacob, his wife and their children do not observe Shabbat anymore or consume some products that are “major no-nos in the Kosher world”. More importantly, they do not appear to have any religious faith and want their children to be atheists as well. Since Jewishness has been largely defined by its religious aspects for many years, it is not surprising that contemporary secular Jews struggle to define their identity.

As explained by the Pew research center, Jews with no religion, also called “secular Jews” or “cultural Jews”, include the ones who declare they are “atheist, agnostic or nothing in particular,

but who have a Jewish parent or were raised Jewish and who still consider themselves Jewish in some way”. This definition corresponds perfectly to Jacob in *Here I Am*, since secularization does not prevent his family from feeling Jewish and valuing their Jewishness. It can be noticed that, despite doubting the existence of any God, they put strong emphasis on the symbolic meaning of ceremonies and rituals, including a few religious ones, such as their sons’ circumcision and bar mitzvahs. They believe that these rituals should be maintained because they are part of their Jewish identity, even if they are not always able to give a convincing explanation to their children:

“But the rite of passage is nonnegotiable,” Sam confirmed.

“Yes,” Jacob said, “that’s correct.”

“Because it was nonnegotiable for you, because it was nonnegotiable for –”

“Correct again. That’s what Jewish people do.”

“Not negotiate?”

“Have bar mitzvahs.” (296)

This illustrates that it is sometimes difficult to pass on traditions, since the importance we attach to them comes from intuition and cannot be explained in a rational way. In spite of this, rituals and ceremonies have been kept alive from generation to generation, even among secular families. This is also the case in the Blochs’ family, since the novel emphasizes that Max and Benjy, like their brother Sam, will ultimately decide to have a bar mitzvah.

Though sociological surveys show that most American Jews believe religion is not the most essential element to describe Jewishness, Jacob does not seem to be confident about the fact that being secular does not necessarily mean being less authentically Jewish. As a secular Jew, he sometimes seems to be ashamed of this classification and therefore “feels the need to compensate for it” (Lindenfeld). To maintain Jewish rituals in his family and respect a few Jewish commandments is Jacob’s way to honour his Jewishness, despite his status as a non-believing Jew. Moreover, as highlighted by the Pew study, older generations give more importance to the religious aspect of Jewishness. This also appears to be the case in *Here I Am*, in which Isaac and Irv appear to care more about respecting the Jewish law. As a result, Jacob feels forced to respect Jewish commandments to please his grandfather by organizing his son’s bar mitzvah, for example. He has also transmitted this feeling to his son Sam who “despite identifying as an atheist, inexplicably feels the need to lie when asked by his great-grandfather if his middle-school girlfriend is Jewish”

(Lindenfeld). This demonstrates again that the desire to preserve traditions is transmitted through generations and is often inexplicable.

Grady argues that “the characters of *Here I Am* try to replace religion with family”. He observes that Jacob is not personally religious, but “[i]nstead, he tries to make his family his religion”. From the beginning of their relationship, Julia and himself create a “religion for two”, with their own rituals and traditions that bring their family closer to each other:

[...] ritualized kisses and sunset walks, a policy of radical and complete honesty, Shabbat readings of love letters and poetry. And as they had children, they expanded their rites to include ritualized bedtimes, whispered parental praise, an after-dinner ceremony of walking through the house with closed eyes. (Grady)

However, the times they perform their family rituals become increasingly rare, which both Julia and Jacob regret. As a result, their relationship gradually deteriorates: “The inside of life became far smaller than the outside, creating a cavity, an emptiness. Which is why the bar mitzvah felt so important: it was the final thread of the frayed tether” (13). They realize how fragile their marriage has become and place some hope in the bar mitzvah, which they believe could bring them closer again. For Jacob, rituals and ceremonies are also the only times when he can connect with the members of his diasporic family: “All the local cousins were at the funeral, and a few older, zanier Jews came in from New York, Philly, and Chicago. Jacob had met these people throughout his life, but only at rites of passage – bar mitzvahs, weddings, funerals” (341). The novel depicts rituals as being important for a family, since they allow its members to stay connected.

According to Menaker, by creating a disrupted text, Foer “breaks things in the interest of making them whole again”. In *Here I Am*, he explores how Jacob can manage to combine the different parts of his identity. Moreover, he presents American Jews as having a torn identity because, in addition to their family roots and their American nationality, they also feel Jewish but struggle to define this Jewishness. He faces Jacob with different crises to make him reassemble the Jewish elements that he considers as important and wants to pass on to Sam, Max, and Benjy. For Jacob, as a secular Jew, strictly religious aspects have become less essential, but he still believes that maintaining old traditions is important. The novel emphasizes the importance of family and the role that rituals and ceremonies can play in bringing its members together, as they connect

generations as well as family members spread across the world. For Jacob, family seems to be the most important aspect of his life.

During Samanta's bat mitzvah speech, Sam explained that the portion of the Torah about Isaac's sacrifice is about many things but "it is primarily about who we are wholly there for, and how that, more than anything else defines our identity" (103). At the end, Jacob decides not to go to Israel but to stay in America because he wants to be with his family. Therefore, what truly defines his identity is neither religion nor nationality, but family. They are the people he wants to be wholly there for. Whilst Jacob had been avoiding this moment since the beginning of the story, the novel ends with the moment when he finally decides to put down his old suffering dog: "He told the vet: I'm ready" (571). This concluding sentence shows that Jacob has finally stopped to be constantly hesitating and is finally ready to say "Here I Am" to someone.

4.2.2. Israel's Heroism versus America's Great Flatness

The confrontation between Tamir and Jacob, as well as their sons, draws attention to a few striking differences between American and Israeli Jews. Tamir and Jacob's lives in America and Israel are depicted as being significantly different. The novel highlights that, already during their childhood and youth, there was a "chasm between their life experiences" (223). Tamir became independent faster than Jacob, going through significant experiences before him, such as drinking alcohol, discovering sexuality and love, traveling, and so on. Even before adulthood, Tamir is already faced with danger, is given an M16, and is ready to fight for his homeland, which highly contrasts with Jacob's lifestyle as a young American. Jacob grew up in a safer environment that allowed him to be a teenager, while Tamir was forced to become an adult faster.

Life in America, though safer, appears dull in Jacob's eyes when compared to life in Israel, which is more intense. This is illustrated by his visit to his cousins' house, when Jacob's dad insists on visiting the shelter. Though the presence of this shelter is a reminder that the threat of war is ever-present in Israel, Jacob and his dad are quite excited about exploring it. Jacob does not want to leave and wish he could "spend his remaining time in Israel exploring every inch of the room, learning it, learning himself in it, simply being there" (257). Despite being aware of the fact that their cousins do not want to go in the shelter because it reminds them of the danger they are

constantly facing, Jacob and Irv show excitement during their visit and are even envious of this room.

Once older, Jacob deplores the fact that he never feels fully alive and, consequently, is constantly looking for excitement and adventure. The novel emphasizes that the only time he felt like living fully was when he sneaked in the lion's enclosure of a zoo with his cousin Tamir. He describes this episode as the moment when he stood at the top of a mountain, contemplating "the great flatness" that will characterize the rest of his life (391). He wishes he could go back to that feeling and is bored with his simple life as a husband and a father. In the middle of a mid-life crisis, he feels nostalgia for enchantment. When he goes to the airport with the determination to fly to Israel to join the war, he does get that feeling again: "I had written books and screenplays my entire adult life, but it was the first time I'd felt like a character inside one – that the scale of my tchotchke existence, the *drama* of living, finally befitted the privilege of being alive" (485). In his view, Israel offers an exciting life which allows to feel fully alive, while his own life in America has become dull and uninteresting.

However, the novel emphasizes that to envy his cousins' life in Israel is quite unreasonable. As a matter of fact, while America offers some safety to his family, the Israelis are surrounded by conflict and violence. The following sentence, for example, is quite ironic: "He'd fought for his homeland, while Jacob spent entire nights debating whether that stupid *New Yorker* poster where New York is bigger than everything else would look better on this wall or that one. Tamir tried not to get killed, while Jacob tried not to *die* (my emphasis) of boredom" (224). The choice of the hyperbole "die of boredom" just after the word "killed" brings attention to the fact that Tamir literally risks his life, while Jacob does not face any real danger. At some point, Jacob mentions the possibility that distance and absence are the reason why his grandfather favors his cousin over him: "Maybe it was the distance Isaac loved. Maybe the absence allowed for a mythology, while Jacob was cursed to be judged by the increments he fell short of perfect menschiness" (225). Jacob believes that absence can lead to the creation of a mythology. It is interesting to notice that this is also a good explanation for his perception of Israel as a place where people achieve a more exciting and fuller life.

Tamir also highlights that Jacob should be grateful to be safe in America and seems to despise his need for drama. He believes that Jacob puts too much emphasis on feeling, while he

should put it on peace instead. Besides, he emphasizes that all the small things that characterize Jacob's life matter: "If one thing matters, everything matters. [...] Lo mein matters. Stupid, dirty jokes matter. Firm mattresses and soft sheets matter. [...] Springsteen. A heated toilet seat matters. The small things: changing a lightbulb, losing to your child at basketball, driving nowhere. There's your Great Flatness" (407). At the end of the novel, Jacob also seems to come to that conclusion. When his marriage is about to end, he realizes that he could lose all those little things of the everyday family life that he considers as his Great Flatness, but that are actually what matters most to him. While he finally feels "the privilege of being alive" again before joining the war in Israel, he ultimately decides that going back to his family is more important.

At some point, Jacob describes his need to live fully as resulting from, at least in part, his Jewishness and the Holocaust trauma. He believes that his Jewish identity comes with many obligations and describes "Expectations. Prescriptions. Commandments. Wanting to please everyone." as "Jewish nails driven through [his] palms" (407). In addition to that, there is also the feeling of having to live "Jewishly in some demented effort to redeem the suffering that made your increasingly alienating life possible" (408). As a child, mostly because of the numerous Holocaust stories he was told, he grew up with the idea that he was extremely lucky to be able to do what other Jewish kids will never have the chance to do:

"Did you ever have to read that poem, or journal entry, or whatever, by the kid who died in Auschwitz? Or maybe Treblinka? Not really the important detail, I just . . . The one about 'Next time you throw a ball, throw it for me'?"

[...]

"I must have heard it a thousand times. It was the theme song of Jewish education, and it ruined everything. Not because every time you throw a ball you're thinking of the corpse of a kid who should have been you, but because sometimes you just want to veg out in front of shitty TV, and instead you think, 'I should really go throw a ball.'" (407 – 408)

As a result, he feels the need to live a worthy life and to enjoy it deeply. It does not seem to be a concern for Tamir, who is living in Israel, a place where Jewish people devote much of their time to the aim of offering a safe home for the Jews. This, from a Zionist perspective, can be seen as the best way to honor Holocaust victims.

When his Israeli cousins arrive in America in the middle of Jacob's midlife and marriage crisis, he starts to compare himself to Tamir. Even physically, they are said to be completely different: "Here was someone with whom Jacob shared more genetic material than just about anyone else on earth, and yet how many passersby would even guess they were related?" (229). The contrast between the Israeli and American part of the family is even more striking when comparing the members of the younger generation. One important element within *Here I Am* is Sam's passage to manhood, Jacob's eldest son, which is underlined by the preparation of his bar mitzvah. While Sam spends most of his time attempting to escape reality on a virtual game called *Other Life*, Tamir's first son, Noam, is already in the army. His second son, Barak, accompanies Tamir to America, which allows the narrator to compare him to Max during their first meeting. Barak surprisingly already looks like a man, making Max look smaller than what he really is, which everyone seems to notice: "Among his brothers, and between haircuts, Max was boy enough. But Barak made him seem small, weak, ungendered" (230). Though being both only kids, Barak looks already quite tougher than Max. Generally speaking, the Israeli characters are described as being muscular, hairy and tall.

The Israeli characters' physical appearance reflects the way values have evolved in their country. In her article "Militarization and Gender: The Israeli Experience", Golan explains that the militarization of society in Israel reinforces gender roles and stereotypes. Because of the compulsory service for Jewish citizens, the military is central "in Israeli society and in the lives of almost all its citizens" (Golan 115). As a result, they are influenced by the norms and values of the military during their passage to adulthood. Moreover, men later "continue to serve, regularly and actively, throughout most of their adult lives" (Golan 115). Because of its central place in Israeli society, the army perpetuates and reinforces "the stereotypical role of women as subordinate, subservient, superfluous, [...] vulnerable and in need of protection" (Golan 115-116). In Israeli society, male qualities are highly valued. Golan explains that "such a situation inculcates and venerates 'military' traits: strength, force, aggressiveness, bravery. That is, the very traits generally associated with masculinity or the male stereotype" (Golan 117). As a result, the Israeli society values virility and strength over traits that are often described as more feminine such as being peaceful, moral and caring (Golan 119).

For American Jews, by contrast, the military does not have a central position in their life. Consequently, the values listed above are not dominant in their community, and they are more influenced by the democratic and liberal values that characterize America. By accentuating the fact that American Jewish characters are less virile, less muscular and smaller than the Israelis, the novel highlights that they are influenced by different values. The physical distance between the Blochs and the Israelis can also be interpreted as a metaphor for the actual distance that separates their countries, as well as the emotional distance between them. Jacob later emphasizes the differences between Tamir and himself, and the fact that they disagree on many topics and sometimes do not manage to understand each other: “Google knew how far Tel Aviv was from Washington, and a tape measure could determine the width of the table, but Jacob couldn’t even approximate his emotional distance from Tamir. He wondered: Do we understand each other? Or are we near-strangers, just assuming and pretending?” (382). The emotional distance, as opposed to the distance between their countries is unmeasurable, but it is there, and results from their different lifestyles and values.

Furthermore, the novel emphasizes that there is some competition between Jacob and Tamir and, by extension, between Israeli and American Jews. This is mostly noticeable in the way they embellish their lives, their houses, and their countries. Tamir’s financial success sometimes makes Jacob feel jealous of his cousin, envying his houses, cars, girls, and even his appearance. Moreover, there seems to be some conflict about receiving recognition and respect from their elders. When Irv defends Tamir against Jacob, it is said that he is “creating sides by choosing one of them” (231). Also, Jacob believes that Isaac always favored Tamir, which he cannot understand, as he is the one who takes the most care of him:

“[...] Everyone ignored Isaac, but no one less than Jacob, and no one more than Tamir. Yet Isaac would have *traded* (my emphasis) six Jacobs for five Tamirs.

Tamir. Now, he’s a good grandson.

Even if he wasn’t all that good, or in any way his grandson. (225)

To use the word “traded” gives some materialistic aspect to this sentence. Tamir is also a materialistic person, since all the things he is proud of, like cars, pieces of furniture, money, and so on, are material. Later, during the scene involving the American filmmaker Stephen Spielberg, Jacob denounces some competition between the American and Israeli Jews in general. When Tamir

refuses to acknowledge that he knows who the American star is, Jacob accuses him of lying because it is his “bizarre Israeli way of diminishing the achievements of American Jews” (236). Unlike Tamir, Jacob’s pride does not result from some material aspects but rather from the Jewish American artistic achievements, which shows again some differences in values between them.

The novel also addresses the questions of authenticity, as there is some competition about who is being a good Jew between the Blochs and the Blumenbergs. When he compares his family to the Blumenbergs, Isaac feels the need to reaffirm that the way they are living their Jewish life is better than the Israelis’:

And when they left, he’d spend twice as long as their visit bemoaning how big-headed and tiny-minded they were, how American Jews were Jews and the Israeli crackpots were Hebrews – people who, given their way, would sacrifice animals and serve kings. (220)

From Isaac’s point of view, Israeli Jews have an extremely radical conception of Judaism, and this leads him to call them “Israeli crackpots”. He accuses them of being archaic by referring to them as “Hebrews” and describes them as observing old practices. This demonstrates that, in his view, they have not evolved over time, as opposed to them, who adapted to the contemporary society in America. Furthermore, when Tamir visits Jacob, the reader realizes that he does not respect a commandment that the Blochs, though being secularized and adapted to the American lifestyle, still give significant importance to. As a matter of fact, Tamir’s family members eat pork. While the Blochs allow themselves to eat some shrimps on occasion, they still respect the Jewish restriction on the consumption of pork. When Tamir chooses to order pork in front of Irv, he cannot help showing some displeasure. Moreover, Irv shows contempt for Tamir’s choice to buy German furniture: German foosball tables, German bathrooms, “Everything made in Germany” (242). When hearing the word “German”, Irv groans, demonstrating his belief that Jewish people should not buy German products. Those disagreements demonstrate that the Jewish heritage has evolved in different directions and that they have now different cultural memories and influences.

In her article, Zoe Lindenfeld analyses the novel on basis of her personal experience as an American Jew, with an emphasis on the relationship between Israel and the characters. She highlights the fact that in the post ten years, Israel “has, in a sense, become synonymous with ‘political’” and now always leads to debate. However, Foer does not directly deal with the political

debates around Israel and rather connects it to “the phenomenon of feeling Jewish in America, something very separate, in Safran Foer’s construction, from merely being a Jew” (Lindenfeld). By doing so, he introduces what Lindenfeld describes as some kind of “apolitical side to Israel” in *Here I Am*.

According to Lindenfeld, Foer “forms a conception of Israel separate from the hotbed of political debate: he paints it as a place of freedom for the Jewish identity that starkly contrasts with the experience of many American Jews” (Lindenfeld). She explains that “whereas Jacob is quietly embarrassed by his lack of religious observance, Tam[i]r flaunts his disregard for Jewish laws”. For example, he does not show any hesitation or guilt about eating pork in front of his cousin and uncle. According to Lindenfeld, the reason Tamir does not feel the need to prove his Jewishness is that “living in Israel enabled every life experience to be inextricably connected to it”. As a result, Tamir is not faced with the problems of divided identity that some American Jews struggle with, since he can “just be Jewish without having to feel Jewish” (Lindenfeld). This explanation is similar to the one given by Pew about the fact that secular Jews are more religiously observant in Israel than American because “Jewish observance is more ingrained in daily life” there. For Tamir, being Jewish is not only a part of his identity that he must reconcile with other cultural references, it is “his identity, and the backdrop to which every other aspect of his life played out” (Lindenfeld), which Jacob envies a lot.

Foer, like Isaac, reaffirms the specificity of Jewish life in America. Scott argues that *Here I Am* cannot be called “anti-Zionist” but rather “counter-Zionist”. This means that “like *Operation Shylock* but even more insistently, it locates within the American Jewish experience a plausible counter-Zionism, a mode of Jewish identity that Foer refuses to regard as less authentic or heroic than the Israeli version”. In his view, *Here I Am* demonstrates how American Jews like Jacob and Julia “tend to [their] kids, [their] careers, and [their] libidos, and by means of these commitments sustain [their] beautiful Jewish souls”. Foer’s novel reasserts a sense of Jewishness but questions if there is really an authentic Jewish identity. Again, to people who oppose authentic Jewishness to American lifestyle, the question “why so binary?” could be asked. The novel demonstrates that one can live a worthy Jewish life without being a strong, virile, and heroic person, but simply being there for their family. In Scott’s words *Here I Am* is “a passionate hymn to complacency, a wildly overreaching defense of modesty and caution; a big, bombastic celebration of the smallness of life”.

4.3. The Characters' Attitude Towards the State of Israel

4.3.1. Jewish Homes and Homelands

The Blochs belong to a diasporic family which is extremely divided, since their relatives live in different countries all over the world. This is highlighted in the novel by the theme chosen for Sam's bar mitzvah: "The theme [...] would be Sam's Family's Diaspora. [...] They would have tables representing each of the countries the family had been dispersed to – America, Brazil, Argentina, Spain, Australia, South Africa, Israel, Canada – and instead of seating cards, each guest would receive a 'passport' to one of the nations" (196). They have established a home in different places and, as can be noticed when comparing Tamir and Jacob, they have consequently developed different identities and values. Moreover, their nuclear family is also on the verge of collapse, as the result of Jacob and Julia's impending separation. Their worries about the consequences of their divorce for their children express the fear that it would further complicate their notion of identity since, in the event of a divorce, they would literally be divided between two different homes.

Julia's main struggle is to determine whether or not a family can still be a family even when living in two different houses. She is an architect and keeps building "imaginary homes for one" (41), but they remain only fantasies. She feels extremely guilty about her wish to live on her own because she thinks that by getting a divorce, she is destroying her family and giving up on her kids: "What this is going to do to them" and "[w]hat seeing them half the time" is going to do to them, as parents, are her major concerns (47). Jacob is also extremely worried about destroying his home and family by ending his marriage. Eventually, Julia comes to the conclusion that the best option for all of them is a divorce, but she feels the need to explain to her sons that "[s]ome families live in two houses" (318). By extension, this question also applies to the Blumenbergs and Blochs' family: can they still be a family if they live in two different homes, Israel and America?

The Blochs' home and the Blumenbergs' home stand for the American and Jewish homeland. The Americans as well as the Israelis appear to care a lot about how the other side of the family perceives their homes. In particular, Tamir tries to present his home and his country in a positive light. During his visit to America, he insists on persuading Jacob that his home in Israel is the best, giving a full description of his huge magnificent apartment and its incredible pieces of furniture. He claims to have found the best kind of craftsmanship and puts particular emphasis on the fact

that it could never be found in America. This further demonstrates the presence of some competition between them. Moreover, the reader can notice again that Tamir is depicted as being extremely materialistic.

In *Here I Am*, the Israeli characters' homes also display the intensity of life in Israel, as opposed to America. Their different attitudes towards television reflect that they are living in considerably different places: "At home, the Blochs made a point of trying not to turn on the TV. The Blumenbergs made a point of trying not to turn it off" (222). This illustrates the fact that Israelis could be faced with important news and images that are difficult to watch every single day. Foer's novel depicts television as something that is seen as entertainment in America, a distraction from what really matters, such as education or family. For the Israeli characters, by contrast, it is a useful source of knowledge to keep them up to date and be warned in case of imminent danger. Moreover, in the Israeli houses, including Tamir's current as well as childhood house, there is a bomb shelter because, as emphasized by Isaac's cousin Shlomo, it is stipulated by the law. This also demonstrates the threatening constant possibility of danger in Israel.

In the novel, the possible destruction of the homeland is compared with Jacob and Julia's troubles at home. Both the war and the divorce can be understood as a metaphor for the other. Foer emphasizes this comparison by using military terms to describe Jacob and Julia's marriage destruction:

It felt like there were so many emotional land mines; they moved through the hours and rooms on their hearts' tiptoes, with large earphones connected to sensitive metal detectors that could pick up traces of buried feeling – if at the expense of blocking out the rest of life [...] All that tiptoeing, all that precious overinterpreting and evading, and it wasn't a minefield at all. It was a Civil War battlefield. (131)

Moreover, Sam, Max, and Benjy can be compared to a buffer state during a war since, as noted by R. Larson, they "have become buffers between their parents, not so much in a vicious state that often evolves in troubled marriages, but possibilities for the parents to avoid one another". Seen in that light, a divorce and a war share many common elements.

Also, the divorce and the war have a similar effect on the characters. The possible destruction of Israel makes Jacob reconsider his duties as a Jew as well as the question of the homeland. Similarly, the Blochs' notion of home is challenged by the possibility of ending their marriage.

Clark describes *Here I Am* as a novel dealing with, among others, “the intimate dissection of a family that has ceased to become a home for its member” (Clark). Through the whole book, there is an obsession with the idea of home. The characters keep questioning what makes a home great and go as far as wondering what it would be for a bird (158). For them, to build a great home does not merely depend on furniture and material aspects. When Jacob looks for a new house, he declares that the house that he and Julia lived in was “the best house” (443) and when he moves in his new house, he does not feel home but knows that “[i]n time, his house would resemble his home” (538). It is the beautiful moments its inhabitants spend together that transforms a house into a good home, and not its furniture or architecture. This obsession with home has the effect of bringing the theme of the homeland to the foreground and debates about Israel between Tamir and Jacob make that point even more explicit.

The most difficult period for Jacob is said to be the time he spends between houses, illustrating how hard it is not to have a place that you consider as home. The difficulty of transition from one home to another and the time needed to transform a house – or a country – into a home accurately describe important moments during a divorce, but also during immigration. It takes some time, but the new country can become home, as America did for some diasporic Jews like the Blochs. The story about Isaac and Irv moving away from their Galician home after the Holocaust to rebuild their family in America and Israel can be seen as a *mise-en-abîme*, i.e. a story within a story. Like *Here I Am*, this is also a story about losing home and having to build a new one somewhere else.

Here I Am, though dealing with many other themes, is a novel that considers the topic of Jewish Diaspora and the concepts of home and homeland. As explained above, the characters’ divided identity is even more complicated by the fact that other Jewish people have different definitions of Jewishness than them. An important point is that, in the view of some Jewish people, Israel is expected to be considered as the genuine Jewish homeland, while the Blochs’ home is in America. As described by Scott, “[t]heir experiences of home are shadowed by terrible memories of Europe and by the ambiguous promise of Israel, which even the happiest exiles are supposed to regard as an ideal future home, or at least a refuge of last resort”. The long exile of the Jewish people and the decision of many of them to remain in the Diaspora make the notion of the Jewish homeland highly complex. In particular, Jacob refuses to recognize Israel as the only homeland for the Jews, as illustrated by the following fragment:

“[...] Is Israel the Jewish homeland?”

“Israel is the Jewish state.”

Tamir straightened in his seat.

“That wasn’t the part of my argument you were supposed to disagree with.”

Irv shot Jacob a look. “Of course it’s the Jewish homeland.”

“It depends on what you mean by homeland,” Jacob said. “If you mean ancestral homeland –”

“What do *you* mean?” Tamir asked.

“I mean the place my family comes from.”

“Which is?”

“Galicia.”

“But before that.”

“What, Africa ?”

Irv let his voice drip like molasses, but not sweet: “*Africa*, Jacob?”

“It’s arbitrary. We could go back to Eden. You pick Israel. I pick Galicia.”

“You feel Galician?”

“I feel American.”

“I feel Jewish,” Irv said. (232)

Jacob argues that the notion of homeland is arbitrary, or at least subjective since people may have different interpretations of what “homeland” means. He points out that Jews, based on religion and history, have found a home in numerous different places: in Eden, in Africa, In Galicia, in America, or in Israel, among others. Through the introduction of a term like “ancestral homeland”, he attempts to demonstrate that different kinds of homeland can exist. The ancestral homeland, for example, would not be America or Israel, but Galicia or Africa. Therefore, he refuses to call Israel *the* Jewish homeland, though he acknowledges that it is the Jewish state. Israel is a kind of homeland, the historical one, but not the only one. Max adopts a similar attitude to Jacob by calling Israel the “historical Jewish homeland” (511). By doing so, he also demonstrates a refusal to consider Israel as the ultimate homeland. This, again, expresses the view that one should not be too binary.

The way the characters debate about the Jewish homeland also demonstrates that they have different opinions depending on the generation to which they belong. The dialogues allow the reader to compare the way opinions may differ between them as Irv, Jacob, as well as his three young sons, Sam, Max, and Benjy, take part in them. Irv declares feeling Jewish more than anything

and, in his view, there is no doubt that Israel is the Jewish homeland. Strenger describes Irv as “a somewhat one-dimensional portrait of the older generation of American Jews for whom being pro-Israel is non-negotiable”. While Isaac idealizes America, Irv idealizes Israel and shows unconditional commitment to it. He politicizes everything and is persuaded that everyone hates Jewish people: “The world hates Jews. I know you think the prevalence of Jews in culture is some kind of counterargument, but that's like saying the world loves pandas because crowds come to see them in zoos. The world *hates* pandas. Wants them dead. Even the cubs. And the world hates Jews. Always has. Always will” (194). As a result, according to him, it is impossible to avoid anti-Semitism. The narrator brings this to the attention of the reader by mentioning the way Irv contradicts Isaac’s positive claims about America: “And unless America turned on the Jews – *until*, his son, Irv, would correct – the tree would continue to branch and sprout” (4). Irv argues in favor of the idea that the only place where Jews can find eternal peace and a home is the State of Israel.

Irv unsuccessfully attempts to convince his son and his grandsons that the whole non-Jewish world hates Jews. When he is involved in the dialogues, topics like the Holocaust and anti-Semitism are rarely left unmentioned. For him, any discussion, even on domestic matters, is an opportunity to remind others of the persecution suffered by the Jews in different periods of history:

“[...] We had a talk with the rabbi, and now we’re fully in salvage-the-bar-mitzvah mode.”

“You had a *talk*? You think *talk* got us out of Egypt or Entebbe? Uh-uh. Plagues and Uzis. Talk gets you a good place in line for a shower that isn’t a shower”

“Jesus, Dad. Always?”

“Of course always. ‘Always’ so ‘never again.’” (25)

However, Foer does not seem to encourage the reader to take Irv’s claims seriously. In the last fragment, for example, to mention the Holocaust in this context seems totally exaggerated and Irv is mocked by Jacob. Moreover, Foer introduces much humor in the dialogues and Jacob and his sons do not hesitate to contradict Irv and make fun of him:

“Our only reliable friends in Europe are the Germans, and does anyone doubt that they’ll one day run out of guilt and lampshades? And does anyone really doubt that one day, when the conditions are right, America will decide we’re noisy, and smelly, and pushy, and way too smart for anybody else’s good?”

“I do,” Max said, opening up a pinch to zoom in on something.

“Hey, Maxy,” Irv said, trying to catch his eye in the rearview mirror, “you know why paleontologists look for bones and not anti-Semitism?”

“Because they’re paleontologists and not the ADL?” Jacob suggested.

“Because they like to dig. Get it?”

“No.” (194).

The sarcastic tone used in the novel as well as the fact that the younger generations of the family do not agree with Irv and often mock his extremist judgments discredit his claims. Max and Jacob refuse to believe that America could one day persecute Jews as other nations did in the past, and they truly believe it can be a home for Jewish people like themselves.

As opposed to Irv, the younger generations of the Blochs’ family are quite critical towards the State of Israel. Jacob’s sons seem to feel concerned by issues related to Israel as well, since they sometimes debate about them with their father: “Jacob tried to stimulate heated discussion at dinner, to help the boys become eloquent, critical thinkers. In the middle of such debate – should Jerusalem or Tel Aviv be Israel’s capital? – Julia asked if anyone had seen Argus” (112). This question refers to the controversial debate about Israel’s capital within the Jewish community. The novel mentions it only briefly, but it highlights that Foer believes that one should be critical about such issues, since it is mentioned that he has those conversations in order to make his sons become “critical thinkers”. Foer’s novel does not argue in favor of blind allegiance, but rather seems to encourage reflection on Israel’s political actions.

For Jacob and Max, their home is in America, not in Israel. Scott argues that the word “here” in the title of *Here I Am* could be interpreted as follows: “Geographically, ‘here’ might be the diaspora, where most Jews throughout history have found themselves” (Scott). In this view, the title of the novel makes a statement about Jacob’s identity. It affirms that he is “here”, in America, where his home and family are. As explained by Wagner, “Tamir says to Jacob: ‘You need to come home’”, when talking about taking a plane for Israel, “[b]ut Jacob thinks he is home – in Washington, where he lives”. However, “[t]o Tamir, ‘home’ for Jews, however secular, must always be Israel” and later, “[t]he war forces Jacob to test this proposition against his personal beliefs” (Wagner). Jacob’s final decision is to stay in America:

“Who are you Jacob?”

“Who are *you*, Tamir?”

“I am someone who goes home, no matter how difficult.”

“Well then, you took the words out of my mouth.”

“Maybe. But not out of your heart. Wherever you go, you won’t be going home.” (517)

When Tamir is ready to take the plane for Israel, and Jacob to go back to his wife and sons, they both believe to be doing the same thing: to go home. Tamir, however, keeps seeing Jacob as a Jew in exile who will never be home anywhere.

When Isaac and Benny chose to live in two different countries, a conflict of opinion arose between the Blumenberg and the Bloch families:

The brothers spent a year in a displaced persons camp, where they met their wives, who were sisters. Each couple had a child, each a boy: Irv and Shlomo. Benny moved his family to Israel, and Isaac moved his to America. Isaac never understood Benny. Benny understood Isaac, but never forgave him (219).

Subsequently, the brothers feel the need to prove that they made the good choice. When they visit each other, the family reunion soon becomes an attempt to impress the other. Isaac brings them to the best restaurants in town and shows them the beautiful sights of Washington. When they go to Israel, the Israelis show a similar attitude. Impressing the other becomes a sort of tradition that reveals a need to reaffirm their choices.

Tamir is full of pride and tries to present Israel as a superior country. In the same way that he embellishes his apartment, he shows off about his country. He claims that they make even better Italian food than Italians themselves, and better beer than Germans. When he praises Israel’s success, mostly with regards to its culture and economy, he cannot help pointing out that Israel is superior to America in some areas: “We have more startups than China, India, and the U.K., and file more patents than any country in the world – *including yours*” (240). Moreover, Tamir claims that “[t]hings have never been better *anywhere at any time* than they are in Israel right now” (241). His claims are quite paradoxical, as he just mentioned that Israel is engaged in perpetual war a few sentences before. Again, Tamir is depicted as a materialistic person who focuses on wealth and success to praise his country.

As explained above, Foer described his Israeli friends as people who love their country and would die for it, but do not want to raise their children there anymore. Interestingly, this is the way Tamir is portrayed in *Here I Am*. Even if he embellishes his house, he eventually admits that he is planning to move to America. He thinks about making “hayila”, the opposite of Aliyah. (413). This explains why, despite the terrible events happening in his country, he continued to enjoy touristic attractions in his cousins’ city. During all that time, he was actually looking for a new house in a safer place. There is no doubt Tamir loves his country and literally fights for it when the war breaks out, but he seems to believe that this is not a good place to raise his children. His desire to leave Israel materializes when his son must join the army, and even more when he is sent to the West Bank. Noam, in Israel, seems to be deprived of the normal life that someone of his age should enjoy. When he talks to Sam about his plans for the future, he mentions that so far, he has not been able to enjoy life: “After the army, school. After school, life. I hope.” (363). *Here I Am* concludes that material elements are not enough to make one’s home and land great, and other aspects are more important, such as hospitality and safety.

4.3.2. The Allegiance to Israel

As highlighted by both Scott and the Pew study, Israel is one of the topics on which Jewish people increasingly disagree. Almost all the participants of the Pew survey believe that Israel is important to what being Jewish means to them, but not all of them agree on whether or not it is an essential part of their identity. Jewish people above fifty years old show more attachment to Israel and are also more likely to consider the State as an essential part of what being Jewish means to them. In *Here I Am*, Irv belongs to this older generation of American Jews and Tamir, as an Israeli Jew, unavoidably also considers Israel as essential. They are convinced that this should be the case for every single Jew. Jacob, however, considers Israel as important but in the beginning of the novel, he has not yet made a decision on whether or not it is essential to his Jewishness. Therefore, his notion of Jewish identity is highly challenged by Irv and Tamir’s claims about Israel, especially after the war breaks out, when Tamir tells him that he should join the Israeli army to fight on their side.

Despite his belief that being Jewish does not necessarily mean to aspire to live in Israel, Jacob appears to agree that it does involve feeling concerned about what happens there. He also often discusses Israeli issues with Irv and tries to transmit his feeling about the importance of Israel

to his children, as he launches debates about Israeli issues with them. Besides, when the crisis hits the Middle East, he considers joining the war to fight on the Israeli side. Foer depicts Jacob as caring about Israel and feeling emotionally attached to it. However, as opposed to his father, he is not fully committed to that cause. Consequently, when the war breaks out, he struggles to define what his duties and responsibilities towards the State are. The crisis forces him to decide how much Israel means to him as an American Jew, what are his duties and responsibilities towards it and to which extent he needs – and wants – to be wholly present for and fully committed to it.

Jacob's lack of determination about his duties towards the State demonstrates how controversial this topic has become for some American Jews. Though the American Jewish characters consider Israel as important and feel emotionally attached to it, they question its political actions. When the war in Israel breaks out, Jacob starts to further question the Jewish part of his identity, especially with regards to Israel. Therefore, in *Here I Am*, Israel is not depicted as a home, but something that makes American Jewish people question their Jewish identity even further. It could be argued that Jacob's choice to stay in America rather than joining the war in Israel defines his Jewish identity, as it demonstrates that being present for his family represents a more important part of his Jewishness than loyalty to Israel. Like 44 percent of American Jews (Pew), Jacob ultimately decides that Israel is important for what being Jewish means to him, but not essential.

Already before the Prime Minister asks the Diasporic Jews to join the war, Jacob discusses his duties and responsibilities towards Israel. This topic is brought up by Tamir during his visit for Sam's bar Mitzvah. Through a few discussions, he makes clear that he believes American Jews do not give enough to the State of Israel: "I give more than half of everything I have, and you give one percent, tops" (395). The fact that Jacob does not even support Israel's economy by going there on vacation but chose to visit Germany instead makes Tamir's anger grow even more. In Tamir's view, being Jewish involves the duty to work on building the Promised Land for the Jews. Jacob, however, does not perceive financial support to the State as his responsibility since his home is in America. When Tamir claims "Well, I know that I give more than sixty percent of my salary", Jacob replies "You mean in taxes? You *live* there" (394). The novel depicts Israeli and American Jews as having different opinions on how much support America should give to Israel. Tamir is illustrative of the Israeli Jews who condemn the lack of allegiance to Israel among American Jews, while they, in Israel, give all they have for that cause. As highlighted by the Pew report, this

corresponds to the general view in Israel, where Jewish people generally believe America should give more support to the State, while most American Jews believe that their country's support is about right.

It is interesting to note that the extent to which the Bloch family members consider Israel as their responsibility appears to have changed over several generations. As already stated above, Irv Bloch, representative of an older generation of American Jews, showed unconditional loyalty to Israel. In his view, each Jew, even living in the Diaspora, was supposed to serve the Promised Land. Jacob, who represents the third generation of Holocaust survivors, is less committed to Israel. Irv deplores the fact that his son dedicates his time to purposes that he considers meaningless. He tells Jacob that he thinks he is wasting his life because he made a bad choice "writing for that dumb TV show" (197) and wants him to "write something that matters" instead (205), something beyond mere entertainment. To defend himself, Jacob mentions the four million people who watch his show, to which Irv answers "A: So what? B: *Which* four million?" (197). Irv thinks that his talent, sensitiveness and intelligence should serve the Jewish people: "You should forge in the smithy of your soul the uncreated conscience of your race" (197). As underlined by Rosenthal in his article "Righteousness as Commitment" (2017) published in *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, "[i]n fact, Jacob has been trying to forge something meaningful in the smithy of his soul: for years he's been secretly writing a show about his family". Irv believes that the most important thing to write about is Israel, while Jacob thinks it is his family.

Central to Foer's novel is this shift away from Israel. The younger they are, the less the Blochs seem to consider Israel as *theirs*. The choice of the possessive pronouns plays a considerable role in the representation of the American Jews' relationship with Israel, since it demonstrates how much they consider it as being their responsibility. Those pronouns express ownership, and as argued through the whole book, one is responsible for what is *his* or *hers*. This claim is explicitly expressed by Julia, who tells Jacob he needs to put down his dog:

"You need to put down Argus."

"Put him down?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because it's time, and because he's *yours*. (my emphasis)" (429)

Jacob, as Argus's master, is responsible for him. He also has to take care of *his* sons, *his* wife, *his* parents, and *his* grandfather. The fact that he considers his cousins as *his* also implies that he is somehow responsible for them. However, at the end, he does not longer recognize his cousins as *his*:

What was Israel to him? What were Israelis? They were his more aggressive, more obnoxious, more crazed, more hairy, more muscular brothers ... *over there*. They were ridiculous, and they were *his*. They were more brave, more beautiful, more piggish and delusional, less self-conscious, more reckless, more themselves. *Over there*. That's where they were those things. And they were *his*. After the near-destruction, they were still *over there*, but they were no longer *his*. (541)

This demonstrates that Jacob ultimately decides that Israel is not his responsibility. He distances himself from Israeli values and characteristics that he does not recognize as his, such as bravery and recklessness. As will be discussed below, this distancing results from Israel's inhumane actions during the war.

In spite of Isaac's emphasis on how necessary it is to maintain closeness between the two sides of the family, distance seems to deepen with each generation. Jacob, for example, finds his cousins "at once alien and familiar" (220). Nevertheless, despite the fact there is some physical and emotional distance between him and his cousins, Jacob still considers them as *his* before Israel's near-destruction. This feeling, however, is not shared by Max:

"Listen', Jacob told Max as Irv pulled into a parking spot, 'our Israeli cousins –'
'Your Israeli cousins'
'Our Israeli cousins are not the easiest people in the world –'
[...]
'We're the second-most-difficult people in the world,' Jacob told Max.
'After *your* (my emphasis) Israeli cousins. [...]'"

Despite Jacob's attempt to reaffirm that they are *their* cousins, Max insists they use the pronouns *yours* and *your*, thereby refusing to acknowledge that they are his cousins and responsibility as well.

The choice of the personal pronouns also plays an important role in the novel, since it illustrates the characters' disagreement on the question of who should support Israel and to which

extent. Irv, Tamir, and Jacob have a hard time determining who is included in the *we* or the *you* they use when talking about the events in Israel. Do they refer to the Israeli Jews only? Or all of them, including the Diasporic Jews? Tamir emphasizes the importance of that difference. For example, even before the earthquake, Irv declares: “I think we should boom Iran before it’s too late” (243). Tamir replies: “And I think we should establish who *we* is before it’s too late” (Ibid). Irv devotes a lot of time to thinking and talking about Israel, and even takes part in debates on television and writes about it on his blog. However, he always acts from safe America and, consequently, has never taken any real risk for Israel.

“He wrote op-eds, led marches, lobbied.”

“You know I love your father, but I hope you can hear yourself, Jacob. Op-eds? My father commanded a tank unit.”

“My father helped.”

“He gave what he could give without sacrificing, or even risking, anything. Do you think he considered getting on a plane and coming to fight?” (396)

Furthermore, Irv wonders “when was Israel going to make us proud by making itself safe?” and thinks “Wasn’t it high time we – you did something about this or that?” (244). This demonstrates the hypocrisy of some Diasporic Jews who, in Tamir’s view, act like they form a *we*, like Israel is *theirs*, but expect only *them* to act *there*, while they feel safe in their own country.

Tamir also denounces the American Jews who do not perceive the Promised Land as theirs. After the American President’s speech about the Middle East crisis, Tamir and Jacob argue about the fact that he avoided the name Israel. As Tamir highlights, he even said “the people of the region” instead of “the people of Israel” (293). Jacob insists on saying that Tamir probably misheard what he said, but that it should not matter anyway because the crisis is not political:

“It’s a regional catastrophe,” Jacob resumed, “not an Israeli one. It’s geological, not political.” [...]

“And if you were somewhat less insistent on hearing your name, it would be somewhat easier to say.” [...]

“And can I ask you,” Tamir went on, “who *you* is? When you say, ‘If you were somewhat less insistent,’ who is the *you*?”

“*You*.”

“Me, Tamir?”

“Yeah. Israelis.”

“*Israelis*. OK. I just wanted to be sure you didn’t mean Jews.” (293-294)

Tamir denounces the fact that Jacob makes a distinction between Israel and the Jews in general, while in his view, Israel is the homeland for every Jewish people, including Diasporic ones. Jacob, as opposed to Irv, does not use *we* to talk about Israel, but *you*. When Jacob comes back to his home, he tells Julia “As it turns out, there is no *we*” (522). Foer depicts the Jewish community as being extremely divided because American Jews feel gradually more distant from Israel. Instead of demonstrating a sense of commonality, a universal Jewish identity and a feeling of unity, the novel argues that they are not a *we* anymore.

As argued by Hoffman in his article “Chabon, Safran Foer, and the Great Jewish American Novel”, “Safran Foer’s highly hypothetical worst-case scenario is just plausible enough to call due all the promissory notes the Diaspora has made to the defense of Israel”. Hoffman argues that the novel does that through featuring “a leaked memorandum by the Israeli government outlining strategic responses to the catastrophe that annotates the age-old dichotomy of homeland and diaspora with a realpolitik revision” (“Chabon”). In this memorandum, the Israeli government’s strategies are revealed to the reader:

While the war has exposed a widening gap between American and Israeli leadership, and between American and Israeli Jews, Israel will, with the proper public relations campaign, culminating with a speech delivered by the prime minister, persuade 100,000 American Jewish men to come to Israel to support the war effort...the president of the United States could watch eight million Jews be slaughtered, but not 100,000 American Jews (Foer *Here I Am* 287).

In *Here I Am*, the United States is depicted as not bringing political support to Israel during such a terrible crisis, because they do not agree with the decisions Israel makes. When Tamir gets angry about the fact the American president did not mention the name “Israel”, this demonstrates his assumption that America will not support Israel. Moreover, Hoffman notes that:

Lingering in the background of the response to this crisis are the bitter lessons learned during the last one, when the petitions to President Franklin Roosevelt to bomb the train tracks to Auschwitz went unheeded: that failure has entered Jewish memory as a bitter reminder of general callousness to the fate of the Jews and the attendant need for Jewish self-defense (287).

During World War II, despite knowing about the gas chambers at Auschwitz, Roosevelt decided not to bomb the concentration camp. In *Here I Am*, faced with such a crisis, Jewish people are scared that America would not help them again. This illustrates the anxieties among the Jewish community that no one can be trusted except themselves, since America, among others, has already let them down in the past.

Tamir emphasizes the importance of determining who is the *we* that should fight for Israel before it is too late, but the characters never do. As underlined by Hoffman, one often thinks of “‘existential crisis’ as precluding the possibility of weighing and accounting” (“Chabon”). However, when the crisis hits Israel, American Jews like Jacob still struggle to know if they belong to this *we* or not. Jacob still does not know if it is his Jewish duty to fight for Israel as an American Jew. After a group of extremists enter the Dome of the Rock and set it on fire, the Israeli Prime Minister asks the Jews to come to Israel to fight alongside their brothers. Tamir tells Jacob to join the war with him, which forces him to make a decision, but he hesitates until the very last moment and eventually changes his mind. Hoffman highlights that “[w]hile we generally think of an ‘existential crisis’ as precluding the possibility of weighing and accounting, Safran Foer’s maneuver here is to show how this future moment of reckoning will be the instant where such debates over Israel’s character will continue as they were, with the same battle lines drawn and the same formations around identical pitched tents” (“Chabon”). In *Here I Am*, even when faced with Israel’s destruction, American Jews keep questioning what their duties towards the State are.

Tamir, as an Israeli Jew, has no doubt about his duty towards Israel. The only thing preventing him from joining the war is the flights cancellation. While he believes that Jacob should come with him too, this decision is much more complicated for the American characters. Jacob questions his duty towards Israel, a place that is not home and distant for him. Moreover, going to Israel would also mean leaving his family behind. For Julia, there is no doubt about the fact that being present for their children prevails over anything. She constantly reminds Jacob that their family crisis is more important than what is happening in Israel: “I realize the Middle East is collapsing, and that the entire world will get sucked into the vortex, but this is actually more important right now” (313). Jacob is faced with a great dilemma: choosing between fighting for Israel or being present for his family. This is a dilemma that Tamir does not have to solve as his political and family problems exist side-by-side in Israel. When he decides to stay in America, Jacob asserts this

difference: “You’re returning to your family,” I said. “I would be leaving mine” (516). Jacob ultimately decides that who he wants to be fully there for, is his family, is home, and his home is with his family in America, not in Israel. The novel concludes that home is not a place or a building, it is your family.

4.4. An Israeli Dystopia

Since the publication of Foer’s *Here I Am*, a few critics have called the novel a “dystopia” as it imagines the destruction of Israel, which both contrasts and resonates with the domestic narrative that dominates the first part of the novel. In his review published in *CounterPunch*, R. Larson describes the book as follows: “[t]he events surrounding the disaster in Israel are dystopian in an otherwise realistic narrative” and Garner speaks about “a plausible dystopian nightmare”. Furthermore, in her article “‘*Here I Am*,’ an American Divorce Novel Inside an Israeli Dystopia”, Margalit interprets the first part of the novel as “nothing but a prelude to a dystopian plot twist”. Barekat describes it as belonging to the “dystopias of the present”, that he calls “political disaster novels”. According to him, “[b]y confronting us with our worst nightmares, such fictions offer a space to explore and interrogate our anxieties”. The introduction of a disaster in Israel in his fiction allows Foer to explore American Jews’ anxieties about the future of their Jewish community.

In his interview with Goring in 2016, Foer denied that the novel had any political intent. He acknowledged that “[i]t would be disingenuous to say it wasn’t also born out of some political instincts or my own feelings about the Middle East” but emphasized that he “wrote the book as a novelist, not as a commentator or an activist of any kind” (Goring). Goring argues that in his novel, Foer “revels in debate and discussion, and cannot settle for certainty” but also stresses that “[y]et on one subject he seems oddly sure”, that *Here I Am* “talks of global threats to Jews”. Even if Foer claims he does not want to promote any particular political view, his novel gives expression to the anxieties felt by American Jews, especially in regard to Israel. It depicts American Jews as gradually feeling more distant to the State, which makes them question their Jewish identity. Moreover, the novel explores a catastrophe scenario happening in the Middle East, which reflects the fear that Jewish people experience as the result of Israel being surrounded by numerous conflicts and enemies.

In contrast with the reviews that call the novel a dystopia, some critics interpret the Israel plot as a mere distraction from the central theme of the novel, i.e. the divorce. According to them, *Here I Am* is a domestic novel rather than a political dystopia. Scott speaks about “domestic realism” to describe the genre of the novel, even though the conventional narrative is sometimes disrupted by post-modernist elements. Wagner declares: “[i]ts opening might lead the reader to believe that Foer is setting off on the path of dystopian fiction: but that’s not the way this story goes”. According to her, it is “the distillation and dissolution of their marriage, the way they think about it, the effect this has on their three sons, Sam, Max and Benjy, which are the heart of the book”. Another example includes Mermelstein, who says that “[c]omparisons between *Here I Am* and Philip Roth’s Israel novels – namely, *The Counterlife* and *Operation Shylock* – are inevitable, but Foer’s novel is more parts family drama than apocalyptic political thriller-slash-satire”. Those critics interpret the dystopian plot as a minor part of a domestic novel that foregrounds Jacob’s family problems. Moreover, Foer does not further explore the possible destruction of Israel and ultimately goes back to Jacob’s family drama in the last chapter.

During a literary event organized by Politics and Prose Bookstore on 16 June 2017, Foer shared his concerns about selecting a passage to read from the text. In his view, any passage would be misrepresentative of the story, since it would make it appear either as only domestic and tragic, or too culturally specific. On the one hand, to reduce the novel to a domestic tale would be misrepresentative because it says a lot about the Jews’ anxieties and the threats they face. On the other hand, to reduce the book to its dystopian aspect would also be misrepresentative, as the war never becomes the central theme of the book. Therefore, it would be safer to conclude that none of the narratives are dominant, but that they equally complement each other as Foer finds a way to connect them. Even if the first part of the book is dedicated to Jacob’s domestic problems, the two narratives intertwine later and, as already demonstrated, both the war and the divorce can be seen as a metaphor for the other.

Dystopias are usually set in the future and depict a frightening society, which has often become totalitarian or post-apocalyptic, in order to draw attention to some issues of today’s society and give a warning about the future. In *Here I Am*, the technique seems to serve a slightly different purpose. While one would expect the author to examine issues that might arise if Israel was destroyed, he decides to let the State recover without much explanation. Rather than exploring the

possibility of a disastrous future for the Jewish people, the dystopian plot is used to support the protagonist's search for identity. During his book promotion tour, Foer was interviewed by "Talks at Google" and discussed his last novel, as well as the entirety of his work. He explained that in each of his fictional books, he confronts his characters with horror so that they are forced to make decisions. The dystopian plot is used as a tool to question what Israel means to Jacob, what his position is as an American Jew, and what he considers to be his duties and responsibilities as a father and husband. Confronted with the horror of the war, he is forced to make decisions about whom and what he really wants to be fully present for and this determines his identity. In Hoffman's words: "[t]he erosion of the physical terrain of the physical space forces the Bloch's to wander through their own mental map of sympathies and allegiances".

Nevertheless, a few aspects in the dystopian plot deserve to be given particular attention and can be interpreted as a warning about the future. First of all, the introduction of news reports, televised speeches and interviews allows Foer to explore the way the media can influence American Jews in their perception of Israel. Then, via the earthquake and the following political crisis, he introduces the possibility that Israel could be destroyed. Finally, Foer shows that the relationship between American Jews and the State of Israel could further deteriorate as a result of Israel's political actions. In *Here I Am*, the Israeli government behaves inhumanely towards its neighbours during the crisis and thereby neglects values that are central to American Jewish culture. Consequently, once the war is over, the American Jewish characters feel even more distant from the State and Israeli Jews.

4.4.1. The Influence of the Media

Here I Am demonstrates that the media can have a considerable role in the relationship between Diasporic Jews and Israel because it is the main source of information about the events occurring there. Apart from a few vacations at their cousins' home, the Blochs have no direct contact with Israel and learn about it mostly through the Internet, television and newspapers. Sam, Max, and Benjy, for example, have never seen the country with their own eyes. When the crisis hits Israel, none of the members of the Bloch family directly experience it. The only contact they make with Israel is through technology: news reports, television, or even *Other Life*, where Sam gets to converse with his cousin Noam. In America, the characters also greatly depend on the news to keep updated with the events, since Tamir's family is rarely reachable. As a result, a place like Israel

feels both close and distant, since they have access to much information, but it cannot replace the direct experience of living through those events.

Television also enables the Israeli Prime Minister to communicate with American Jews in order to devise his plan for Israel's survival. This allows him to look "directly into the camera, and directly into the Jewish souls of all Jews watching" (435). He launches an operation to bring back all the Jews to Israel so that they can join the army and fight alongside Israeli Jews, in an operation that he calls "Operation Arms of Moses". This operation is reminiscent of other moments of the Jewish history when they tried to "bring home" other Jews, especially "Operation Moses", that aimed to rescue Ethiopian Jews by bringing them back to Israel in 1984. The Prime Minister makes explicit that this name is also a reference to the episode of the Bible in which Moses won the war thanks to the help of his brothers, Aaron and Hur. He uses this story to stress that American and Israeli Jews are brothers and need to rescue each other, as they have always done in the past. During his speech, he also emphasizes the link between Diasporic and Israeli Jews by reminding them of their common history of survival: "And where are our historical enemies, who have always outnumbered us? Where are the pharaohs, who destroyed our firstborn but could not destroy us? Where is the Roman Empire, which destroyed our Second Temple but could not destroy us? Where are the Nazis, who could not destroy us?" (446). He embellishes their relationship and underlines that even if they are now "spread across the globe" with "different dreams in different languages" they are "joined in a richer, prouder history" (446).

For the Prime Minister, the end of Israel is the end of "the story of the Jews" (447). He warns them that their common history of survival could become a story of destruction if they are defeated. Again, the pronominal choices are particularly important in his speech. When talking about Israel, the Prime Minister uses *we* and *our* and refers to all the Jews, not just the Israeli ones. As mentioned by Proctor and Su, "[e]xperimental research has shown that the manipulation of personal pronouns influences the way we interpret our relationships with others" (3251-3252). Those personal pronouns can easily "convey different meanings" and consequently are "a perfect tool for rhetorical purposes" which is often used by politicians (3252). Bull and Fetzer demonstrated that "politicians use personal pronouns to good effect", including "to encourage solidarity" (qtd. in Proctor and Su 3252), which appears to be the case in the Israeli Prime Minister's speech.

The Prime Minister describes Israel as the homeland for every Jew: “On the seventh day, the Diaspora will be *home* (my emphasis): one million Jews, fighting shoulder to shoulder with their Jewish brothers and sisters” (448). This is a statement Jacob would probably not agree with, since he demonstrates that home can be another place than Israel for some Jewish people, like him and his family. When describing the Prime Minister’s speech, the narrator also shows some disagreement: “looking directly into the camera, and directly into the Jewish souls of all Jews watching, he conveyed the unprecedented threat to Israel’s existence, and asked that Jewish men between the ages of sixteen and fifty ‘come home’” (435). According to Hoffman, the repetitions of “Jews” and the quotes around “come home” suggest a “highly self-conscious spotlighting of the claims Israel makes, which are both highly pitched and highly contestable” (“Chabon”). For many Diasporic Jews, “home” is in the Diaspora and, therefore, going to Israel would not mean “coming home” but flying away from it. Moreover, it is quite ironic that Foer decided to make the Prime Minister talk about solidarity and unity while the Netanyahu government has continued to make decisions that have divided the Jewish community in recent years. In *Here I Am*, the Prime Minister claims that the war will bring Jewish people together, while in reality, Israel’s violence is what has led some American Jews to distance themselves from Israel.

The reader rarely receives pieces of information about Israel that are not available to the characters, but they do learn more than them about the Prime Minister’s real intentions thanks to a memorandum written by the Ministry of Defense. This fragment makes clear that while he stresses the importance to rescue each other and makes claims about Jewish brotherhood and unity, the Prime Minister is actually prepared to put American Jews’ lives in danger because he believes it is necessary for Israel’s survival. The Ministry of Defense develops a strategy to win the war that they call “Reverse Diaspora”. They do not want American Jews to join the Israeli soldiers to strengthen their army, as they possess no qualifications in that field anyway, but only aim to “force America’s military hand” (287). As stated in the memorandum, “[t]he president of the United States could watch eight million Israeli Jews be slaughtered, but not one hundred thousand American Jews” (287). The way the novel emphasizes that an American Jew like Jacob does not have the qualifications to fight in the army demonstrates again the fact that the military has a more central place in Israeli society than in America. Moreover, the Prime Minister’s claims further illustrate the fear that America would not help Jewish people, except if they are American citizens. Because the Prime Minister’s real intentions are made clear to the reader, his claims about solidarity and

unity appear hypocritical. Foer depicts Israel as a State that considers its survival as more important than the lives of American Jews.

The media is presented as not always being reliable when relating information about Israel. It is a space that allows manipulation, since the Prime Minister can hide his real intentions behind an emotional speech. Moreover, the information they receive cannot always be trusted and it is difficult to evaluate their reliability. This is further illustrated by Irv's answer to Jacob's claims about the American newspaper *Times* in the following fragment:

“A friend at the *Times* said it's nowhere near as bad as it sounds. Israel is intentionally making the situation appear worse than it is with the hope of getting more American support. He said they're drawing it out to achieve the most propitious peace.”

“The *Times* is an anti-Semitic pap smear.” (482)

Irv is mistrustful towards the American news, since he thinks anti-Semitism is still highly present among gentiles. Moreover, even if the *Times* is actually right about the fact that Israel is trying to get more American support, they have no way to verify the facts for themselves. In America, they can only see and hear what the media allows them to. Consequently, this always involves the possibility of being manipulated by modified pieces information or political speeches, by America or even Israel.

4.4.2. The Near-Destruction of Israel

An important point of *Here I Am* is that it introduces the possibility that Israel could be destroyed. Again, a parallel can be drawn with Roth's *Operation Shylock*, in which Moishe Pipik describes Israel as a temporary solution that has come to its end: “[...] for the European Jews, Israel has been an exile and no more, a sojourn, a temporary interlude in the European saga this is time to resume” (42). Pipik argues in favor of Diasporism, or in other words the return of the European Jews to their former countries in Europe. His claims are founded on the fear of what he calls “a second Holocaust” in the Middle East: “But a second Holocaust could happen here all too easily, and, if the conflict between Arab and Jew escalates much longer, it will – *it must*” (43). This character also mentions the possibility of Israel's destruction: “The destruction of Israel in a nuclear exchange is a possibility much less farfetched today than was the Holocaust itself fifty years ago” (43). By imagining how Israel could be destroyed, Roth's *Operation Shylock* and Foer's *Here I Am*

express the Jews' anxieties about the fact that Israel is situated in the middle of incessant and dangerous conflicts.

As opposed to *Operation Shylock*, none of the characters in *Here I Am* brings an argument in favor of the Jews' departure from the Middle East, but, as underlined by Hoffman, Foer "goes one massive step forward" than Roth: "he imagines the Jewish state itself destroyed and indeed enacts Israel as a space at risk of being cancelled and undone, putting Israel in a state of both literary and literal peril". When the president of the European Union delivers a speech about the crisis, he says: "The catastrophe in the Middle East reveals a failed experiment" (284). Here, Israel is considered to be an experiment, and as an experiment, it can be successful, but it can also be a failure. After the earthquake hits the Middle East, the Israelis can observe destruction everywhere and the situation soon escalates to the point that the Israeli State, after almost seventy years of existence, faces the threat to come to its end.

What leads Israel to such a critical situation is the fact that the State is not prepared to face a major earthquake. Consequently, the situation following the aftershocks in Israel is a real catastrophe: "Everywhere you look there is destruction" (252). They run out of electricity and water, the West Bank is destroyed, and many Israelis are killed. As mentioned by a character in the novel, an Israeli engineer, they are not equipped to deal with such an event. This weakness is explained by the fact that Israel has been in perpetual conflict since its creation. As a result, they did not have any building code until the late 1970s because they had other issues to focus on.

SIEGEL: Why is that?

HOROWITZ: We've had other things in our minds.

SIEGEL: The conflict.

HOROWITZ: Conflict? We should have been so lucky to have only one conflict. Most buildings are made of concrete—very rigid, unforgiving engineering. Buildings like Israelis, you might say. It's served a booming population well, but couldn't be worse-suited to the current situation. (253)

By mentioning Israel's booming population, the engineer highlights that they have focused on rapid expansion instead of trying to meet the building standards. Even if buildings may resist, most of them will be inhabitable. Also, the engineer explains that "Israel's tactical superiority is technological, and that has been greatly diminished by the quake" (255). While Israel is well-

equipped to deal with human invasion, it is not ready to deal with such a geological catastrophe. In *Here I Am*, Israel demonstrates a considerable fear of others and an obsession with survival. Through the voice of the engineer, Foer is quite critical towards Israelis since he calls them “rigid” and “unforgiving”, which again demonstrates a past-oriented attitude. In his novel, Israel’s obsession with survival led them to focus on military issues and brought them to overlook other important aspects such as the possibility of a natural disaster, which almost led Israel to its total destruction.

The way Israel focuses on materiality can be compared to Tamir’s attitude. When Tamir tries to persuade Jacob that his home and homeland are the best, the debate focuses on wealth and success. He is extremely proud of material things, but never mentions convivial aspects. Later in the novel, it is revealed that he does not feel good in his homeland. *Here I Am* argues that at the end, it is spending beautiful moments with their family that makes one’s home great because it creates a warm and convivial place. In Israel, Tamir’s house fails to be a home for its residents because they cannot be close to each other and spend good times together, since their son is risking his life every day in the army. Similarly, the Israeli government has been building homes but have failed to create some conviviality and hospitality. The novel depicts Israel as being obsessed with building since, to use Foer’s words, they have “a booming population” and therefore always feels the need to expand in order to accommodate more Jewish people. Despite Palestinians’ protests, and other nations’ opposition, Israel has continued settlement building, which led to many protests and conflicts, and many people were injured or killed, including Palestinians as well as Israeli Jews. *Here I Am* condemns Israel’s focus on materiality instead of conviviality by showing that this could lead them to this extreme crisis situation.

Foer is the first major American Jewish author to depict the destruction of Israel and the scenario he imagines is quite plausible. The explanations given by Foer’s character, the Israeli engineer, are based on real information. In her article “Is Israel Ready for the Next Big Earthquake?”, Sarah Levi explains that, according to an Israeli chief engineer for the Association for Better Housing “most homes would not withstand a powerful earthquake”. Eyal Eizenberg also said that “an earthquake in Israel is more dangerous than war”, as it would lead to “damage to life and property on a much more significant scale” (qtd. in Levi). Moreover, exactly like in *Here I Am*, “[i]n addition to buildings being destroyed, the damage to critical infrastructures such as electricity,

water and communication is expected to be great". This threat is real since Israel is located in a region where "a major earthquake is statistically due [...] with a serious one arriving every 80-100 years" (Levi). Moreover, Israel can fear reprisals from its neighbouring countries such as Iran for example, whose "theocratic Shia Muslim regime has sworn to destroy the state of Israel" (Tisdall). Therefore, the events occurring inside the novel are quite realistic and there is a possibility that the same thing could happen in Israel in the next years.

4.4.3. The Destruction of Unity Within the Jewish Community

Foer's insistence on keeping the action in America as well as the way he continually goes back to Jacob's identity crisis suggest that his aim is not only to express some criticism of Israel, but also to discuss the State's relationship with American Jews. In *Here I Am*, he demonstrates that there is some distance between American Jews and Israel and explores how their relationship could further deteriorate if the Israeli government keeps making decisions that contradict their values. The novel first highlights the distance between American Jews and Israel by confronting Jacob and Tamir, whose relationship involves some competition, some hatred, and some emotional distance. Jacob is aware of the emotional gap that exists between him and his cousins but struggles to determine how great exactly this distance is. As already mentioned, the narrator explains that, while the geographic distance between Israel and America is easily measurable, Jacob cannot approximate his emotional distance from Tamir.

The characters develop different techniques that allow them to measure physical as well as emotional distance. Jacob and Julia, for example, keep measuring their children's heights on the doorframe of their house. As a parent, Jacob does not realize that his children's heights change over the years because he sees them almost every single day and the doorframe is his way to measure their growth. This is comparable to the distance between Julia and Jacob: they do not see it grow, but it does. As opposed to spatial distances, emotional distances cannot be directly observed. Therefore, Foer develops other strategies to help his characters to realize how much distance has grown between them. The flashbacks highlight how Jacob and Julia think back on good memories, but they fail to be present for each other in the present. In *Politics and Prose Bookstore*, Foer explained that when Jacob and Julia go back to the Pennsylvania Inn, the place where they once had a wonderful holiday together, it serves the same purpose as the doorframe. This allows them to measure the distance that has grown between them. Though they have a lovely

time at the Inn again, they are forced to realize that a lot has changed between them and that they have been growing apart. It seems to me that the introduction of the Israeli crisis in the novel serves the same purpose. In this case, it is the distance between an American Jew like Jacob and Israel that Foer attempts to measure. Therefore, the dystopian plot, exactly like the doorframe and the Pennsylvania Inn, allows to measure distance better.

In Foer's novel, when the war breaks out, not many American Jews decide to answer Israel's call for help. While the Prime Minister aimed to gather one million American Jews, "*The Times* estimated that fewer than thirty-five thousand American Jews ultimately went" (541). Moreover, to examine which Jewish people decided to go also confirms the fact that allegiance to Israel seems to have diminished over generations. Most people who take the plane to go to Israel belong to the older generations since three-quarters of them "were forty-five or older" (541). Foer depicts the younger generations of American Jews as people who, though feeling concerned with Israeli issues, are not ready to fight and die for it. In Strenger's words, "[y]ounger Jewish Americans, it seems, can't really see much meaning in moving to Israel and fighting for its survival, and those who come to help play no role in Israel's surviving the ordeal".

According to Strenger, the way American Jewish characters decide not to fight for its survival reflects "plenty of social science data that show that young Jewish Americans no longer have the deep connection to Israel their parents had" (Strenger 2017). It could be argued that the fact that younger generations of American Jews no longer have a deep connection to Israel demonstrates that they are disappointed at the State. Before the establishment of Israel, the idea of a Promised Land had been central in Judaism for centuries and the Jewish community idealized this future country, which they thought would be a perfect place for Jewish people. As a result, when Israel was established, many Jewish people had great expectations from the State. However, the Promised Land was not only an abstraction anymore, but a real state and, as any other countries, it has flaws. Therefore, Israel turned out to be quite different from the utopian place they had imagined, and its political actions disappointed some American Jews.

It could be suggested that the predominance of the Blochs' family issues and search for identity in the novel also expresses the distance between Diasporic Jews and Israel. Scott concludes that *Here I Am* portrays Israel as a mere distraction for the Jews living in America:

The destruction of Israel feels like a distant abstraction compared with the upheavals of the Bloch household. While this may represent a failure of novelistic craft, it is consistent with the book's conclusions about the place of the Jewish homeland in American Jewish life. The Promised Land is a shibboleth, a red herring, a monumental distraction. ("Invented Disaster" 2016)

By sometimes relegating the Israeli crisis to the background and going back to the events happening within the Blochs' family, Foer illustrates the way American Jews are faced with the news about Israel. They are aware of Israeli matters and feel some concern, but it always seems quite distant when compared to their own problems at home. The narrative is often interrupted by news on the radio or television that keep the characters updated about the crisis and as a result, "Israel is absorbed into the Jewish American context" through news reports and television speeches that are "reproduced in full and covering whole tracts of this very large novel" (Hoffman). According to Hoffman, "[t]he effect is to make Israel both center stage and off-stage, which is not a bad description for how it often appears in the American eye".

Furthermore, Foer demonstrates that the relationship between American Jews and Israel could further deteriorate. This is probably the most important warning he attempts to convey by introducing the dystopian plot, which allows him to explore how Israel would respond to such crisis events. The catastrophic situation that follows the earthquake can be interpreted as a criticism based on the fact that by focusing on military security, Israel has overlooked other important elements. Those elements include, for example, an appropriate building code, but also some Jewish values, such as righteousness. In *Here I Am*, in order to protect its state, the Israeli government has taken decisions that are morally questionable. At the beginning of the crisis, other nations see in the geological crisis an opportunity for the countries of the Middle East to be brought together: "Let's hope the shared tragedy brings the region together" (255). However, this is not the path that Israel decides to follow. Instead, they decide to keep their resources for Israelis only and to keep refugees out. Foer presents Israel as a state that would do whatever it takes to survive, even if it means risking the lives of American Jews or refusing to help neighbouring populations. At the end of the novel, the gap between American Jews and Israel has deepened even further, mostly because of Israel's lack of humanity during the war.

Strenger argues that the way the State of Israel decides to act in *Here I Am* reflects the way it acts outside the novel, since "Israel has become more nationalistic than ever; mainstream Israelis

no longer care about liberal values, sophistication and sensitivity for other ethnicities, races and religions”. He explains that “Reform Judaism’s ideal of tikkun olam – healing the world with universalist values and commitment to humanity as a whole – is utterly foreign to Israel’s mainstream”. According to him, “Foer refers to the racism that has become the bon ton of Israel’s dominant political right within the context of the fictitious earthquake: Israel’s government refuses any humanitarian help to ‘non-Jews’ [...] and lets them die, even though it could save them”. This brings to mind the May 14th Gaza massacre again, when Israeli soldiers decided to shoot unarmed Palestinians, while they could have used many other techniques for maintaining public order. Before *Here I Am*’s publication, Israel’s actions had already been the subject of much debate. Hoffman lists two examples, namely “the wars in Gaza” and “the trial and conviction of Elor Azaria for shooting and killing an unarmed terrorist in Hebron”. Such events led Foer to depict Israel as a state that is indifferent towards the deaths of its neighbors.

Foer gives some explanations on how the Jewish community came to consider survival as the most important Jewish ambition. In *Here I Am*, the Jews are represented as a traumatized people. This collective trauma results from the long history of persecution they have endured and is transmitted across generations. In an essay entitled “Transmitted Holocaust trauma: a matter of myth and fairy tales?”, Codde gives an overview of the three main mechanisms that are responsible for intergenerational transmission of Holocaust trauma, which I will summarize in the following lines. Firstly, listening to their parents’ stories can create empathy and therefore identification with these events, or can even lead to the illusion of these stories being their own (Codde 63). Secondly, if their parents do not recount memories of their time in the camps, the transmission of trauma may still occur. By living in what are called “dysfunctional families” with “traumatized parents who suffer from a variety of symptoms – like panic attacks, depression, outbursts of temper evoked by insignificant events”, children do not get the “reassuring sense of safety or stability needed for their wholesome psychological development” (Codde 63). Finally, some geneticists argue that trauma can be transmitted through the genetic material that is passed on to them. However, this is a revolutionary view that is still contested by other geneticists (Codde 63). Consequently, the following generations of Holocaust survivors can still be perceived as traumatized, since the children are “re-traumatized” because of their parents’ behaviour (Codde 63).

Like in *Everything is Illuminated*, the protagonist again belongs to third-generation Holocaust survivors. Isaac, his grandfather, is a Holocaust survivor and has developed some post-traumatic symptoms. He was deeply affected by the fact that he and Benny were the only ones to survive the Holocaust in his family. At the end of his life, painful memories keep coming back into his mind and “the sound of his time” is described as “the cries of his dead brothers” (203). Isaac’s name also evokes the theme of trauma, since it refers to the biblical figure who was probably traumatized by his near sacrifice. In *Here I Am*, Isaac is portrayed as showing some dysfunctional behavior. For example, he changed himself in public spaces with no regard for his own privacy and did not understand why this would not be allowed: “Why not, because if you’d seen the things I’ve seen, you would also lose your ability to comprehend embarrassment?” (307). Jacob’s clear memories about those moments prove that his grandfather’s behavior marked his childhood and left a huge imprint on his mind.

During Isaac’s funeral, the Rabbi questions how they should say goodbye to the last Holocaust survivors: “How do we mourn Isaac Bloch? With tears, with silence, or with song? How do we mourn the end of his life? The end of the Jewish epoch that he participated in and exemplified?” (348). In American culture, the Holocaust occupied a central place and even led to what Finkelstein called “The Holocaust Industry”, which refers to the exploitation of Jewish suffering in order to make money (Traverso 216). This includes, for example, museums, exhibits, film productions, and novels about the Holocaust. As a result, it “has become a central aspect of our depiction of the twentieth century” and the memory of the Holocaust is “obsessively present in public life” (Traverso 215). In the last decades, the Holocaust has become a major aspect of the Jewish identity. After the last survivor dies, there will be no one left who has directly experienced those traumatic events, but the Holocaust keeps determining Jewish people’s identity, even among younger generations. According to the Pew Research Center, 73 percent of American Jews as well as 65 percent of Israeli Jews believe that remembering the Holocaust is an essential part of their Jewishness.

For each generation in the Blochs’ family, the Holocaust still represents an essential part of their identity. As opposed to *Everything is Illuminated* in which Jonathan was the last generation of his family, Foer introduces a fourth generation via the characters of Max, Benjy, and Sam, whom one scene depicts as also being affected by the Holocaust. In sixth grade, Sam watched a

documentary about the concentration camps during a class at his Hebrew school. He explains that this left him with different knowledges, including: “[...] the knowledge that his life was, if not the result of, then at least inextricably bound to, the profound suffering, and there was some kind of existential equation, whatever it was and whatever its implications, between *his* life and *their* deaths” (338). Later, he concludes that it was maybe not a knowledge that followed him after learning about the horror of the Holocaust, but rather a feeling, “the feeling of being Jewish” (339). This feeling is shared by his father, his mother and his brothers, whose personality is also impacted by the Holocaust trauma. This is illustrated by the next fragment in which Sam is the center of focalization and shows how he perceives the members of his family:

“His dad was obsessed with displays of optimism, and the imagined accumulation of property, and joke-making; his mom, with physical contact before saying goodbye, and fish oil, and outer garments, and ‘the right thing to do’: Max, with extreme empathy and self-imposed alienation, Benjy with metaphysics and basic safety. And he, Sam, was always longing.” (339)

All the elements the Blochs are obsessed with can be associated with trauma. For example, their traumatic experience in the camps and the fact that they could not get back their homes after the Holocaust led Jewish survivors to be obsessed with safety and property, like Jacob and Julia.

The fact that Sam learns about the events of the Holocaust by watching a video demonstrates the impact of the media on cultural memory. Sam explains that it was never clear for him if his teacher chose to show a video because he was lazy or “unable or unwilling to teach the material, or felt the impossibility of teaching it in any way other than simply showing it” (337). The difficulty in talking about the Holocaust is further illustrated by the fact that, when he comes home, Sam never mentions the video to his parents. Furthermore, Jacob explains that during his childhood, he was greatly influenced by the many stories he heard about Jewish kids who died in the camps. Therefore, in *Here I Am*, the media sometimes plays a bigger role than family in transmitting the memory of the Holocaust.

Though never forgetting the Holocaust and his brothers, Isaac made some effort to leave the past behind and move on when he arrived in America. The fact that he decided to give up the name Blumenberg and changed it to Bloch can be understood as a desire to distance himself from his past in Europe. Isaac emphasizes that America never asked him to do so, that it was his own

choice. Moreover, in addition to adapting to his new country and learning its language, Isaac made the choice to teach only English to his offspring and wanted them to forget Yiddish, the language he spoke in Europe, which made him “the last Yiddish-speaker in his family” (347).

The Israeli side of the family showed even more difficulties to leave the past behind. Benny never changed his name, and Tamir and his sons are still called Blumenberg like their family members who died in Europe. The Holocaust is constantly present in the Israeli Jews’ minds, as demonstrated during Jacob’s first visit to Israel. At some point, an air-raid siren went off because of “Yom HaShoah” (Holocaust Remembrance Day) and everyone stopped what they were doing to stand in silence. Jacob observes: “The Jewish American response to the Holocaust was ‘Never forget,’ because there was a possibility of forgetting. In Israel, they blared the air-raid siren for two minutes, because otherwise it would never stop blaring” (221).

Foer appears to argue that the Jewish community has developed a constant fear of others and an obsession with survival because they have not been able to overcome the suffering caused by the traumatic experiences they endured in the past, especially the Holocaust. Instead of saying “Here I Am” and being more future-oriented, they keep thinking about what happened to their community in the past. After watching the video about the Holocaust, Sam says he was also left “[...] with the knowledge that everything that has happened once can happen again, is likely to happen again, *must* happen again, *will*” (338). This is also something he inherited from his grandfather, Irv, who keeps reminding Jewish people that anti-Semitism could occur again if they are living in a gentile country. In Israel, where the Holocaust is even more present in their minds and where they are faced with conflict and danger every day, they constantly feel the need to protect themselves against others. As a result, they are obsessed with survival and focus on military aspects more than anything else.

In a way, Jacob and Julia can be compared to the Jewish community because they also keep reflecting on the past. In addition to thinking about old memories and regretting the closeness they have lost, they do not manage to overcome the trauma resulting from Sam’s injury: “There was a trauma center in her brain [...] At the center was Sam’s injury” (173). When Sam was younger, his hand was crushed in a door and severely injured. Both his parents believe it was their fault, since Julia is the one who opened the door, and Jacob the one who closed it. However, it took a lot of

time before they were able to talk about it and forgive each other, which they did only years after their separation:

JACOB

You opened the door, unknowingly. I closed it, unknowingly.

JULIA

What door?

JACOB

Sam's hand.

Julia starts to cry, quietly.

JULIA.

I forgive you, Jacob. I do. For everything. [...] (508)

It is important to notice that the lack of communication within their family is one of the elements that prevents them from being able to overcome this trauma. In their family, no one ever mentions Sam's accident or his injured fingers. In fact, the Blochs refrain from mentioning any kind of trauma, including the Holocaust: "So it was never mentioned, always never talked about, the perpetual topic of nonconversation. Everywhere you looked, there it wasn't" (339). The way this sentence is constructed emphasizes that, though one can avoid talking about trauma, it is still present. It is there without being there, since, despite the difficulty to talk about it and represent it, one can feel its effects. *Here I Am* seems to reject an extreme past-oriented attitude that leads people to focus only on the past but encourages communication about trauma.

During Isaac's funeral, the Rabbi also discusses how the Jewish community was brought to consider survival as one of the most important ambitions of Jewish life. In his speech, he explains that "[i]t's not true that everyone hates Jews, but in every country we've ever lived, in every decade of every century, we have encountered hatred" (349). This sentence shows that he rejects Irv's idea that anti-Semitism can be found everywhere but acknowledges that, as Jewish people, they have known a long history of suffering and persecution. Over the course of history, many episodes of anti-Semitism forced Jewish people to develop strategies to protect themselves and find a way to survive. Consequently, according to the Rabbi, "survival has been the central theme and imperative of Jewish existence since the beginning, and not because we chose it to be that way" (348).

Though the Rabbi acknowledges that the events the Jewish community has endured forced them to develop a sense of survival, he regrets that this has replaced what he believes should be the most important Jewish value: to be righteous. He illustrates that point by claiming that Anne Frank's diary has replaced the Bible, which means that the Holocaust has become even more important than God's word to determine their Jewish identity. While Holocaust stories present survival as the most important Jewish ambition, the Jewish Bible "makes it abundantly clear that life itself is not the loftiest ambition. *Righteousness is*" (349). He recalls that in the Bible, people whose lives are spared are not saved because life should be saved, but because they are righteous people. In his words, at the end, "[h]umankind is saved not because it is worth saving, but because the righteousness of a few justifies the existence of the rest" (350). *Here I Am*, though giving a less religious interpretation of Jewishness, still returns to the text of the Bible. The Bible is depicted as an important source of knowledge that shares great values, such as being righteous and being able to say "Here I Am".

According to the Rabbi, the Holocaust and the many great sufferings the Jewish people have gone through turned them into a "traumatized people" and "nothing else has trauma's power to deform the mind and heart" (349). To want to survive at any cost can lead people to perform bad actions and act inhumanely in some contexts. To be righteous, by contrast, means that one individual should act honorably regardless of the circumstances. The Rabbi underlines that Jews have sometimes been aligning themselves "with poignancy over rigor, with hiding over seeking, victimization over will" (349) and questions if it has been good. He highlights that, though the Jewish community feels like they have sometimes no choice than to act the way they do, not to have a choice is also a choice: "We *choose* to make life the ultimate Jewish value, rather than differentiate the values of kinds of life, or, more radically, admit that there are things even more important than being alive" (349). He believes that the Jewish people might be much greater if "instead of *not dying*, our ambition was *living righteously*" and if "instead of 'It was done to me,' our mantra was 'I did it.'" (350). Therefore, in addition to encouraging Jewish people to adopt an attitude that is more oriented towards the present and the future rather than the past, Foer's novel also stresses the importance of helping others, instead of focusing on themselves.

Hoffman argues that Foer "accentuates the perennial balance between survival at any cost and the imperative to be a 'Light Unto the Nations'", which he describes as one of the current

anxieties of American Jews (“Chabon”). According to him, this debate is quite recurrent, as it “seems to reproduce itself at each critical moment around Israeli security policy”, such as during the wars in Gaza, for example. He adds that “[t]his weighing finds a kind of parallel in the ongoing debates around the possibilities of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state” (Hoffman “Chabon”). In *Here I Am*, Israel focuses on survival and neglects important values, thereby failing to be a “Light Unto the Nations”. This demonstrates that “[s]ixty-eight years after the founding of the State of Israel and 70 years after the Holocaust, mere survival is no longer an absolute value” (Ibid). The novel insists on the fact that hospitality, righteousness and morality are important values for American Jews and, if Israel does not want to divide the Jewish community even further, they need to respect these values.

After the war, the distance between American Jews and Israel has further increased. Hoffman claims that “[i]t is to his credit that Safran Foer has Israel make the choice to survive, but there is something both inevitable and depressing in how this choice precipitates drift among American Jews” (“Chabon”). American Jews resume going to the State of Israel “to vacation and bar mitzvah and *find themselves* in Israel [...] but the feeling of having arrived, of finally finding a place of comfort, of being *home*, was disappearing” (539). Different explanations are given in the novel to explain this feeling:

“For some, it was the inability to forgive Israel’s actions during the war – even a massacre or two would have been easier to accept than the complete and explicit abdication of responsibility for non-Jews – the withdrawal of security forces and emergency personnel, the stockpiling of medical supplies that had urgent use elsewhere, the withholding of utilities, the rationing of food even amid a surplus, the blockade of aid shipments to Gaza and the West Bank” (539)

For other American Jews, emotional distance is created by “how those actions were perceived” by those who had good faith in Israel before the crisis, or by “the discomfort of Israel being neither a scrappy underdog nor a bitty superpower capable of bombing its Stone Age neighbors back into the pre-Stone Age” (540). In *Here I Am*, what brings American Jews to feel more distant to Israel is not assimilation, but the consequences of Israel’s own actions.

By distancing itself from American Jewish values, Israel fails to achieve its own utopian dream, which is to create a place that would feel like home for the Jewish people. The dystopian

plot demonstrates that if Israel acts immorally towards non-Jews, it will fail to feel like a home for many American Jews. It is mentioned that, even if Israel has survived, the situation has maybe become even worse: “[m]aybe it was worse to have survived, if continuing to *be* required destroying the reason to be” (539). Hoffman believes that “[e]ncoded in that ‘maybe’ is the nagging sense that just surviving is no longer good enough, that preserving Jewish life and the Jewish polity is only worthwhile if the moral cost is not too high” (“Here I Am”). Israel has maybe literally survived, but it is metaphorically destroyed, since it ceases to be its reason to be, that is a home for every Jewish persons. As with many dystopias, *Here I Am* depicts a utopian society in which things have gone wrong.

As already explained, Scott believes that *Here I Am* cannot be described as anti-Zionist because Foer is sympathetic to the claims of Zionism. Hoffman also believes that “Jacob is not quite sure how he feels, and throughout, Israel’s position is depicted sympathetically if not exactly fervently” (“Chabon”). *Here I Am* does not question Israel’s existence, but its political actions. Therefore, Hoffman argues that the novel does not introduce anti-Zionist ideas, but rather explores American Zionism:

Entertaining the possibility of Israeli extinction allows Foer to suss out the nooks and crannies of Jewish American identity and the limits of American Zionism. What kind of love is a love for place that is distant—or lost? What are its boundaries? How does it jostle for priority with other commitments? The book’s interest is in using an extreme scenario not to leap into fantasy but to dig deeper into the stressors and paradoxes already baked into the Jewish American relationship to Israel (“Here I Am”).

The novel does not attempt to demonstrate that American Jews do not support Israel at all but put them to the test. Because Israel is not home, it feels unavoidably distant to some of them. Moreover, if Israel acts in a way that goes against American values, including the values of democracy, it is quite likely that this emotional distance will increase even further.

5. Conclusion

What the present study has shown is that Foer's novel *Here I Am* is more than a story about midlife crisis and divorce. In many ways, it explores the anxieties and fears about Jewishness and Israel among American Jews in today's society. *Here I Am* highlights that the contemporary Jewish community is extremely divided. As a result, in Foer's novel, American Jewish characters feel particularly torn between different identities. Since Isaac's arrival in America, the Blochs have adapted to their new country, have developed a sense of Americanness and the last generations have become secular. Consequently, Jacob's conception of Jewish identity differs from the older generations and he feels the need to reassemble the Jewish traditions and values that he wants to preserve. The novel reaffirms the importance of rituals, ceremonies, and more importantly, reminds the readers of the importance of righteousness as a Jewish value. The difficulty in honoring Jewishness in a secular world had already been represented in different American Jewish literary works, but Foer underlines another aspect of the American Jews' split identity by confronting his characters with Israeli Jews.

Foer's novel highlights that the different Jewish communities also have different definitions of Jewishness. By comparing the Israeli and the American characters, it is possible to conclude that Foer believes the Jewish heritage has evolved in different directions, since they are depicted as having developed different values. Because the army has always had a central position in Israeli society, Israeli Jews have been considerably influenced by military values. Consequently, for Foer's Israeli characters, being Jewish involves being heroic, strong and virile, and it also means serving the army and fighting for the political survival of their homeland. Jacob's family members, by contrast, do not have this relationship with the army and have developed more liberal values that characterize America. By emphasizing the characters' physical differences, such as the fact that Israeli characters are more virile and stronger than the Blochs, the novel highlights this difference in values.

Furthermore, the author tackles the questions of home and homeland. His novel demonstrates that Israel is not the only country that can offer a home for Jewish people. Foer refuses to view things in binary terms and to distinguish between *the* ultimate Jewish homeland and the Diaspora, since his characters demonstrate that different homelands can coexist. While some Israeli

Jews still argue that Israel is the only possible Jewish homeland, *Here I Am* emphasizes that Diasporic Jews have found a home in various countries over the world. Moreover, the novel underlines that American Jews and Israeli Jews have different values, and, as a result, some of them would not feel home in Israel.

The novel presents family as the more important aspect of Jewish life. Consequently, Foer comes to the conclusion that nationality, culture, and religion do not determine where one's home is, but family does. Though Jacob first appears envious of what he perceives as an exciting and fully life in Israel and deplors his "Great Flatness", which refers to the little things of everyday life as a father and a husband, he realizes that America is the place where he should be. By giving his novel the title "Here I Am" and repeatedly using this quote, Foer reasserts the position of his American Jewish characters in the Diaspora. Through the voice of Sam, Foer goes back to the biblical meaning of "Here I am" and adapts it to his story. Sam explains that it expresses commitment, since the way Abraham answers "Here I am" shows that he is totally present for God and his son. At the end, Jacob decides that what he wants to be totally present for, the thing he wants to say "Here I am" to, is his family. Therefore, "there he is", in the Diaspora.

By using different literary techniques, Foer manages to connect the domestic and dystopian elements of the story. Jacob's midlife crisis reflects the general Jewish identity crisis. He deplors his constant lack of determination and struggles to make decisions. This illustrates the growing lack of certainty about Jewishness and unity within the Jewish community. Through metaphors and the use of montages, Foer also connects the divorce with the destruction of Israel, that, although being seemingly different experiences, show many similarities. As a matter of fact, both the couple's problems and the destruction of Israel are the result of a distancing, between Jacob and Julia, and between American and Israeli Jews. Jacob's midlife crisis and divorce make him question his identity as a husband and a dad, and the crisis in Israel makes him question his Jewishness, in particular his allegiance to the State. Moreover, like the Jewish community as it is depicted in the novel, Jacob and Julia focus on the past and are unable to overcome trauma. In both cases, it leads to the destruction of homes, since Jacob has to leave his home as the result of his divorce, and Israeli buildings collapse following the earthquake. Besides, Israel fails to offer a place that feels like home for the American Jewish characters.

In *Here I Am*, Foer is highly pessimistic about the future of the relationship between American Jews and Israel. However, it could be argued that he is quite optimistic about the future of the Diasporic Jewish community. As a matter of fact, his characters demonstrate that Jewish people can adapt to their new countries and become part of the global community without renouncing to their Jewishness. The younger generations, in spite of assimilation, still feel a sense of belonging to the Jewish community. Foer demonstrates that the Jewish identity can be reconstructed in order to suit better their new lifestyles and ideologies. Moreover, Jacob, Julia and their sons have found a home in America and do not appear to fear a new rise of anti-Semitism anymore. The quote “Here I am” contains some assertion about the fact that the American Jewish characters belong to the Diaspora and have chosen to remain living there.

Furthermore, the Israelis are portrayed as being materialistic people, and Israel is presented as focusing on survival and rapid settlement building. The novel underlines that by considering those elements as its first priorities, the State has overlooked many important aspects. At the end, the Israeli characters do not feel good in their homeland because they live in an inhospitable country where they constantly fear for their children’s lives. The introduction of the dystopian plot, which involves a violent earthquake leading to a geographical and political crisis in Israel, highlights that, according to *Here I Am*, Israelis have been building many houses in their country, but they have done it the wrong way. From a technical point of view, this means that they have invested a lot in settlement building, but they have focused on rapid expansion instead of trying to meet the building standards. As a result, when the earthquake hits the Middle East, the Israeli homes collapse. Metaphorically, this implies that they have focused on material aspects and military security rather than hospitality and, consequently, the Israeli houses have failed to become actual homes.

Foer’s novel subtly portrays the way American Jewish people question their duty towards the State. Jacob struggles to determine how he should support Israel from a distance and this is further complicated by the fact that both his father and Tamir think that American Jews should give more support to Israel. They also believe that being pro-Israel and fighting for its survival is non-negotiable for Jewish people. By confronting different generations, Foer underlines that the distance between Israel and American Jews has been gradually growing from generation to generation, since Irv is considerably more attached to Israel than his son. When the war breaks out, Jacob reflects upon what his duty towards Israel is for a long time, but eventually decides not to

fight for its survival. Therefore, he reasserts again that he belongs to America, where his family is, and not to Israel: “Here I Amn’t” (101).

Foer also expresses fears and anxieties resulting from the State’s situation in the Middle East. Though Israel’s main aim is to offer a place of safety for every Jew, it has been in the middle of incessant violent conflicts since its creation. The fact that Israel is not safe is particularly emphasized in the novel through the description of Tamir’s house and the way he expresses his anxiety about the situation in which his family is living. Moreover, because of its traumatic past, the Jewish community is depicted as being afraid that other countries, including America, would let them down in a situation of crisis, as they have already done in the past. With regards to American Jews only, Foer also underlines that they are afraid of being manipulated by the Israeli as well as the American media and politicians. In America, they have no control over the situation in Israel and greatly depend on the news to keep themselves informed about the events occurring in the Middle East, which gives much power to the media.

Through the voice of different characters, Foer denounces the past-oriented attitude of the Jewish community. The novel examines how their traumatic past led them to consider survival as being more important than righteousness. By recalling the years of persecution and suffering the Jewish community has gone through, one can only empathize with them. Though this allows the reader to understand the emphasis Israelis put on survival, Foer denounces the fact that it led them to perform inhumane actions. During the terrible crisis that hits the Middle East, they refuse to help their neighbors and let them die. At the end, the narrator mentions that the State of Israel has survived, but its strong focus on military issues and survival has led to its metaphorical destruction. Because of Israel’s actions during the war, American Jews’ emotional distance with the State has increased at the end of the novel. Consequently, the Jewish community is further divided and there is no unity anymore: “there is no *we*” (522). The State still exists but it has become a dystopian place. Foer’s main warning is that if Israel acts inhumanely, it will be a state of murder and destruction, but not the place of safety and peace that it aims to offer to Jewish people. If the Israeli government attempts to create a home for Jewish people, but only for themselves, and overlooks the rights and interests of Palestinians, it will always fail to achieve its utopian dream.

Considering the different criticisms Foer has expressed about Israel’s political actions recently, in interviews and in *Here I Am*, it can be concluded that he argues in favor of being critical

towards the State. He seems to believe that it is possible to express some constructive criticism about Israel, and it is probably what he attempts to do in *Here I Am*. Foer warns about the possibility of a divorce, not only the one between Jacob and Julia, but also between American and Israeli Jews. On account of the recent events in Israel, it could be argued that this warning comes too late. The dystopian scenario Foer develops in his novel is, in a way, already happening right now. Israel was not hit by a geographical crisis such as that depicted in the novel, but they did act in a way that is morally questionable. As a result, it can already be noticed that a few American Jewish people distance themselves from the State. When comparing Foer's novel with the current situation, one considerable difference can be highlighted. The May 14 massacre in Gaza was not the consequence of Israel's actions only, but also of America's political decisions since the Trump administration's resolutions about Jerusalem and the U.S. embassy are the reasons why Palestinians were demonstrating that day.

Ever since renowned American Jewish authors such as Philip Roth or Saul Bellow established themselves in the American literary field in the second half of the twentieth century, there have been many analyses of their work in the literature. Scholars have given much attention to the way in which they define Jewishness and have particularly emphasized the representation of double identity as American Jews and the consequences of assimilation. However, Israel has not been a current topic in American Jewish fiction until recently and, therefore, there has been less research conducted on this topic. To analyse Foer's *Here I Am* makes it possible to have a better understanding of the way the Jewish community is evolving since the establishment of Israel, and how this is represented in literature. This dissertation has shown that, though Foer still represents the difficulty of being both Jewish and American, he also highlights that the American Jewish characters are feeling torn between different identities because the Jewish community is extremely divided, especially when comparing Israel and America. This study has also highlighted how Foer depicts the differences between those two Jewish communities. As argued by Halevi, "identifying and confronting American and Israeli Jews' differences and similarities will help both communities grow stronger" (Kuruvilla).

Jonathan Safran Foer is not the only American Jewish author who has shown some interest in Israel recently. Consequently, an interesting study could be made of the comparison between *Here I Am* and the novels of other American Jewish authors of his generation, such as Nicole

Krauss's *Forest Dark* (2017), for example. It would also be interesting to analyse if the novels published after Trump's election reflect a change in the way American Jewish people perceive their relationship with America. When he published *Here I Am*, Foer believed with certainty that Trump would not win the election and could therefore not predict such a change in America's politics. Upcoming novels about American Jewish identity, however, may deal with these recent developments. Because of Israel's recent actions, it is quite likely that the number of novels dealing with themes similar to those discussed in *Here I Am* will increase in American Jewish literature.

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