Jewish Identity over the Life Cycle:
Poems by Maxine Kumin and Linda Pastan

Lois Elinoff Rubin, Pennsylvania State University, New Kensington

Abstract

Stuart Charme’ et al (2008) propose a complex, spiral-shaped model of Jewish identity, in which one’s identity evolves over a lifetime, responding to Jewish issues according to changing circumstances and one’s stage in the life cycle, and is influenced by other identities that one has. Responding to their call for longitudinal studies, Rubin argues that the poems of Maxine Kumin and Linda Pastan, composed over more than fifty years of writing, provide just such insight into their developing Jewish identity. To trace this, she discusses poems about their childhood experiences with family and culture, poems that reveal their responses to experiences (visits to Israel) and events (Hamas election victory), and late life poems that both revisit earlier issues related to Jewishness and branch out in new directions. Many of their poems also reveal the interaction of other identities (environmentalist, feminist, universalist, art-lover) with their Jewish selves. While the “Jewish” poems of the two women follow in some respects different trajectories, Pastan’s revisiting late in life the immigration experience of her relatives, Kumin’s including a new element, sacred Jewish texts, in a recent collection, they both also present responses to common experiences of twentieth century Jewish life.

How does one determine Jewish identity? In the past, Jewish researchers and educators determined it largely by focusing on specific actions (amount of synagogue attendance, keeping kosher, etc.). Using the “nutritional” analogy devised by Stuart Charme’, children, in order to acquire this “strong” Jewish identity, should “consume” a diet of Jewish experiences (Jewish summer camp, Jewish day schools, Jewish youth organizations, trips to Israel, etc.) (117-118). Doing this, it was believed, would result in the desired identity, which involved being committed to Jewish continuity and regarding Jewishness as primary.

More recently, researchers, influenced by postmodern, constructivist approaches, have proposed a new paradigm, a more complex way of looking at Jewish identity. This model is not prescriptive but descriptive, relies not only on external action but also on “internal report,” and views identity not as static but as dynamic—composed of various ingredients and influences, and evolving, responding to historical and personal circumstances and to stages in the life course (Charme’ 117-119). As a visual model, Charme’ suggests a double spiral to represent how a...
person “reposition[s]” him/herself over a lifetime in regard to Jewish issues, returning to them from various perspectives (121). Jewish identity is at once influenced by the other identities that a person has and also “fluid and changing in different contexts and stages of life” [120]).

To examine the concept of Jewish identity as evolving (119), researchers call for longitudinal studies which would chart people’s interaction with Judaism over the course of their lives (137). Such an investigation is possible, I argue, through examination of poems on Jewish subjects composed over the life course by two acclaimed Jewish women poets, Maxine Kumin (age 85) and Linda Pastan (age 78). Both have published, over fifty plus years of writing, many collections of poetry (15 by Kumin, 13 by Pastan), have won important awards (Pulitzer for Kumin, Lilly Prize for Pastan), and have been included in scholarly works like Contemporary Authors and Jewish American Writers as well as the subject of many reviews, published articles, and for Kumin the book Telling the Barn Swallow.

A study of Kumin’s and Pastan’s poems written over the years on a variety of Jewish subjects (what could be called their “internal reports”) illuminates how the various circumstances of their lives—influences of their family backgrounds and early years, events and experiences in their lives and their movement through the life stages—shape their Jewish identities, and reveals both the concerns they return to again and again and the new issues they deal with over time. In contrast to the more fixed, traditional view of Jewish identity (in which the Jewishness of a writer was determined, for instance, by criteria such as his/her use of Jewish texts in his/her writing), this new more dynamic view includes Jewish writers, like the subjects of my essay, Maxine Kumin and Linda Pastan, whose writing reflects Jewishness in more complex and subtle ways.

According to what scholars and reviewers say, Judaism has had only a peripheral effect on Kumin’s and Pastan’s poetry. In her essay “Poetry” in Jewish Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia, Jessica Rosenfeld describes the Jewish background in Kumin’s poems as “practically invisible” (1085) and observes that Linda Pastan does “not confront directly [her] Jewish self in [her] work” (1085). And in her essay on Jewish-American writing in The Oxford Companion to Women’s Writing in the United States, Kathryn Hellerstein places both Kumin and
Pastan in the “broadest and least significant group” of Jewish women writers, those whose poems reflect “occasional “rather than “sustained examination” of Jewish materials (445-446).

By contrast, the poets themselves describe their Jewishness and its impact on their work in a more complex way, echoing in some ways the new paradigm established by Charme’ and others for determining Jewish identity. Admitting openly that they are not observant in a traditional way—in terms of belief in God, practice of ritual and synagogue attendance—they still affirm their Jewish identity. In Kumin’s words, “I don’t think [Jewishness] is the major focus of my work, but it’s certainly present . . .. I’m a total nonbeliever, but I do have a Jewish consciousness” (Interview with author, June 14, 2005). Responding to a reviewer’s observation that in her first collection Judaism is a “mere biographical detail” for her, Kumin asserts, “My Jewish consciousness is present in a goodly number of poems from that first book onward” (Barron 96). Pastan describes her Jewishness in this way: “I think if it hadn’t been for the Holocaust and such, we probably would’ve stopped being Jewish because we’re not interested in religion” (Interview with author, June 21, 2005). Yet, she also observed the presence of Jewishness in her identity: “the Jewish elements in my work are all mixed up with everything else, as they are in my life. I don’t think about them, they are just there.” (E-mail to author, 3 October 2003).

This essay will explore the Jewish identity of poets Kumin and Pastan that is revealed in their poems and other autobiographical materials: interaction of their Jewish identity with other identities, and changes and consistencies in their Jewish identity in response to circumstances and movement through the life cycle.

**Childhood Experiences of Family and Culture**

According to Charme’, “[identity] is constructed out of what we are given. Early childhood experiences of family and culture provided ingredients that will be incorporated in new irreducible ways” (122). A look at what Kumin and Pastan were “given” reveals the following. Both were born into secular, upwardly mobile second-generation Jewish families. Observance of religious tradition was limited in their Americanized families. According to Pastan, “We’re very nonobservant” (interview with author. June 21, 2005). Kumin says she came from “a nominally
observant family of Reform Jews” (unpublished manuscript) and attended ten years of Sunday school. Yet, like many other Jewish poets of their generation, both had contact with the strongly Jewish culture of their immigrant ancestors (Pacernick 17). Pastan’s grandparents were observant Jews of East European background (interview, 2005). In her words, “I had grandparents that I loved who were very observant, and so some of my interest in Jewish culture came from them, and so it comes into some of the poems” (interview with author. June 21, 2005). In addition, her father and her aunts and uncles (many of whom were immigrants) grew up on the Lower East Side early in the 20th century, and she is interested in their circumstances. Kumin’s paternal grandparents were Russian immigrants who spoke Yiddish and kept Kosher (unpublished essay). Her maternal grandfather, American born but observant, patriarch of the only Jewish family in Radford, VA, laid tefillin daily and brought his family forty miles to the nearest synagogue every year for the High Holidays. Kumin feels a bond with ancestors on both sides, keeping two artifacts she has from them—a letter from her maternal great grandfather and the naturalization papers of her father’s father—in view on the wall of her study and referring to these ancestors at the beginning of an autobiographical essay.

And so these “givens” of their Jewish identity, childhood experiences of family and culture, are represented frequently in their poems. For Pastan, Jewish elements of her family background, the shtetl in Europe, immigrant experience, Lower East Side, are a recurrent theme; they appear in her early work and are an even stronger presence in her more recent collections, The Last Uncle in 2002 and Queen of a Rainy Country in 2006. Kumin is also engaged in a “search for her origins” (Burstein in Zierler, 99) as she explores in poetry her mother’s ancestors in the South and in Austria and refers to her father’s Polish cousin who died in the Holocaust.

Pastan’s poem “Grudnow” (1988) depicts the shtetl where her grandfather grew up, according to his description and a photograph of it, in Russia/Poland, as a barren, dismal place (“a landscape emptied/ of crops and trees, scraped raw by winter”). Knowing what outcome awaits residents of the town during the Holocaust, the speaker imagines herself there (if her grandfather hadn’t emigrated): “I would have died there . . . of some fever . . . [or] of history.” In a recent poem “Armonk,” (2002), Pastan returns to the shtetl background of her grandparents.
Even as her family, including her Orthodox grandfather, celebrates the quintessential American holiday of Thanksgiving in a traditional, American setting of their Armonk home (colonial farmhouse, complete with shutters, clapboards and musket on the mantel), the shtetl is still very much with them, providing a contrasting back-story both for those who knew it firsthand and those who didn’t: “It was as though we longed to be part of a history that could replace our own/ancestors’ broken nights in the shtetl/ with the softly breaking light/ of an American morning” [emphasis mine]. The poem creates an interesting blend of her American (the world she is living in) and Jewish (her ancestors and the world they came from) backgrounds, or what Pacernick calls “a synthesis of past and present, Jewishness and national culture” (18). Here the American identity supplants the shtetl Jewish one, the latter one being gladly abandoned.

The poem “Cossacks” (2002), the title referring to Russian horsemen, traditionally viewed as inflicting pogroms on Jews, deals with a situation in Jewish life in the shtetl of Eastern Europe that Pastan’s ancestors might have faced. The speaker makes an analogy between those who face misfortune with equanimity (her mother, her friend Frannie whose calmness while dying stimulated the poem) and people like herself who fear adversity. The starting line, “for Jews, the Cossacks are always coming” provides a historical rationale for the speaker’s description, in the second line, of her own emotions: “Therefore I think the sun spot on my arm/ is melanoma.” At the end of the poem, she returns to the image of the Cossacks (“those are hoofbeats/on the frosty autumn air.”), again attributing her own fearfulness to the historic Jewish condition, that of being a despised minority group, fearful of the next episode of persecution. Here she is consciously exploring an aspect of her own identity that she believes is related to the historic circumstances of the Jewish people.

The immigration experience and life in the Lower East Side of her ancestors, while referred to occasionally in earlier poems, receive fullest attention in the collection *The Last Uncle* (2002) where a whole section is dedicated to memory poems, six of which depict ancestors either in the shtetl in Eastern Europe or on the Lower East Side. Pastan depicts the harshness of immigrant life: her great aunts sewing in their tenement (“Frances and Mary Allen, Sewing Group, ca. 1900”), and her father and uncle’s harsh beginnings (“Family History,” “March 5”). It is her
relatives who endured the hardships of immigrant life, and she experiences these hardships through them: “I remember a whiff/of steerage, of rotting fruit/from the Lower East Side” (“March 5”) [emphasis mine]. The shtetl and immigrant life, though not experienced directly, are available, second hand, through her connection to her grandparents, aunts and uncles and father, and she inscribes this part of her Jewish identity into her poetry. In this, Pastan is like current Jewish women writers (although she is a generation older), who, according to Sara Horowitz, “explore the Jewish past . . . in particular, the shtetl,” an important window on where we came from that shapes who we are today (214). Indeed, remembrance of the past, according to Yosef Yerushalmi, has always been “a central component of Jewish experience” as indicated by the everyday prayers that demand remembrance and seasonal festivals that recall a shared past (quoted in Burstein 232).

A childhood experience of a different sort, not connected to immigrant ancestors, depicts Pastan’s first brush with anti-Semitism: “1936, Upstate New York” (1998). The speaker recalls that she, a four year old child, and her mother, while spending the summer in an upstate New York farmhouse, were surprised to discover the Nazi sympathies of their hosts: “the muffled sounds of German” on the radio, “the swastika on an envelope on the kitchen table.” They quickly returned to the city, but the speaker recalls vividly this incident some sixty years later. The experience of being the likely object of someone’s hostility because of one’s Jewish identity (though only later did she come to realize this) affected her enough to be recalled and formed into a poem.

For Kumin, the “givens” of her Jewish identity are her ancestors, those on her mother’s side, from Austria who settled in the south and those on her father’s side, observant Jews (Yiddish speaking, keeping a kosher home) from Poland. Two poems depict what Kumin affectionately calls her “flamboyant” ancestor, her mother’s grandfather (unpublished essay). Two poems concern this ancestor, who followed a trajectory common among 19th century Jews: avoiding conscription in the army by migrating to the US, starting out here as a peddler and advancing to store owner. The poem “On Being Asked to Write a Poem for the Centenary of the Civil War” depicts a great grandfather who “in 1848 . . . sailed in at Baltimore/ a Jew, and poor;/ strapped
needles up and notions/ and walked packablack across the dwindling Alleghenies”; later, settling in Virginia, he became a tailor who made uniforms for the confederate army (1961). Another poem, “For My Great-Grandfather: A Message Long Overdue” (1961), takes the form of a letter, responding to a three-page letter written by the same ancestor and passed down to her, and addresses him directly and familiarly: “You with the beard as red as Barbarossa’s . . . I choose to be a lifetime in your debt.” She is grateful that he lived and founded the family that she is part of. Kumin expresses both affection for and connection to this ancestor, both by writing these poems and by hanging Great-Grandfather’s letter on her study wall.

Her mother’s death catalyzed Kumin to compose the memorial poem “The Chain” (1982), a biography of her mother, which foregrounds aspects of the older woman’s Jewish identity. In it she traces the complex youth of a Jewish woman in a small Southern town in the early 20th century, noting in particular the family’s distance from a Jewish community (“Grandfather drove forty miles to Roanoke/to witness the blowing of the shofar/on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur”), the fact that her mother played the organ at a nearby church, and that “one by one [her mother’s] sisters are sent north to cousins/ in search of kindly Jewish husbands.” This history too she claims as her own, describing her search as “Affirming my past” (italics mine). The fact that she depicts in poems these ancestors, with affection and pride, highlighting their Jewish characteristics, suggests that they played a role in forming her Jewish identity. Like Pastan, she is preoccupied with the past and searches for her origins.

Also present in her memories of childhood are examples of her father’s connection to Jewish life. Vivid in her mind and mentioned several times in poems composed as far apart as 1975 and 2005 and in her autobiographical essay is the memory of her father crying over cousins who perished (or were about to) in the Holocaust. In her autobiography and in a telephone conversation with me she recalled him at the dinner table “reading letters and putting his head in his hands and weeping” (June 14, 2005). She portrays this scene in her poems early and late: in 1975 poem “The Thirties Revisited” (1975) and in two poems in the recent 2005 collection where in one case she mentions the death of the relatives (“Women and Horses”) and in the other portrays the scene where her father cries over letters imploring his help (“Appropriate Tools: An
Elegy and Rant). Kumin also described having Nazi nightmares as an adolescent (email, June 18, 2005), and when I sent her a collection of memoirs by Pittsburgh Holocaust survivors, *Flares of Memory* (2002), she was greatly moved by it, reading it from cover to cover and writing me an emotional response immediately. The Holocaust for her, as for Linda Pastan, had great impact.

Another thread in Kumin’s childhood Jewish identity is located paradoxically in the Christian atmosphere of the Convent school (and Germantown of the 1920s and 1930s) she attended in her first three years of school. There, as she recalls, in an autobiographical essay and in a 2005 poem (“The Agony”), she encountered the “life-size crucified Christ at the end of the corridor.” As a child, she could not escape this cruel image, and the strangeness of it to her revealed her difference from others in the school. Adding to her discomfort (she recounts in her essay), she was informed in school that Jews were responsible for the figure’s suffering. Once her parents became aware of the situation, they removed her from the convent school, but the memory of the Christ image, and the sense of difference and guilt that it occasioned, stayed with her, as indicated by the words of her autobiography and recent poem.

Similarly, in two early poems the speaker portrays discomfort as a Jewish child in Christian settings. In “Sisyphus” (published in her first collection, in 1961), the speaker recalls her discomfort when the amputee who begged near the school called her “a perfect Christian child,” for pushing him up hill in his cart. She wanted to admit her Jewish identity but did not have the courage to do so: “One day I said I was a Jew./ I wished I had. I wanted to.” Although “Mother Rosarine” is an affectionate remembrance of nuns at the convent, the speaker still refers to herself, the Jewish child from next door, as an outsider: “Wrong, born wrong for the convent games, I hunched on the sidelines beggar fashion.” As Kumin herself noted, “Frequently, my [Jewish] awareness is set against a Christian landscape” (Barron 96). Exposure to Christian contexts stimulates her to note her difference as a Jew, calling attention to her distinct Jewish identity.

**Travel and Events**

According to Charme’, attitudes toward one’s Jewish identity ebb and flow. That is, people’s attitude toward their Jewishness “will fluctuate, change, ebb, and flow in response to personal
and historical circumstances” (121). Indeed, travel and events—both historical and personal—frequently stimulate Kumin’s and Pastan’s involvement with their Jewish identities and result in poems about that involvement.

Invited to serve as poet in residence at Danville College in Danville, KY, Kumin (as in the Convent poems) portrays her condition as outsider in this religious Christian community. Beginning the poem “Living Alone with Jesus” (1971) with these memorable lines, “Can it be/ I am the only Jew residing in Danville, Kentucky,/ looking for matzoh in the Safeway and the A & P?” The speaker goes on to describe, using a variety of Christian symbols and allusions, the religious atmosphere of the place: residents who try to convert her to Christianity, the thirty-seven churches, and their bells. She once observed that Danville with its strongly Christian atmosphere was to her a more exotic place than Europe. Again her status as outsider stimulates awareness of her Jewish identity and results in a poem.

Invited to the Salzberg Seminar in the early 1980s, Kumin took the opportunity to travel throughout Austria, and as a result produced two poems reflecting her Jewish background. In one, as she looks through an old Baedeker travel guide, she imagines the life her ancestor (the forbearer of the German peddler) might have lived as a tailor living in three rooms above his shop in the ghetto, to Judenrassse or Jew alley. Using an intimate tone, speaking directly to her ancestor, she warns him to leave picturesque 19th century Austria, which (from her vantage point in the late twentieth century) she knows will, one hundred years later, be taken over by the Nazis: “Time to shoulder your knapsack and strike out for Ellis Island. . . Never look back, Grandfather.” (“On Reading an Old Baedeker in Schloss Leopoldskron,” 1989). The bond she expresses in the poem toward this ancestor was confirmed by the feeling in her voice as she commented in a phone conversation: “How can you not think of your great grandfather who emigrated from Bohemia. And you try to visualize what life was like to be a Jew, living in Jew Alley, being a tailor, shoemaker, or whatever” (telephone conversation with author, June 14, 2005). Here she demonstrates “the constructive power of search for origins” (Burstein in Zierler 99); her affinity to her ancestors and their situation as Jews is stimulated by her visit to their native land.
Similarly, for Pastan a visit to Amsterdam and the House of Anne Frank, stimulated a poem (“It Is Raining on the House of Anne Frank,” 1978) on a Jewish subject. In it she recounts gloomy details (the narrow hiding place, the rainy day, the unenthusiastic fellow tourists) but concludes with a beautiful metaphor which describes both the next visit of the day (to the Van Gogh museum) and Anne Frank herself who “could find the pure/center of light/within the dark circle/of [her] demons.” Clearly, the speaker was drawn to visit this Holocaust site and was moved by the experience to write a poem about it. In this, she is like other Jewish poets of her generation, according to Pacernick, many of whom were “affected by the Holocaust and reflect that . . . in their poetry” (17).

By travelling to Israel, as many Jewish writers of their generation did, Kumin and Pastan at once at express their Jewish identity (in choosing to make the trip) and develop that identity further. Both writers expressed attachment to the Jewish State to me in e-mail messages. Pastan observes, “And you can’t have grown up during the Second World War, as I did, without feeling a special connection to Israel” (March 27, 2010). When I asked Kumin if she had felt connected to Israel while she was there, she responded, “Yes, of course I felt some personal connection to Israel” (March 27, 2010). At the same time, the multiple identities of each woman, with their “tensions and contradictions” (Charme 118) are on view in their Israel poems.

For example, Pastan’s poem, “Mosaic,” was stimulated by a mosaic that the poet observed during a visit to a tile shop in the Armenian Quarter of Jerusalem (1982). After describing the Biblical scenes portrayed on it—the near sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham, the tablets being given by God to Moses, Cain and Abel—the poet (drawing an analogy to Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob) describes the jealousy toward herself that she senses in the tile maker’s Arab assistant and comments: “all of us wondering/why for every pair/there is just one/blessing.” Here the speaker feels sympathy with the outsider, the Arab, in spite of her connectedness to the Jewish state. Two strands of her identity—loyalty to her own people, belief in social justice for all, what Lyons calls the strain of “universalism” in 20th century Jewish thought (72)—seem to be in conflict in this story.
Kumin also writes in response to a visit to Israel in the lengthy poem, “1984: The Poet Visits Egypt and Israel” (1985). While in Egypt, the poet, invited to lecture on American women poets, is sensitive to the incongruity of poor Egyptians (“starved donkeys/ and skeletal horses pulling impossible loads” co-existing with wealthy foreign visitors ([at the Sheraton] oiled, bikinied, all-but-naked bodies/of salesmen’s wives and airline attendants on holdover”). In the Israel part of the trip, the poet gives a full portrayal of everyday life in Jerusalem: Sephardic Jews celebrating a bar mitzvah at the Western Wall, Jews and Bedouins searching through fruit at a market, Hasidic young men biking at rapid speed through the streets. Going deeper, she points out the tension among the various factions sharing Jerusalem (concentration-camp survivor, blue faced Bedouin, Hasidic believers) —“like tripwire/ stretched taut before the spark ignites the fuse” – and imagines the outcome: “blood running/in the streets to mingle Shiite, Druse, Israeli, French, American.” Talking about herself in the third person point of view (“the poet leaves for Tel Aviv at night.”), she takes the stance of a detached observer of the scene, perhaps to enable herself to view the situation more clearly and less emotionally. Despite the poet’s expressed personal connection to Israel, the speaker gives an evenhanded portrayal in this poem and expresses concern for the effects on all groups of the violent outcome she fears.

“In the Absence of Bliss” (1985), inspired by a visit to the Museum of the Diaspora in Tel Aviv, the poem begins with this image of Jewish persecution: “The roasting alive of rabbis/in the ardor of the Crusades.” In contrast to Pastan, Kumin is not subtle in her use of Jewish materials but graphic—describing horrors directly (“eyeballs popping,/ the corpses shrinking in the fire”). Even as the speaker describes being appalled by the cruelty suffered by her people, Jews, over the centuries, the poem also refers to problematic elements of the Jewish scriptures, expresses antagonism toward patriarchal gods, and questions both religious faith and her own agnosticism as well. A mix of identities—Jewish, feminist, and agnostic—co-exist with some dissonance in this poem.

Another poem by Pastan about Israel was stimulated not by art or a visit, but by an event, the 1967 Israeli/Arab war. As she watches “On watching the Israeli War on TV” (1970), the poet expresses her sense of belonging to the Jewish people: “We are Jews after all” (italics mine), she
says, though she is at the time vacationing in Narragansett, a seaside resort on the coast of Rhode Island, far away from Israel. This moment of trial for her people motivates the poet to express her identity as a Jew and solidarity with the Jewish people (and, perhaps, some guilt for not being with them). She is both alien to Israel (as an American at a seaside resort) and alien to America (as a Jew connected to Israel). The usual order of her identities (American then Jewish) is thrown into question by this war that threatens Israel.

Recent Poems

Recent poems show both consistencies and changes in the poets’ involvement with Jewishness. In their later years, Kumin and Pastan continue to explore, although with different material and perspectives, subjects like Jewish ancestors and adversities experienced by Jews that have always preoccupied them. At the same time, they branch out in new directions, Pastan becoming more political and Kumin experimenting with Jewish sacred texts. These late life poems in particular reveal what Bethamie Horowitz labels the “dynamic” nature of Jewish identity, “how a person’s sense of Jewishness evolves over time and under changing circumstances” (137).

In Pastan’s recent 2006 collection, *Queen of a Rainy Country*, several poems on Jewish subjects show Pastan “[circling] back to certain core issues and themes” that she dealt with in earlier poems (121). For one, she is still searching for her origins and frustrated that she can’t get further in this quest: “Failed/archeologist of memory,/ I never asked/ a single question.” As in earlier poems (poems about the immigrant experience of her older relatives in the 2002 collection and earlier poems about conflicts with her father), in “A tourist at Ellis Island,” she once again explores the mystery of her father’s background, the unknown aspects of his early years in the Old Country which so contrast with the sophisticated Americanized surgeon father she knew. This poem is catalyzed by seeing his name (in its original Old World form) on the manifest of the ship that brought him to the United States. The fact that the poem appears on the first page of the collection shows its importance to her. Her link to immigrants in her family, especially her father, is the basis of her Jewish identity and she returns to it in this latest
collection. Like today’s women writers, the past is still present for her; she is still investigating her origins (Sara Horowitz 214).

Two poems on facing pages, holding positions of prominence at the end of the book, illustrate another recurrent theme in her Jewish identity, the Holocaust. Strongly affected by the Holocaust, as Kumin and other Jewish poets were, she observes, “it’s always in my consciousness; it colors my world view of what we’re capable of” (interview with author, 21 June, 2005). This concern, present in her earlier poems like “Grudnow,” “It is Raining on the House of Anne Frank,” re-appears in these two poems at the end of Rainy Country. About one of them Pastan observes, “I try to deal with [Holocaust] in a different way in a new poem [“What We Are Capable of], which puts what’s going on in the world now into perspective” (interview with author, 21 June, 2005). In this poem, rare for Pastan in addressing a current political situation, prisoner abuse at Abu Ghrab activates at once her Jewish identity (her people’s experience with oppression) and her desire for social justice for everyone. Indeed, the speaker, overwhelmed by the human capacity for evil demonstrated by abuse at Abu Ghrab, looks to rescuers during the Holocaust for inspiration: “I think of those villagers in France/who risked their only lives/ to save a handful of Jews,” an action which she likens to a “chink of light . . . through darknesses.” As in the poem responding to her visit to the house of Anne Frank (1978), the Holocaust is used to represent the struggle between forces of good and evil, and the same image—light amidst darkness—used in the earlier poem is used here. The Jewish experience with persecution and hardship, which she depicts frequently in her work, serves as a way to understand and protest the abuses at Abu Ghrab. Her two identities—Jew, mourning those lost in the Holocaust and Universalist believer in human rights for everyone—are compatible here.

On the opposite page is a poem titled “Landscape Near Dachau,” based on the painting by Adolf Holzel c. 1900. Pastan has written many ekphrastic poems, poems about art—I’ve counted twenty of them—throughout her oeuvre. A devotee of museums, she often writes about what she sees there and describes herself as “a very visual person.” (E-mail to author, 21 Oct. 2008) This poem combines two very different parts of her identity (which don’t come together often)—sophisticated art lover and Jew troubled by the Holocaust and what it reveals of mankind.
While the painting, as she reports, describes a peaceful rural scene (sky, river, snow, farmhouses) in Germany around 1900, the poem describes something else; Pastan sees in it premonitions of the Holocaust, which will occur almost forty years later. The tranquil elements of the rural scene are, in her mind, harbingers of disaster: the blue sky described as “innocent,” foreshadows the lack of innocence (awareness of evil) that will follow under the Nazis; the “chimneys” of the “humble roofs” in the painting are innocent versions of the smokestacks of Dachau’s gas chambers, and the “only shadows” of the trees on the water in the painting suggest another kind of shadow, that of darkness and evil, to come. That Pastan included this poem in the section of her book devoted to political poetry and right next to the Abu Ghraib poem with its Holocaust reference indicates, as before, how deep in her consciousness the Holocaust is and how persistent this preoccupation is over time. Once again, Jewish experience is the lens through which she views the world, just as art is, and here the two domains inform each other.

Two recent poems by Kumin that take as their central subject an event in Jewish history give insight into both her Jewish consciousness and creative process. On a private tour of the Skirball Museum in LA, where she was doing a reading, she came upon The Jew Order (order by Grant to expelling Jews from his military district in Western Tennessee) on the wall. She describes her reaction: “I was just totally taken aback, nobody seems to be aware of its existence. I was moved to write the poem” (Interview, 14 June, 2005). In the poem, ”The Jew Order” (2005), using the scenario of a high school history class of white and black students (similar to one she attended), she imagines students being provided with historical background related to the Jew Order: that few Jews lived in the South in the 1860s; that the Jews were traders, bringing in goods desperately needed by southern households; that, under the Jew Order, any Jews remaining in the territory would become prisoners, that a small group of them appealed to Lincoln to revoke the order; that the Jew Order was revoked by Lincoln in the same month that he signed the Emancipation Proclamation. Had the American history curriculum included this information, the speaker asserts, instead of the usual dull subject matter, Black and Jewish students would have been roused from their boredom to feel “a heady momentary taste of solidarity.” As she is here,
Kumin is often strongly aroused by threats to the Jewish people. But desire for justice for her own people spurs her to advocate justice for others as well.

An event threatening to Israel, the Hamas victory in the parliamentary election in Jan. 2006, arouses Kumin’s concern and causes her to look to historical solutions. In fact, she reported saying to friends, “Oy, we should have taken the Brits up on their offer” (E-mail to author, 19 Feb. 2006), referring to the offer the British made to give Jews their own state in Uganda. Hence the poem titled “Revisionist History: the British Uganda Program of 1903” (2007). Again, as in “Jew Order,” she takes a little known historic incident and embeds it in a creative scenario. Imagining what might have happened if Zionists had accepted the British offer of a Jewish state in Uganda, she speculates on how the two peoples (Masai natives and European Jews) might have gotten along: “What if the Jews grew browner,/ the Masai grew paler until/the plateau was all café au lait . . . They blessed each other’s Torahs.” The uniting of people in their common humanity is, for Kumin, always a desirable goal. In the above two poems her Jewish identity is clear; events threatening to her people (Jew Order, election of Hamas) catch her attention and, in her words, “move” her to write poems. In the poems themselves, she shows sympathy for her people (the afflicted Jews), either by expressing indignation at their plight (directly defending them) or by creating an imaginary world in which the threat to them no longer exists. In addition, by taking two little known historical incidents and developing whole poems about them, she is trying to inform, to fill the vacuum of information. As she says (interview, 6/14, 2005), “Much is left out of history books.” Her accounts are fuller, more informative, and direct than those of Pastan, but like Pastan, she is in these political poems at once expressing her particular Jewish identity—loyalty to the Jewish people—and her sympathy with others (resisting injustice anywhere it’s found and realizing one’s common humanity with others). The two identities represented in this poem—Jewish and Universalist—are in harmony.

Throughout her career Kumin has occasionally written what could be called religious poems, poems dealing with holidays, rituals and belief. For instance, in “In the Absence of Bliss,” after reviewing examples of both Jewish and Muslim martyrdom, she ponders the issue of belief—what she would sacrifice herself for. And in “For Anne at Passover” (1961), she contrasts rituals
of Passover and Good Friday (both occurring on the same day that year) and the Gods that inspired them and concludes that all religious rituals have the same goal—the desire of humans to connect to something larger than themselves, a spiritual life force. However, in her newest collection (2007), Kumin has gone further in this direction, devoting a whole section, entitled “Turn it and turn it,” to poems which draw on sacred Jewish texts. Pastan uses Biblical references in many poems—Exodus in the poem “Passover” (1971), Noah in “Ark” (1982), and Adam, Eve and the garden of Eden in various collections (1971, 1975, 1988). However, these stories are treated as literature (she says that she loves the Old Testament—“the rhythm and the stories and the images” [interview 22 June 2005]), not as springboards to discussion of religion. The only poem that can be thought to concern theology is the brief “A Short History of Judaic Thought in the Twentieth Century” (1978), which deals with one issue—the injunction not to touch a dying person—and does so in a humorous way. And so, Kumin includes one area of Jewishness, discussion of religious texts that Pastan does not.

Four poems in section III of Still to Mow (2007) are an amalgam of several different materials/themes that interest her: sacred Jewish texts and rabbinic lore, pagan myths, recollections of Shabbat dinners in her childhood, feminist consciousness, and concern for the environment.

Two poems in this collection are grounded in Kumin’s recollection of her father’s reciting the words of Genesis 2.2 (“and it was evening/ and it was morning/ of the seventh day and/ God rested on the seventh/day . . .”) as he blesses the wine on Friday nights during her childhood. The poem “The Saving Remnant” uses passages from Genesis and Pirke Avot to discuss the passing of time. The first, italicized sentence of the poem, “Turn it and turn it/the old rabbis said/ for everything is in it,” from Pirke Avot, while generally thought to refer to the value of the Torah (study it from all sides for the Torah has all the wisdom in it that you need), is used here, she says, “to represent the passage of time.” (Email to author, 24 Feb. 2009) And it does that through tracing life cycle of members of her family: a childhood scene in which her father blesses the wine with young Maxine and her brothers gathered around the table on Friday night, her grown up brothers being sent overseas to combat in World War II, and, finally, family
members dying off, one by one. In addition, the sentences from *Genesis* 2.2 (“and it was evening/ and it was morning/ of the seventh day”), italicized and repeated throughout the poem, emphasize the passing of time; sacred text provides a way for us to understand time. However, while leaning on sacred text in this poem, Kumin feels free to add what, to her, is missing from it: two female references. Complementing her father’s reciting of *Genesis*, is a creation myth in which a goddess gives birth to the world egg from her navel. And the poem ends by noting that women, who are so involved in creating and maintaining life, are left out of the holy book; they are, in her final words, “the saving remnant.” Elements from her Jewish identity intertwine in the poem with those of her feminist consciousness, but clash in the conclusion where the Jewish text is condemned for not including women. Using the pronoun “us,” the speaker identifies with the excluded women, not the male God.

Creation is the subject again in “O Sacred Fridays,” which evokes the same Sabbath scene with her father reciting the same lines from *Genesis* (“And God rested from all the work that He had made”) as he blesses the wine. This mention of *Genesis* is the catalyst this time for discussing the nature of sacred texts, whether Bible stories (Adam and Eve, Noah and the Ark) should be accepted as true, as many (for instance, the Bishop of Ussher in the poem) do, or regarded as myth, the way “rationalists” see it. The end of the poem moves from creation, the beginning of life, to the end of the world, which she describes in terms of environmental degradation—“starved polar bears, drowned baby seals”—brought about by the actions of humanity, not of God. Putting environmental degradation in the context of the creation story gives it more significance; to destroy what God has created seems even more terrible. Skeptical of the Bible, she yet values childhood memories of her father reciting words of *Genesis* and uses the beginning/end of the world as a frame in which to express her fears for the destruction of our planet. The various and clashing identities (Jew, non-believer, environmentalist) of the speaker work together to make her point in the poem.

Two other religious poems in this section focus on the Messiah, the figure who, traditional Jews believe, will come to save humanity. The poem “Though He Tarry” begins with philosopher Maimonides’ famous declaration of faith: “I believe with perfect faith in/ the coming
of the Messiah/and though he tarry I will/wait daily for his coming,” the twelfth of Maimonides’ thirteen principles of faith. After describing the conflict between believers and nonbelievers—giving statistics, citing authorities—Kumin makes a shift. The dispute over religion can’t be resolved, but what **can** be known is that the planet is at risk: “what about the planet?” In angry tones, Kumin berates humankind for the various ways it abuses the environment, for being selfish and greedy. Then, predicting the worst consequences for us, she returns to the Messiah, begging him in irreverent language to come (“If only he’d . . . get his licensed/ and guaranteed ass down here”). Though she knows (and we know) that no Messiah will come to save us, that we must save the planet ourselves, her appeal shows just how desperate she feels, how little confidence she has in humanity’s ability to change. Here she is juxtaposing, in her words “the forever-delayed coming of the Messiah and the very realistic coming of the destruction of our planet” (email to author, 24 Feb., 2009). Again her Jewish, non-believer, and environmentalist identities are in evidence—but this time the Jewish element, the Messiah, is not taken seriously, and the non-believing environmentalist viewpoint takes precedence.

By contrast, the seven-line poem, “When the Messiah Comes,” placed last in this section, has a celebratory tone. The poem depicts the regeneration of life in the spring—plants sprouting, horses basking in the sun and crows calling out to welcome the spring. The Messiah, which she describes as coming up the drive, may be nature itself, which regenerates every spring. Here nature is viewed as sacred and the change of seasons becomes a holy event. The only term referring to religion is the word “Messiah” in the title. This is the least “Jewish” (most nature-oriented) of the religious poems.

Clearly, Kumin is taking traditional materials—Biblical, Talmudic, myth and philosophical sources—and using them in to make her own points about issues that matter to her (environment, women’s roles). She blends pieces of religious texts (“Turn it, turn it”; “Saving Remnant”; “It was evening and it was morning”) with pagan myths, family memories, statements of scientists and clergymen, and historical events in an interesting, unique, and sometimes jarring mix. We see threads of her Jewish identity mixed with her other identities—nonbeliever, feminist, environmentalist—sometimes clashing, sometimes reinforcing each other. She said she has no
idea why she is writing these “religious” poems now (“It’s as much a mystery to me as to you”
email, 2/24/09) but I see them as culminating. At this point in her life, in her eighties, she is (able
to) taking the long view, looking back at her earliest associations with Jewishness in the family
Shabbat scenes, including Jewish texts that she’s familiar with over a lifetime and that are
memorable to her (though she doesn’t believe in them), and also bringing in her strongly
progressive values as feminist and environmentalist.

So what can we learn about Jewish identity from studying the poems on Jewish subjects
written over the life course by Maxine Kumin and Linda Pastan?

First, certain seminal elements in Jewish life, for example the immigrant experience, the
Holocaust, Jewish holidays, and Israel, are common triggers for exploring their Jewish identity
for these two poets as I believe they are for other Jewish writers of their generation. Both wrote
about the immigration experience of their ancestors, Pastan’s from shtetl to Lower East Side,
Kumin’s from Austria to the American South; both wrote poems about Passover, Israel and the
Holocaust. Both were also motivated to write about the experience of being an outsider, Kumin
in Christian settings and Pastan in a guesthouse operated by Nazi sympathizers.

On the other hand, the development of Jewish identity for Kumin and Pastan, as Charme,
Horowitz, and others say, is individual: the two women follow in many respects different
patterns in developing and expressing their Jewish identities. For example, poems about family
members remain constant over time throughout Pastan’s work. Early on, she writes about the
Jewish background of her grandparents; recently, she extends that exploration, portraying the
immigrant and Lower East Side experience of grandfather, great aunts, uncles, and father. For
Kumin, while the memory of her father’s grief over cousins lost in the Holocaust appears in early
and late poems, full-length ancestor poems about her mother’s family in the South were written
early, and the subject was not revisited. On the other hand, political/historical poems, many
representing instances of persecution in Jewish history, are written both early and late by Kumin.

In recent poems, both poets move in new directions in their poems on Jewish subjects, but
the new directions the two women take are not the same. Pastan writes a rare political poem
about Abu Ghraib, which includes a Holocaust analogy and combines the Holocaust and art.
Kumin writes a series of poems using Jewish sacred texts in developing environmental and feminist themes.

Finally, as Charme’, Horowitz and others say, Jewish identity does not exist in isolation, but interacts with other strands of one’s identity, the elements sometimes conflicting, sometimes reinforcing each other. For example, Kumin combines environmentalism, feminism, Jewish texts, and memories of family Shabbat dinners, in a somewhat jarring mixture, in a series of poems in a recent collection. Pastan blends her interest in art with her preoccupation with the Holocaust in a more subtle style in a recent poem. Most important, both early and late, the two poets combine their particular Jewish identity and a universalist outlook, portraying in their work not only the sufferings of the Jewish people but injustices and cruelty endured by other groups as well.

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