# Here I Am Study Guide

## Here I Am by Jonathan Safran Foer

BOOKRAGS

# Contents

# Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Here I Am, by Jonathan Safran Foer. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York, NY. 2016.

The title, and much of the book's narrative and thematic content, refer to a story in both the Old Testament of the Bible and in the Hebrew Torah – specifically, the story of how God demanded that Jewish patriarch Abraham sacrifice his son Isaac in order to prove his (Abraham's) faith. Each of the central figures in that story – God, Abraham, Isaac – use the phrase "Here I am" to reveal their presence to the others.

As the story begins, Jewish television writer Jacob and his architect wife Julia have busy lives, raising their three sons (Sam, Max, and Benjy, all individual, intelligent and precocious); interacting with Jacob's father Irv (a renowned activist and writer); and worrying about the care of Jacob's grandfather Isaac (an elderly survivor of the Holocaust). As the story develops, the family's full but managed routine is shaken up by a series of unexpected events.

The first of these events is the discovery that eldest son Sam has been caught writing down racist and discriminatory words (including what is referred to as the "n-word") and refuses to admit responsibility. This leads to complicated, fraught discussions about whether his bar mitzvah should be allowed to proceed. The second major event is Julia's discovery that Jacob has a second cell phone, and her simultaneous discovery that he has been sending crudely suggestive text messages to another woman. The third and fourth major events in the family's life occur at roughly the same time – Isaac commits suicide, and an earthquake devastates the Middle East, including the Jewish state of Israel. Throughout all these events, there are ongoing references to the failing health of the family dog Argus, and the impending need to have him put to sleep.

As the complications and consequences of all these events affect the various members of the Blochs, they are visited by members of the Israeli side of the family – Jacob's cousin Tamir and his son Barak, ostensibly arriving to attend Sam's bar mitzvah but in fact searching for a new place to live. The earthquake strikes shortly after they arrive, triggering in Tamir a desperate desire to return home and, in Jacob, a desire (triggered by a call for help from the Israeli government) to go to Israel and help in the recovery and war efforts. As both the rebuilding and the war with the Arab countries in the Middle East increase the tensions in Israel, revelations and self-discoveries at Isaac's funeral and Sam's bar mitzvah all lead Jacob to the realization that while he is Jewish, he feels more of a connection with his home in America and his family than with Israel.

Finally, after Tamir returns home; after the question of Sam's responsibility for the words is resolved; and after Julia and Jacob agree to end their marriage, Jacob begins to build a new life. He buys and furnishes a new home for himself and for his sons when they visit; he establishes a relatively peaceful relationship with Julia; and he starts to focus more on writing for and about himself, rather than on writing designed to make him a living.

As the novel draws to its conclusion, Jacob takes Argus to the veterinarian to be euthanized. As Argus ends his life, Jacob realizes that he is now truly ready to begin his.

# Part 1, Before the War – Section 1

## Summary

Get Back to Happiness – “When the destruction of Israel commence[s]” (3), elderly Isaac Bloch struggles to come to terms with the idea of moving into an elder-care facility. At the same time, Isaac’s grandson Jacob and his wife Julia argue with the rabbi that runs the school attended by their son Sam about whether Sam is guilty of, and should be punished for, writing down a list of words associated with racism and prejudice (including “the n-word”). Narration includes references to rituals the family has lost; their relationship to well-known political figure Irving Bloch (Jacob is Irving’s son); and Julia’s desire to resolve the situation so the family could “get back to happiness.” Also at stake: the celebration of Sam’s bar mitzvah, which is apt to be canceled if the situation is not resolved. Jacob leaves the rabbi’s office insisting that Sam is innocent.

Here I Amn’t – Narration describes Sam’s intense (often obsessive) intelligence, and his lack of need for ritual, including that associated with his family’s Jewish faith. Narration also describes how he plays an alternate reality game called “Other Life,” where he plays a Latina avatar / alter ego (Samanta) and goes to a synagogue.

Happiness – Even though he continues to believe Sam is innocent, Jacob agrees with Julia to treat Sam as though he is guilty. Narration of their conversation refers to Jacob’s concern that Julia might have found and seen his phone. As the conversation concludes, Jacob says Julia can have the rest of the day to herself. Back at home, the two youngest children (Max and Benjy) are being taken care of by their grandparents, Irving (Irv) and Deborah. A busy, multi-topic conversation is anchored by argument between Irv and Jacob about what should be done about Sam, with Irv advocating that he be forgiven (because he was practicing free speech) and telling Jacob his house smells horrible, only he does not notice. Jacob argues that the house smells the way it does because family dog Argus is incontinent.

A Hand the Size of Yours, A House the Size of This One - As it details a lengthy list of things Julia likes, and another list of things she dislikes, narration reveals that Julia is an architect and designer, and has a hobby of designing possible homes for her family. Narration also describes a sexually-charged night she spent at a rural inn with Jacob early in their relationship, in which they bantered about things they were withholding from each other; and the process of how, over time and due to the process of raising a family, “their inner lives became overwhelmed by all the living” (37). As an example of all the living they are doing, narration includes a reference to some of the peculiar habits of their son Max, including a description of his habit of comparing things – “a hand the size of yours, a house the size of this one” (38).

Narration then shifts into a present-day encounter, on Julia’s “day off,” between her and a colleague, Mark, for whom she has been designing and decorating a home. As they banter flirtatiously, Mark reveals that he and his wife Jennifer are getting a divorce, and

that Julia will no longer need to work on their home. During their conversation, Mark challenges Julia to think about whether she would enjoy being alone more than continuing to live the life she has, and she says she would choose her own life. As their conversation concludes, Mark reminds Julia that they are the co-chaperones for a school trip their children are taking, and Julia slips the doorknob they had been considering for the house into her purse.

Narration then returns to the past, to Jacob and Julia's tenth wedding anniversary, which they celebrated by returning to the hotel referred to earlier. Narration describes their efforts at recreating exactly what happened, efforts that are uncomfortably juxtaposed with detailed narration of their new bedtime routines. Back in the present, Julia sits in the parking lot of the store where she met Mark, contemplating what to do with the rest of her day. She ends up returning home. The narration of this chapter contains frequent interjections of crude sex talk.

Here I Amn't – This chapter focuses on Sam, in his bedroom on his I-pod chatting with friends while his family talks about what is going to happen to him. He reflects on how strange he feels in his body and in the world; recalls the accident in which his fingers were slammed in a car door and during which he was comforted by his mother; and asks his brother Max, who comes to see him, who he's going to live with when their parents get a divorce – which Sam thinks is inevitable.

## Analysis

These opening few chapters of Part 1 introduce the book's protagonist Jacob Bloch. They also introduce several physical antagonists, or characters that triggers conflict for the protagonist (among them: primary antagonist Julia), and also another kind of antagonist, one that might be described as a psychological antagonist, a perspective that likewise triggers conflict. This is Jacob's perspective on Jewish practice and ritual, on what it means to be Jewish. Here it is important to note a couple of things: that those perspectives are, in general, shared by Julia and many other characters; but that they also, in the case of the book, the characters, and its themes, tend to lack reference to faith or spirituality. In other words, Jacob and those around him seem to be defined, on some primary way, by perspectives on what being Jewish means they should do, or how they should act, not what they actually believe. What defines Jacob as a protagonist, in this chapter and throughout the rest of the book that follows, is his journey past this sense of Jewishness as practice and activity, and into some kind of actual spiritual perspective. The first steps on that journey are taken here, with the reference to Argus and his incontinence (that is: to Jacob's home smelling bad) metaphorically suggesting the foulness of the relative superficiality of faith and practice from which Jacob moves. The reference also foreshadows the Argus-related moment at the very end of the book when Jacob and the reader both realize that this is what has been happening.

All that said, several other narrative elements that define key moments of Jacob's journey of transformation are also introduced here. The question of what exactly Sam

did and why, for example, sets him up as taking a parallel journey towards personal integrity as his father. At the same time, it ties this journey quite closely to a specific example of Jewish practice: the bar mitzvah. The answer to the question, raised here, about what will happen about Sam's bar mitzvah is revealed later in the narrative, and bears a clear relationship to what happens to Jacob by the novel's conclusion. Meanwhile, the reference to Sam's bar mitzvah is also an introductory development in the novel's thematic exploration of various types of ritual, while the father/son relationship between Jacob and Sam is one of several thematically significant father son relationships that are developed throughout the book. Another is the confrontational Jacob / Irv relationship; still another is the less narratively present, but still thematically significant, relationship between Irv and Isaac.

Other key narrative elements introduced here include the possibility of Julia's affair and the complex exploration of her feelings about, and within, herself. The exploration here foreshadows future explorations that, in turn, tie in to the narrative's exploration of the many levels of action and reaction, expression and with-holding, that define her relationship with Jacob. Events within that relationship, in their turn, play key roles in defining Jacob's novel-length journey of transformation.

Other important instances of foreshadowing include the crude sexuality of the interjected comments in "A Hand…," which foreshadow the later revelation of the context in which those contents were made, a revelation which is another example of the shifting back and forth between past and present as described below. There is also the reference to the doorknob, which plays a significant role in the next section of Part 1.

Also in terms of important narrative elements, a couple of ongoing symbols are also introduced in this section. The first is the online game Other Life, played by Sam and which clearly serves as a symbolic evocation of many different kinds of other lives throughout the book. The second is Sam's injury which, as the story develops and takes on more and more facets, can be seem as metaphorically representing the "injury," or damage, being Jewish (or rather, his parents' practice of being Jewish) has done to him. Aside from the fact that it is entirely realistic that a character of Sam's age (early teens) and temperament (intellectual) to be obsessed with an online game, there is real significance in the fact that a physically wounded character is the one so desperate to escape into an "other life."

Other important components in this section include several stylistic elements: the inclusion of long and complex sections of dialogue, which effectively communicate character and relationship; the shifting back and forth between past and present (i.e. the section in which Julia, in the middle of a present-time conversation with Mark, reflects on her past); and the connections between chapter title and chapter content. These connections are sometimes literal and sometimes metaphoric, but all relate (in one way or another) to the overall title of the section in which the chapter is found.

Finally, and is the case throughout the narrative, there is the irony associated with the various explorations of the concept and meaning of, and search for, happiness.

Essentially, the action of the novel and the journeys of its characters are all entirely defined by the discovery that none of them are as happy as they think they are.

## Discussion Question 1

How does the narrative in this section sketch in the book's thematic interest in the power and value of individual choice?

## Discussion Question 2

What do you think the narration means when it suggests that Jacob and Julia's inner lives have been overwhelmed by all the living they have been doing?

## Discussion Question 3

Irv argues in favor of free speech as an absolute – no matter what someone says, they have the right to say it, and do so publicly. Do you agree or disagree with his assertion? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

commemorate, insomniac, agnostic, mummify, horticulture, intuition, nihilistic, synchronicity, profligate, embroider, dopamine, draconian, elicit, reflexive, racial, epithet, precedence, macaque, vociferous, sufficient, existential, misogyny, plausible, continuity, ennoble, ritualistic, elaborate (adj.), filament, revelatory, retaliation, derivative, dissipate, redundancy, propaganda, continuity, paunch, edifice, exacerbate, egregious, calcify, omnipresence, extradite, enclosure, banquette, perpetual, finitude, bespoke, rigmarole, insatiable, recoil, anorexic, pincushion, itinerary, configuration, stoicism

# Part 1, Before the War – Section 2

## Summary

Epitome – Julia arrives home in the middle of an intense discussion (not quite an argument) between Jacob, Max, Benjy, Irv, and Deborah. The argument includes a discussion of the word “epitome” (which means “essence of” [73], according to Deborah). As Julia calms the upset Benjy (who, at one point, says “amn’t” instead of “aren’t”), Jacob erupts in anger, suggesting that in his family, there is too much acceptance of people’s opinions and not enough challenging wrong ideas. The argument is broken up by the sound of a pair of dogs quarrelling in the street. Julia then goes up to have a shower, and ends up masturbating with the doorknob she put in her purse. As she climaxes, she has a hallucination of herself in her grave, and then hears a strange buzzing sound. She traces it to a cell phone hidden behind the toilet, the buzzing indicating a text message … from someone named Julia. The text: “What happened to you?” (78).

T-H-I-S-2-S-H-A-L-L-N-‘-T-P-A-S-S As Sam (grounded in his room) foresees the future end of his parents’ marriage, Julia comes in and, in bantery conversation about a number of things, eventually asks where the phone came from. Sam says he does not know. They try to open it, using various combinations of a family-used password (“this too shall pass”), with Julia giving up and Sam eventually getting in. Julia realizes the phone belongs to Jacob, and then tells Sam it is all right for him to play on his I-pod, including Other Life. After she leaves, Sam sets in motion his plan – to have Samanta blow up the game’s synagogue. Narration reveals that he had found the phone weeks earlier.

Epitome – That night, after a busy evening and Jacob going out for a drink with friends, Julia is cleaning up the kitchen when Jacob comes home. She confronts him about the phone, and a vicious, blazing argument erupts, resulting in the revelation that the crude sex talk quoted in Section 1, “A Hand the Size of Yours” was texts from Jacob to an unknown woman, a casual relationship that never became an affair that, he says, is now over. Eventually, after serious and nasty needling from Julia (including references to how much she hates cleaning up Argus’ shit, and how much she hates Argus in general, partly because Jacob brought the dog home even though she hates dogs.), Jacob finally screams at her that she is his enemy. A moment later, Benjy comes in, awakened. He says he thinks that Jacob meant “epitome,” not enemy. Jacob takes Benjy to bed, watching him fall asleep “just as he watched himself disappear” (100).

Here I Amn’t – Samanta speaks during her bat mizvah ceremony, referring to the text in the Torah in which God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, and in which each of the three main figures in the story (God, Abraham, Isaac) respond to each other’s calls call by saying “Here I Am.” As Samanta concludes, she tells the other people in the online game that she is about to blow up the synagogue. As they worry, she says they

“can follow the lighted path out of the synagogue. It will show [them] the way” - or they can follow her (104).

Someone! Someone! – The argument between Jacob and Julia becomes quieter, but continues as they get ready for bed and eventually get into bed. Narration, meanwhile, slips into the future, describing a way of keeping in touch with his sons after he moved out. Back in the present, the argument continues as Jacob and Julia get into bed, narration revealing their respective perceptions on how much they have drifted apart and are hiding from each other. Julia ultimately tells Jacob that she would respect him more if he HAD been having an affair, saying that it would have made him more human in her eyes. Just as the remorseful Jacob is looking for the words to fight back, Benjy cries out that he needs “someone! Someone!” (118).

The N-Word. After calming down Benjy, Jacob visits Sam. During conversation, Jacob reveals that he believes Sam did not write the list of racist words. He and Sam agree that an apology will be painful, but effective. After shared laughter over a dirty joke, they talk about what goes on for Sam in Other Life, with Sam revealing that he repeatedly builds and destroys synagogues. Jacob says he understands: “like, maybe you were trying to get something exactly right, and when it wasn’t, you needed to destroy it?” (125). Narration reveals that Jacob is right, but that Sam will not admit it. The chapter, and the first part of the book, conclude with Jacob telling Sam a long story of how he (Jacob) used to transcribe lyrics to pop songs; how he found one in a particular punk rock song difficult; and how Julia eventually corrected him. He then tells Sam that mishearing the lyric was his mistake: he “thought it had to mean something” (127).

## Analysis

Part 1, Section 2 contains a key turning point in the overall action of the narrative. This is Julia’s discovery of the phone and its content, which sets in motion the novel-long chain of events that trigger the breakdown, and eventual end, of the marriage between Jacob and Julia. It also triggers a similarly novel-long chain of introspections and contemplations on the part of both partners. For Jacob, those contemplations eventually result in a new breadth and honesty of thought, self-awareness that manifests clearly in the final moments of the novel (which, as previously discussed, is also tied to the experiences of Argus). For Julia, however, those contemplations eventually result in an even tighter and more closed sense of self, a clear contrast to the experience of her (soon-to-be-ex) husband.

In this context, it is useful to take a brief, somewhat closer look at the final text on the hidden cell-phone. “What happened to you?” is not just a question to Jacob about what seems to be a missed rendezvous: it is also the question he asks himself throughout the narrative, eventually coming to the: she tends to a freer answer that he does at its conclusion. Julia, however, does not ask herself this question. She tends to see herself as just fine the way she is, having made good choices based on healthy priorities. Again, there is a clear contrast here between Julia and her husband, and a parallel with the book’s thematic exploration of the nature of being Jewish: Julia’s staying in one

place can be seen as echoing the novel's apparent thematic intention that being Jewish also means staying mostly in one ritualized, patriotic place.

A related point to those made in relation to the Jacob/Julia situation has to do with what Jacob screams at Julia at the climax of their argument: the meaning of his claim that she is his enemy slowly becomes increasingly clear as the narrative unfolds, both action and theme eventually revealing to both Jacob and the reader why Julia, her attitudes and actions, have been enemy-like.

Part 1, Section 2 also introduces another key symbol: the synagogue, and its destruction, in Other World. This embodiment of the book's thematically central interest in destruction resonates on a number of levels, including the most immediate connection – between the destruction of the synagogue and the destruction of Jacob and Julia's marriage. There is also a clear historical parallel to the destruction of the ancient temple of Jerusalem, a key moment in Jewish history, which in turn leads to another thematic level of meaning to this symbol. This is the slow, but eventual, destruction of Jacob's perspective on being Jewish – specifically, his lifelong perspective on the value of Jewish ritual and practice (itself one of the book's secondary themes).

On yet another level, the fact that Sam engages in this type of destruction while in his "other life" can be seen as foreshadowing and paralleling his father's experience of a more metaphoric destruction of his experience of being Jewish. This, in turn, manifests yet another theme: the book's exploration of father / son relationships, ironically also explored in the phrase "here I amn't" – in other words, "here I am not," a turn-around of the phrase "here I am" that is a key component in the story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son Isaac. "Here I am" is a key element of the respectful, loving father/son relationship between God and Abraham, as well as that between Abraham and Isaac. "Here I amn't," then, aside from being a comic reflection on how the precocious Benjy talks, is also a reflection on the nature of the father-son relationships here and throughout the book: I am not the father, or the son, that you think I am, that I am supposed to be, or that I am expected to be.

One final point to note has to do with the final line of Part 1, the reference to Jacob thinking that the mis-remembered lyric had to "mean something" (127). This can be seen as a clear, metaphoric reference to his feelings about being Jewish and about his marriage, both of which he sustained because he believed they had to, and did, "mean something" (127).

## Discussion Question 1

How does Part 1, Section 2 develop the motif / themes associated with rituals?

## Discussion Question 2

Given what has just transpired in Jacob's life, what do you think the narrative means when it comments that Jacob "watched himself disappear" (100)?

## Discussion Question 3

What is the parallel between the topic of conversation between Jacob and Julia and Benjy's nighttime cry out?

## Vocabulary

immolate, salivary, penultimate, constrictive, vehemence, askew, resilient, scurvy, melanoma, plaintive, epitome, imperceptible, exertion, proficient, recurrent, rhetorical, anatomical, yarmulke, ostensible, residue, plagiarism, halitosis, desiccated, puerile, parquet, commotion, eloquent, vigilant, nomenclature, concession, esoteric, rotunda, asymmetrical

# Part 2, Learning Impermanence

## Summary

Antietam – In the weeks after Julia's discovery of the phone, she and Jacob go through a complex series of negotiations and avoidances. Narration describes a moment on Jacob's first trip to Israel – when he and his family went into a sacred space, the Dome of the Rock, that was reportedly the site of, among other things, Abraham's preparations to sacrifice his son Isaac.

Damascus – On "the day before the beginning of the destruction of Israel" (135), all the members of the family go in separate directions. Throughout complicated, rapid fire dialogue (within which there is a great deal of unspoken tension between Jacob and Julia), Julia and Sam leave for the school trip (which Julia is co-chaperoning with Mark); Jacob and Max take Argus to the vet; and Benjy goes with Irv and Deborah.

The Side that Faces Away – Jacob, Max, and Argus make a stop for fast food on their way to the vet, part of their routine for such visits. As they eat and chat, Max pays a lot of tender attention to the dog: "Argus brought out a different side of Max, a sweetness, or vulnerability that usually faced away" (144). When they get to the vet's office, and as they wait, Jacob recalls a visit to a museum with his father (Irv); how special it was to spend time with his busy father, and how Irv told him that the stuffed animals in the museum were positioned so that their wounds faced away from the people looking at them. When they finally get to see the vet, Jacob is angered by the terse text he gets from Julia saying that she and Sam have arrived at their hotel. The thought occurs to him: "Why does she always give me so little?" (149). Finally, Jacob tries to control the conversation about Argus' condition and limit what the vet is told, but Max tells the truth, suggesting that Argus should be put to sleep. This leads to an argument about whether Max's great-grandfather Isaac wants to, or should, be put to sleep.

Not Yet – In the school's van on the way to their hotel, Sam and Billie look at some slightly extreme, or intense, videos on youTube. At the hotel, Sam asks Julia to not embarrass him, but then she gives a speech to the students that references sex and drug use. As narration reveals that the students are there to participate in a model United Nations, Mark speaks up, making himself seem much cooler and more approachable than Julia. After the kids disperse to their rooms, Mark asks Julia to go for a drink. Eventually, she agrees.

Someone Else's Other Life – Back at the house, Jacob catches Max playing Other Life with Sam's I-pad, and convinces him to let him try. Conversation continues as Jacob tries to manipulate Sam's Latina avatar, but gets her killed. As Max freaks out, he curses at his father. As Jacob erupts in temper, Benjy calls from Irv and Deborah's, asking to speak to Max. As Max asks for privacy, Jacob accidentally sees another window that Max had had open on the I-pad: information on how to euthanize dogs at home.

The Artificial Emergency – Over drinks in the hotel bar, Mark tells Julia how much of a relief it is to be getting divorced. Julia tells Mark about what she found on Jacob' phone. Mark tells Julia she should leave her family. Julia says she could never do that. Conversation is interrupted by the excited arrival of Billie, with news that in the model United Nations scenario (her class is representing Micronesia), they have just acquired nuclear capabilities. As Mark hurriedly convenes a meeting of the students to discuss the artificial emergency, Julia flashes back to the main real emergency in her life: Sam's accident (when his fingers got shut in a car door). During the meeting, Julia and Mark lead opposing sides of the argument about what to do about the nuclear capabilities the country they represent now has. As the argument reaches its climax, Sam takes Julia out of the room and angrily her to stop interfering. He is so intent on berating his mother that he speaks sharply to Billie, leaving both Billie and Julia close to tears.

Someone Else's Other Death – Jacob calls the support center for Other Life, and is shocked to discover (after conversing with a tech support worker who repeatedly insists that Other Life is not a game) that to get a rebirth of Sam's avatar complete with its long-developed characteristics would cost $1,200.

A Complete Rebirth – Julia is visited in her hotel room by Mark. His gesture of attempted comfort is first rejected by Julia as being too sexual, and then, as the chapter ends, accepted by her as being welcome. The chapter, and section, end with Mark's reassurance that "things are about to become different" (187).

## Analysis

Perhaps the most significant element of this part of the book is its final line: specifically, Mark's reference to how things are about to become different. On one level, he is referring to Julia's specific situation, but in terms of overall storytelling, the comment refers to the event that is about to cause the destruction of the state of Israel, an event foreshadowed in the novel's very first sentence and repeatedly foreshadowed since. The nature of that event is revealed at the end of Part 3, is tied in closely to events that are similarly destructive, in their own way, in the lives, perspectives, and ways of the Bloch family. Here it is important to note that both the particular event and its destructive consequences are also foreshadowed in the reference to the Micronesian bomb, which can also be seen as an echo of certain other destructive incidents or circumstances that take place earlier in the narrative.

There is one other key piece of foreshadowing in Part 2 – or rather, several events foreshadow the same event. These events have to do with the question of when and whether Argus should be euthanized. The questions resurface several times later in the narrative, while the event of euthanization itself plays a key role in the novel's final moments.

Meanwhile, another connection to the event that ostensibly destroys Israel can be found in the reference, early in Part 2, to the Dome of the Rock, a reference that foreshadows events in Part 4 and beyond that also involve the Dome. At the same time, in its

comment on the relationship between the Dome and the story of Abraham and Isaac, the reference echoes the book's title (which, as noted, is a key phrase repeated throughout that story). In doing so, it also references the book's overall thematic interest in fathers and sons, explored in several additional ways in Part 2.

There are a couple of historical points to note in relation to some of the chapter titles in Part 2. Its first chapter, "Antietam," is named after a particularly violent battle that took place in the American Civil War (a war defined by, among other things, a dispute over slavery), while its second chapter, "Damascus," is named after a city in Syria, itself engaged in a more contemporary civil war. Because civil war is, by definition, a war fought between opposing sides within the same country, or geo-political boundary, there is potentially a metaphoric echo here of the battle being fought between opposing sides within the same family, or marital boundary: specifically, the battle between Jacob and Julia.

Finally, Part 2 continues and develops a pair of narrative techniques introduced earlier and continue throughout the narrative: the use of dialogue to illuminate character, story and moment (and also to inject occasional humor); and the flipping of the narrative back and forth between timeframes and contexts. There are also a repetition of a key symbol: the reference to Other Life again parallels "other lives" being developed and experienced by other characters.

## Discussion Question 1

In what ways does this section develop the book's thematic interest in father / son relationships?

## Discussion Question 2

What are the various thematic and/or metaphoric implications, here and throughout the book to this point, of the image of people facing away?

## Discussion Question 3

Part 2 briefly raises the question of human euthanasia – specifically, the practice of helping a suffering human being end his or her life. What sorts of things might the characters involved in this decision be asking themselves?

## Vocabulary

abstention, requisite, ostensible, artifact, adamant, herculean, camaraderie, reciprocate, copacetic, alleviate, colostomy, incontinent, imminent, coincide, impromptu, lethargic, ethos, proximity, diorama, circulatory, syphilis, epigraph, archipelago, omniscient, astute, sobriety, bolster (v.), endive, valance, resonance, upholstery, repulsive,

gratification, armament, partake, prevalence, composure, revile, subservient, predicament, sedentary, apothecary, proficient, lithograph, plausible

# Part 3, Uses of a Jewish Fist – Section 1

## Summary

Holding a Pen, Punching, Self-Love – Irv drives Jacob and Max somewhere, arguing passionately and violently that the world hates Jews, and that Jews should fight back with whatever means they have, saying that a Jewish fist can do more than write or masturbate. He also berates Jacob for not doing enough with his life ("You should forge in the smithy of your soul the uncreated conscience of your race" (198), conversation revealing that Jacob makes his living writing for a well-regarded, successful television show. Narration reveals that on his own time, Jacob has also been writing a television show of his own creation, based so closely on his life that his family sometimes says things that his characters have only recently said in the script. Narration also reveals how much preparation Jacob puts into the show without actually producing it: "The notes were Jewish-motherly in their irrepressibly naggy didacticism, Jewish-fatherly in their need to obscure every emotion in metaphor and deflection" (202). Eventually, conversation is interrupted by a phone call from Julia, with narration communicating the contents of the call solely through what Jacob says. He tells Julia what the vet said about Argus; learns how the model U.N. is going, and discovers that Julia and Mark had sex. The whole while he is being interrupted by Irv and Max, eventually choosing to not reveal the contents of the call in spite of being tempted to. "He cleaved to the life from which he cleaved himself" (212).

The L-Word – In the aftermath of more debate about what to do with the Micronesian bomb (in which it was decided to hand the bomb over to someone who could safely dismantle it), Sam texts Julia with an almost-apology, and with a description of the damage to his hand as a result of the incident with the car (three fingers were severed and had to be reattached), which in turn results in his keeping his hand in his pocket and not touching his mother with it. Julia mentions her love for her son. He does not respond.

Maybe It Was the Distance – This chapter sketches in the outline of Jacob's family history: how Isaac and his brother Benny survived the Holocaust and went their separate ways (Isaac to America, where he changed his name to Bloch by choice: Benny to Israel, where he kept the family name of Blumenberg). For Isaac and his descendants, "everything was something never to remember, or never to forget, and what America had done for them was told and retold" (220). Isaac's and Benny's families visited each other, but never really got along, the rivalries between the two brothers moving down the generations to Jacob and his materialistic cousin Tamir, with whom Jacob had occasionally masturbated; who had done virtually everything before Jacob did; and who had served in the Israeli army ("Tamir tried not to get killed, while Jacob tried not to die of boredom") (224). Narration reveals that Tamir is Isaac's favorite grandson, and that he (Tamir) is coming to America for Sam's bar mitzvah and Isaac's move into the retirement home. Finally, narration reveals that Irv, Jacob, and Max have been driving to the airport to pick up Tamir and his family.

In the End, One's Home is Perfect – This brief chapter describes the memory-defined contents of Isaac's home, focusing on the bubble wrap that he used to protect so many of them. "Who among the living world would want what he had let to give? And what interruption of the stillness, what sudden disturbance, awakened the fizz of the last ginger ale in the fridge?" (228).

## Analysis

There are several key points to note about Part 3, Section 1. Perhaps the most straightforward is the narration of Jacob's family background: the description of how the two sides of the family separated; how as the result of the separation the perspectives of the two families on being Jewish became very different (in other words: a development of the book's central theme); and the particular relationship between Jacob and Tamir. While there are glimpses here of the book's thematic interest in father and son relationships, the most significant aspect of this particular piece of narration is that it foreshadows both later revelations about Jacob and Tamir's history and future events in the narrative.

A second key point has to do with the references to masturbation, an activity that has been referred to several times up to this point and will be referred to several times in future sections. There are two points to consider here. The first is that masturbation is, in the novel, primarily associated with men: the only reference in the book to female masturbation involves Julia. This leads to the second point to consider. In Jewish tradition, where there are few (if any) actual teachings or instructions on female masturbation, male masturbation is prohibited as being wasteful of male reproductive energy and fluids. The fact that there are so many references in the book to masturbation by so many of its male characters (in Irv's language; in the descriptions of Jacob and Tamir's relationship; and in its description of Sam's lonely self-pleasuring) suggests that the Jewish prohibition against masturbation is one way in which so many of the characters can be seen as actively rejecting ways of being Jewish (again, a development of the book's central theme).

A third key point, developed in this first section of Part 3, relates to the revelation that television writer Jacob is writing a story based very closely on his own life. The reference to the writing in general, and to "The Bible" in particular ("Bible" in this case referring to a collection of guidelines and insights by television creators to those who work on the project), functions on two levels. First, it foreshadows later events (including the entirety of Part 7) that relate to the existence and the content of the Bible. Second, it clearly echoes the existence of the online game that Sam is so obsessed with playing: that is Sam's "other life," the television series is that of his father. This, in turn, can be seen as another development in the book's thematic interest in father / son relationships.

Finally, there is the brief and enigmatic question at the end of this section of the book which can be seen as a somewhat poetic foreshadowing of the eventual revelation of what exactly happened to Isaac Bloch.

## Discussion Question 1

How do the events in Part 3, Section 1 develop or reflect the book's thematic exploration of destruction and rebuilding?

## Discussion Question 2

What do you think is the significance of the contents of the phone call between Jacob and Julia in "Holding a Pen …" being revealed solely from Jacob's perspective (i.e. the reader having to understand what Julia is saying solely through what Jacob says)?

## Discussion Question 3

What are the metaphoric implications of the reference to bubble wrap in "In the End"? What is bubble wrap for – what is its purpose – and how does it relate to events and circumstances in the novel?

## Vocabulary

loathe, revulsion, satchel, flamboyant, erroneous, repugnant, rhetorical, binary, reliance, coercion, caricature, smithy, ottoman, didacticism, familial, commensurate, minuscule, reprimand

# Part 3, Uses of a Jewish Fist – Section 2

## Summary

Here Come the Israelis! Jacob, Irv, and Max greet the talkative, outspoken Tamir and his athletic son Barak off their plane. They stop for something to eat before leaving the airport, Tamir continuously bragging about how successful he is and eventually getting into a political argument with Irv. Meanwhile, Jacob's mind drifts to fantasies about Julia having sex with Mark, and about Mark becoming a step-father to Benjy. His reverie, and the argument about Iran, are interrupted by Max, telling his father to turn on the radio because something had happened in the Middle East. The chapter ends with the comment that "Other Life was happening even when no-one was present," a comment that begins a brief reference to Julia attempting to reconcile with Sam even while he is making a speech at the model U.N., referring to the ruins of the synagogues Sam had created in Other Life.

REAL Real – At the model U.N., Billie delivers a speech from Micronesia that makes a series of demands based on the current, unexpected power associated with having a nuclear bomb. As she half-listens, Julia asks herself why she told Jacob what she did (about Mark) when she did. She also continues trying to reconcile with Sam by passing him a note, which he returns with an enigmatic note of his own. As Billie's speech is interrupted by the arrival of a messenger with news of an earthquake in the Middle East, Julia receives a phone call from Deborah, who assures her that Benjy is all right but then tells her to go home.

Vey Iz Mir – This chapter begins with an on-air conversation between an interviewer and an Israeli architect / engineer, in which conversation reveals that the earthquake has seriously damaged both the religious sites and the functional infrastructure (i.e. power, water, transportation) of Israel and the Palestinian settlements, and that the resulting instability could very well lead to conflict as the one tries to get control over the resources of the other. Meanwhile, Tamir is trying to get hold of family in Israel on his cell phone, Jacob recalling his visit to the bomb shelter in the basement of the Blumenberg home and also reflecting on how much he hates his own phone for controlling his life. As they pass the zoo, narration reveals that Tamir and Jacob frequently bonded when they visited it as younger men, and that the zoo was where Sam's accident happened. Vey iz mir is the saying Jacob uses to refer to how bad things are in Israel.

The Second Synagogue – When Sam gets home, he learns from a note left on his I-pad by Max that Samanta had accidentally been destroyed. This leads him to recall a brief Skype-conversation with Isaac that morning, in which there seemed to be a strange longing in the air; in which Sam tried to convince Isaac to come live with them, and failed; and in which Sam realized that the longing was coming from Isaac. Back in the present, Sam creates a rough new avatar for him to use in Other Life, destroys the second synagogue that he had been constructing, and then goes to the site of the first

synagogue. He creates a house, adds a basement that seems to resemble a bomb shelter, gives his avatar a resemblance to Isaac … and Googles a question: “How is bubble wrap made?” (265)

The Earthquake – When he and the family arrive home, Jacob is surprised to see Julia. After she greets Tamir; after Barak and Max go upstairs to see Sam; and after Irv goes in to use the bathroom, Jacob senses that something is going on with Julia. She starts to tell him that something has happened, and he first assumes that it has to do with Mark, and then to do with the earthquake. As he thinks, he remembers a long and moving story told at their wedding by Deborah, one that ended with her comment that in any illness or calamity that strikes a relationship, “there is only the medicine of believing each other’s pain, and being present for it” (272). Back in the present, Jacob has difficulty understanding when Julia tells him that Isaac has died.

## Analysis

The early moments of Part 3, Section 2 explain the circumstances of Part 3, Section 1 – specifically, explaining that the destination for Jacob, Irv, and Max during the driving sequence of that section was the airport, to collect Tamir and Barak (who also embody yet another of the book’s explorations of father / son relationships). The rest of the chapter is defined by its description of events immediately before and immediately after one of the book’s turning-point events: the earthquake in Israel, the event that seems to be at the epicenter of the destruction foreshadowed from the novel’s very first line.

At this point, there are several key points to note, the first probably being the most significant and having to do with the author’s very clear intent to conflate, or entwine, the earthquake with the death of Isaac. That point is this: the two events occur within pages of each other. The former is far more physically destructive, but both it and the latter, because of that juxtaposition, seem to have the same metaphoric intent. This seems to be the intention to echo the destruction taking place in the marriage of Jacob and Julia, itself shattered by a single event (the discovery of the phone), and to foreshadow further destruction on several levels. These are the physical destruction of the state of Israel; the relational and situational destruction of the Bloch marriage; and the moral / psychological destruction of many of the family’s perceptions and values associated with being Jewish. In other words, the earthquake is the most significant narrative event, the most significant metaphoric event, and the most significant thematic event in the book. Everything that happens and everything the book is saying is tied in to this single incident.

Also in this section, the narrative’s complex inter-weaving of symbols and metaphors continues. There are, for example, several possible meanings to the reference to Other Life: the “other life” in Israel, the “other life” after divorce, the “other life” beyond Jewishness – in short, all the “other lives” that emerge in the aftermath of destruction. Also: this is where the novel begins, in earnest, its exploration of its thematic focus on destruction and rebuilding. From this section on, and as foreshadowed in the reference to destruction and rebuilding of Sam’s “second synagogue (itself an echo of the

destruction of the sacred Hebrew temple in Jerusalem), the energy and focus of the narrative, is that not necessarily of the act of rebuilding (although there are moments when this becomes the focus), but of the goal of rebuilding.

There are a couple of other points to note about this section. The reference to the incident at the zoo with Tamir and Jacob foreshadows the later revelation of what exactly took place during that incident. Finally, there is the reference to the story told by Deborah at Jacob and Julia's wedding – specifically, the story about the relationship between relationship and pain. Aside from being a vivid, and very wise, commentary on a key component of a healthy relationship (in universal terms, not just Jewish terms), the fact that this transcendently valuable piece of insight takes place at a wedding (i.e. a ritual) is one way in which the novel turns its mostly critical examination of ritual around, and suggests that somewhere, at the core of such rituals, there is an accessible, applicable truth and reason for that ritual to exist. It also foreshadows later references to important events at another wedding (that is: another ritual).

## Discussion Question 1

How do the events and situations here relate to, or manifest, the book's thematic interest in individual choices?

## Discussion Question 2

What are the various metaphoric and literal references associated with the term "Other Life" in Part 3, Section 2?

## Discussion Question 3

With Part 3, Section 2, the author is clearly attempting to draw some kind of parallel between the destructive events in Israel and the death of Isaac. What do you think that parallel / those parallels might be?

## Vocabulary

boisterous, preposterous, apropos, capricious, aviator, flagrant, concentric, moratorium, judicious, facilitator, nonchalant, cataclysmic, hyperbole, epicenter, sentient, defecate

# Part 4, Fifteen Days of Five Thousand Years

## Summary

This section provides a day-by-day breakdown of events in Israel in the 15 days following the earthquake.

Important events include difficulties coordinating rescue and relief efforts; the highly publicized saving, and eventual disappearance (also highly publicized), of a vulnerable young woman named Adia; and the outbreak of several forms of disease, including cholera and dysentery. As the situation escalates, the Israeli government takes increasingly desperate, and increasingly violent, measures to ensure its geographical security, and also to ensure that aid sent to Israel goes only to Jews. There is also an attempt by Israeli extremists to set fire to the Dome of the Rock, a holy site held sacred by Muslims. This, in turn, leads to the gathering of several Arab nations into an alliance that eventually declares war in Israel.

Conservative and Orthodox Jews proclaim that the Messiah is coming; other nations (including several in Eastern Europe and Africa) join the declaration of war; there is a second, more devastating earthquake; and the so-called March of a Million, a worldwide gesture of support for those who are suffering in the aftermath of both quakes involves more than two million.

America comes under pressure from its Jewish citizens to come more aggressively to Israel's defense; the outbreaks of disease threaten to cause more fatalities than World War Two; and a conservative Jewish news outlet publishes continuously updated lists of Defenders and Betrayers.

Finally, in the aftermath of successful attacks by Israel's Arab enemies, the Israeli ministry of defense comes up with three options for the next phase of the war. The first is retreat to more easily held defensive positions, and let disease kill the invading soldiers. The second is to blow up the Aswan Dam in Egypt and blow up Arab oil refineries, thereby destroying the Arab coalition's ability to function. The third is to convince American Jews to come to Israel and fight for their homeland, the argument being that "the president of the United States could watch eight million Israeli Jews be slaughtered, but not one hundred thousand American Jews" (287).

## Analysis

This brief but powerful chapter takes the narrative in a different direction, as it shifts attention away from the dramas of the Bloch family and into an all-too-plausible chronicle of the events in the Middle East in the aftermath of the earthquake. Stylistically, the chapter is presented in the form of a news summary, or a series of

headlines. Content-wise, it lists events and situations that take place over a period of around two weeks, with those events and situations being referred to in subsequent parts. In other words, the narrative line here forms a framework, or a structure, for the narrative lines of the remainder of the book, with several events (such as the call for Jewish citizens to return home) foreshadowing particular events in the lives of the members of the Bloch family.

Thematically, this chapter explores the idea of destruction and rebuilding within the contexts of both natural disaster and war; and, more significantly, explores the thematically central issue of being Jewish not from the experience of individual Jews or families (as it does when the narrative focus is on the Blochs), and not from the perspective of a country, but from the perspective of centuries of history. Earlier in the narrative, Irv refers to the Jewish people being treated as slaves or other lesser forms of humanity for 15,00 years: the title of this part of the story suggests that that attitude, and the Jewish / Israeli response to that attitude, is at the core of more current events – that is, the earthquake and its aftermath.

One last point to note: the narrative attention paid to the young woman, Adia, suggests that her story and situation will become important later in the narrative. This does not happen, a situation that seems, in relation to the references here, to evoke the situation in contemporary society and the contemporary media in which a human element to an otherwise traumatic news story receives a great deal of attention, but then quickly disappears when the news cycle, and those who watch it, find something else that gives them a rush of sentiment, of adrenaline, or of anger.

## Discussion Question 1

In what ways do the events in Part 4 explore the book's thematic interest in destruction and rebuilding?

## Discussion Question 2

Given the book's earlier reference, made by Irv, of how the Jewish people has been under attack for 15,000 years, what do you think is the meaning of the title of Part 4?

## Discussion Question 3

What point do you think is being made with the reference, at the end of Part 4, to the attitudes of the President of the United States towards Jews of different nationalities?

## Vocabulary

Zionist, recipient, axiom, catastrophic, abrogate, semantic, cholera, epidemic, dysentery, typhoid, intone, caliph, demise, coherent, belligerent, rhetoric

# Part 5, Not to Have a Choice is Also A Choice – Section 1

## Summary

The I-Word. As the President of the United States makes a speech in support of the relief efforts in the earthquake-stricken Middle East, Tamir waits for him to use the specific word Israel (i.e. the I-word). He never does. As Tamir and Jacob argue over whether what that means, Julia comes in and joins the argument, which turns into a discussion of whether Sam's bar mitzvah should be canceled, or at least the plans changed, as a result of both the earthquake and Isaac's death. All three children – Sam, Max, and Benjy – appear, and the conversation quickly becomes a five-way argument, part of which involves Jacob and Julia taking marriage-related pot-shots at each other. The chapter ends with a description from an image on the television, a woman "of unknown ethnicity or nationality, pulling at her hair as she wailed, pulling with enough force to yank her head left and right … there was no cause offered for her suffering" (300).

Absorb or Absolve. Narration reveals that Isaac had requested that he be buried in Israel. Because of the earthquake, it is impossible for that to take place, but Jacob insists that his wishes be honored. Jacob, then, and members of his family (including Tamir) and members of their synagogue community take turns sitting with the body as part of the Jewish ritual of shmira (i.e. sitting with a body until it is buried). At one point, Jacob takes Max. To fill the time, they play word games, including one that involves taking turns offering letters to make a word: that particular game ends with the possibility of "absolve" becoming "absorb" (the narrative isn't clear on which character makes the final call). At one point, Max says he wants to see Isaac's body, and after some debate, Jacob lets him, his own unwillingness to do so resolving into the realization that his grandfather was too important for him to see dead. "…before he was a body, he was an embodiment" (307).

What do the Children Know? With the television on in the background, displaying images of the destruction in Israel, Jacob and Julia rehearse what they are going to say to their sons about their marital situation. At various points, they surprise each other with humor, with vulnerability, and with tenderness. At another point, Jacob and Julia discuss who is going to cry, and why, and what would happen. "They would all cry," narration comments. "They'd wail. It would be horrible, The kids' lives would be ruined. Tens of thousands of people would die. Israel would be destroyed. [Jacob] wanted all of that, not because he craved horror, but because imagining the worst kept him safe from it – focusing on doomsday allowed for the day to day" (314). Later, after interruptions from their children (and from Billie, there to visit Sam), Jacob calls his father, and says that he will be fine with letting Isaac be buried in America.

The Genuine Version – Alone with his I-pad and Other World, Sam is developing his new and unformed avatar (Eyesick) when he is contacted by a flamboyantly designed avater, someone who recognizes him, but whom he does not recognize himself. Narration reveals that Sam is one of the family gathered to sit shiva for Isaac, a thought that leads to a detailed exploration of Sam's history with masturbation, which he did for the first time at the shiva of a distant relative. Narration describes both the frequency and the variety of Sam's masturbatory practices, commenting at one point that "… immediately after coming, everything that seemed not only good but logical, necessary, and inevitable before coming instant seems inexplicable, deranged, and repugnant" (333). Narration also comments that "When masturbating, [Sam] both owned and existed in his body. He was effortless, a natural, himself" (334) Narration then returns to the Other World conversation, with the avatar turning out to be Sam's cousin Noam, Tamir's son, who is trapped in Israel in the aftermath of the earthquake. Noam offers Sam what he needs, in the game, to empower his avatar, and they debate possible scenarios for the situation in Israel. This leads to Sam recalling an experience of seeing a documentary on the horrors of Holocaust while in school, and to an examination of his and his family's core experiences in life. Sam is left with the idea of his experiencing "something with stubborn belief, and stubborn dignity, and stubborn joy. And yet it wasn't really any of those things, or the sum of them. It was the feeling of being Jewish. But what was that feeling?" (339).

## Analysis

In a number of ways, the focus of the narrative subtly shifts in Part 5, Section 1. Specifically, there is a sense that authorial and thematic intent is moving more in the direction of a perspective with a bit of edge – irony, at the very least, and very possibly satire. The evidence for this lies in the author's clearly deliberate juxtaposition of the international traumas and challenges arising in the aftermath of the Middle East earthquake, and the more personal / family traumas and challenges arising in the aftermath of the trio of "earthquakes" that have shaken up the Bloch family: the Jacob/Julia situation, the "Sam's bar mitzvah" situation, and the "death of Isaac" situation. The book's thematically central exploration of the difference between Jewish and Israeli lies at the core of this set of parallels, in that the Blochs are so concerned about being Jewish (as in performing the right Jewish rituals in the right way) that they downplay the experience of being Israeli (i.e. suffering in solidarity with their Hebrew family, both literal and cultural, in what they are told is their homeland).

There is another level of meaning to this shift in perspective, the feeling that that the members of the Bloch family really do have their priorities in something of the wrong place – or do they? The sense of satire sneaks into the narrative as the reader cannot help but wonder whether the author is seriously suggesting that the troubles of one family are as significant as those of an entire part of the world. But on another level, one less satirical and possibly more surgical in intent, as Part 5 commences the novel begins its implied exploration of whether actions focusing on more immediate personal experience (affecting only a few people) are, in brutal honesty, of more concern than the experiences of thousands of people thousands of miles away. In the context of this idea,

it is important to notice two things. The image that concludes the first chapter of Part 5 (the woman tearing her hair out), which seems to refer to both types of suffering outlined in Part 5's first chapter and which seems to ironically reinforce the idea that all the drama around the Bloch family situations is really a bit self-centered. The idea is further reinforced by the sense that "The I-Word" can be seen as having two meanings. There is "the I-word" (i.e. "Israeli") as referred to by Tamir, and "the I-word" implied by the actions of the apparently self-centered Blochs (i.e. "I" as in me, myself, and I).

And all of that is in just the first chapter. The tensions arising from these ideas, both ironic and literal, simmers beneath the action and events of the rest of this section of Part 5, and indeed throughout the remainder of the book. They infuse, for example, the references to masturbation (which is, ultimately, a very self-oriented action); the question of what to do with Isaac's body (which, in addition, is another aspect of the book's thematic interest in the power and value of ritual); and the references to the Holocaust. This last is particularly significant, in that if there was ever a situation that affected the worldwide community of Jews, it was the Holocaust: and yet, in this chapter, its impact is primarily explored within the context of Sam's consideration of his family situation. All this gives the final lines of this section of Part 5, and indeed of the book, a particularly pointed poignancy – or, for that matter, a poignant pointedness.

## Discussion Question 1

How does this first section of Part 5 explore the book's thematic interest in father / son relationships?

## Discussion Question 2

Given the clear visual echo between the terms "the I-word" (used here in a direct reference to Israel) and "the n-word" (used earlier in the novel to refer indirectly to African-Americans), what do you think is the metaphoric / thematic echo between the uses of the two terms?

## Discussion Question 3

How does the description of Sam's experience of masturbation relate, either ironically or directly, to other references to masturbation to this point in the book?

## Vocabulary

duress, impoverished, avert, gauche, tectonics, encumber, patriarch, perpetual, begrudge, intolerable, prohibition, proximity, benign, in auspicious, plausible, visceral, dichotomy, opalescent, viscous, leprous, nugatory, minuscule, perpetual

# Part 5, Not to Have a Choice is Also A Choice – Section 2

## Summary

There Are Things That Are Hard to Say Today. Even as the earthquake-triggered conflict in Israel is continuing, the family gathers for Isaac's funeral. Jacob is simultaneously angry and jealous about how easily and casually Tamir moves through the whole thing, while at the same time uncertain about why his generally irreligious father is going along with the service at all. He also is inclined to resent the young, seemingly self-conscious rabbi, but then the rabbi speaks, his words laced with humor and recollections of visiting Isaac on the morning of the day he died, a visit during which Isaac apparently said "Not to have a choice is also a choice" (347), narration commenting that Jacob does not believe Isaac ever said that. The rabbi also speaks at length about how Isaac, in many ways, embodied what it means to be Jewish, both in life and, for those left behind, in death. "There are only two kinds of Jews of [Isaac's] generation," the rabbi comments, "those who perished and those who survived … but we turned our backs on those who endured, and forgot them. All our love was for the dead" (353). There is a brief exchange between the rabbi and Jacob's family on the subject of crying – whether Jews cry silently or out loud – and the rabbi says that Jews cry by laughing. As the rabbi's speech comes to its conclusion, Jacob bursts into loud, wailing tears.

The Names Were Magnificent – After carrying Isaac's coffin to the gravesite, and after Irv throws the first clod of dirt into the grave, Jacob goes for a walk through the cemetery, noting the various names of the dead. He realizes he is in the part of the cemetery where those who committed suicide were buried separately from those who had lost their lives in less self-destructive ways. Here narration reveals that Isaac died by hanging himself with his belt. Narration also explores the theory and practice of both the rule of "not carrying" on Shabbat, and the ways around not carrying, including being enclosed by an eruv (a boundary marking a private, separate area). As Jacob contemplates Isaac's death, he also contemplates what constitutes an eruv – earth's equator? The orbit of Pluto? The wedding ring on his finger?

Reincarnation – During Sam and Noam's conversation in Other World (while the reception for Isaac's funeral is going on in other rooms), Noam reveals that his father (Tamir) is planning on buying a house in America and moving there, adding that he (Noam) will probably stay in Israel. Noam also starts to transfer life and power to Sam's new avatar (Eyesick), much more of both than Samanta ever had. Narration describes how Sam discovered Jacob's second phone, broke the password, and was scrolling through the sexual texts when his parents came home, dropping it behind the toilet where Julia later found it. As the transfer of power continues, and as Noam repeats "Look at you, Bar Mitzvah" (368), Sam starts to cry, recalling the last time he cried (at seeing Jacob behave tenderly towards Argus after the dog had had surgery). At that moment, narration comments, "Sam was reborn" (369).

Just the Wailing – As the family separates into age-defined groups at the reception following Isaac's funeral, Jacob contemplates how Jewish funeral rituals get / got the aftermath of death right. He also has a conversation about God with the questioning, anxious Benjy, a conversation that ends with Benjy revealing that the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem has been destroyed. "Now," he says, it's just the Wailing" (375).

Look! A Crying Hebrew Baby – Julia is alone with her thoughts and imaginings – of the aftermath of separating from Jacob, of the process of separating from Jacob, of the potential sufferings of her children. This leads her to recollections of Sam's injury, and the ways in which she and Jacob avoided, over the years, discussing exactly what happened, and thereby avoiding both blame and responsibility. "Too much love for happiness, but how much happiness was enough … Mark had said it wasn't too late in life for happiness. When, in Julia's life, would it be late enough for honesty?" (378/9). Julia collects her coat, empties its pockets of anything to do with her life, walks past all the members of the family, and leaves.

## Analysis

In this section of Part 5, the narrative continues to place the aftermath and consequences of the earthquake-triggered destruction of Israel in the background of the aftermath and consequences of the various destructive incidents in the recent history of the Blochs. Here it is interesting to note the various things that are being destroyed, and the way in which the characters are rebuilding themselves and their lives in the aftermath of that destruction. Key examples include Jacob's emotional reserve, which narration has indicated is something that he has built up and strengthened his entire life - that is: a metaphorical wall around his feelings. That wall, much like the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem (see below) and the eruv (or boundaries) referred to in Jacob's contemplations, comes down here: in fact, the release of Jacob's feelings here eventually proves, by the time the novel concludes, to be a key point in his journey towards the freedom he feels, and acts on, in the novel's final moments. Similar walls are similarly destroyed in this section: the wall of similar repression Sam constructed around his own feelings; the wall of self-delusion (lies) Julia has constructed around her belief of what happiness means, or is; and the wall of belief around the wrongness of suicide, which comes down as Jacob contemplates the reasons why Isaac felt inclined to end his own life.

This, in turn, leads to consideration of other important points about Part 5, Section 2. The first is the revelation of the fact that Isaac did, in fact, commit suicide. The phrasing of the revelation here clearly echoes the image at the end of Part 3, Section 1 Specifically, the reference to the mysterious jarring of the ginger ale in the refrigerator. There is the very clear sense here that that jarring was triggered, somehow, by Isaac's suicide - perhaps by the collision of his body with a wall, or by the actual fall of his body to the end of his belt.

Meanwhile, there are several important points to note about Sam's experience of weeping. Among them: the fact that it echoes his father's experience of weeping, and

the fact that the juxtaposition of Sam being “reborn” is juxtaposed with a reference to Jacob caring about Argus. This is a significant piece of foreshadowing, in that at the novel’s conclusion, Jacob’s own experience of being reborn is likewise connected to an incident involving a gesture of caring towards Argus. Finally, there is the fact that one of Sam’s triggers is clearly the generous, unconditional bestowing of life upon his avatar (in Other Life). This action, because of the parallel between Sam’s tears and his father’s, in turn suggests that at least part of the trigger for Jacob’s weeping was the “bestowing of life” from the rabbi – or, more specifically, insight into the meaning and value of life.

The rabbi’s speech is, in fact, a key event in the lives of several characters, and in the narrative as a whole. The speech triggers not only a release of feeling in Jacob and, indirectly, in Sam, but also triggers contemplation in Julia. Interestingly, this last is more an experience of thought than feeling, and an experience of outer, physical change (i.e. leaving) than it is about inner change, such as that experienced by Jacob and Sam. Here it is interesting to note that the real transformation, here and in the novel, rests with the male characters: intriguing because, for the most part, experiences of Jewish-ness, in terms of both religious practice and family life, are defined, motivated, and led by men – in this context, the fact that the rabbi is male is significant. What is also significant, however, is that the rabbi, for all his articulateness and triggering of personal insight, does not say much about faith. He talks much more about the practice of being Jewish, doing so with wisdom, insight, compassion, and respect – but not a lot of reference to God.

Finally, a piece of historical information. The Wailing Wall is (or was, in the context of the narrative and its description of the destruction of Israel) the last remaining wall of the ancient Jewish temple in Jerusalem, destroyed in conflict with Roman armies centuries in the past. The Wall is / was a site for prayer and lamentation, with pilgrims putting prayers in the holes in the Wall. Its destruction is metaphorically significant on several levels: as a foundation of Jewish experience and faith, its destruction in the novel represents the destruction of a foundation of Israel’s existence. Its destruction also has metaphoric value: as noted above, it echoes and symbolizes the destruction of a number of personal walls constructed by, and within, the members of the Bloch family.

## Discussion Question 1

How do events in Part 5, Section 2 develop the book’s thematic exploration of rituals?

## Discussion Question 2

What do you think is the most likely reason that Jacob weeps at the funeral?

## Discussion Question 3

How do Julia’s contemplations of happiness here reflect or illuminate, ironically or literally, her contemplations of happiness earlier in the narrative?

## Vocabulary

pedophiliac, infringement, obnoxious, encumbrance, extemporaneous, resilient, epoch, exemplify, delineate, lucrative, idiom, desecrate, salacious, generic, proficient, gelatinous, obstinate, spectate, commingle, virtuosic, venetian, buoyant, inertia, profligate, turbulence, purgatory

# Part 5, Not to Have a Choice is Also A Choice – Section 3

## Summary

The Lion's Den – Jacob and Tamir end the day of Isaac's funeral drinking beer in Jacob's kitchen. As they talk – about the relative difficulties of their lives, about the difference between being Jewish in America and Jewish in Israel, about their different beliefs about Isaac – Jacob remembers an important incident the two of them shared 30 years previously. The night before his bar mitzvah, Tamir talked him into breaking into the zoo and then jumping into the lion's cage. Jacob recalls that afterwards, particularly after a near-escape from an awakened lion, he never felt more alive, and realizes that every moment of fear, or hope, or joy, that came afterward paled in comparison. Conversation starts to become aggressive and then vulnerable, with Tamir admitting that he does not know where Noam is, and Jacob admitting that he does not know where Julia is, adding that he did have sex with the woman with whom he texted, but never in the house. The conversation almost ends in the aftermath of Tamir saying that Isaac was the only member of the family who succeeded at doing something real, but instead of choosing to end the conversation, Jacob suggests that he get out his long-hidden bag of marijuana.

In the Hinge – Julia visits Mark, but finds herself unable to do more than say hello and leave. She realizes, in her uncertainty, that she understands Jacob's actions. "He needed to stick his hand in the hinge. But he didn't want to close the door on himself" (404). Mark, upset by what she is doing (and not doing), tells her that she is not the problem: her life is. She then says she needs to go home, but then goes to a hotel.

Who's In the Unoccupied Room? Jacob and Tamir get stoned on Jacob's pot, and their conversation covers a wide range of topics, including Tamir's story of how his education and life were changed and defined by a story he was told in school about a Jewish boy in a Nazi death camp who urged those who came after him to, when they threw a ball, throw it for him. Jacob also reveals the existence of the TV show he is writing about his family, and also his addiction to listening to podcasts, in the same sort of unoccupied room (i.e. alone) that he inhabited when he sent his sexy texts to a woman. Tamir reveals his idea of moving to America, and his obsession with childhood pictures of Noam, who has become unreachable. Later, after Jacob falls asleep for a while, Tamir wakes him with the news of the attack on the Dome of the Rock (as referred to in Part 4 – specifically as taking place on Day 9 of that chapter's 15 days). Tamir reveals his desperation to return home, and his belief that Jacob should go with him. Jacob is astonished to see, in Tamir's eyes, the same kind of fear he saw in the eyes of his children when there has been an injury, or a wound.

De Zelbe Prayz – After Tamir goes to bed, Jacob repeatedly tries to get ahold of Julia. He eventually succeeds, and announces his intention to go to Israel with Tamir. Julia

first berates him for leaving the children for her to take care of, then mocks him for being essentially useless to the war effort, and then lights into him for never saying sorry about the texts. When Jacob tells her that she is afraid to say she does not want him to go, and that she will be a widow, she says that being a widow implies that a woman has lost her spouse, and that she does not think of him as her spouse. Julia then tells him that if he is going to go, they need to have Sam's bar mitzvah, and that Jacob has to put down Argus, "because it's time, and because he's yours" (429). This leads Jacob to recall an encounter with the Jewish, British parents of a deaf child with an injured hand who moved to America to give their child the best possible chance in life. The father said, at one point, that it was harder to be Jewish than deaf: being Jewish, he said "doesn't give you every best chance" (430).

## Analysis

Jacob's continuing journey of transformation is the primary focus of the narrative in Part 5, Section 3. At this point, there is a clear sense that in the aftermath of his response to what the rabbi said in the previous section, or more specifically in the aftermath of the rabbi-triggered breaking down of the walls Jacob built around himself, Jacob is trying to figure out who he is. He starts this exploration with a recollection of who he was – or, again more specifically, a recollection of the part of himself he wishes he was still connected with, or carried with him. Here it is interesting to note several things about the story of Jacob and the lions. The first is that the story continues and develops the metaphoric motif of making discoveries associated with the self after transcending a wall – in this case, the wall surrounding the lion's den. The sense here is that as he transcends the contemporary wall he built around himself, and the wall constructed by his marriage, Jacob is looking for the same kind of courage he found in the lion's den. The second key point about the story is that it clearly parallels Jacob's experience in the past, in that he is led to an act of courage (i.e. going to war for Israel) because of a desire to emulate the actions and attitudes of Tamir, an individual choice inspired by external influence as opposed to a true internal belief.

The final point to note about the story of Jacob and the lions is its very clear allusion to one of the more famous stories in the Torah (otherwise known as the Old Testament of the Christian Bible): that of Daniel, a powerfully faithful Jew thrown into a den of lions to be executed but who emerged alive and unscathed, protected by God because his faith was so strong. The irony, of course, is that Jacob (in the past) was not protected by God, and that Jacob, in the present, is making his choice about going to Israel with no relationship to God whatsoever: he is doing it because Tamir is doing it, because it is the Jewish thing to do, and because he wants to prove to himself (and perhaps to Tamir, to Irv, and to Julia) that he is, in fact, a man – or, more specifically, a good Jewish man worthy of respect.

Other points to note about Part 5, Section 3 relate to, or develop, images or motifs from elsewhere in the novel. The title and content of "In the Hinge" can be seen as echoing, or referring to, the accident with Sam – specifically, his getting his hand caught in a closing car door (i.e. its hinge). This incident is also indirectly echoed in the narrative

description of Jacob seeing, in Tamir's eyes, the same sort of pain he (Jacob) saw/sees in the eyes of an injured child. In any case, the actual details and circumstances of that incident are revealed later in the narrative.

Another image, or motif, recurring here is the reference to the Dome of the Rock, notable because it places the events of this chapter within the context of the sequence of events outlined in Part 4. Yet another is the reference to the relationship between Jacob and Argus which, in the same way as other references to this point in the novel, foreshadows its final moments, which are defined by what is arguably the ultimate resolution of the relationship between the two.

Finally, there is the reference at the close of this section, and therefore of Part 5, to the implied idea that being Jewish is more of a disability than being deaf. On the one hand, this ties in to the idea, expressed by Irv and other characters, that simply being Jewish is a trigger for violence or, at the very least, discrimination. This, in turn, is a further development of the book's thematic exploration of the experience of being Jewish.

## Discussion Question 1

How does the theme of father / son relationships manifest here?

## Discussion Question 2

What do you think is the most likely reason that nothing sexual or physical happens between Julia and Mark?

## Discussion Question 3

What is the metaphoric meaning implied by the dying boy's request that people throw a ball for him?

## Vocabulary

mesmerize, prognosis, verdigris, transgression, copious, exemplar, savannah, pangolin, paraphernalia, reprieve, deviation, remunerative, Geodesic, nonchalant, accoutrements, vigilant

# Part 6, The Destruction of Israel – Section 1

## Summary

Come Home – As plans are made for the bar mitzvah, Jacob finds himself unable and unwilling to put Argus down: neither of them, he feels, is ready. Meanwhile, his and Tamir's attempts to get to Israel are at first blocked by travel restrictions, but then eased when the Israeli Prime Minister asks for Jews to "come home" (435), and arranges for flights and airspace. This takes place two days after the fifteen days referred to in Part 4.

Today I Am Not a Man – The night before his bar mitzvah, Sam has a meeting with Max and Benjy, in which they talk about the family's situation. Sam says that because all the family's plans (the divorce, Jacob moving out, Jacob going to Israel) are dependent upon his bar mitzvah, he says he's not going to HAVE the bar mitzvah. He and his brothers also talk about running away, with Sam saying he will run away until the war is over and Benjy asking what if the war never ends.

O Jews, Your Time Has Come! There is semi-casual, mostly loaded conversation between Jacob and Julia when she returns home. Jacob ends up trying to sleep on the couch, but is too restless and too angry. He gets up and turns on the television, watching the latest news in the war. As he does, he recalls his own bar mitzvah. Meanwhile, the Ayatollah from Iran prepares to make a speech, narration commenting that "there was absolutely nothing to distinguish his face from that of a Jew" (445).

Come Home – This chapter consists of the speech given by the Israeli Prime Minister, celebrating the durability and power to survive of the Jewish people; defining parallels between the stories of Jews in the Torah and of contemporary Jews; and revealing the arrangements for Jews to come home safely, saying that "one million Jews" will soon come home, and that "our arms will not only be raised in victory, we will be able to dictate the peace" (448).

Today I Am Not a Man – Sam and his family go through the rituals of his bar mitzvah, and then Sam makes the customary speech, in which he refers to his family's history, to how he tried to get out of his bar mitzvah for various reasons, and to the fact that while he accepts the event of the bar mitzvah, he does not accept what it means. "I did not ask to be a man, and I do not want to be a man, and I refuse to be a man" (452). And then he says he will explain why he wrote those racist words.

O Jews, Your Time Has Come! This speech, seemingly delivered by the Ayatollah of Iran, says that the time has come for Muslim triumph and Jewish destruction.

Come Home – This speech seems to be a continuation of the speech of the Israeli Prime Minister, again / still calling for Jews to come home.

## Analysis

The key point to note about the entirety of Part 6 (both this section and the section that follows) is the way that post-earthquake political speeches in the Middle East in the aftermath of the earthquake are juxtaposed with the before, during, and after of Sam's speech at his bar mitzvah. There are several points to note about this chapter. First is its title, which has both literal and metaphoric implications throughout Part 6. On a more literal level, the speeches of the Prime Minister and the Ayatollah are both defined by circumstances around the literal destruction of Israel – the destruction caused by the earthquake, and the destruction caused by the subsequent war.

On a more metaphoric level, the title can be seen as referring to Sam's refusal to accept the spiritual and psychological implications of the bar mitzvah ritual, a metaphorical kind of destruction of Israel as defined by the "destruction" of the power and meaning of one of the most significant rituals in Jewish practice and in the life of a Jewish man. Here again it is important to note the maleness of this situation: it is intriguing to consider whether anything associated with the metaphor of this particular coming of age ritual would have, or be given, the same weight if it was a bat mitzvah – that is, the same ritual, but for women.

## Discussion Question 1

How do events in Part 6, Section 1 add a new facet of exploration to the book's thematic interest in rituals?

## Discussion Question 2

What does the Israeli prime minister mean when he makes his comments about claiming victory and dictating the peace?

## Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Sam refuses to become a man? What do you think he means when he says that?

## Vocabulary

despicable, gesticulate, undulate

# Part 6, The Destruction of Israel – Section 2

## Summary

Today I Am Not a Man – Sam explains that he wrote that list of words in response to a challenge from Billie, who accused him of being repressed and who dared him to say the hardest thing he can think of. He says he wrote those words to practice, but then realized that the hardest thing to say was not the actual words, but the circumstances in which the words were said. “It requires the hardest person, or people, to say it to” (457).

O Jews, Your Time Has Come! The speech of the Ayatollah, inciting Muslims to war, continues.

Come Home – After he finishes his speech, the Israeli Prime Minister sounds a shofar, a sacred ram’s horn that was a 2,000-year-old relic, in a symbolic calling of the Jewish people. Narration describes how the Prime Minister, as he inhaled, symbolically “gathered into the ram’s horn the molecules of every Jew who had ever lived … [including] Abraham offering his God and his son what could not be offered to both: ‘Here I am’” (461).

Today I Am Not a Man – As he nears the end of his speech, Sam reveals that he and his brothers have agreed to stay together with one parent if they were forced to choose. He then concludes his speech first by referring to the Micronesia bomb debate at the Model UN. “We didn’t ask for a nuclear weapon,” he says, and didn’t want a nuclear weapon, and nuclear weapons are, in pretty much every way, horrible. But there’s a reason people have them, and it’s to never have to use them” (462). With that he finishes, and there is silence … until Billie shouts out “Yet!” (463).

O Jews Your Time Has Come! Jacob watches as the commentators on the news analyze the Ayatollah’s speech at the same time as video shows celebrations throughout the Muslim world. The whole while, Jacob is unable to think of anything but his family. The chapter ends with Jacob’s recollections of what he and Julia were taught just before bringing Sam home from the hospital, the Ten Commandments of Caring for a Newborn. The tenth: “You shall remember: it will not last” (465).

Come Home – After the conclusion of the bar mitzvah, Jacob and Julia clean up the house, bantering about which parent the boys would stay with (both are convinced it’s Julia) and discussing plans for Jacob’s possible death (including some legal plans Jacob has made) and his hope that she reads his TV series and its Bible – that is, its rules for performance. They discuss Jacob’s knowledge of sign language (which Julia never knew about), and how Jacob is finally putting dishes back in the cupboard the way Julia wants: he says he’s “just tired of disagreeing” (471). The chapter, and the section, conclude with a discussion of why the Jews, throughout their 40 years of

wandering in the wilderness, kept the broken and intact fragments of the Ten Commandments with them instead of burying them, or leaving them behind. “Because they were ours” (472).

## Analysis

In Part 6, Section 2 the first point to note has to do with Sam’s comment about what makes something hard to say. There are several points to note here, the first is the clear wisdom of this statement: something difficult to say is not only difficult because it is uncomfortable for the speaker, but because it is / will be uncomfortable for the hearer. The irony, of course, is that the speeches by the Israeli Prime Minister and the Ayatollah are not difficult for either the speaker or those to whom the speeches are primarily addressed (in the case of the former, the worldwide Jewish community: in the case of the latter, the anti-Israel community in the Middle East, and arguably around the world).

A second point to note about Part 6, Section 2 has to do with Jacob’s reactions to the various speeches. The fact, revealed in narration, that he is unable to think of anyone but his family reiterates the previously raised question of priorities – specifically, how concern about family and more immediate priorities, rightly or wrongly, pre-empt concern about suffering thousands of miles away, even though that suffering is being experienced by members of the same ethno-cultural community. Meanwhile, the reference to Sam as a newborn can be seen as foreshadowing Jacob’s experience of becoming a re-newborn at the narrative’s conclusion. Finally, the reference to the Tenth Commandment of Child Rearing can be seen as having a double meaning, or suggestion: to hold onto the joys of a child’s infancy, because it will not last, and to let go of worry and other sufferings associated with childhood and growth, because they will not last either.

In the final two chapters of Part 6, Section 2, the action moves outside the boundaries of the bar mitzvah ritual and the speeches and back into the novel’s primary focus – the breakdown of the Jacob – Julia relationship. Several points to note here. The first is a question: does Jacob agree that the boys will stay with Julia because he truly believes it, or because, like the argument over the placement of the dishes, he is tired of “disagreeing” – that is, arguing his perspective against the bull-dozer self-righteousness of his wife? Second, there is the almost in-passing reference to Jacob’s Bible – that is, the story of his life as he has been privately writing it. Here it is interesting to note that while the reference seems casual, on the part of both Jacob and the author, it is nevertheless quite a significant moment. In revealing his hope that Julia read it, he is letting down the wall around his inner life that she has frequently, up to this point, accused him of deliberately keeping up against her. It is, in other words, a further step in the direction of the true freedom that he finds in the novel’s final moments.

Finally, the Jacob/Julia conversation once again draws thematically significant parallels between the broad-strokes experience of being Jewish and the more narrow strokes experience of being in this particular Jewish family. Specifically: the reference to Jews carrying fragments of the Ten Commandments with them can be seen as a metaphoric

reference to Jacob and Julia carrying fragments of their marriage, their love for and attraction to each other, and their responsibilities to and for their children with them into the future, all for the same reason: because they are theirs.

## Discussion Question 1

How does the theme of destruction and rebuilding manifest, literally or metaphorically, throughout this part of the book?

## Discussion Question 2

What do you think are the parallels between Sam's reference to the nuclear bomb and the situation in his family?

## Discussion Question 3

Do you agree or disagree with the idea that, in the event of a divorce, all three boys would go to live with Julia? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

berate, befit, blasphemy

# Part 7, The Bible - Section 1

## Summary

Part 7 consists of a series of directions Jacob has written for actors, directors, and other participants in the making of his TV show. The entries are journal-like, first-person narratives that include references to past events in the novel and to Jacob's thoughts and experiences.

There are several that seem particularly significant, each with a heading starting with "How To Play (Love – Anger – Fear of Death) and several more. The first is an examination of what Jacob believes to be his baldness, in which he imagines a conversation with Benjy taking place after the boys have started spending time at his (Jacob's) new home, and a visit from Benjy decades afterwards. There is a memoir of how Jacob raised his voice only twice in his life, both times to Julia, and one of the adoption, and renaming, of a golden retriever named Stan. There is also narration of Jacob receiving the confirmation of Isaac's suicide and, that night, dreaming of Isaac hanging himself from a tree that split open, revealing rings inside that Isaac uses to indicate the important moments of Jacob's life. This leads to a recollection of the rings Julia walked around Jacob during their wedding, enacting the metaphoric march of Joshua's army around the wall of Jerusalem. This then leads to contemplation of Julia's reaction to the "walls" around Jacob's inner life, Jacob commenting that she did not know, until their marriage was ending, what his deepest secret was. There is then a recollection of Julia's 40th birthday: she initially protested all she wanted was a quiet day, so Jacob gave her one; then she realized, at the end of the quiet day, that she wanted a big deal, and triggered a fight; and then, just at the climax of the fight, a big party (including a magician) was revealed.

Meanwhile, interspersed with these other stories is a series of narratives each titled "How to Play No-One" that chronicle the narrative of Jacob's trip to Israel. There is narration of Jacob and Tamir's departure for Israel (in which Irv stands in for Tamir's father and gives him a blessing, but does not give one to Jacob); how, at the airport, Jacob stopped wondering if he felt Jewish; and goes through an evaluation process that "roughly correspond[s] to age. The resonance with the selections upon entering the concentration camps was so explicit and undeniable, it was hard to imagine it wasn't intentional" (486). He is also asked a series of questions about health and military experience, several of which he answers with jokes. Some time later, he returns home and tucks Benjy in for the night, saying that he (Jacob) didn't go to war. Meanwhile, Benjy reveals that he found out what the n-word means, but does not know how to pronounce it – "is it a g like gun … or like ginger?" (496). He then asks whether Jacob is ever going to go away again. Jacob says no.

Finally, following an analysis of different kinds of love ("Without love, you die. With love, you also die. Not all deaths are equal" (497), there is an extended imagined future telephone conversation with Julia about the possibility of Jacob having throat cancer,

from what they both believe are long suppressed tears. As conversation continues, they reveal to each other what happened on the occasion of Sam's accident: Julia opened the door, Jacob closed it, both unknowingly. They forgive each other for every hurtful action, mistake or deliberate, that they made, and in the silence that follows, Jacob cries.

## Analysis

The first point to note about Part 7 has to do with its title. A "bible" is the term used, in the sphere of television writing and production, to describe a document that contains basic information about a television series – characters, relationships, themes, story ideas, images, and style are elements that consistently appear in most such bibles. This particular bible, however, is somewhat different, in that while it instructs those who read it in how circumstances and experiences should be portrayed or communicated (a variation on one component of an actual television bible), it is also part journal (in that it documents events as they take place), part speculation (in that it imagines events in the future), and part contemplation (in that the writing therein seems, at least in part, designed to help Jacob come to understand both events and himself). All these are very different from the function and content of an actual television bible.

A second key point to note is Part 7's structure. For the purposes of clarity and simplicity in this analysis, Part 7's narrative threads have been separated: into the sequence of entries defined by a shared title ("How to Play No-One", a title that suggests its entries have something to do with Jacob trying to find out more of who he is, now that his perceptions on so many aspects of his life are changing), and the sequence of entries with different titles. For much of Part 7, the action alternates between the two narrative threads, events and contemplations and speculations in one thread reflecting, illuminating, or ironically commenting on similar threads, events, and contemplations in the other.

Throughout Part 7, and throughout the development of these two narrative threads, the novel's themes and motifs continue to emerge and develop. There are, for example, several references to walls which here, as throughout the narrative, represent walls constructed in relationships to keep people isolated, from each other and from themselves. There are also references to father/son relationships - in particular, to the relationship between Jacob and Benjy, the son who is perhaps the most unexpected of Jacob's three sons to develop a close relationship with his father. There is also the facsimile of the father / son relationship between Irv and Tamir.

Finally, and, as is the case with much of the latter half of the narrative (that is: after Part 4, which marks something of a dividing line between stages of the story's development), there are explorations of the power and value of personal choice. This is particularly important, and particularly significant, in terms of the character of Jacob, who seems, at this point more than at any other point in the novel, to be who he is as a person, and not who he is as a Jew. This sense of independence, of individuality, develops in several of

the other characters, but reaches its thematically central climax, in Jacob, at the novel's conclusion at the end of Part 8.

Important individual moments in this section include the description of events at Jacob and Julia's wedding. The idea of boundaries, and of the eruv (a boundary of a certain sort discussed earlier), manifests in the story of the rings in the tree, while the reference to the wedding itself refers back to the portrayal of another important event at that wedding – the speech by Deborah about relationships (Part 3, Section 2) which, in this context, might be seen as an implied suggestion of how walls, boundaries, and eruvs in a relationship might be transcended.

Other important individual moments include the reference to the concentration camps in relation to Jacob's being separated by other travelers at the airport (the moment is chilling in the obviousness, and the irony, of the parallel). Here it is interesting to note the juxtaposition of this particular moment with Benjy's inquiries about the pronunciation of the n-word – or, more specifically, the juxtaposition of images associated with prejudice and violence.

As this section of Part 7 concludes, there is the final revelation of what happened to Sam's hand, one in which – perhaps surprisingly – the usually blaming, self-righteous Julia acknowledges her role in what happened. There is a clear sense here that in this shared guilt and shared forgiveness, at least one of the walls between Jacob and Julia has come down, and they have become better parents and better people. The moment is particularly significant because it seems to be another step forward for Jacob on his journey of transformation towards a fuller, more responsible life. Note again that in this moment, he weeps: for Jacob, weeping seems to be a clear marker that he is taking another step on that journey.

## Discussion Question 1

How do events in Part 7, Section 1 develop the theme of destruction and rebuilding?

## Discussion Question 2

Earlier in the narrative (Part 5, Section 2), there is a reference to an eruv – a boundary around a separate, private area. What story elements, or images, echo that initial image here?

## Discussion Question 3

What does the title of Part 7, "The Bible," refer to, both literally and metaphorically?

# Vocabulary

testosterone, libido, tumescent, speculation, doula, congregant, inane, scrutinize, consolation, resonance, explicit, topographical, claustrophobic, lactose, intolerant, decipher, perusal, ascend, atone, misogyny, flamenco, utilitarian, moratorium, pretentious, malignancy, cummerbund

# Part 7, The Bible - Section 2

## Summary

The format of sections beginning “How To Play …” continues, with imagined memories of future life, including Max’s bar mitzvah, at which he speaks of Israel meaning “wrestles with G-d”. There are also references to wrestling essentially implying closeness and a kind of connection, and to the idea that “you only get to keep what you refuse to let go of” (511). There are detailed recollections of Sam’s gestation and childhood (in which Jacob reflects on the preciousness of each moment he got to spend with him), and on how feeling so much love did not bring happiness.

There is then an extended “How To Play No-One” section, in which Jacob’s memories of talking with Tamir at the airport about Jacob’s decision to stay in America are intercut with Jacob, at his bar mitzvah, receiving a camera from Isaac (a camera that Isaac had taken pictures of his family with), then passing the camera on to Sam after his bar mitzvah (narration revealing that Sam’s passion for photography led him out of Other World), and then Sam leaving the camera on a train in Europe while on a trip with his first wife. At the conclusion of this section, Tamir calls Jacob innocent (as in childlike) … and Jacob remembers his father chanting the prayer for the dead at Isaac’s funeral. This leads to contemplations of Isaac’s suicide. There is a short “How To Play No-One” in which Jacob describes coming home, getting into bed with Julia, and Julia commenting that winning might just mean surviving.

There is then an extended section entitled “How to Play ‘Here I Am.’” The section starts with narration of the negotiations between Jacob and Julia around their divorce (in which she contends that she’s never going to be married again). The section then describes the development of her relationship with a man named Daniel, which culminates in their wedding, to which Jacob is invited. After the ceremony and celebrations, Julia sits with Jacob at his table, their conversation covering a lot of ground: the fragility of the glass broken as part of the Jewish wedding ceremony, their faded recollections of why they got divorced, and how they believe that their 16 years together were more than just a phase, or a chapter. When their sons see them crying, they come over to see what is going on, and Jacob and Julia both comfort them, assuring them everything is okay … and then, as the dancing starts, Jacob leaves early.

Part 7 ends with Jacob describing, in narration, how the synagogue he has constructed is made of the words and memories of a boy “who spent his life breaking his fists against the door of his synagogue, begging to be allowed in … the boy who would have realized that the heavy, heavy door opens outwards, that I was inside the Holiest of Holies all along” (533).

## Analysis

Once again, as is the case with the first section of Part 7 and, to a lesser degree, throughout the rest of the narrative, the story moves back and forth in time, through past, present, and future. Here it is important to note that the narratives of the future – for example, everything around Julia's wedding – is still speculative, what might happen as opposed to what actually did happen. It is also important to remember that Jacob is the author and creator of these bible entries, meaning that all these events have arisen in his imagination and/or from his memory. Things are as he recalls them, and / or would like them to be.

A primary element in the first part of Part 7, Section 2, has to do with the narrative around the lost camera. The key point to note here is that it is an object associated with the Holocaust, but which loses its meaning in the same way that it itself gets lost. The symbolic sense here is that contemporary experiences of being Jewish, and arguably of being Israeli are like the camera: the relationship to the Holocaust, its horrors and its meaning, is being gradually diminished, and will ultimately be lost.

A primary element in the second part of Part 7, Section 2, has to do with the extended exploration of events around and during Julia's wedding. This is a clear and relevant exploration of the book's overall thematic interest in the power and value of ritual – specifically, in its value to heal (i.e. the breach between Julia and Jacob). It is, in this context, significant that the title of the chapter that contains the description of the wedding is "Here I Am." The fact that this is the book's title suggests that this particular sequence is key to its thematic and narrative points (i.e. the point at which Jacob, as a man, is most present – that is, "here"). At the same time, because the phrase "here I am" is so key to the story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son, there is a sense that in the reconciliation of Julia and Jacob, the narrative is portraying another near-sacrifice … that of the value of their initial relationship. Again, however, it is important to remember that all this is in Jacob's present-day imagination: the events here have not happened yet.

Other thematically relevant explorations of ritual include the reference to Max's bar mitzvah (which seems to be a little more traditional in content and outcome than that of older brother Sam) and the reference to Isaac's funeral, which in turn is a brief evocation of the book's thematic interest in father / son relationships, and perhaps also an evocation of the theme of destruction and rebuilding.

Finally, there is the reference at the end of Part 6, Section 2, and therefore of Part 7 itself, to Jacob's realization that he has been able to get into the synagogue all along – that is, to live according to the truths and values at the core of the practices and rituals associated with being Jewish. Those truths and values relate, it seems here and as a result of the (imagined) events at the wedding, to the unselfish forgiveness of, and compassion for, others. This, then, can be seen as the novel's climax, its highest point of narrative, emotional, and thematic intensity – in other words, the point at which the change in protagonist Jacob becomes most powerful. In the aftermath of that climax

(Part 8), the narrative illustrates the depth, immediacy, and consequences of that change.

## Discussion Question 1

How does the book's thematic exploration of the nature and power of, and need for, individual choice manifest in Part 7, Section 2?

## Discussion Question 2

What references, situations, or contemplations from earlier in the narrative are echoed in Jacob's contemplations of happiness?

## Discussion Question 3

Given that Daniel is the name of the Biblical hero who survived being in a lion's den, what is ironic or noteworthy about the fact that Julia's second husband has this name?

## Vocabulary

consulate, conciliatory, subliminal, venerate, residue, contentious, codify, oligarch, diligent, tautology, diaphanous

# Part 8, Home

## Summary

“In the long aftermath of the destruction of Israel, Jacob moved into his new house” (537). There is considerable exploration of how it was constructed, how it was decorated, and how Jacob started to make it an actual home. There are also comments on how Israel physically reconstructed itself, and on how difficult it became for Israel to reconstruct itself politically and morally: “…even a massacre or two would have been easier to accept than the complete and explicit abdication of responsibility for non-Jews” (539). This comment, related to how Israel refused medical treatment and / or reconstructive support to any non-Jew, is juxtaposed with Irv’s comments about how, no matter what, he would prioritize his own family – and with the revelation that in the aftermath of Isaac’s death, Irv and Jacob became closer, even while Tamir and Jacob became more distant from each other, even after Noam was seriously injured and Tamir reconciled, at least temporarily, with his once-estranged wife.

Narration then returns to Jacob’s present, and a description of how, after his sons stayed at his new house for the first time, Jacob lay with the aging, unhappy Argus. Narration describes how he (Jacob) has been contemplating what to hold onto from his old life and what to let go of; his process of choosing and purchasing furniture for the new house; and how Argus became increasingly unhappy and infirm.

On the day of the boys’ first visit, Julia and Jacob follow the pre-rehearsed plan and let the boys explore the house on their own. Narration reveals that it is still being renovated and decorated, and Julia offers Jacob some advice, which he accepts: he realizes that “he can’t be without her without her” help (556). They then try to come up with a name for the house, struggling for a while as narration comments on how “Judaism emphasizes intelligence – textually, ritualistically, and culturally” (558) while other religions emphasize other things like faith, avoiding sin, or praise. They do not quite succeed at finding a name, Julia saying they have to leave and telling them to say “a good goodbye” to Argus (558). She also says a good goodbye, and Jacob marvels at her composure. Then, at Benjy’s suggestion and with Sam’s support (narration commenting on how he steps forward, “into the space of his adulthood” (559)), they play an old family game: exploring the house with their eyes closed. At the conclusion of the game, Benjy comes up with a name: Wailing House.

At one point (narration is not clear on the sequence of events at this point), Jacob visits the furniture store and encounters the mother of one of Sam’s childhood friends. She recognizes him, and refers to him as one of those who went to Israel and fought in the war (narration revealing that the numbers of those who actually went were far smaller than the numbers anticipated, or called for, by the Israeli government). Jacob does not tell her that he never actually went, instead using Tamir’s story of becoming a tank loader as his own. He also responds to the woman’s clear attempt at flirtation, even after telling himself that their relationship can go no further.

Part 8, and the novel, come to a close with the description of Jacob taking Argus to the vet to be put down, narration commenting that as he did so, Jacob wondered about (among other things) how it came to be known when it was time for things (like his marriage) to die. As he waits to feel ready for the vet to perform the procedure, Jacob talks to Argus as lovingly as Max once did; contemplates what it means to actually live in the world, and die in it; and plans to sit with the body until it is cremated. He and Argus then look deeply into each other's eyes as the vet conducts the procedure, saying that "Argus dies fulfilled. His master has finally come home" (571). Jacob tells himself "Life is precious, and I live in the world," and then he tells the vet "I'm ready" (571). There, the novel ends.

## Analysis

Once again, the narrative draws clear and seemingly deliberate parallels between the experience of an individual (Jacob) and the experience of what is arguably a nation, or a world-distributed community of people (Jews). Here, in the comments of Jacob's father Irv (one of the last noteworthy evocations, in the book, of the theme of father/son relationships), the narrative makes the clear statement that such prioritizing is not only natural, but right. It also takes that statement to a new level: the narrative clearly suggests that ultimately, it is more important to be a good man (such as the man that Jacob is becoming) than it is to be a good Israeli, or even a good Jew. The point is not made to suggest the transformation in Jacob is complete: his withholding of the complete truth about himself, in the conversation with the woman at the furniture store, suggests that there is still some part of him that values being believed to be a good Jew. Nevertheless, he does seem to be on his way to becoming something much more than he once was.

This contention is borne out by several elements in Part 8. His relationship with Julia is more compassionate; his relationship with his sons is more compassionate and more open (infused, as it is, with the best of their old family rituals); and, most importantly, his relationship with reality is less clouded with beliefs and more illuminated with truths. This last is made clear through the development of his relationship with Argus – specifically, the reality of the latter's impending death. Here, there are several points to note. The first is stylistic: how the reader comes to know what is going to happen to Argus through the implications of Julia's actions and dialogue during the trip through the new house. The second point to note in relation to the death of Argus is how it corresponds with images of new life: the new house, Jacob's renewed relationship with the kids. Finally, and in the very last moments, the very last lines of the book, the narrative makes its ultimate statement – how death leads to rebirth. In specific terms, the novel's final moments suggest that the death of his marriage leads to rebirth of Jacob as a man and a human being; the death of Argus leads to rebirth of Jacob's acceptance of responsibility for the quality of life (and death) of those in his care; and, in the acceptance of that responsibility, the death of fear leads to the thematically significant individual choice to move forward, to take the steps into a new and rebuilt life that, interestingly, are only glimpsed in relation to the aftermath of the destruction of

Israel. Here again, the novel makes the statement that to be a good man is more important than to be a good Israeli, or a good Jew.

In this context, Benjy's idea to call Jacob's house "The Wailing House" can be seen as quite ironic. In many ways, for Jacob at least, the "wailing" associated with so much of his earlier life (i.e. before and during the destruction of Israel and of his marriage) is over. It is time now, as Jacob himself suggests, to choose to start living.

Finally, consideration of the novel's final moments seems to be a good place to also consider an important symbolic element of the book as a whole: the name of Jacob's dog. The name "Argus" has two potential origins, both from Ancient Greek mythology. The first is that Argus was the name of the dog of Odysseus, who wandered the ancient world for a decade in the aftermath of the Trojan War. When Odysseus returned, Argus recognized him, but was too old and feeble to stand. Odysseus, because he was in disguise, could not acknowledge him, and shortly afterwards, the dog died. There is a clear parallel here to the story of Jacob's dog, who dies just as Jacob, much like Odysseus, is coming back to his own life after a long voyage away. Argus is also the name of an ancient monster with a countless number of eternally unsleeping, watchful eyes. There is a sense that the dog has this name because he has been a witness to so much over the ears of his time with the Bloch family.

## Discussion Question 1

How does the theme of destruction and rebuilding developed in Part 8?

## Discussion Question 2

What are the various layers of meaning and implication associated with the use of the term "Home" as the title for the final part of the book? How do each of those meanings intertwine?

## Discussion Question 3

What are the implications for Jacob and his life in the book's final moments?

## Vocabulary

rosette, jaundice, forfeiture, dispersal, provocation, preferential, contentious, emboss, increment, exhumation, traverse, armistice, depraved, resiliency, aneurysm

# Characters

## Jacob Bloch

Jacob is the novel's central character and protagonist. As the novel begins, he is a successful writer for television, a practicing if not terribly spiritual Jew, and deeply engaged with four generations of his family – his grandfather (Isaac); his father and mother (Irv and Deborah); his wife (Julia); and his three sons (Sam, Max, and Benjy). While the novel contains relatively few considerations of Jacob's work life, the story's plot and themes are primarily defined by the other two main aspects of his life, both of which – his religious heritage and his family – intertwine and interact. In other words, how Jacob experiences being Jewish significantly shapes his relationships with his family, while the ways in which he experiences being a grandson, son, husband, and father all shape his perspectives on being Jewish, with its various rituals, rules, and values (not, however, its spiritual elements, which tend to be unexplored.

It could be argued that most, if not all of Jacob's struggles, choices, and dilemmas could fall under the somewhat cliché umbrella of a so-called "mid-life crisis" – that is, an experience faced by many men when they arrive at the ages between,40-60. As biological reproductive potency begins to fade, in both male and female spouses; as children begin to move away from having identities defined by parents and towards those defined by the self; as the inevitable process of physical aging (deterioration?) begins, a great many men have experiences of disillusionment, fear, frustration, loneliness, confusion – in other words, a sense that identity is being lost, that life is no longer exciting or even worth living, and that death really is inevitable. It must be noted that the term is never used in the book, but the sensibility of the experience is there: there is the clear feeling that everything Jacob knows, believes, cares about, accepts, and needs about his life is changing in ways that he is both fearful of and uncomfortable with. That fear and discomfort lead him to choices, and almost-choices, that throughout the narrative trigger even more unsettling changes, several of which seem defined, at least by implication, by a desire to recapture youth. But by the novel's conclusion, Jacob seems to have had a middle-aged-man's coming of age, with the book's last lines making it very clear that he is ready, if not yet fully willing and almost certainly not entirely able, to move into the next phase of his adult life.

## Julia Bloch

Julia is Jacob's wife. An architect and decorator by profession, she nevertheless seems to define herself by her work and successes at being a good mother – not so much a good wife or good partner, there is a clear sense throughout the story that Jacob is, for Julia, a means to an end. That end seems to be happiness: there are several points, throughout the narrative, at which both Julia's choices and her reactions are defined by her understanding of what has brought or will bring her happiness. This includes her relationship with her husband, the moments when he leaves her authority and

perspectives unquestioned as much as the moments when he brings her happiness, joy, or sexual pleasure.

Here it is interesting to note that for Julia, happiness seems to be defined by two things: a sense of being self-contained, and a sense of being in control of others, to the point where her oldest son actually calls her a nag and her husband calls her his enemy. Here it is also important to note that Julia, for the most part, is much less of a self-examiner, or a self-questioner, than her husband. He is self-absorbed, where she is self-righteous. He is neurotic, where she is judgmental. He is loving and forgiving towards his sons, where she is domineering and insistent. All that said, she is not harsh, or loud, or nasty: she rules with an iron fist wrapped in a caressing velvet glove, aspects of her character that make her seemingly relentless determination to be right that much more insidious, dangerous, and subversively destructive. There is, perhaps, a parallel between the actions and attitudes of Israel, as commented upon by Jacob and portrayed in the narrative, and the actions and attitudes of the self-willed, blinkered, manipulative, and sometimes vicious Julia.

## Sam Bloch

Sam is the oldest son of Jacob and Julia Bloch. As the novel begins, he is approaching his bar mitzvah (a Jewish ritual intended to transition an early-teens young man into adulthood). Other important aspects of Sam's character include his reclusiveness, his obsession with the online game Other Life, and his self-consciousness about a childhood injury that left him with a malformed hand. All three of these aspects to his identity are closely related, and are also important symbolic and literal elements of the book's plot. In many ways, Sam has a journey of transformation over the course of the narrative that parallels that of his father: both come to closer terms with knowledge of themselves, an experience that entwines with a shared, perhaps mutually triggered, rejection of Jewishness and Jewish ritual as defining, controlling elements in their lives.

## Max Bloch

Max is Jacob and Julia's middle son. He is less sensitive, more outgoing, and more imaginative than Sam. Of the three boys, Max is closest to the family dog, Argus. His affection for the dog proves to be both an inspiration and a trigger for the development of Jacob's connection to him (Argus), a connection that proves climactically essential to Jacob's journey of transformation over the course of the narrative.

## Benjy Bloch

Benjy is Jacob and Julia's youngest son. Like his brothers, he is intelligent to the point of being precocious - that is, having perspectives, values, and vocabulary that seem more adult than his age would suggest. Benjy is perhaps the wisest of the three Bloch boys, offering and communicating insight in ways that his brothers do not. He does not always know the value of what he is saying, but those around him (and the reader) do.

## Irving Bloch

Irving (known as Irv) is Jacob's father, a well-known Jewish activist. The son of Holocaust survivor Isaac and famous for his strongly argued support of an independent and free Israel, Irv is an imposing figure, one who, by both implication and direct confrontation, puts a lot of pressure on his son to behave and believe in a particular way. His steadfastly advocated beliefs about the essential value of Jewish practice are in clear and vivid contrast to the more ambivalent, or uncertain, beliefs of his son. Later in the novel, Irv reveals a more emotional, sensitive side to him, an important element in Jacob's journey of transformation into a more open, sensitive man himself.

## Deborah Bloch

Deborah is Irv's wife, and Jacob's mother. She is a relatively minor figure in the narrative, a somewhat reactive presence in a world, and in the family's conversations / life, dominated by male presence. Her moment of most significant impact on the story and its characters comes in Part 3, Section 2 where, in a flashback to Jacob and Julia's wedding, she is portrayed as offering a profound and wise commentary on the values of a good marriage / relationship, values that the narrative suggests Jacob and Julia have not themselves applied.

## Isaac Bloch

Isaac is the Bloch family patriarch: father of Irv, grandfather of Jacob, and great-grandfather of Jacob's three sons. Isaac is a survivor of the Holocaust, and as the novel begins, is unhappily contemplating a move into a retirement facility. His suicide is a result of that unhappiness, and as such is a revelation of how deep that unhappiness ran. The timing of his death is very close, within a few pages / hours, of the earthquake that triggers destruction and war in Israel: there is, in this juxtaposition, a very clear sense that the author is drawing some kind of parallel (literal, ironic, or perhaps even satiric) between the destruction of the Jewish homeland and the self-destruction of an elderly Jewish man.

## Mark

Mark is a client of Julia's, for whom she is designing and decorating a new home. In the aftermath of his announcement that he is getting a divorce from his wife, both he and Julia feel free to reveal, and act on, their mutual attraction. Julia, however, does not fully follow through, leaving Mark unhappy and frustrated.

## Billie

Billie is a classmate of Sam's. Intelligent, articulate, and practical, she is the lead debater on his team participating in a model United Nations. She has flashes of deep and clear insight, one of which adds powerful meaning to Sam's bar mitzvah speech, in which he announces his intention to not embrace the meaning of the ritual (i.e. becoming a man).

## Tamir Blumbenberg

Tamir is Jacob's cousin. Tamir lives in Israel, and is a passionate advocate for Israeli independence and sovereignty. A successful entrepreneur and businessman, outspoken and direct and un-hesitant, both the reader and Jacob himself see Tamir as a very clear contrast, sometimes inspiring and sometimes infuriating, to Jacob. Tamir's determination to return home to fight for his homeland in the aftermath of the destructive earthquake in the Middle East inspires Jacob to at least think about following suit: Jacob's decision to stay, however, ends up driving a wedge between the two cousins.

## Noam Blumenberg

Noam is Tamir's eldest son, and is on active duty with the Israeli army when the earthquake hits. Tamir is desperately worried about his safety, in a way that seems to be a vivid contrast to ways in which Jacob seems less worried about his sons. A key point to note about the presence of Noam in the narrative is the way that he reaches out to Sam, Jacob's eldest son, through the medium of Other World (the narrative is never entirely clear how Noam figures out which of the many avatars in the game is actually Sam's). Noam's gift of character health and well-being to Sam's new avatar can be seen as symbolically representing a key belief in both Noam and his father (Tamir): the idea that Israel, and being as Israeli as they are, can be (is?) a source of life and health for the Blochs and other American Jews. This, in turn, can be seen as tying in with the actions of the Israeli prime minister, in calling American and other Jews back to Israel to help in its post earthquake self-defense and rebuilding.

## Barak Blumenberg

Barak is Tamir's younger son. He accompanies Tamir on his visit to America, and seems primarily defined by a near-obsessive focus on playing video games and connecting with those back home on his cell-phone. He is physically much more robust than any of Jacob's sons, but seems to lack their intelligence and articulateness. This can be seen as the flip-side of the symbolic relationship between Israeli Jews (Tamir, Noam, Barak) and American Jews (Jacob, his sons, and his forefathers): physical robustness in the former, intellectual robustness in the latter.

## The Rabbi

The unnamed rabbi who speaks at Isaac's funeral provides key insights, for members of the Bloch and Blumenberg families, into the experience of being Jewish. These insights are particularly moving for Jacob who, as a result of what the rabbi says, discovers wells of feeling in himself, and the capacity to express those feelings, that he did not know he had. As a result of this experience, Jacob is propelled further along his journey of transformation. Here, however, it is important to note that the rabbi (who is unnamed) speaks not of actual faith, but of the value of ritual and Jewish practice: he, like much of the rest of the novel, avoids full and direct consideration of Jewish spirituality, focusing instead on the value of what Jews DO, rather than on what they BELIEVE.

## Dr. Silvers

This character never actually appears in the narrative, but is referred to frequently. He is the counselor that Jacob sees, with the references to the comments that he (Silvers) offers often referred to either as inspirational or trite. He is, in many ways, a secular (non-religious) influence on thought and belief in Jacob's life, his guidance seeming to serve as a substitute, or replacement, for spiritual guidance and inspiration. In other words, Jacob's reliance on Dr. Silvers, instead of on God and the teachings of the faith, plays a clear role in defining the novel's behavior-oriented beliefs about Jewishness.

# Symbols and Symbolism

## Other Life

Throughout the narrative, the online game Other Life represents the specific efforts of Sam to escape his real life, and on a broader metaphoric scale, to symbolize similar efforts made by several other characters. While the exact nature and details of how Other Life works, there is the clear sense that it is a reality in which players have the power and capability to create and to destroy objects and other characters.

## Samanta and Eyesick

Samanta and Eyesick are the names given to the two avatars (alter-egos, game characters) played in Other Life and which symbolize different aspects of Sam's character. Samanta is a young Latina, whose existence in the game comes to an end in the aftermath of a playing mistake made by Sam's father. Eyesick is her replacement: the character's name is a clear evocation, or echo, of Sam's perspective on himself. It is interesting to note how Sam's Israeli cousin Noam uses power from his own avatar to help Eyesick, a metaphoric example of the novel's thematic exploration of the relationship between Israeli Jews (like Noam) and American Jews (like Sam).

## Sam's Hand Injury

The hand injury can be seen as representing the psychological wounds inflicted upon Sam by his well-meaning, but troubled and somewhat obsessive parents. Early in the novel, narration reveals that Sam's hand was injured in a childhood accident. Later in the novel, narration reveals that that accident involved Sam's hand being accidentally slammed in the door as the result of mistaken actions by his parents.

## Sam's Synagogues

Within the context of the novel's exploration of the question of whether, and how, Sam's bar mitzvah is going to go forward, Sam's creation and destruction of the synagogues in Other Life can be seen as a manifestation of the novel's overall ambivalence about the role and importance of Jewish practice and ritual.

## Masturbation

The fact that so many of the novel's male characters masturbate is another way in which the novel suggests that Jewish practice and philosophy seems, to those engaged in it, to be contradictory to human nature and ultimately unsatisfying.

Throughout the novel, narration spends considerable time considering and describing the role masturbation plays in the lives of several characters, primarily Jacob and Sam. Aside from the essential, by-definition self-centeredness of the act (a representation of the essential self-centeredness of Jacob and other characters), the symbolism of male masturbation has to do with its being taboo within Judaism, seen as a waste of reproductive potential.

## Jacob's Television Show

In much the same way as Sam escapes into Other Life, Jacob escapes into a television series of his own creation, a series built around events and people in his life. There is a clear sense that while, on one level, the show is as much of an escape for Jacob as Other Life is for his son, the television show is at least as therapeutic as it is creative: Jacob examines himself, his life, and his problems through his writing and almost obsessive development of the show.

## Jacob's Second Phone

The second of Jacob's two cell phones is, like the television series he is developing and writing, representative of his desire to escape his life and live at least partly in another world, or at least another set of experiences and circumstances. Julia's discovery of the phone, and of the sexy texts to another woman that she finds there, are the primary catalyst for much of the book's plot, revolving as it does around various aspects of the end of the Jacob-Julia marriage in the aftermath of the discovery of the phone.

## Argus

The elderly family dog Argus, infirm and incontinent and in pain, can be seen as representing the state of Jacob and Julia's marriage, itself near death. He can also be seen as representing Jacob's sense of his own dying individual identity, a sense that is most vividly expressed by the novel's ending: as Jacob takes Argus to be euthanized, he (Jacob) realizes and accepts that he is free and able to live his own life.

## Jewish Rituals

Throughout the narrative, a number of rituals associated with the practice of the Jewish faith play key roles in plot developments, and also in thematic considerations of the meaning and value of being Jewish. The bar mitzvah (a ceremony of entering manhood) is perhaps the most significantly and frequently referred to, but there are also references to weddings and to funerals. There is a clear sense throughout the narrative that in most instances, particularly those around bar mitzvahs, the ritual is seen and/or experienced as being essentially empty, without genuine religious, spiritual, or personal meaning. As such, the references are a key part of the book's overall thematic contention that it is more important to be a good person than a good Jew.

## The Micronesian Bomb

The bomb can be seen as a symbolic representation, or echo of other profoundly destructive incidents or objects: the earthquake in the Middle East, and Jacob's cell-phone with the sexual texts.

When Sam and Julia participate in a model United Nations, Sam is assigned to represent the country of Micronesia. During the course of the weekend of activity, the delegates learn that in the imaginary world inhabited by the various delegations, the tiny country has been given nuclear capability. Part of the debate, within the whole of the model UN and the Micronesian delegation, has to do with the question of what to do with it, given its potential destructive power.

## The Earthquake in Israel

In the middle of the novel, and in an event foreshadowed from the novel's very first line, a devastating earthquake strikes the Middle East and triggers what amounts to a life and death struggle. In the same way as the Micronesian Bomb and Jacob's cell-phone are catalytically destructive (or potentially so) in their respective circumstances, the earthquake is physically destructive in the region and, as such, is part of the trio of metaphoric representations of the transformative power of destruction. The earthquake is a particularly potent representation of this, tied as closely as it is to explorations of the destruction of the marriage of Jacob and Julia.

## Operation Arms of Moses

Operation Arms of Mosis is one of the ways in which the novel dramatizes, or explores, the difference between being Jewish and being Israeli: the author portrays the government as apparently thinking that all Jews should think of themselves as Israelis, but at the same time suggests that more important than both is being a good human being.

Operation Arms of Moses is the name given to the plan, put forward by the Israeli government, to bring the Jewish diaspora (i.e. Jews living in places other than Israel) to Israel to help in the earthquake-triggered war and reconstruction. Moses being one of the ancient patriarchs or founders of the Jewish faith, the clear sense of the title and of the operation is that the government is calling its citizens, and those whom it thinks SHOULD be citizens, home.

# Settings

## The United States

The U.S., with its long social and political history of complicated relationships with both Jews and Israel, is the broad-strokes, overall setting for the narrative. Welcoming of Jewish immigrants and refugees since virtually the beginning of modern immigration, the U.S. (as the narrative itself suggests) has arguably become almost as much of a homeland for Jews as Israel. This contention can be seen as being supported, in the novel, by the fact that protagonist Jacob chooses to prioritize the life he has in his true homeland of the U.S. and not the life he has in his theoretical homeland of Israel.

## Washington, D.C.

Most of the novel's action takes place in the capital city of the U.S., Washington D.C. This circumstance - that is: Jacob's establishment of his life in a city that is the center of power in the Jewish "homeland" in the so-called "new world" - can be seen as further reinforcing the contention made above: specifically, the idea that America can be seen as being as much a geographical center of Jewish life as Israel.

## The Middle East

The Middle East is a term used to describe a geo-political region that straddles borders between Africa and Asia. It has been the setting for centuries of conflicts between the various ethnic communities (most notably, those of Arabs and Jews) that claim the region, or parts of it, as their own territory. It is the setting for a major natural disaster (a powerful earthquake) that serves as a catalyst for significant transformations in the lives of the novel's characters.

## Israel

Relatively little of the novel's actual action takes place in Israel: only sections of Parts 4 and 5 actually take place there. Other portions of both these parts of the book and its other chapters contain references to characters and situations taking place there without actually taking the narrative there. All that said, Israel's presence is more important to the book as a whole than the actual amount of action that takes place there might suggest. It is perhaps more appropriate to suggest that it is perhaps a psychological setting, a "mindset," that defines the ways of thinking of many of the characters.

## The Present

Contemporary society, with its cell-phones, 24-hour news broadcasts, and history of Arab-Israeli conflict, is the novel's primary setting in time. There are several points at which the narrative shifts into the past or into the future, but for the most part, the action of the story is anchored in the here and now.

# Themes and Motifs

## Being Jewish

Virtually every element in this book – story, characters, plot, secondary themes – is defined, in one way or another, by an exploration of what it means to be Jewish. The meaning and value of Jewish ritual, the sanctity and safety of the Jewish homeland (Israel), the history – and historic treatment – of the Jewish people are all foundational elements of the story's central narrative lines and core thematic premise. This last is grounded in the idea that being Jewish is a fundamental, and ultimately preemptive, shaper of individual identity.

There are two essential points to note about how the novel explores this theme. The first has to do with the sense that for the most part, explorations of being Jewish are confined to manifestations of faith, rather than of aspects of the faith itself. In other words, there is little or no reference to the spiritual meaning of being Jewish, no explorations of Jewish belief, of the faith's its spiritual values. Much more emphasis is placed on behavior, ways of interacting with the world, with other Jews, and with non-Jews. This leads to the second essential point to note about this theme: the fact that much of the conflict, or discussion, dramatized in the book suggests that being Jewish and being Israeli (i.e. a Jew living in Israel) are very different things.

This sense of difference emerges primarily as a result of the narrative's focus on the attitude and actions of protagonist Jacob Bloch. Jacob considers himself a practicing Jew, recognizing the value of tradition and history and ritual. He does not, however, spend a great deal of time either contemplating or acting on spiritual aspects of being Jewish, and neither does he consider the damage done to Israel by the earthquake or the war entered into by Israel in its aftermath as a personal attack on him as a Jew. This is in direct, and arguably deliberate, contrast to the attitude of Jacob's father (a Zionist Jew whose beliefs are defined by the sacredness of Israel as a / the Jewish homeland) and cousin (an Israeli Jew whose beliefs and actions are similarly defined, to the point of patriotic near-fanaticism). Jacob is patriotic, but only to a point: again unlike Tamir, but perhaps like his ego-driven celebrity father, he is portrayed as ultimately being too self-oriented to be fully and effectively Israeli.

## Rituals

Throughout the narrative, there is a predominant emphasis in the importance of ritual in the experience of being Jewish and maintaining Jewishness. The first point to note here is the idea that faith and spirituality are, for the most part, absent from the novel's discussions and/or portrayals of Jewishness. Again, the emphasis for the characters and the story is on what a character does, not about what a character has faith in. This aspect of the book's primary theme is particularly noteworthy when one considers that

many of the rituals referred to in the novel are grounded, at least ostensibly, in some kind of spirituality.

The most frequently referred to ritual, the most narratively significant, is the bar mitzvah, the ceremonial celebration of the rite of passage from boy to man (there are also references, albeit less frequent, to the parallel female experience of the bat mitzvah). A central narrative question throughout the book is whether Sam, the eldest son of protagonist Jacob, will go through his bar mitzvah and under what circumstances. The family, because of the perspectives of the Jewish community in general and throughout history, places a great deal of importance on the ritual, but it is interesting to note that all the discussions, all the conflict, all the questioning of whether it will happen are defined not by what Sam believes or understands about God, but by whether circumstances are right, by arrangements for decoration and for food, and by timing in relation to other rituals – the burial of Isaac's father and the somewhat ritualistic war for self-containment and independence fought by Israel in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake.

But all that said, there is another form of ritual that plays a similarly significant role in the story. This is the idea of family ritual, of behavior, of relationship, and of daily function that move past mere habit and into having some kind of connection to a more emotional, spiritual, or psychological significance. This, in turn, could be either positive or negative: building on or sustaining connection (such as the ways in which Jacob and Julia develop and promote connection in their family home), and building on or sustaining disconnection (such as the ways Jacob and Julia ritualize the silence and withholding in their marriage). What is interesting here is that both these sorts of rituals are portrayed, throughout the novel, as having more meaning to those involved than any of the more religious rituals: the exception is Isaac's funeral, a ritual which, when discussed and commented upon by a rabbi whose thought processes seem to transcend the merely Jewish and move into the more fully human, triggers breakthroughs of emotion in virtually everyone who hears him. The unnamed rabbi illustrates the possibility of a powerful spirituality in religious ritual that moves the characters to individual experiences of faith that, in turn, triggers them to make significant choices – another of the book's more significant secondary themes.

## Individual Choices

In spite of the book's prevailing focus on being Jewish, it ultimately seems to be making a clear and contrasting point about the ultimately transcendent power of individuality and making personal choice. The actions of several characters – among them Isaac (in ending his own life), Sam (in refusing to accept the ritual meaning of his bar mitzvah), and Jacob (in ultimately refusing to join the fight in Israel) – are made in defiance of the traditions of Jewish practice. Suicide is regarded as a sin against God and the community; refusing to acknowledge the meaning of a bar mitzvah goes against the very reasons for the ritual being in existence; and refusing to join what the Israeli powers-that-be seem to perceive as a kind of militaristic, international, family reunion. Isaac, Sam, Jacob, and several other characters choose to take action in spite of the pressures of community, with both community and pressure ultimately being the

defining forces in the experiences of several other characters, contrasting and less independent: Irv and Tamir in particular, who tightly and closely follow the line of thought and action prescribed for them by Jewish group-think.

In this context, it is important to note how the novel ends: with Jacob, who has throughout the narrative rejected different sorts of convention, saying (as his dog's life is coming to an end) that he himself is ready to start living. He no longer has to do what he is expected to do as a husband, but he is prepared to be the kind of man and father he needs to be to be true to himself. In short, in the novel's final moments, Jacob is rewarded for his independence-defined choices (as mistaken as they are, i.e. the texts with the other woman) with an experience of freedom, of integrity, and of a positive future.

Somewhere between the experiences and perspectives of these two characters, there is the experience of Julia, who defines herself repeatedly by her need to be a good mother, and her self-perceived success at being so. She makes a lot of choices that seem to be oriented towards convincing herself and others that she is a good mother, and a good Jewish mother: choices defined by pre-conceived belief and the perceptions of others. On the other hand, at one point she also makes the different sort of choice: in choosing to separate herself within and from her marriage, she makes a personal individual choice based on who she thinks she is and what she thinks she needs to be. There is the clear sense, however, that this sort of choice is the exception rather than the rule, a sense that despite the significant role she and her choices play in the story and in shaping the narrative of Jacob's life, his book-ending choice to live life independently, and on his own terms, is the one that the author wants to thematically emphasize, as opposed to Julia's general tendency to make choices in relation to what others will think of her.

## Father / Son Relationships

The tensions and differences between Jacob Bloch and his fire-branding activist of a father are only one aspect of how the novel explores father-son relationships. In fact, the Jacob-Irv relationship is only one layer on the four-generation sequence of fathers and sons whose relationships form the backbone of how the book explores this particular theme. The relationships of Isaac and his son Irv, of Irv and his son Jacob, and of Jacob and his sons Sam-Max-Benjy play out this theme in a variety of circumstances and also in a number of cross-generation permutations: variations include grandfather-grandson relationships (i.e. Irv and Benjy, Isaac and Jacob), and the relationship between Sam and his great-grandfather (Isaac).

The core point of intersection and comparison in all these relationships has to do with how these sons are all different from their fathers and grandfathers, in spite of all being connected by the same experience: that of being Jewish. The sense here is that by creating a sequence of generations in which individuals within each generation are different from the one before, the author is suggesting that such differences are inevitable, perhaps even necessary. The point is given another facet of meaning when

considered within the context of the book's larger central theme: in Jewish tradition and practice, the father has the responsibility of providing leadership for his family, in terms of financial security, moral example and guidance, and psychological stability. The point made by the action of the narrative is that the former is relatively easy when compared with the struggles of maintaining the latter two; that no matter how much of a priority a father makes the former, sons will be dissatisfied with the latter; and that a Jewish man / father is more concerned with actually that, being a Jewish man / father, than he is with being a good man or a good father.

Here it is important to note the presence and value of a vividly contrasting character, Jacob's cousin Tamir, who is both perceived and portrayed as a good Jew, a good father, and a good Jewish father. There is a very strong sense that both Jacob and Irv feel a bit put to shame by Tamir on all three levels, particularly within the circumstance of Tamir's determination to fight for Israel; his simultaneous devotion to his son; and the unabashed, unashamed pride he feels in relation to both aspects of his life.

## Destruction and Rebuilding

The ways in which Tamir, as a strong-willed Jewish father, takes steps to participate in both the destruction of Israel's enemies and the rebuilding of Israel's life, existence, and reputation can be seen as one relatively literal way in which the narrative defines the relationship between the first two themes. Destruction can be either natural (the earthquake) or man-made (the war that emerges in the earthquake's aftermath); it can be global in scale (between Israel and the Arab communities in the middle east) or personal (between Jacob and Julia Bloch); it can be real (all the above) or an illusion (the destruction of Sam's temples in Other World). All in all, the narrative clearly (albeit metaphorically) suggests that destruction is an essential component of living a new life: for something better, healthier, safer, and more true to emerge, something has to be destroyed, whether it be a new and more secure / populous Israel being rebuilt from the ashes of the old; a new and truer relationship between two people being rebuilt from the ashes of a marriage; or a new and truer sense of self emerging from the ashes of a crumbling identity.

The primary examples of this theme manifesting in narrative have to do with the story, actions, and transformations in protagonist Jacob Bloch. The acts of destruction in his life range from the self-destruction of his grandfather (i.e. Isaac's suicide) to the destruction of his marriage (in part-self-triggered, in part triggered by the choices of his wife Julia) to the impending destruction of his dog Argus. This last is particularly significant, in that Jacob avoids the end of Argus' life throughout the entire narrative: only in the book's very final moments does Argus' death reveal its metaphoric and thematic meaning. As a veterinarian prepares to euthanize the dog, Jacob has an experience of discovering he is prepared to move ahead with, and rebuild, his life. The echoes of this experience resound backwards through the entire narrative, suggesting that each of the many acts of destruction it portrays offer similar opportunities for new beginnings.

# Styles

## Point of View

For the most part, the narrative unfolds from a third person, past tense point of view – that is, as recounting events that happened, rather than events that ARE happening. The most significant aspect of this overall point of view is that it repeatedly shifts – from that of protagonist Jacob, to that of Jacob's wife Julia, to that of their oldest son Sam, and at times to what amounts to what might be described as a journalistic point of view, objective reporting of big picture news. This is a clear contrast to the more intimate perspectives of Jacob and his family, with the repeated shifts between the more objective considerations of the former and the more subjective considerations providing effective narrative contrast and similarly contrasting thematic perspectives.

In terms of those thematic perspectives, the central theme that threads its way throughout the entire book, no matter what its narrative point of view (familial, journalistic) is its carefully ambivalent examination of what it means to be Jewish – not a Jew, but to be Jewish. This is an important distinction, given that a great deal of the novel is spent exploring issues related to ritual and patriotism, arguably external aspects of the practice of being of the Hebrew faith (i.e. being Jewish) as opposed to the internal aspects of the faith itself (i.e. being a Jew) which is, in fact, discussed very, very rarely, if at all. See "Themes."

In this context, the authorial point of view seems to be that there is positive value in certain aspects of being Jewish (i.e. the comfort, and opportunity for growth, found in ritual), but that there is also negative value. There is the clear sense that in the author's perspective, a great deal of the conflict that arises from the destructive act of nature at a central narrative turning point is the result of Jewish pride and nationalism – in other words, of patriotism destructively evolved into at times extreme acts of self-preservation.

## Language and Meaning

In general, the book's use of language is consistently defined by a close knowledge of Jewish culture and history, by an intelligent breadth of vocabulary, by a reliance on dialogue, and by an authorial tendency to develop a sometimes overwhelming range of different facets of the same idea. The first of these elements is both thematically and narratively significant, in that one of the book's key thematic perspectives and narrative anchors has to do with considerations of what it means to be Jewish, considerations that are at times questioning, at times celebratory, and at times condemnatory. All three perspectives on Jewishness are reflected in the book's language.

At the same time, there is a breadth and intelligence to the book's general vocabulary that is at times powerful and at other times a bit incongruous. The former point arises in relation to the detail and uniqueness of the ways in which the book makes its thematic

points and communicates its narrative events. The latter point arises as a result of the fact that Jacob's sons (who are 13 years or younger) tend to speak with a sophistication and precociousness of thought and insight that sounds more like the author than someone of the characters' ostensible ages. This, in turn, relates to the third noteworthy element of the book's use of language: its tendency to employ dialogue as a technique of communicating event (i.e. what happened), of revealing character (i.e. the motives that triggered what happened, and the feelings that resulted), and of revealing inner life (i.e. implying motivation and intention without actually stating it). Here again, characters speak with an intelligence, an insight, and a wit that at times creates a sense that they are all from the same clever family, and at other times that the author is having difficulty acknowledging that people, even younger people, speak differently from one another.

This aspect of the book's use of language relates, in its turn, to the fourth key point about its use of language – the author's deployment of extensive lists to illustrate a character's perspectives, thoughts, questions, and values. These lists (for example, the list of things that Julia likes, and then the list of things she dislikes, in Part 1, Section 1) seems to be intended to reveal a complexity of character, and at times the technique succeeds. At other times, though, the lists (which appear throughout the novel in a variety of circumstances) become less of a narrative technique and more of a narrative flourish, one that starts to become more about the author than the story he is telling.

## Structure

As the novel begins, its structure appears simple – the language and writing suggest that events are being described in relation to a particular event ("the destruction of Israel"), and imply that the narrative is heading in the direction of an exploration of that particular event. To some extent, this is what happens: the first five sections of the book lead into the events of Part 6. Here, it is important to note that even within this fundamental framework, there are shifts in time – flashbacks into the past (at times distant and at times more recent) and also flashes forward into the future (again at times distant as well as at times relatively near).

Part 6, meanwhile, contains an almost journalistic narrative of a series of events that take place over the 15 days after a powerful earthquake hits the Middle East. The chapter concludes with a reference to a decision that must be made, and actions that might be taken, a few days later.

Parts 7 and 8, in their turn, take place within the time frame defined by Part 6 – that is, events in those sections of the book take place at the same time as the events in the early phases of Part 6. The core timeline of Parts 7 and 8 parallels the timeline of Part 6, with references in the narration of events in 7 and 8 referring to events that took place on the same day in the narrative of Part 6.

At the same time, the narratives of Part 7 and 8 also contain flashes both backwards and forwards: into family history and world history, as well as into family future (not so much world future). In other words, the narrative's exploration of time, in relation to

experience, moves in and out of linear structure, creating a sense of perspectives that arise in future life, and from past life, being available and accessible in the present.

# Quotes

Despite the incomprehensible vastness of Other Life, there was no synagogue. And despite [Sam's] profound reluctance ever to step foot in an actual synagogue, there had to be a synagogue. He didn't long for one, he needed one: you can't destroy what doesn't exist."
-- Narration (Part 1, Section 1)

**Importance**: This quote introduces a key aspect of Other Life (its size); the fact that it is missing a key, defining element of Sam's real life (the synagogue, with everything about being Jewish that it represents); and the relationship between Sam and the idea of a synagogue (which he shares with his father, the rest of the family, and arguably the novel). The quote also introduces a key element of Sam's character: his drive to destroy that which he creates because it is imperfect. Finally, the quote foreshadows the various examples of destruction (including the "destruction" of Israel) that appear throughout the narrative.

I am a mother, [Julia} thought … no more her ultimate ambition than happiness, but her ultimate identity. She had no lives to compare with her life, no parallel aloneness to measure against her aloneness. She was simply doing what she thought was the right thing to do. Living what she thought was the right life.
-- Narration (Part 1, Section 1)

**Importance**: At the same time as it explores what Julia sees as the defining experience and perspective in her life, this quote also draws a parallel between Julia and her husband. In the same way as Julia sees herself as being defined by the rightness of her life as a mother, Jacob sees himself as being defined by what he is told is the rightness of his life as a Jew. Note the difference in phrasing: Julia is who she is because of what she believes, while Jacob is who he is because of what he has been told to be.

Neither knew, only a few steps onto that invisible bridge, that it never ended, that the rest of their life together would require steps of trust, which only led to the next step of trust. She wanted to care for him then, but she wouldn't always.
-- Narration (Part 1, Section 1)

**Importance**: This quote defines the central situation in the relationship between Jacob and Julia - that it started out with trust and connection, but over time, evolved into something leading to more separation, more mistrust, and much less communication.

Sam enjoyed knowledge. The accumulation and distribution of facts gave him a feeling of control, of utility, of the opposite of the powerlessness that comes with having a smallish, underdeveloped body that doesn't dependably respond to the mental commands of a largish, overstimulated brain."
-- Narration (Part 1, Section 2)

**Importance**: This quote sums up the essential character, identity, and situation of Sam,

Jacob and Julia's eldest son. The actions and insights coming from that brain, combined with Sam's self-consciousness about that body, lead him to self-defining actions that, in many ways, simultaneously foreshadow and parallel those of his father: specifically, a claiming and declaring of individual identity.

Sometimes they would go to bed and make one more effort, now horizontal, to work it through. Sometimes going to bed made things possible that weren't possible in the infinitely large room. The intimacy of being under the same sheet, two furnaces contributing to the shared warmth, but at the same time not having to see each other … or perhaps it was the back of the brain, where all the blood then pooled, that the generosity lobe was located."
-- Narration (Part 1, Section 2 )

**Importance**: This quote considers how Jacob and Julia attempted to use a re-kindling their physical and/or sexual relationship to rebuild their emotional relationship.

The absurdity of it, the agony and beauty of it, almost brought Jacob to his knees: these two independent consciousnesses, neither of which existed ten and a half years ago, and existed only because of him, could now not only operate free of him (that much he'd known for a long time) but demand freedom."
-- Narration (Part 2, Section 1)

**Importance**: Here, Jacob considers his relationship as a parent with his children - specifically, their movement from dependence to independence and self-identity. Throughout the novel, Jacob himself is on a similar journey - from dependence on being Jewish to define his life to an independence from that kind of imposed definition. The quote, therefore, can be seen as foreshadowing and/or paralleling his own experience.

So the bar mitzvah would be at the synagogue they paid twenty-five hundred dollars per visit to be members of, and officiated by the hip young rabbi who wasn't, by any reasonable definition, hip, young, or a rabbi. The party would be at the Hilton was THIS CLOSE to being put out of our misery, and where Julia and Sam were representing Micronesia. The band would be capable of playing both a good horah and good rock … Jewish Americans … who will go to any length, short of practicing Judaism, to instill a sense of Jewish identity in their children."
-- Narration (Part 3)

**Importance**: In many ways, this quote is a concise, specified evocation of the novel's thematic perspective on being Jewish - that the experience is more about what is done than what is believed, about the superficial rather than the spiritual.

All Tamir wanted to talk about was money – the average Israeli income, the size of his own easy fortune, the unrivaled quality of life in that fingernail clipping of oppressively hot homeland hemmed in by psychopathic enemies. All Irv wanted to talk about was the SITUATION – when was Israel going to make us proud by making itself safe? … All Jacob wanted to talk about was living close to death. Had Tamir killed anyone? Had Noam? … What's the worst thing either ever saw with his own eyes?"

-- Narration (Part 3, Section 2)

**Importance**: This quote sums up the very different experiences, associated with being Jewish, of these three very different characters. Tamir's focus is economic, Irv's is political, and Jacob's is psychological. It is arguable that if asked, all three might say that their experiences are closely tied with the spiritual experience of being Jewish: the novel, however, argues here and elsewhere that their experiences are, in fact, more tied to outer than inner experience. Jacob's perspective perhaps comes closest, but it is important to note that his questions would apply to anyone who lived with or near death on a daily basis. They are not specifically questions about what it means to be Jewish facing death. Perhaps this is implied simply by the fact that the question is being asked of a Jewish man, but the point here is that Jacob's question reflects his overall placement within the book's thematically central consideration of being Jewish. Jacob seems more interested in the human aspects of experience, rather than the Jewish aspects.

It’s very hard to have a productive dialogue with a thirteen-year-old boy, as every gently broached subject becomes an Ultimate Conversation, requiring defense systems and counterattacks to attacks that were never launched. What begins as an innocent observation about his habit of leaving things in the pockets of dirty clothes ends with Sam blaming his parents for his twenty-eight-percentile height, which makes him want to commit suicide on YouTube."
-- Narration (Part 5, Section 1)

**Importance**: Within this darkly humorous consideration, from Jacob's point of view, of his relationship with Sam, there is a clear sense that the tensions in that relationship are, in fact, those of every parent of a teen-aged young man, perhaps every parent of a teen-aged person. The universality of this idea, in fact, can be seen as connected to the novel's perspective on being human vs. being Jewish.

How do we mourn the end of [Isaac’s] life? The end of the Jewish epoch that he participated in and exemplified … do we shed tears for their disappearance? Silently grieve? Or sing their praises? Isaac Bloch was not the last of his kind, but once gone, his kind will be gone forever … we KNOW them. We know them with tears for their suffering, with silence for all that cannot be said, and with song for their unprecedented resilience.
-- The Rabbi (Part 5, Section 2 paragraph 348)

**Importance**: In this section of his lengthy, thematically significant speech at Isaac's funeral, the rabbi touches on the fact that Jacob was a Holocaust survivor; the fact that all of his kind (i.e. all Holocaust survivors) will one day be gone; and the implication that everyone that calls themselves Jewish owe it to the survivors, to those who died, and to everyone considering themselves Jewish to remember both the survivors and what they survived. The rabbi, in fact, seems to be suggesting that such memory is, and needs to be, an essential part of being Jewish.

Judaism gets death right, Jacob thought. It instructs us what to do when we know least well what to do, and feel an overwhelming need to do SOMETHING. You should sit like this. WE WILL. You should dress like this. WE WILL. You should say these words at these moments, even if you have to read from transliteration.
-- Narration (Part 5, Section 2)

**Importance**: While much of the narrative's thematic perspective on Jewish ritual is that it is essentially empty of spiritual value, this quote allows room for there to at least be psychological value, not only to the rituals around funerals and death, but by extension rituals in general. It is an important contrast.

Next time you throw a ball, throw it for me' … except that throwing a ball becomes an attitude toward academic achievement, becomes measuring the distance from perfection in units of failure, becomes going to a college that murdered kid would have killed to go to, becomes studying things you aren't interested in but are good and worthy and remunerative, becomes getting married Jewishly and having Jewish kids and living Jewishly in some demented effort to redeem the suffering that made your increasingly alienating life possible.
-- Tamir (Part 5, Section 3)

**Importance**: This quote within a quote within a quote suggests that for Tamir, the symbolic value of acting on behalf of those who were killed for being Jewish (and specifically those who died in the Holocaust) is a defining one for anyone who considers themselves Jewish. It is a key component of the novel's overall consideration of the value of living a Jewish life, and is a similarly key contrast to Jacob's perspectives on being Jewish.

The great bulk of family life involves no exchange of love, and no meaning, only fulfillment. Not the fulfillment of feeling fulfilled, but of fulfilling that which now falls to you."
-- Narration (Part 6)

**Importance**: This quote sums up what is arguably the experience of all the parental figures in the novel on being apparent - the value of doing duty coming first, the reward being a sense of fulfillment when that duty is accomplished. What is interesting here is that this perspective also seems to be that of the novel, and many of its characters, on the experience of being Jewish.

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.
-- Narrator (Jacob) (Part 5, Section 1)

**Importance**: As he is leaving for Israel, Jacob realizes the ways in which his life has become a story worth both telling and living. The term "tchotchke" is a Yiddish term, describing something small, ornamental, and cluttery. The sense here is that Jacob,

within the context of exploring the possibility of contributing to a greater good (i.e. the well-being of Israel), sees his life in similar terms.

Some people think it's to remind us of all the destruction that was necessary to bring us to the moment of our greatest happiness. Soome people think it's a kind of prayer: let us be happy until the shards of this light bulb reassemble. Some people think it's a symbol of fragility. But the interpretation I've never heard is the most straightforward one: this is what we're like. We are broken individuals, committing to what will be a broken union in a broken world.
-- Jacob (Part 7, Section 2)

**Importance**: In this contemplation of a particular moment (a breaking of glass) in a Jewish wedding ritual, Jacob sees a larger metaphoric value in the action. Here again is one of a very few instances throughout the narrative in which the value of ritual, often portrayed or felt to be shallow and spiritually low in meaning, can be seen as having psychological value, at least potentially.

All those years felt worthwhile while they were happening, but only a few months on the other side of them and they were a gigantic waste of time. Of a life. It was an almost irrepressible urge of [Jacob's] brain to see the worst in that which had failed. To see it as something that had failed, rather than something that had succeeded until the end."
-- Narration (Part 8)

**Importance**: Jacob's contemplation of the nature of failure, just as his marriage is ending and his dog is coming to the end of his life, is a particularly telling one, the idea being that something is a success, or at least an attempt at success, right until the end of its existence.

Argus' eyes rose to meet Jacob's. There was no acceptance to be found in them. No forgiveness. There was no knowledge that all that had happened was all that would happen. As it had to be, and as it should be. Their relationship was defined not by what they could share, but what they couldn't. Between any two beings, there is a unique, uncrossable distance, an unenterable sanctuary. Sometimes it takes the shape of aloneness. Sometimes it takes the shape of love."
-- Narration (Part 8)

**Importance**: This quote, from the novel's final moments, portrays the realizations that occur as Jacob is finally embracing the inevitable death of his dog, realizations that can be seen as relating to the death of his marriage, and the death of his self-defining ideas about what it means to be Jewish. the sense here that he is fully on his way to becoming not just a good Jewish man, but simply a good man. The imagery of the quote - specifically, the unenterable sanctuary - can be seen, on one level, as referring to what Jacob and many other characters tend to see as the unenterable sanctuary of the truth of spiritual Jewish-ness. Further to that point, however, it can also be seen as a reference to a point, earlier in the narrative, when Jacob acknowledges that it had been possible for him to enter that sanctuary all along. The quote is therefore ironically poignant, or poignantly ironic.