



Daniel Ross Goodman: *A Single Life*

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What is a 30-ish Yeshiva-trained Talmud scholar to do about his stalled love life? Why can't he ever get past the second of his matchmaker-arranged dates? Is he respectably employed? Yes. Is he ugly? Does he have bad breath? No and no. Can he sustain an interesting and varied conversation? Absolutely. What, then? Could it be that he is Black?

Black???

Seemingly accepted without hesitation by his fellow students, his teachers, his colleagues at the Jewish high school where he winds up working (though out in the world, he is stopped for driving while Black and bristles at being compared to Trevor Noah), Eli nonetheless cannot make any progress toward fulfilling the mitzvah of marriage and family, let alone emotional and sexual fulfillment. When he develops a chaste, text-messaging relationship with a non-Jewish teacher at the school where he works, it is only in his increasingly chaotic dreams that he seems to consider the solution of stepping away from the Orthodox world.

But could he step away? From his earliest days, quizzed obsessively by his (white) rabbi father about minutiae of Jewish law, living nearly all his life in yeshivah, and finding as a young man that he is prepared for no other vocation than teaching Talmud, Eli cannot, even in his dreams, do more than gaze beyond the invisible fence of his Jewish life.

In Chaim Potok's *The Chosen*, a talented Talmud student leaves the Hasidic world for secular college—a story that Eli knows from a version told by his rebbe as a cautionary tale. Eli toys with the notion of his own escape by imagining marrying Emma, the colleague with whom he is infatuated, a woman who shows no sign of hesitancy over Eli's race. But he can't do it. Much of the second half of the novel is taken up with dream scenarios in which Eli imagines married life with Emma, but every episode ends badly. Eli is unable to outsmart the contradiction in his desire to fulfill the mitzvah of marriage and family by compromising his strict and structured Judaism.

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Eli's mother remains a blank, for him and, frustratingly I must say, for the reader. She dies when Eli is an infant and thus is not available to mediate race and religion for him. The rabbi father will not speak of her, and Eli is too timid to confront him about it. There is, in short, no alternative cultural model for Eli to adopt. His own form of rebellion against the yeshivah world is the sin of reading classical secular literature. This "vice" enables him to interact—via social media, another terrible sin—with Emma, the Christian English teacher at his school.

The story remains unwaveringly within Eli's thoughts and perspective. He speaks and thinks in Yeshivish—English suffused with expressions in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Yiddish that quote Bible, Talmud, rabbinic sources, and yeshivah-based forms of study and thought. These phrases, italicized in the text and translated in footnotes, bring home the insularity of Eli's upbringing. All his perceptions and ideas about life are filtered through this medium.

Beyond the surprises in this novel—the mysterious past of the protagonist or the dialect writing in Yeshivish—Goodman compellingly portrays the despair of failed relationships, the emotional vertigo of text-messaging courtship, and the intellectual struggle to keep faith with the rich but often restraining heritage of observant Judaism.

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