

## I Know How He Felt

*Nozomi Onishi*

What? I work like a common thickneck? My learning comes before my living. I'm a man of brains. In a necessity I could turn to business. I have a quick head for business. If I only had money, I could start myself selling wine and schnapps, or maybe, open myself an office for an insurance agent or matchmaker, and hold on to my learning at the same time (Yeziarska, 1970, p. 48).

In *Bread Givers*, the Smolinsky family moved to the U.S. from Russia to make their lives better; however, in reality, they realized that America was a country of business. As the mother said, "Who would ever dream that in America, where everything is only business and business, in such a lost corner as Hester Street lives such a fine, such a pure, silken soul as Reb Smolinsky?" (Yeziarska, 2003, p. 16) There was an evident necessity for the father to have his own job because of their poverty; however, he kept refusing it no matter how many times it was suggested. To me, it seemed like the father excessively denied the changes which were caused by the immigration from Russia to the US. I wondered what parts of his identity caused his actions of refusal to change. In this paper, I will analyze what parts of his identity made him refuse to change, and also why he acted like so.

The biggest part of his identity was his traditional religious background. He was a rabbi, which meant a man of God, according to his own definition, and he was very proud of it. What he did was only studying, reading, or praying to God, and he did not provide for his family at all although they were very poor. No matter what kinds of miserable situations they were in, he suggested his family pray to God and he believed everything would go well as long as he believed in God. For example, when the mother mourned about their poverty, the father said, "What is there to worry about, as long as we have enough to keep the breath in our bodies? But the real food is God's Holy Torah" (Yeziarska, 2003, p. 11). Since I am not a religious person at all, I think of those words as humorous. However, he was completely serious, and his belief in God was so strong that he was arrested one day because his landlady stepped on his bible and he slapped her on the cheek. As the reader can see Moishe's religious background as a rabbi [is] one of the biggest parts of his identity, appearing throughout the episodes in the book, and this is one of the reasons he refused to change. To him, working for God was the most valuable occupation, not earning money.

However, as the story goes on, the reader sees his contradictory actions become more and more extreme and it seems like he refuses to change not only for religious purposes but also due to fear. While he insisted on his belief in God, his actions were not caring toward

others. He cared about his family at first; however, he cared about them less and less as time passed. He cheered his wife up when she was depressed about their poverty, and their daughter Sara said that “His kind look was like the sun shining on her” (Yeziarska, 2003, p. 11). It seemed that he was naive and truly believed God would help them no matter what happened. However, he made a lot of mistakes as the story went on, and he could not admit they were his mistakes. For example, he was deceived by a scheming storeowner without investigating the supplies. He also chose a fake diamond dealer for his daughter’s husband. Those were mistakes he made; however, when he found out that he had been deceived, he said to his daughter Mashah, “Where were your brains? Didn’t you go out with the man a whole month before you were married? Couldn’t you see he was a swindler and a crook when you talked to him?” (p. 83).

Moishe’s contradictory actions influence not only the care of the family, but also his care [for] others. He was supposed to be nice to his neighbor, and he did volunteering even though he was poor. However, for example, when a customer came to his shop to buy a box of bran, he said, “By us home, in Shnipshock, they gave bran horses and cattle. But Americans are such fools, they make eating out of it. This is a sensible store. We don’t keep such nonsense” (p. 133). This heartless kind of words should not come from the mouth of a “man of God.” So, why did he start acting differently and also, why did his refusal to change become stronger and stronger? I think because he was losing confidence in his identity.

I think my experiences in the U.S. were similar to his. Since I came to the U.S. as an international student, I have faced a lot of differences, including educational system, life styles, and the characters of people. What I had gotten used to doing in Japan does not work well in the US very often, and I have felt the necessity of adapting to American culture or changing myself. This feeling of being forced to change sometimes makes me wonder why I am trying so hard to change myself. My identity had been created through living in Japanese culture, being with my friends and my family, and I had a confidence in myself because my identity was loved by them. I came to the U.S. because I wanted to improve myself, not because I wanted to change my identity. However, now I keep telling myself to change and sometimes I realize I cannot say I like myself anymore.

I think the same thing happened to Moishe. As he made more mistakes and realized what he had been to doing in Russia did not work well anymore in the U.S., every one told him that he needed to change. Although he was aware that he needed to find a new way of earning a living, he was asking himself, “Why do I need to change?” Changing meant admitting that he was losing confidence in himself; therefore his contradictory actions became extreme as he made more mistakes and he was told to change. He knew he needed to

change; however, he did not want to admit it since he was very proud of his identity.

This is shown in the last scene when Sara visited her father's house with Hugo, and Hugo asked the father to teach him Hebrew. Sara narrates, "His eyes grew soft and moist. He looked most gratefully from Hugo toward me. 'I thought that in America we were all lost. Jewishness is no Jewishness, Children are no children. Respect for fathers does not exist. And yet my own daughter who is not a Jewess and not a gentile – brings me young man – and whom? An American. And for what? To learn Hebrew. From whom? From *me*. Lord of the Universe! You never forsake your faithful ones'" (p. 294). After that, "The old pride flames up in his face" (p. 298). This scene suggests that the father was losing his confidence but gained it again because his identity was respected by Hugo, who was an American, one of those who always denied Moishe's identity. When he regained his confidence again, he finally actually changed, becoming more open to American culture.

I am reluctant to say that I like the father in this book. I think he should have cared about his family before he cared about God so much, and also I think he was very selfish for not trying to change even though he knew he needed to. However, at the same time, I understand his struggles and what it feels like. Losing belief in oneself suddenly is very scary to anyone, not only to Moishe Smolinsky. I know what this is like. I know how he felt.

#### Work Cited

Yeziarska, Anzia. Bread Givers. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: Persea Books, 2003.

#### *Commentary by Caroline Wilson*

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*The paper "I Know How He Felt" could have simply been a traditional analysis of the book Bread Givers. However, what is unique about this paper is that Nozomi Onishi brings her own voice and experiences into the paper. Though Onishi dislikes the main character, Moishe, Onishi can still identify with him somewhat based on her own experiences as an international student studying in the United States. By describing her own experiences, the argument becomes more powerful and personal to the reader. It is clear that Moishe is a character with many flaws; however, Onishi can identify with him in a way that asks readers of her paper to see Moishe differently. Additionally, the conclusion of this paper is strong; Onishi succinctly states her opinion of the book, while bringing all of her previously discussed ideas together to complete her argument. It is also important to note that the conclusion is not too repetitive of ideas that she has previously stated. This is a good essay that demonstrates the deeper connections that can be made between literature and personal experiences.*

