

Puddingstone

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Puddingstone is a novel by Mark Mirsky about a Jew growing up the area near Franklin Park in Boston in the 1960s. It's a world where young Irish bullies torment young geeky Jewish boys. The main character is Maishe Ostropol. Hershel Ostropol was a popular figure in Yiddish humor, and the name "Maishe" is the Lithuanian accented Hebrew version of "Moshe". He represents the comic Jewish struggle to find a place in a strange world, in an America of WASPs, Amerindians, and Irish. All he has to comfort him are his dreams of Bar Kochba, the Jewish version of Superman, or the Golem of Prague. Failing those saviors, there's always the hope of a Jewish Messiah. Its actually a relevant theme for Chanukah, the physically strong Jewish hero, the soldier in contrast to the scholar, the pietist. Should we have to choose?

The title, "Puddingstone", refers to a composite stone found in the Boston area that was formed when glaciers crushed different rocks together to produce a conglomerate that resembled a pudding with bits of fruit mixed in. It is the Boston equivalent of a "melting pot" or "Irish Stew".

The book is a lively and humorous intertextual romp through a mélange of cultures. Unlike so many American Jews writing about their Jewish roots, Mark Mirsky celebrates Jewish culture and scholarship. He gives expression to a yearning for resolution and yet an affirmation of difference. The art and skill of the author, as well as his humor, suffuse the work. And the graphics of Inger Johanne Grytting are a delight. It is an important testament to an age in which Jews were the underdogs struggling to rise in an alien and often physically abusive environment. We thought in my generation this was all over, the irrational hatred. Sadly it is not.

I never experienced the physical anti-Semitism that Maishe Ostropol did or that was once prevalent in parts of Boston and New York. I was fortunate not to be brought up in an inner-city ghetto. The anti-Semitism I experienced in England was of a different order. Living in the Oxfordshire countryside, the worst I experienced was name-calling when I complained to the manager of the local movie theater because the price of the tickets went up. Or on the soccer field when we played the local non-Jewish schools. And there we gave as good as we got.

As an adult it was much more veiled and genteel. Minorities in Britain were made to feel "tolerated", on sufferance, not really belonging. I recall a conference of the of headmasters the top British Public Schools in 1975 when I was asked to say "grace". Several headmasters, men who influenced the next generation of Englishmen, walked out in protest because, as they explained awfully apologetically afterwards, "Don't take it personally old chap, but the organization has always had been a Christian one, and we'd like it to stay that way." Believe me, that would not happen to a Muslim in England today.

The USA was always much more immigrant friendly than Britain. But that did not mean it was easy, or that it didn't treat some minorities disgracefully (it's always been better in theory than practice). All Irishmen were wife-beating drunks, all Italians were Mafiosi. Now all Muslims are terrorists, and according to Donald Thump, Mexicans are rapists. Jews got it on all sides. The Irish Catholics hated them for being Christ-killers. The wealthy Americans accused them of being filthy, primitive commies, and the rest thought that all Jewish finance controlled the world. Let's not forget Bugsy Siegel, Meyer Lansky, and the rest of the Jewish mob.

Catholics, in particular, had an animus towards Jews, because until Pope John XXIII it was still Church dogma that Jews were guilty of deicide and cursed for rejecting Jesus. Amazingly it is the fiftieth anniversary of Nostra Aetate, this significant document, official papal policy that reversed thousands of years of hatred and prejudice. (And today I read that the Vatican has just issued a clarification to complement what was seen as a gap in the Nostra Aetate document, and it now adds the rider that the Church no longer seeks to convert Jews to Catholicism.) It still has not seeped down to the lower reaches of the church in many parts of the world. Even today most immigrants from Catholic South America arrive with negative attitudes towards Jews, which after a generation or two disappear. How ironic that nowadays in Europe the hierarchy of the Catholic Church is now so favorably disposed to the Jews.

Until recently young Jewish Americans were largely unaware of the history of anti-Semitism in the USA. Peter Stuyvesant initially refused to allow Jews to contaminate his vision of a Christian New York until the Dutch East Indies company ordered him to relent. Washington wrote a magnanimous letter to the Jews of Rhode Island. But both Generals Ulysses Grant and Tecumseh Sherman were vocally anti-Semitic. Although millions of Jews came into the USA during the nineteenth century, legislation was introduced specifically to exclude Jewish immigration in 1924.

Between the World Wars, the notorious Father Coughlin spewed vicious, primitive anti-Semitism over the radio to millions. Henry Ford poured millions into anti-Semitic publications in Dearborn, Michigan. I wonder what he would say to the fact that Dearborn is now home to one of the largest Muslim populations in the USA. President Roosevelt faced enormous pressure against going to war against Germany, because it could be seen as a Jewish war. Many, including Joseph Kennedy, were pro-Hitler and American companies supported him. President Truman's wife refused to host Jews in her home. Most Ivy League colleges had restrictions on Jews well into the 1950s.

We thought we had left all this behind. But spurious antagonism and misrepresentation has returned in force. In many American universities Jewish students now find themselves uncomfortable at best, bullied at worst, by ideologically antagonistic faculties and abusive student bodies. The Internet and social media are flooded with vicious anti-Semitism, staged videos, and a dishonest doctoring of history. Sadly, this will only be reinforced with thousands of new refugees who, although they deserve refuge, will in many cases bring the generational hatred of Jews with them. Fortunately, in the USA there are so many different minorities that no single narrative will

prevail. That, of course cuts both ways.

The circle of history is constantly turning. And that is no bad thing. For when we Jews have it too comfortably (as Moses predicted thousands of years ago) we usually drift away. Only a challenge or a threat brings out the best in us. But in the end the only thing that will keep us alive and vibrant will be the degree to which we are committed to, fluent in, and enjoy all that is positive in our heritage. Otherwise, if we are ignorant, our label is just an embarrassment to be escaped from, one way or another.

Happy Chanukah.