

# Sara smolinsky's journey to fulfillment



Anzia Yeziarska's *Bread Givers* is the story of Sara Smolinsky, a young Jewish girl, growing up in New York City in the early twentieth century. Even as a young girl, Sara rejects the Orthodox Jewish teachings of her father, a rabbi. She refuses to accept the Torah's idea that without a man, a woman is "less than nothing" (205). Instead, she embraces American culture. "In America, women don't need men to boss them" (137). She sets out to find her own life. She sees how the lives of her mother and sisters are dominated by her father and does not want that for herself. "Thank God, I'm not living in olden times. Thank God, I'm living in America! You made the lives of the other children! I'm going to make my own life!" (138). Sara views success as the attainment of individuality through hard work. This is her vision of the American Dream. It contrasts sharply with her father's traditional beliefs and his desire to be wealthy without working. Still, once Sara does achieve her professional goal, she realizes that without family and love, she is unfulfilled. She discovers that personal success does not necessarily mean happiness and contentment, but is a critical part of developing her own identity. Even as a very young girl, Sara's quest for self sufficiency and willingness to work hard is evident. One day she decides she is not going to sift through the ash cans for coal. "...that morning, I had refused to do it any more. It made me feel like a beggar and thief when anybody saw me" (7). She does go out later to find coal as she feels guilty for disappointing her mother. The idea of balancing family obligations with her own wishes ends up being an important one in the novel. Sara concludes that she cannot continue as a beggar. In order to help her family, she will work. "No—no! I'm no beggar! I want to go into business like a person. I must buy what I got to sell" (21). With a quarter, she buys 25 herring and sells them on the street for two cents

apiece. She feels pride in her work after making a twenty-five cent profit. "Give only a look what 'Blood-and-iron' has done" (23). Sara's father, Reb, refuses to embrace American values. He is concerned foremost with his religion and preaching. He relies on his daughters to provide for him. When his daughter Bessie falls in love with Berel Bernstein, Reb refuses to allow her to marry him because Berel will not give him money to start a business. Berel says, "In America, they got no use for Torah learning. In America, everybody got to earn his living first. You got two hands and two feet. Why don't you go to work?" (48). Reb replies that he has a head for business, he merely needs the money to start it. Reb later proves himself a non-savvy businessman when he gets scammed into buying a store that is busy when he sees it only because the seller slashed prices to draw crowds. The goods on the shelves are really empty boxes. His response is, 'This man who robbed me only pushed me closer into the arms of God. Now I know that everything that happens to us is from God, for our good' (125). Sara denounces such unbending faith in God and the beliefs of the Old World and believes instead in the opportunity in America to build up oneself through work and determination. Sara watches as her father marries her sisters off to men they do not love. Bessie is married to Zalmon the fish peddler, who repulses her, because he will pay her father a dowry. Sara's other sisters, Mashah and Fania, are married off to a diamond dealer and a "cloaks-and-suits millionaire," respectively. The former turns out to be a fraud and the latter a gambler. Both women end up unhappy. Sara does not want this for herself. "I'd want an American-born man who was his own boss. And would let me be my own boss" (66). While Sara knows what she wants in a man, she finds love difficult. While still a child, she professes her love to Morris

Lipkin, Fania's former boyfriend, by whose poetry she is captivated. When he dismisses her with a laugh, she is crushed. While stomping on all of Morris's letters to Fania, she says, " I felt I stamped for ever love and everything beautiful out of my heart" (88). For several years, she is able to put love aside to pursue her goals, but she eventually discovers that she needs love in her life in order to be happy. Sara decides to leave her family while only seventeen years old. She can no longer stand being under the control of her father. She needs to find herself, and running away is the only way to do so. " I leaped back and dashed for the door. The Old World had struck its last on me" (138). She first attempts to live with Bessie and then with Mashah, but finds both living arrangements impossible. She is truly on her own. She walks the streets one night, " drunk" with her dreams. She recalls a story of a girl that goes to college and becomes " a teacher in the schools" (155). She experiences hope through independence for the first time. " I, alone with myself, was enjoying myself for the first time as with the grandest company" (157). She finds a small, dingy room to rent, but it is her own, and that is all that matters to her. It has a door that she can close to block out the rest of the world. " This door was life. It was air. The bottom starting-point of becoming a person" (159). Finally relieved of the burden of her father, Sara forms a conception of success. She needs to be independent and possess the capacity to pursue her American Dream. It is only once these qualifications are met that she can grasp the other necessities of fulfillment. Sara demonstrates great resolve in creating her own life. She works ten hours a day as an ironer, takes two hours of night classes, and then studies for another two hours. Her studies are all that matter to her. One day her mother comes to visit her. Sara is thrilled to see her, but when she asks Sara

to visit home, Sara replies that she cannot. " I'd do anything for you. I'd give you away my life. But I can't take time to go ' way out to Elizabeth. Every last minute must go to my studies" (171). Sara's mother is concerned that she will end up an old maid, but Sara assures her she will be married one day. " But to marry myself to a man, I must first make myself for a person" (172). Sara needs a sense of individuality before anything else in her life can become truly meaningful. Sara's commitment to the pursuit of her American Dream is seen by her sisters as crazy. Fania and Bessie also visit Sara, and they want to take her home to see their mother. Sara refuses on account of her schoolwork. Fania cannot believe her and says, " Come, Bessie. Let's leave her to her mad education. She's worse than Father with his Holy Torah" (178). Sara is as unwavering with her beliefs as her father is with his, but she knows such willpower is needed if she is to succeed. She listens to how unhappy her sisters are. Without her fierce resolve in the face of all those who doubt and criticize her, she would end up as unhappy as they are. Fania attempts to set Sara up with Max Goldstein. While Sara is put off by his taste in entertainment and obsession with money and material goods, in him she realizes her need for love. " One moment he would say something that would rise up like a sword between us, pushing us apart; and then, at the touch of his hand, the look of his eyes, I forgot all his faults. My one need of needs, stronger than my life, was my love to be loved" (198). Despite her desire to be loved, Sara is able to break things off with Max. Learning is more important to her than is a man who would see her as nothing more than property. Her father cannot believe she has rejected Max. He visits her to denounce her choice. He preaches the Torah's teaching on a woman needing a man, and says, " Woe to America where women are let free like men"

(205). The ideological conflict between Sara and her father cannot be clearer. For Sara, America's opportunity is what allows her to distinguish herself as a true human being, while for Reb, American values destroy her as a woman. As Sara moves on to college, new challenges confront her. She feels alienated by her peers. She has trouble in geometry. She sees no need for physical education. She becomes enamored with one of her professors who does not have time for her. Still, she gets through. At graduation, she wins not only the essay contest, but finally the acceptance of her classmates. As her name is announced, "...all the students rose to their feet, cheering and waving and calling my name, like a triumph, ' Sara Smolinsky— Sara Smolinsky!'" (234). College provides Sara with the education she needs to pursue a career, and also with a feeling that she finally is accepted by those around her. She has become a successful individual in the eyes of others. Back in New York, Sara feels pride in her accomplishments. I, Sara Smolinsky, had done what I set out to do. I was now a teacher in the public schools. And this was but the first step in the ladder of my new life. I was only at the beginning of things. The world outside was so big and vast. Now I'll have the leisure and the quiet to go on and on, higher and higher (241). With her professional goals met, Sara begins to see what she is missing in her life. She finds her mother on her death bed. When her mother passes on, Sara realizes that family is an important element in one's life. " I had failed to give Mother the understanding of her deeper self during her lifetime. Let me at least give it to father while he is yet alive. And so, everyday, after school, I went to see him" (257). After attaining a realization of self, Sara is able to grow and incorporate other elements of happiness into her life. The final missing element for Sara is love. Sara is not impressed with the

teachers she works with. " They were just peddling their little bit of education for a living, the same as any pushcart peddler" (270). The principal, Hugo Seelig, is different. " He had kept that living thing, that flame, that I used to worship as a child. And yet he had none of the aloof dignity of a superior. He was just plain human" (270). Sara finally finds a man with the same love of learning and teaching that she has. As they get to know one another better, they discover all they have in common, including birthplace. Hugo even asks Reb to teach him Hebrew, winning over his approval. Finally, with Hugo, Sara adds the final piece to her life. She does not have perfect happiness, but she has rediscovered her need of family, and has found a man with whom she shares a mutual respect. At the end of the novel, Sara invites her father to live with her so that he may escape his wretched new wife. Sara knows how difficult it will be to live with her father's constant preaching, as is evinced by his response to her offer. Can a Jew and Christian live under one roof? Have you forgotten your sacrilege, your contempt for God's law...I must keep my Sabbath holy...But if you'll promise to keep sacred all that is sacred to me, then maybe, I'll see. I'll think it over (295). It would be far easier for Sara to avoid her father and his tyranny, but she has never taken the easy path. For her, success is more than professional status and a loving man. She still feels an obligation to her father. She knows it will be a struggle to live with him. The final line of the novel reads, " It wasn't just my father, but the generations who made my father whose weight was still upon me" (297). She needed to run away to find herself, but she cannot escape her relationship with her father. As he was shaped by those before him, so is Sara influenced in part by him. In her early years, Sara seeks independence in order to pursue her dream of an education. She does not

want to end up in an unhappy marriage like her sisters. She cannot continue living under the Old World ways of her father. She embraces America and all it has to offer. Once she finds herself and creates her own identity, she is able to work others into her life. She finds love, and attempts to make amends with her father. She sees that she cannot be satisfied simply with being a successful teacher. She matures throughout the novel, and as she grows, she becomes more aware of what happiness and fulfillment entail. She is still growing as the novel concludes, but she is confident in the choices she has made, and is satisfied with where they have gotten her. In this way, she finds success.