

Hillel Halkin on King James: The Harold Bloom Version

# JEWISH REVIEW

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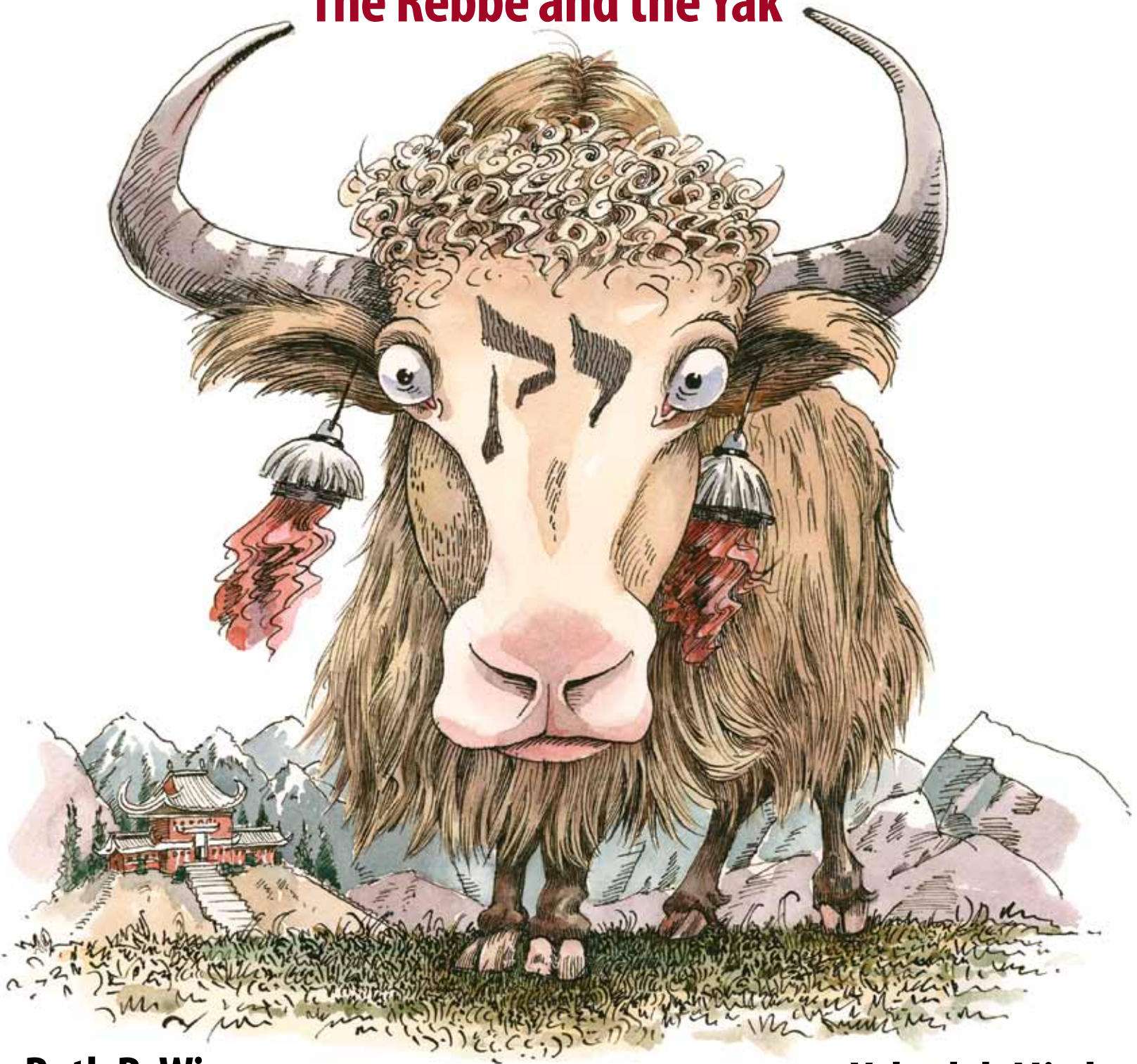
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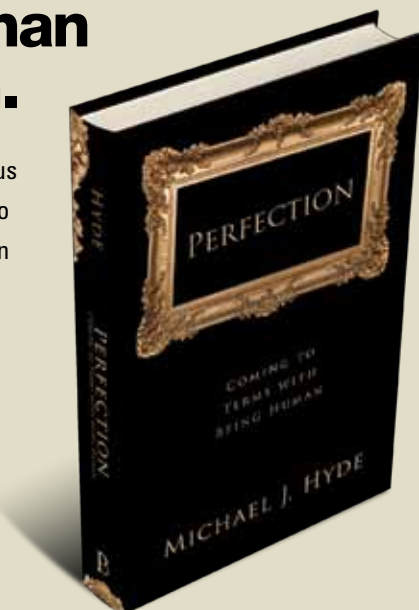
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## The Novelties of Hank Greenberg

How fantastic, on your Summer 2011 cover, Moses Mendelssohn following the flight of a home run ball off Hank Greenberg's bat! Only, your wonderful illustration of the fantastical would have been a *little* more realistic if Greenberg's Detroit baseball jersey had only the number 5 on the back. When Greenberg was hitting homers, players didn't have their names on their uniforms, and in the early days of the game there were not even numbers. Numbers were introduced in 1916 so that fans could match the players on the field with the numbers on their scorecards. It wasn't until 1960, when television fans were without scorecards, that names appeared on baseball uniforms—first on the uniforms of the Chicago White Sox, in fact, when Hank Greenberg was sitting in the Chicago front office.

Tom Putnam  
Buffalo, NY

In his perceptive review of Mark Kurlansky's biography of Hank Greenberg, Eitan Kensky illuminates the aesthetic of Greenberg's determined pursuit of excellence. For children of Jewish immigrants desperately yearning for American acceptance, Greenberg's "baseball Judaism," requiring (one-time) observance of Yom Kippur ten days after hitting two home runs on Rosh Hashanah, vicariously certified them as good Jews and loyal Americans. That Hank also became the first major league player to be drafted into military service in 1941, re-enlisting the day after Pearl Harbor because "My country comes first," added to his patriotic luster in the eyes of American Jews yearning to be Americans first.

Among the flaws in Kurlansky's book not noted by Kensky is the astonishing omission of Greenberg's most memorable and consequential hit: his pennant-winning, 9<sup>th</sup>-inning grand slam in 1945, not long after returning from five years of military service. I vividly remember my father pointing to newspaper photos of Greenberg joyously crossing home plate into the embrace of his teammates, and revealing: "Hank is our cousin."

He was also a kind and generous man. A year after he retired he devoted an hour to hitting fly balls to his nephews and me, providing us with an unrivaled ascent to boyhood paradise. When I reached Oberlin College, Greenberg was general manager of the Cleveland Indians. I was a lonely freshman, and he graciously invited me to his home for Thanksgiving dinner. Then, every spring, he welcomed me to his private box in Municipal Stadium for dinner, genial conversation, and a game punctuated with his baseball insights. As superb a ballplayer and as powerful a symbol for American Jews as he was, Hank Greenberg was, above all, a *mensch*.

Jerold S. Auerbach  
Newton, MA

## Neo-Orthodoxy, or Non-Orthodoxy?

In his review of Irving Kristol's new collection, *The Neoconservative Persuasion*, Meir Soloveichik pays close attention to a line that appeared in Kristol's magisterial *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*. In this line, which has haunted me since I first read it ten years ago, Kristol describes himself as "neo-Orthodox" in his "religious views"—

"views" not "practice," as he acknowledges not being religiously observant.

As a neo-Orthodox Jew, Kristol preferred the rabbinic tradition, with its reverence for the past and the promotion of religiously ordered lives, to the secular humanist version of Judaism, promoted by its more liberal adherents. He saw traditional religion as perhaps the only way to temper base human instincts in an open, free market society that not only allows, but actively promotes, morally problematic indulgences. Kristol's neo-Orthodoxy thus contains an explicit socio-political aim.

While there is nothing wrong with this approach, it cannot be described as Jewish Orthodoxy, "neo" or otherwise. It is unclear why Soloveichik does not take Kristol to task on this. Orthodox Judaism requires committed observance of what it believes are

motion of political causes that are justified as being based on religious values.

One senses that Soloveichik understands this but is reluctant to say so. He would like to claim Kristol for Orthodoxy, but can't quite get around Kristol's lack of interest in halakha. What is disappointing is that Soloveichik makes such an effort to bring Kristol into the Orthodox camp while Orthodox Judaism more broadly has been so unwilling to engage with the ideas of non-Orthodox Jews who are nonetheless committed to Jewish tradition.

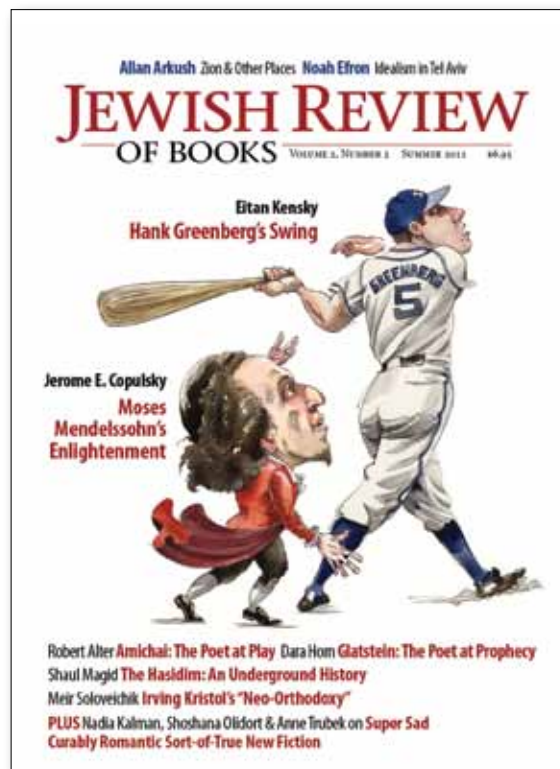
Judah Skoff  
Hoboken, NJ

## Meir Soloveichik Responds:

Judah Skoff queries how I can "claim Kristol" for Orthodox Judaism when Irving Kristol did not live the observant life of an Orthodox Jew. This would be an excellent question, were it not for the fact that nowhere in my article do I claim Kristol for Orthodox Judaism. What I stress is Kristol's affinity, in his teaching and writing, for what he calls Burke's "strong deference to tradition, which is the keystone of any orthodoxy." It is this attitude that Kristol describes as "neo-Orthodox," and it is from Kristol, I argue, that Orthodox Jews can learn a great deal about our own obligation to make this case to a larger audience—to become, as it were, the Burkes of the Jewish world.

It is therefore a profound mistake to refer to Kristol's writings about religion and morality as a "right-wing version of Reform Judaism." First, as I noted in my review, Kristol leveled his critique of non-Orthodox Judaism when he was a New Deal Democrat, long before he became "right wing." But more importantly, in Reform Judaism's emphasizing the moral autonomy of the individual over tradition, it advocates the very moral anthropology that Kristol critiques. With the Enlightenment, Kristol writes, much of the West changed its own attitude about the importance of the past, and with that, for many, came "a change that reshaped the very conception of what it means to be a 'good Jew.'" Irving Kristol was certainly not an Orthodox Jew, but broadly speaking, in the battle of ideas within Western Civilization, Reform Judaism took the side of the Enlightenment, whereas Kristol sided squarely with Aristotle, Aquinas, Burke, and yes, Orthodox Judaism.

Judah Skoff concludes his letter with a strange attack on Jewish Orthodoxy, suggesting that Orthodox Jews show no interest in engaging "with the ideas of non-Orthodox Jews who are nonetheless committed to Jewish tradition." I am not sure what he means by this. The great Orthodox Jewish thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were certainly not averse to studying the thought of Jews not affiliated with the Orthodox community. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, for example, studied and wrote about the philosophy of Hermann Cohen. Michael Wyschogrod was profoundly affected by his studies with Buber, and there are clear similarities between his theology and that of Franz Rosenzweig. I know of many young rabbis who have been profoundly inspired by the writings of Leon Kass. Orthodox Jews today certainly can, and do, learn from non-Orthodox thinkers, even as we at times criticize their denial of halakhic authority.



divinely commanded laws. It shies away from overarching political theories of the kind that interest Kristol because the theory of Orthodox Judaism is that one should practice Orthodox Judaism, not just agree with it.

Kristol seems to have understood the rigidity of this approach, lamenting that before its great modernist (non-Orthodox) thinkers, Judaism did not have a viable intellectual dimension. Although overstating the case, Kristol taps into a central critique of Orthodox Judaism: that it is too rooted in narrow parochialism to speak to broad concerns. Soloveichik, while disputing Kristol's conclusion, recognizes this is a challenge for Orthodoxy.

If one removes the "neo-Orthodox" label, Kristol advocates a vaguely positive view of religion as a "good thing," without defining specific obligations to go with it; a warm and abstract reverence for tradition, with little interest in what that tradition requires; a belief that only the Jewish "moderns" can adequately address the "big" questions; and a conservative political agenda.

To me, this sounds like a right-wing version of Reform Judaism. Kristol's approach is unique in its political orientation, but not in regard to ritual and practice. Those come from Reform Judaism's theological approach that, as Kristol points out by way of criticism, often expresses itself through the pro-

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# Drowning in the Red Sea

BY RUTH R. WISSE

*It is hardly an overstatement to define Yiddish literature of the 1920s as the most pro-Soviet literature in the world.—Gennady Estraikh*

**A**t the end of August 1929, after months of argument over Jewish access to the Western Wall, Arab riots began in Jerusalem and then spread to other parts of the country. The murder and maiming of over 400 Jews, most of them yeshiva students in Hebron and Safed, reminded Jewry both in Palestine and elsewhere of the Ukrainian pogroms a decade earlier. Jewish organizations throughout the world, including in America, began mobilizing what political protest they could on behalf of

of the New York Yiddish *Freiheit* as one of the first Soviet-front agencies abroad.

The *Freiheit's* editorial attack on the Jews of Palestine outraged most of the American Yiddish readership. Some newsstand owners refused to carry the paper, and a special meeting of the American Yiddish Writers' Association on September 11 adopted resolutions condemning the *Freiheit* and expelling its associates for having desecrated "the most basic principles of professional ethics." Several prominent contributors resigned in protest and the paper re-

of anti-Semitic British officers. The *Morgn-Zhurnal* reported that the "official communist world greatly deploras the fallen Jews." It was easier to blame the local editors, Shakhne Epstein and Moishe Olgin, for the *Freiheit's* sudden embrace of the Arabs than to wonder why they would have done so overnight.

**I**n this murky political atmosphere, a brilliant group of writers who had quit the *Freiheit* launched a dissident weekly, *Voch*, dedicated to "culture, literature, education, art, theater, music, and the like," that steered a political course between the *Freiheit* and those whom the *Freiheit* opposed.

In accordance with their established tactics, *they* will push us to the Right. The other *they* will probably pull us and push us in the same direction. When we recall that among us nationalism too often goes along with Rightism, and Leftism with assimilation—our problems multiply because we are nationalists of the Left. But if we don't "keep our heads" we will be of no use to anyone.

"Keeping our heads" was apparently conceived as an attempt to hold the middle ground between some claims of Jewishness and fealty to Communism, yet this editorial statement betrays the precariousness of the project. Unlike their colleagues in the Soviet Union who were feeling irresistible pressure to conform to the Comintern party line, the writers of *Voch*

## The Communist Party's exaggerated notions about the influence of world Jewry resulted in the establishment of the New York Yiddish paper *Freiheit* as one of the first Soviet-front agencies.

the Jews of Palestine, and the Yiddish press sprang into action.

The first response of the New York Communist *Morgn Freiheit* was only slightly more muted than that of other New York Yiddish dailies, the nominally Socialist *Forverts*, the moderately Zionist *Morgn-Zhurnal*, and the mildly traditional *Tog*. The *Freiheit's* headlines on August 25 and 26 read: "20 Dead, 150 Wounded in Battles between Jews and Arabs in Jerusalem" and "Over 100 Dead in the Fighting in Palestine." The paper's editorials blamed the British for permitting Arab violence and failing to protect the Jewish victims. But the following day, in a dramatic reversal, the *Freiheit* redefined the murders as the start of an "Arab Revolt against England."

Now, according to the *Freiheit*, the Arabs were demanding an independent worker-and-peasant land for the masses, and were legitimately opposing the "Jewish fascists" who had provoked the riots. An editorial explained that whereas the Russian and Polish pogroms had targeted innocent Jews, this Arab uprising was provoked by Zionist imperialism: Arabs were said to have been victimized by Jews, just as the Jews had once been by the tsars. The new line had been dictated to the *Freiheit* by the Soviet Communist International, or Comintern.

The Comintern had been established in Moscow in 1919 to fight "by all available means, including armed force, for the overthrow of the international bourgeoisie and for the creation of an international Soviet republic as a transition stage to the complete abolition of the State." Once the Bolshevik Revolution coalesced into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and Lenin established the dictatorship of the proletariat, the Communist Party functioned in all other countries as the instrument of a foreign state. Its exaggerated notions about the influence of world Jewry, perhaps fueled by Jews in the Party leadership, resulted in the establishment

turned the favor by severing all ties with them.

The poet Jacob Glatstein, a regular columnist and editor of the *Morgn-Zhurnal*, wrote that the revulsion with the *Freiheit* was likely to mark the end of Communist influence among Jews in America. Yet since the paper claimed to be independent, Moscow was generally absolved from responsibility for the editorial change of heart. Thus, the *Tog* accepted in good faith its correspondent's report from Moscow that everyone he spoke to "in communist circles" recognized that Arabs had launched bloody pogroms against innocent Jews with the collusion



Crowds gathered in Union Square, New York City during the May Day parade, May 1, 1913. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress.)

were free to define their own political loyalties, which left them exposed to both warring sides.

One might have thought that having quit the *Freiheit* out of sympathy with their fellow Jews in Palestine, the editors, H. Leivick, Menahem Boreisho, and Lamed Shapiro, would have followed this up with further interest in the fate of the Yishuv (as the Jewish community in Palestine was called). Rather, the opposite: Having demonstrated their “nationalism” by quitting the *Freiheit*, they felt obliged to prove their internationalist Leftist credentials. While acknowledging the unity of the Jewish people, they emphasized their solidarity with the working class that would become, if it had not already become, the carrier of their national values. Furthermore:

We consider the October Revolution to be the greatest event of recent generations. By transferring power to the workers, the Revolution simultaneously liberated national minorities, ensured their independence and undertook to help develop their cultures. We stand with the Soviet Union in its overall socialist development and in the economic and cultural reconstruction of Jewish life that the Soviet Union has undertaken.

As for *Voch's* national platform, it was: “We are *Yidishistish*, i.e. we stand for the development of Jewish life along secular modern lines.” Yiddish literature would draw together Jews in all countries, and Yiddish education would prepare the Jewish child for his later active role in the liberation of all workers and all nations. “[In] order that the child should grow into a complete person in his later battles, he must first receive background in universal ideas that are rooted in his own culture.” Thus Yiddish culture was to be the medium of spreading Communism rather than the other way around.

The contributors to *Voch*, including some of the leading American Yiddish writers of the day—Aron Leyeles, Leib Feinberg, Efraim Auerbach, Isaac Raboy, Moishe Leib Halpern, and Avrom Reisen—did not speak with a single voice, but many of their submissions showed the same need for Leftist self-justification. “We have absolutely not become Zionists because of the Palestinian tragedy,” insists Aron Leyeles, calling the Arab riots a “deserved blow” to Zionism for having trusted in the Balfour Declaration, and objecting only to the way the *Freiheit* had joyfully danced on Jewish graves. Lamed Shapiro concurred: “If it were possible, we have become even greater enemies of political Zionism than before.”

Nonetheless, the question of Palestine vexed Shapiro, he wrote, like a pinched toe that thinks it is the central organism of the body:

I know I don't want to go to Palestine, so I say—I am against Palestine. I believe Yiddish is our language, so I decide—I am against Hebrew. When the Jewish Yishuv in Palestine is pogromized, I raise a hue and cry. This means I am *not* against Palestine. When Hebrew is persecuted in the Soviet Union—if it is persecuted there—I protest. So I am no longer against Hebrew. Where then am I?

In fact, Shapiro had once explored the possibility of joining his friend, the Hebrew writer Yosef

Haim Brenner, in Palestine, and the bewilderment he voices here has deep psychological sources that were by then manifest in the chaotic circumstances of his life.

Shapiro's fellow editor H. Leivick wielded special moral authority in the Yiddish literary world as an escaped prisoner from a term of life imprisonment in Siberia for his socialist conspiratorial work in pre-revolutionary Russia. After his daring escape, he had made his way to America, and soon began attracting notice for his autobiographical poetry that projected a Jewish and socialist man of conscience. When Leivick revisited his homeland, by then the Soviet Union, in 1925, some of the Yiddish writers he befriended there hoped that he would stay, and

on his 1925 visit to the Soviet Union he had seen so many “déclassé” Jews who had been devastated and brought to ruin, so many of whom were dying, that “ten Palestine pogroms are a joke compared to their downfall.” He witnessed the hunger and misery of many Jewish towns, including his own. “Had I let loose my so-many-times-suppressed *pintele yid* [Jewish spark], I would have had to raise a howl ten times greater than this one.” Yet he raised no cry. He differentiates himself from the *Freiheit* by boasting that he did not gloat over their distress as the editors would have done. Even when he saw the condition of his uncle, once a wealthy manufacturer who was now expiring in a dank cellar, his cry “tore my heart—but did not embitter me, and did not turn



H. Leivick (front row, center), with other Jewish writers, on a visit to Moscow, 1925. (Photo by B. Kapustinskii, courtesy of YIVO.)

tried to convince him that this could benefit both him and the Soviet cause.

Although he did not stay, and broke with the Comintern four years later, Leivick was still loyal to revolutionary ideals. In “Why We Left the *Freiheit*,” he was unable to condemn Arab terror outright, since Bolshevism likewise justifies the use of terror. Instead, he tries to distinguish between a revolution that is waged in the name of historical necessity and an uprising that is bloodthirsty and sadistic, hailing as the “true” revolutionary someone who considers tragic the blood he must shed in its name.

On the same grounds, Leivick tries to exonerate Communism from the sins of the *Freiheit* by recalling a comparable disgrace: when certain revolutionaries of the 1880s had justified the pogroms in Russia as the beginnings of a proletarian revolt. Then as now, some Jewish radicals had called for revolution, promoting class warfare through the agency of pogroms. Although that proclamation was repressed, Leivick deemed it a scar in the history of revolution, to which the *Freiheit* had added another. “We consider the deeds of the *Freiheit* in these sad days a *greater catastrophe in our lives than the catastrophe of the pogroms themselves*.”—The emphasis was his.

The self-justification that Leivick offered for having left the *Freiheit* included his readiness to practice deceit on behalf of the Soviet system. He writes that

me against the greatness, the greatness that is transpiring in the land of the Soviets.”

Writing from Berlin, the Yiddish novelist David Bergelson found Leivick tortured.

He has placed himself, as if deliberately, where the crosswinds will assail him from every side. Anyone else would be blown off his feet, but Leivick with his honesty and purity can dig in and hold that position for the rest of his life, pale and tight-lipped, a monument of defiance, resisting all those who allow themselves . . . to compromise.

Bergelson's advice was for Leivick to drop the political side of *Voch* and make it a strictly literary magazine. But between the crosswinds was just where the paper wanted to be, responding on a weekly basis to events in the Soviet Union, trying to protect the ideal of revolutionary Communism from its supposedly mistaken representation in the *Freiheit* and elsewhere without ever yielding to what it called the nationalist “Right.”

Though the editorial policy of the paper remained steady, it did not impose strict discipline. Three pages of editorial commentary on current events were followed by another thirteen with a variety of poems, short fiction, feuilletons, political commentary, book or theater reviews,



and a chronicle of current events, mostly about culture. Coverage of world events concerning Jews was delivered in the intimate Yiddish press style that assumed familiarity with all relevant terms and issues. Advertisements for such Leftist institutions as Camp Boiberik, Arbeter Ring (Workmen's Circle), the American-Russian Travel Agency, gave it the flavor of a house organ, and professionals who advertised in the paper were advertising their politics along with their trade. Recurrent subjects were Yiddish schooling in Poland and America, support for Yiddish in all its manifestations, and local struggles over the direction of relief funds. The claims of Jewish national survival were in perpetual conflict with Soviet priorities. Since many Jews by then were growing wary of Communist takeovers in unions and Jewish organizational life, *Voch* tried to bolster faith in the Soviet model.

One hub of this controversy was Birobidzhan, the territory near the border with China designated by the Soviet rulers to serve as an autonomous Jewish region, an alternative to the Land of Israel, with Yiddish rather than Hebrew as its unifying language, and a secular culture shorn of its religious roots. *Voch* fully supported Birobidzhan, but objected when the Jewish section of the Communist Party, the Yevseksia, deliberately scheduled Collectivization Day to coincide with Yom Kippur. Pyotr Smidovitch, administrator of Birobidzhan—whom the editors mistook for a Gentile—won high praise from *Voch* for declaring that Jews may fast and pray according to their customs. Yet when a

have the potential. *Your* camp is the generation of the desert, in every respect. It is perhaps brutal to say so, but in all candor, your time has passed forever.

In short, Birobidzhan is the future; Eretz Yisroel, the past.

## **Voch objected when the Jewish section of the Communist Party, the Yevseksia, deliberately scheduled Collectivization Day to coincide with Yom Kippur.**

Halfway through what was to be the life of *Voch*, in the issue dated January 17, 1930, Leivick published “America—Ours,” a title uncharacteristic for the weekly. Previous issues had been far more interested in developments in Russia, including articles on the deteriorating *shtetl*, than in anybody's America. *Voch* evinced no curiosity in such distinctively American subjects as subways and Indians and skyscrapers and Negroes, all of which had marked an earlier phase of American Yiddish writing. Nor was it interested in the currently falling stock market or failing banks. Governmental policies and affairs on the local or national level went simply unmentioned. And indeed, Leivick appeared to declare America “ours” mostly in condemnation of its faltering Jewish spiritual life, the dullness of its institutions, and the failure of visionary leadership in the Yiddish press, the workers' movement, and communal organizations. As antidote, he hailed the recent establishment in New York of the Leftist

internationalism, and commitment to a culture of self-deception. Indeed, within fifteen years, no one was more eager to expunge this chapter from American Jewish history than those who had written it. Though the mainstays of *Voch* remained partisan Leftists until World War II, in its aftermath they ignored this evidence of their former pro-Soviet

phase as eagerly as Soviet writers were eliminating traces of their right-wing deviationism.

Apart from its cautionary value, *Voch* remains valuable to students of literature as a rare publishing outlet for rapidly declining Yiddish in America. Lamed Shapiro, for example, who never realized his full literary potential, published two stories in *Voch*—“*Nesiye durkhn milkhveg*” (Journey Through the Milky Way) and “*Nyuyorkish*” (New Yorkish)—that show his readiness for the first time to take on America as a subject. “Journey through the Milky Way” is a parable about waxing fat in America. A young Jew arrives at the turn of the century as part of the great Jewish immigration and begins a climb to riches in the women's clothing trade, rising to the position of manufacturing boss—a synoptic version of Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky*. The story charts the immigrant's financial advancement through the rise in his weight, so that the more he eats the hungrier he grows. Diabetes is diagnosed as he tries to break the back of his factory's union. By the time he yields to the workers, his body has begun to fail him and his girth to decline. In his final coma, he drifts into the weightless universe that has all along in the story been the counterpoint to this one, breaking through to the Milky Way and flying so far into distant space that he can no longer find his way back. Shapiro anticipates Nathanael West's phantasmagoric visions of America, rendered here with a touch of humor. “New Yorkish,” a more substantial work, tries to capture with cinematographic delicacy the estrangement of a Jewish bachelor from the land of plenty. It is included in the Yale University Press New Yiddish Library Series' recent edition of Shapiro's *The Cross and Other Jewish Stories*.

I came upon *Voch* when I was tracking the literary career of Moishe Leib Halpern, who likewise found there a temporary outlet for his writing. Halpern had quit the *Freiheit* three years before the 1929 crisis, leaving him without any regular income, place to publish, or sustaining public. *Voch* put Halpern back on the road. He appeared in Philadelphia and Boston, where the paper was trying to establish cultural circles that would also provide financial support. Although some of Halpern's contributions to *Voch* are marked by typical sourness toward America and Zionism, he seems to be having more fun than the others in unmasking local folly and corruption. To demonstrate the powerlessness of the language to which he is condemned, he describes a holdup, a police command, and a marriage proposal, which all fail because they were cast in Yiddish. Halpern quotes someone's uncle saying that if he were a diplomat he would demand that all decla-



*Volume 1, Number 16 edition of Voch, published January 17, 1930, contained Leivick's article, "America—Ours." (Courtesy of Ruth R. Wisse.)*

correspondent in the Zionist Yiddish *Tog* made the same point, *Voch* felt obliged to clarify its political allegiances:

[If] with a knife at our throat, we were forced to choose: you [the *Tog*] and yours or the Yevsektn—we will choose the Yevsektn. Not because they please us—they don't. But they are young and behind them there stands a great and fruitful idea. If they are blind in certain respects, they might in time begin to see . . . they

*Yiddische kultur gezelschaft*, the Organization for Yiddish Culture. The flag of Yiddish in America must be raised aloft, Leivick wrote, on a foundation of “unswerving revolutionary Yidishism.”

This worm's eye view of the American Jewish community unwittingly illustrates *Voch's* own failure to appreciate the opportunities with which it had been blessed. “Unswerving revolutionary Yidishism” turned out in practice to mean an adversarial relationship to America as well as to Zionism, a self-ghettoization in the name of a broader



rations of war henceforth be issued in “Zhargon”—in Yiddish—thereby guaranteeing world peace.

The poems Halpern published in *Voch* range from rakish and tender love lyrics to “Salute,” a satiric depiction of racist lynching as a patriotic American pastime. In John Hollander’s witty translation, Halpern writes:

There’s always something in our land, too,  
And where there’s no lamppost that will do,  
There’s a convenient tree: what’s clear’s  
That a Black of at least twenty years  
Hates anything tall that, in a pinch,  
Would hold you high enough to lynch.  
Although the one that I saw get  
Hanged, wasn’t quite fifteen yet.

Sanctioned by a priest, the lynching is cheered by a maddened crowd within which the poet unaccountably situates himself—

... the whole world’s sorrow-stink  
Who stood at a distance there to think—  
Playing pocket pool, with your fingers curled—  
To dream up a poem for yourself and the world.

Halpern had published his share of protest poems in the *Freiheit*, but less and less had they satisfied the taste of its editors. American capitalism was for him only one of many evils; artists and writers generated their own forms of corruption that were no less in need of deflation. The loathsome scene of lynching that Halpern fashions is made up entirely of stereotypes, and it is this sense of “saluting” his subject that turns the poet against himself. He registers the irrelevance of art to political action and of political indignation to art. While others in *Voch* wrote as if their opinions mattered and took pride in the pacific nature of Yidishism, Halpern exposed its weakness—and his own.

*Voch* was not about to take up Bergelson’s sug-

gestion that it confine itself to literature and cultural issues, yet its growing roster of poets and writers hints at how much more Yiddish writing there might have been in America had it enjoyed a more robust publishing base. Peretz Hirschbein and Esther Shumiatcher, Kadya Molodowsky, and Malka Lee were among its contributors. One of the last issues included a poem by Itsik Manger of Warsaw.

## ***Voch* was not about to take up Bergelson’s suggestion that it confine itself to literature and culture.**

The tribulations of American Yiddish literature are poignantly registered in the ratio of *Voch*’s contributors to the space available to them.

Even that did not last long; the periodical survived only 33 issues, until May 16, 1930. Nonetheless, though it may seem no more than a footnote in Jewish literary history, it ought to loom large for those who want to understand the development of Yiddish literature and culture, the history of American Jewry, and the role of Communism in the life of intellectuals.

Most representations of Jews and American Communism, whether in dramatic productions like “Angels in America” or as part of academic Cold War studies, have focused on the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg and the prosecution of Communists by Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee. This excessive attention to the reaction or overreaction to the phenomenon leaves the impression that one is afraid to examine the phenomenon itself—namely, the involvement of many Jews with Communism in the process of their Americanization. Yet the Communist Party in America did rest largely on a Jewish base, and there are compelling reasons to study this segment of American and American Jewish history, not least because of the creative energy that went into it and the creative talent that it conscripted.

Though the vast majority of American Jews were either hostile or indifferent to Communism, with some in the forefront of the democratic opposition, it had enormous appeal to writers and intellectuals. Writing after World War II, the cultural critic Robert Warshow described the 1930s as a time in America “when virtually all intellectual vitality was derived in one way or another from

the Communist party. If you were not somewhere within the party’s wide orbit, then you were likely to be in the opposition, which meant that much of your thought and energy had to be devoted to maintaining yourself in opposition. In either case, it was the Communist party that ultimately determined what you were to think about and in what terms.” Warshow’s impression of his circle of New York Intellectuals was even truer of the American Yiddish writers and intellectuals of the 1920s, some of whom had themselves escaped from tsarist conscription or imprisonment and welcomed Bolshevism as a form of redemption.

The brief history of *Voch* shows what moral credit Yiddish writers like Shapiro, Leivick, and Leyeles—writers of the highest order—were prepared to extend to the Soviet Union, even after ostensibly declaring their independence from it. One wishes that they had eventually undertaken their own self-accounting, whether in the form of *khezhb’n hane’fesh* (personal account of the soul) that Judaism considers indispensable to the moral life, or objectively, to help us better understand this phase of cultural history. For if Yiddish literature was the most pro-Soviet in the 1920s, its writers were the most cruelly betrayed in the following decades, and we would have benefited from knowing how participants in the travesty understood their role.

It did not happen. The enormity of the *khurbn*—the Yiddish term for the Holocaust is the same as that for the destructions of the Temple in Jerusalem—swept away their native communities and turned them into mourners, *avelim*. This was followed by Stalin’s execution of the members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, which included the major Soviet Yiddish writers and intellectuals. The foundations of Yiddish were annihilated with its speakers. American Yiddish writers found what comfort they could in emergent Israel, which gathered up the surviving remnant. Smarting a little from Israel’s emphasis on Hebrew that came largely at the expense of *their* literary language, those writers who visited Israel were warmly received, and became contributors to *Di goldene keyt*, the Yiddish postwar quarterly established in Tel Aviv.

Its former enthusiasts had no wish to return imaginatively to what others have called “the romance with Communism.” But that they were spared their own intellectual and moral reckoning is all the more reason for their readers to undertake what they could not.

Ruth R. Wisse is Martin Peretz Professor of Yiddish Literature at Harvard University. She is the author, most recently, of *Jews and Power* (Schocken), and editor of *The Glatstein Chronicles* (Yale University Press).

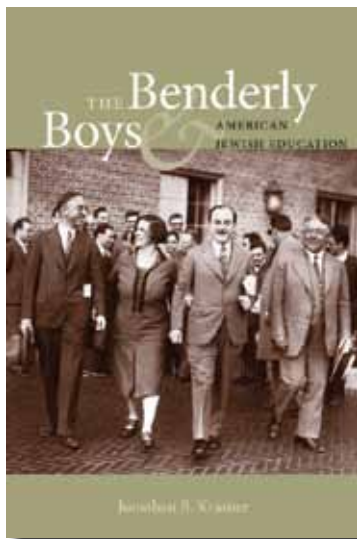


For the Leninist General Line, For the Party And the Comintern Moscow, 1930s. (Courtesy of Yeshiva University Museum, New York, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ludwig Jesselson.)



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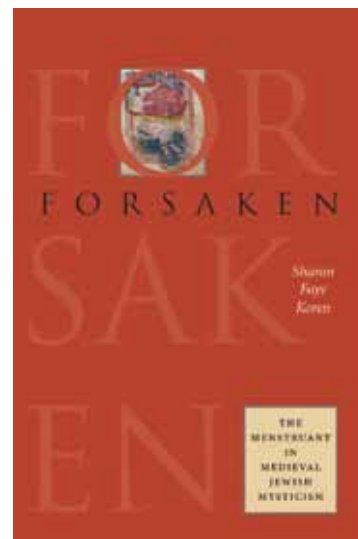
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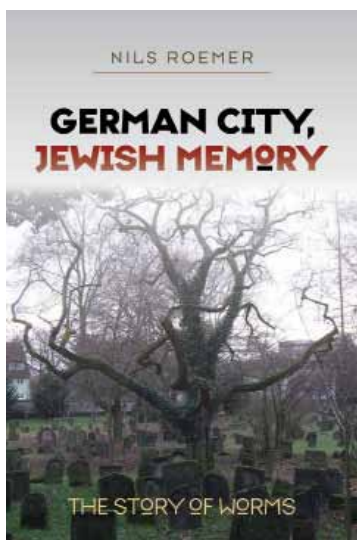
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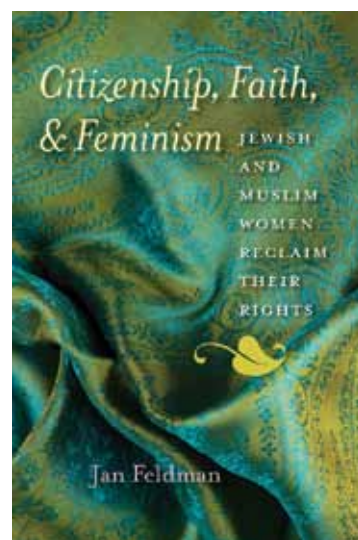
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During the High Holiday season in Bnei Brak, a city of *tzaddikim* (saintly rabbis) and their followers near Tel Aviv, the Ustiler Rebbe has a vivid and disturbing dream. A large buffalo-like animal stands against a backdrop of snow-capped mountains, and speaks to him. It is the voice of his ancestor and namesake Yaakov Yitzchak, known to (actual) history simply as the “Holy Jew” (*Ha-yehudi ha-Kadosh*), an 18<sup>th</sup>-century Hasidic figure of extraordinary spiritual integrity. The animal, or at least its voice, beseeches the Rebbe to rescue him. Ignorant of geography and zoology, the Rebbe consults with more worldly advisers, who identify the animal as a yak and the locale as Tibet.

The dream comes to the Rebbe three times, convincing him that it is truly a message from heaven rather than a trick of the unconscious. His great ancestor has, for some reason, been trapped in the body of a yak through the process of *gilgul*, the transmigration of souls. With the help of one of his followers, a wealthy Antwerp diamond dealer, the Rebbe secretly disappears from his court during the fraught weeks before Rosh Hashanah, flies from Tel Aviv to Beijing and then on to Lhasa, finally taking a Land Rover to remote monasteries in search of the famous wild Golden Yak and the soul of the Hasidic master imprisoned within it.

This is the premise of Haim Be'er's latest novel, *El makom sheha-ruah holekh*, in English literally translated as “to a place where the wind (or spirit) goes,” though the Israeli publisher's suggested English title is *Back from Heavenly Lake*. Be'er's novel is as funny as its premise is preposterous, but the protagonist turns out to be a man with a complex inner spiritual life rather than the farcical Hasidic stick figure one might expect. Moreover, the language of the novel is suffused with antic echoes of sacred texts in a way that makes it a pleasure for any Hebrew reader with a modicum of Jewish literacy. That Be'er can pull all of this off makes him a unique figure in the landscape of today's Israeli literature, in which religious themes are usually regarded as fruit of the poisonous tree. He is one of the few Israeli writers or public intellectuals who draw upon a wide range of traditional Jewish sources while still managing to gain the attention and admiration of a serious reading public that is preponderantly located on the secular side of a deeply divided national culture.

Born in 1945, Be'er used his own childhood on the outskirts of the old Orthodox neighborhoods of Jerusalem as the scaffolding for his early novels, while characteristically deflecting the focus from

himself in favor of a gallery of colorful and eccentric characters whose lives could not be imagined in the pages of any other Israeli writer. Thus, at the center of Be'er's first novel *Notsot* (published in 1979 and translated as *Feathers* by Hillel Halkin in 2004), stands Mordecai, a childhood friend who is obsessed with creating a Nutrition Army that would establish a vegetarian state honoring the principles of Josef Popper-Lynkeus, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Austrian Jewish utopian thinker. *Havalim* (published in 1998 and translated by Barbara Harshav as *The Pure Element of Time* in 2003), Be'er's most richly realized work, is a nuanced account of the author's family, including a pious, storytelling grandmother; a smart and independent mother who descended from the rationalist, anti-Hasidic stock of the Old Yishuv community in Jerusalem; and a passive father, a ref-



Haim Be'er at home in Ramat Gan, 2007. (Photo © Dan Porges.)

ugee from Russian pogroms, who loved synagogue life and cantorial music. Be'er's account of how he found his way to becoming a writer amidst these strong influences bears comparison to Amos Oz's more famous account of his parents' tangled lives in *A Tale of Love and Darkness*. Amos Klausner (later Oz) and Haim Rachlevsky (later Be'er) in fact grew up in nearly the same neighborhood in Jerusalem. As it happens, years later Be'er succeeded Oz as a professor of literature and creative writing at Ben-Gurion University.

Be'er extends his reach in his new, Hasidic-Tibetan novel by doing something unique in Israeli literature: examining the inner life of an

ultra-Orthodox rabbi. The novel's great accomplishment is Be'er's ability to do this in a way that is at once satirical and serious. Here is a passage that demonstrates something of Be'er's capacity to operate in both modes at the same time. The Rebbe is in Beijing on his way to Tibet with Simcha Danziger, the diamond magnate who has underwritten the trip. The two men are studying the weekly Torah portion, which happens to be *Ki Tetse* (Deut. 21:10-25:19), the beginning of which deals with the case of a Gentile woman captured in war. Meanwhile, Danziger has noticed, with alarm, his spiritual leader's keen interest in Dr. Selena Bernard, the beautiful zoologist who is accompanying them.

“Keep in mind, Simchele, that hidden in every transgression is a divine element. One who is engaged in worldly affairs—and who would know this better than you?—needs to conquer the sin in order to redeem the captive imprisoned within it. This captive,” the Tzaddik of Ustil continued to teach Simchele, “is the very same ‘beautiful woman’ described in the Torah portion. A man sees her in her captivity, desires to take her as a wife, and brings her into his house.”

On the one hand, the Rebbe makes a typically Hasidic interpretive move by spiritualizing the biblical text and making it an allegory for the inner life of the believer. On the other hand, he is simultaneously distracting his follower from his questionable behavior and rationalizing his conspicuous attraction to the lovely zoologist, with whom he does indeed fall in love as the story progresses. Is this a depiction of rabbinic hypocrisy in the best traditions of Enlightenment satire? Or is there a genuine lesson being taught about the need for religion to be fully engaged with and exposed to the world? Be'er manages to keep both ideas in play. In fact, this is a novel in which Be'er always has several balls in the air at once, and the good news is that despite the absurdity of its premise, it is both funny and affecting.

There are three very different genres of narrative that overlap and bump up against one another in this novel, and this jostling creates both brilliant effects and occasional confusion. It remains one of the most thought-provoking facts of modern Jewish history that the Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskalah*) and Hasidism both arose at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup>, often in exactly the same regions of Eastern Europe. *Back from Heavenly Lake* is, at one level, a return to the anti-Hasidic satires of the proponents of the *Haskalah*, known as *maskilim*. A tiny minority compared to the Hasidim, the *maskilim* made the barbed arrows of satire their weapon of choice. Enlightened satirists like Josef Perl and S. Y. Abramovich (who went by the pseudonym Mendele Moykher Seforim) wickedly appropriated



the very language in which their subjects thought and spoke, while leaving their readers to savor its absurdity. The novel's epigraph is taken from Abramovitch's *The Travels of Benjamin the Third*, a hilarious tale of a shtetl Jew who embarks on a grand quest but ends up only a few towns away. With the same wink and nod, Be'er lets the chicanery and sanctimony at the heart of the Bnei Brak court of the Ustiler speak for themselves.

In order to find a niche among the fiercely competing tzaddikim of Bnei Brak, the Ustiler's advisors and his wife Goldie have conspired to exploit

## Be'ers language is suffused with antic echoes of sacred texts in a way that makes it a pleasure for any Hebrew reader.

the Rebbe's intuitive wisdom. He is presented to the public with the grandiloquent moniker—in talmudic Aramaic no less—as *Ha-tsintara De-dehava* (the Golden Catheter) who can penetrate people's hearts. The listening devices hidden in the anteroom to the Rebbe's study provide a useful assist in helping the Rebbe deliver his oracular counsel to Jews from all walks of life who seek his advice and then contribute in gratitude to his coffers. As the Ustiler's fame spreads, his handlers position him to be an Ashkenazi equivalent of such illustrious Moroccan holy men as the famous Baba Sali and his successors.

Alongside this satire lies a compelling realist narrative. Here is a man who is trapped—perhaps like his ancestor in the yak—inside an unhappy arranged marriage to the member of another famous Hasidic family. Goldie is a schemer who makes extra cash by smuggling diamonds into the US. Their three sons are devoid of learning or spirit, and the Rebbe's whole entourage is dependent on his willingness to continue playing the role of the wonder-working tzaddik. Although he sincerely believes in the heavenly origin of his strange dreams, it is evident to the reader that the Ustiler's mission to Tibet is a desperate if unconscious strategy to find a way out of his situation.

Even if the very existence of a figure like the Ustiler is just barely credible, Be'er does a good job of imagining what it would be like for a man who has never entered a theater or read a secular book or had a female colleague to encounter the outside world for the first time:

He had never spent time in the company of a woman who spoke to him as an equal. The only women he knew were the mortified women who thronged his inner sanctum to pour out their troubles in hurried tones and with downcast eyes or the women in his family circle, whose words were outwardly modest and pious but inwardly empty, and this is not to mention Goldie, whose speech when they were first married was a kind of fake simpering, which with time became saturated with bitterness, resentment, and disappointment.

So when he meets Dr. Selena Bernard, the beautiful expert on high-altitude fauna who speaks to him simply and directly as a person, he falls hard. Yet although Selena is both impressive and desirable, the ease with which Be'er's sheltered tzaddik jumps into their love affair seems ludicrous and works against

the novelistic credibility Be'er has been storing up.

The novel's most dazzling and credible creation is Simcha Danziger. Be'er has a sharp eye for the curious but real way in which fawning, abject piety can be combined with business savvy in the ultra-Orthodox world. Danziger holds his Rebbe's wisdom in high regard and readily submits to his moral instruction. Yet the lessons his Rebbe teaches almost invariably contain a humanistic twist beneath their holy garb. While the two men are observing a religious procession in Tibet, for example, one of the marchers stumbles and the religious

figurine he is holding aloft almost crashes to the ground. Danziger, who is repulsed by such "idol worship," hastens to quote a famous verse in Psalms: "They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes but cannot see . . . they have hands, but cannot touch, feet but cannot walk." But the Ustiler fires back with Proverbs: "If your enemy falls, do not exult; if he trips, let your heart not rejoice." Behind his scriptural rebuke is more than good manners; he is genuinely open to the world in the way that the worldly businessman's piety cannot allow.

The third narrative layer of the novel is the story of the Rebbe's spiritual search. Despite his complicity in his own merchandising, the Ustiler possesses a genuine religious sensibility and a profound knowledge of both rabbinic and Hasidic literature. He understands his present dilemma as a belated version of his ancestor's quest for authenticity. His saintly ancestor, whose soul is now apparently trapped in a yak, was a student of the famed "Seer of Lublin." In time, the disciple took issue with the master's desire to popularize the message of Hasidism. The "Holy Jew," as he came to be known, established his own court in Pshiskha, where he led a small number of chosen disciples in striving to unify ecstatic prayer with Torah study. His teachings were carried forward by his disciple, Menachem Mendel of Kotsk, who ridiculed wonder-working rabbis. The conflict between the Seer of Lublin and his erstwhile student is the subject of Martin Buber's novel *Gog and Magog*. Selena brings a copy of Buber's novel with her on the trip and finds that the Ustiler has ironically—but entirely plausibly—never heard of it, even though his native humanism makes him sound at times like a Buberian Hasidic master.

The Ustiler Rebbe is seeking not only an elusive yak, but to extricate himself from his soul-crushing predicament in the contemporary world of Israeli Hasidism, and to find a purer path. As a place of genuine if sometimes frightening spirituality, Tibet serves as a foil for Israeli society, where a majority of the population has tragically alienated itself from the resources of its religious tradition, while a minority has turned religion into a prideful hieratic cult. But the contrast is, unfortunately, not really explored. There is a failure of nerve, or at the very least, a conceptual fuzziness, when it comes to parsing the religious moments of the novel. The Ustiler does finally succeed in finding the holy Golden Yak by the "heavenly lake" of the book's title, but whatever Gnostic enlightenment he may have received in the encounter is lost in the fatal



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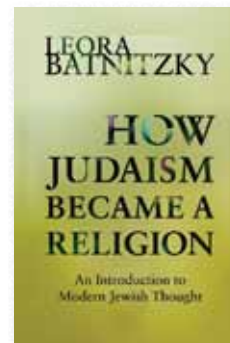
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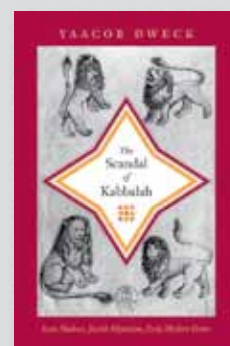
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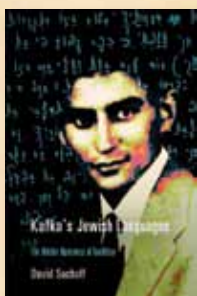
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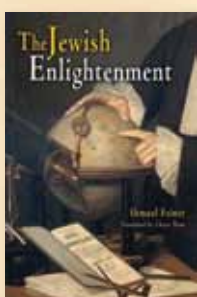
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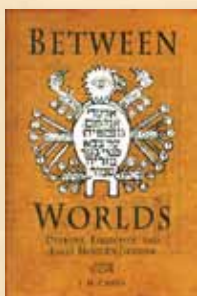
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breakdown or injury—it's never clear—he incurs at that very moment. The yak itself, and the captive soul it contains, remain a mystery.

Be'er has taken a big chance in attempting to combine three different literary modes in one novel, but his gamble pays off only in part. There are moments when we are buoyed aloft by the carnivalesque experience of *Back from Heavenly Lake*, and then there are others when the rapid switching back and forth among these modes leaves us disoriented.

Where this antic, overdetermined quality works to Be'er's best advantage is in his language, which might be the novel's true hero. The best Israeli authors today write in a literary Hebrew that is the culmination of a cultural smelting process that

**Tibet serves as a foil for Israeli society, where the population has tragically alienated itself from its religious tradition.**

has been going on for at least the last century and a half. The religious meaning of words taken from classical sources has been leached out to fashion a secular literary Hebrew, which can then be mixed with the natural speech that has arisen organically from a living society. It is a powerful hybrid medium that has created exceptional literature. Yet reading Be'er makes us realize, heartbreakingly at times, how much has been given up to achieve this goal. Be'er himself uses the standard style adroitly and has a fine ear for slangy dialogue, but he also has at his disposal the daily prayers, the weekly portion, chestnuts from Psalms and Proverbs, the lives of the talmudic sages, the visions of the kabbalists, and, of course, the tales of the Hasidim. His Hebrew breathes of presence rather than absence. He blends these materials together like a joyous organ master who delights in the resources of his complex and magnificent instrument. In this, he can only be compared to his great predecessor S.Y. Agnon. Other writers of Be'er's generation have tried to integrate traditional materials, but their efforts often leave an aftertaste of sanctimony and entitlement. One hopes that the adroitness with which Be'er brings all of these elements together will serve as an inspiration for the next generation of Israeli writers.

It is perhaps *only* at the level of language, as in Be'er's masterful orchestration of Hebrew's many modes, that the contradictions of Israeli culture can be drawn together. If so, then it is not mere escapism to dwell in Be'er's world but a kind of positive duty to be performed with delight. Just as the rabbis positioned the Sabbath as a foretaste of the World to Come, reading Be'er's multivalent novel sustains a larger vision of what the Jewish people could be. Despite the very steep challenges of translation, may the tale of the Ustiler and the Golden Yak soon have the good fortune of being available to English readers as well.

*Alan Mintz is the Chana Kekst Professor of Hebrew Literature at The Jewish Theological Seminary of America. He has recently completed a critical introduction to American Hebrew poetry.*



# King James: The Harold Bloom Version

BY HILLEL HALKIN

## THE SHADOW OF A GREAT ROCK

by Harold Bloom

Yale University Press, 320 pp., \$28

Although a self-avowedly compulsive reader, Harold Bloom, our age's most venerable yet still most provocative literary critic, has more of a writer's sensibility. Key concepts in his work that are not immediately transparent to most readers of books—"belatedness," "the anxiety of influence," literary "contamination," the "agonistic" relationship of texts—need no explanation for those who write them. Few ambitious authors have not known the discouraging feeling that everything has already been said; that they will never find their own voice; that the voices of other authors they have loved and learned from keep creeping into it. From the fierce and usually secretive competition between a writer and his predecessors, Bloom has fashioned a critical vocabulary.

Even Bloom's central notion of "strong misreading" has more to do with writing. "Weak misreading," as he calls it, is common and of little interest; the consequence of inexperience, mental laziness, psychological resistance, or conformity to received opinion, it is what the modernist New Critics with whom the young Bloom studied sought to educate against. Unlike other postmodernists, Bloom has remained loyal to the New Critics' belief in objectively richer and poorer ways of writing and reading, and in universal criteria of literary evaluation. He made an impassioned plea for these criteria in his *The Western Canon*; his forsaking of the New Criticism's methodology of close textual analysis, rather, would seem to have stemmed from his own sense of belatedness. Having arrived on the scene when there seemed little to add to the discussion of strong reading, he turned to strong misreading instead.

Strong misreadings are rare, and occur, according to Bloom, when vigorous and original minds take possession of literary texts or traditions for their own purposes by creatively distorting them, seizing on possibilities of interpretation that ordinary strong readers would reject as implausible. Such forceful appropriations are a new talent's or generation's way of clearing a space for itself, an antidote to the anxiety of influence. To resort to a psychological metaphor of which Bloom is fond, the sons become the fathers of their literary progenitors by recasting them in their own image. An example Bloom has given of this is what he takes to be rabbinic Judaism's strong misreading of the Bible, which robbed it of its primal power while laying a foundation for the grand edifice of rabbinic thought.

Not to be outdone by the rabbis, Bloom, a life-long admirer of the Bible, aimed for his own strong misreading of it in *The Book of J*, published in 1990. His point of departure is 19<sup>th</sup>-century source criti-

cism and its division of the Pentateuch into different strands of authorship known as J (for "Jehovistic"), E (for "Elohistic"), P (for "priestly"), and so on. Bloom proposed a reconstruction of the J-narrative as a literary account of Hebrew origins written by a wittily intellectual woman at King Solomon's court. Her main protagonist, treated by her with cool irony, is an impulsively masculine God whose "leading qual-

more representative passages from the King James followed by a brief commentary. Sometimes these commentaries contain the kind of startling Bloomian aperçus that, casually vaulting over contexts, genres, and historical periods, have the capacity to jolt us into new perspectives. Thus, after quoting the King James rendition of David's elegy for Jonathan in the first chapter of Samuel II, Bloom continues:

**David as the counterpart of Hamlet—well of course! But too often, Bloom seems merely to be turning the pages of the Bible as quickly as he can.**

ity is not holiness, or justice, or love, or righteousness, but the sheer energy and force of becoming." That J never meant her Jehovah to be taken as seriously as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam proceeded to do—that the world's great monotheistic religions were founded on a somewhat whimsical literary fiction—is for Bloom an irony that not even J would have been capable of.

Now, Bloom has returned to the Bible with a book on the King James translation of it, written for the latter's 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Its title taken from a verse in Isaiah, where it refers to a refuge from the summer sun (for Bloom, it also serves as a metaphor for the Bible's overwhelming influence on Western civilization), *The Shadow of a Great Rock* includes an introduction on "the Bible as literature" and chapters on all of its major and some of its minor books, as well as on parts of the New Testament. Each chapter is short and consists of one or

Poet and musician, usurper and anointed monarch, alternately ruthless and expediently compassionate, David anticipates Hamlet as masterpiece of contraries. Like Hamlet, he inspires our love yet does not return it. Hamlet is the hero of Western consciousness and disputes with David the crown of personality, but David is also a religious figure, which may make him even more complex.

David as the counterpart of Hamlet—well, of course! But too often in *The Shadow of a Great Rock*, Bloom seems merely to be turning the pages of the Bible as quickly as he can, as when, after calling the book of Ruth possibly its "most beautiful work," he quotes a lengthy passage from the biblical critic Herbert Marks; makes the questionable assertion that "the name Ruth means a 'friend'" (this is based, as far as I can determine, on his hav-



The Translators Presenting Bible To James I, by George E. Kruger, 1754. (Photo © Hulton Archive/Getty Images.)

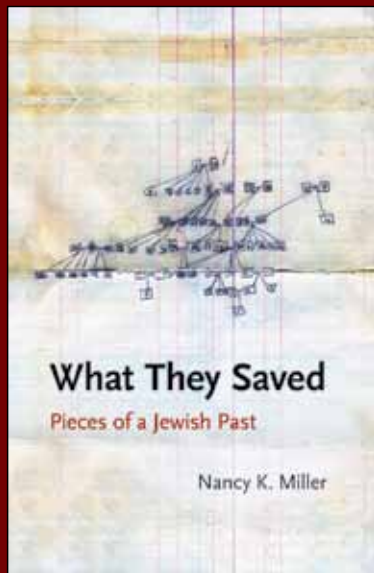


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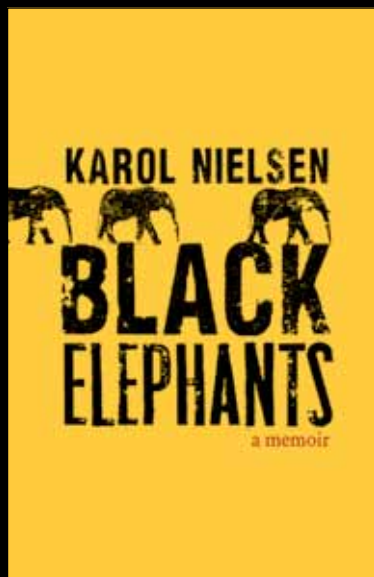
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ing read somewhere that in the Christian Syriac Bible the name is Re'ut) and the even more dubious claim that Boaz “can be interpreted as ‘strength’ in the particular sense of ‘shrewdness’” (the would-be grasp of Bloom’s Hebrew more than once exceeds its reach in this book); makes a passing reference to Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale”; and concludes with another long quote from a poem by Victor Hugo. This is the purest of paddings for not even the thinnest of garments.

*The Shadow of a Great Rock*, on the whole, is a disappointment of the sort often caused by occasion-linked books that are written in a hurry under outer rather than inner compulsion. It has a jerrybuilt quality and much of its contents are rehashed from *The Book of J*. Anyone wishing to read Harold Bloom on the Bible, in fact, would do better to go straight to *The Book of J*, which is a brilliant if eccentric tour de force. The real shadow in Bloom’s new book is cast by it.

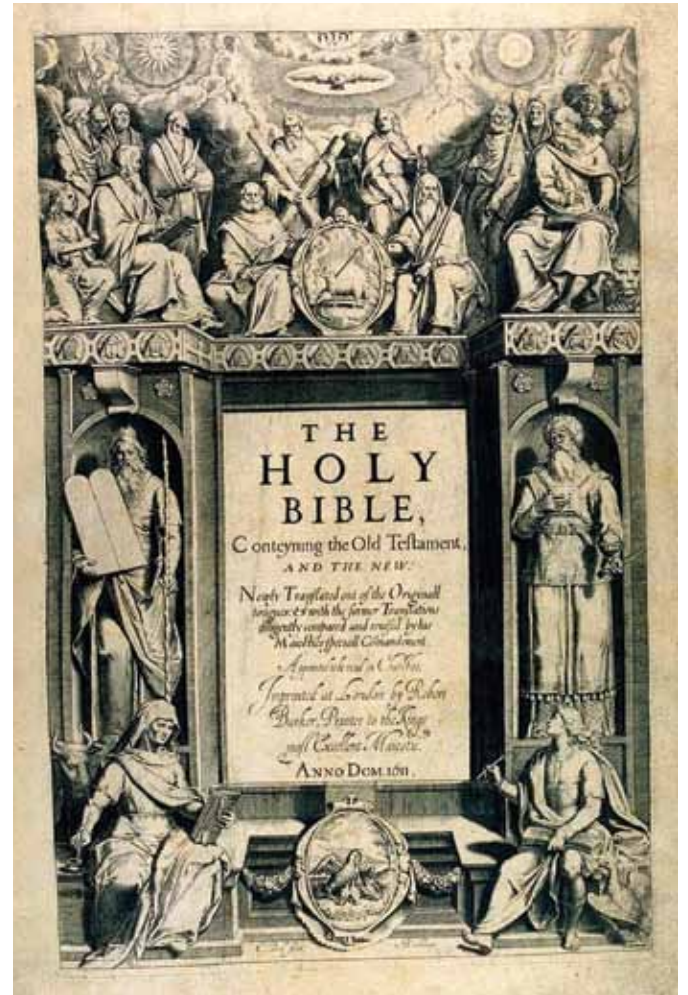
But the problem with *The Shadow of a Great Rock* goes beyond that and pertains to the King James Bible (KJB) itself. This is because, as a critic, Bloom is preeminently concerned with strong misreadings, which is how he would like to view the King James, too—yet if a translation is the closest possible perusal of a text that there is, the KJB’s must be considered an extremely strong “reading” and not a misreading at all.

Bloom, to be sure, contends otherwise. “The aesthetic experience of rereading the ‘Old Testament’ of the KJB,” he writes in his introduction, “is altogether different from that of . . . the Hebrew text. There is a baroque glory in the KJB and a marvelously expressionistic concision in [the Hebrew Bible]; the contrast is nearly total.” And a few pages further on: “The KJB is an English Protestant polemic against contemporary Catholic and ancient Jew alike. Accept that, and its errors are themselves fascinating.” In both form (its “baroque glory”) and content (its “errors”), Bloom’s argument goes, the KJB, while pretending to be close to the Hebrew original, is a radical departure from it.

This argument, however, which Bloom never pushes very hard or very far, fails to withstand scrutiny, not because it necessarily requires us to regard as duplicitous the KJB’s claim, in its 1611 dedication to King James, to be “more exact” than any previous Bible translation (strong misreadings need not be consciously so), but because there is little to support it. The KJB not only had exactness as its goal (its entire mode of production was geared to it), but managed to achieve it to an impressive extent.

The KJB was produced by committees—six of them all told, of which three, comprising twenty-five members, worked on the Hebrew Bible. All twenty-five were fluent in Latin and many in Greek, and among them were also six competent Hebraists and three Arabists. (The KJB was the first Bible translation to recognize the relevance of other Semitic tongues to an understanding of biblical Hebrew.) Each committee had before it, apart from the Masoretic text and its rabbinic commentaries, the Greek Septuagint, Jerome’s Latin Vulgate, the German Bible of Martin Luther, and the Wycliffe, Tyndale, Coverdale, Bishops’, and Geneva Bibles in

English, and each carefully compared them all, frequently borrowing verses from one or the other (especially from Tyndale) or creating pastiches from several. Far from aspiring to a bold originality, the KJB’s translators were cautious and conservative, checking and rechecking their accuracy at every step as befitted men entrusted with God’s word. This is not, as a general rule, how strong misreadings come into being.



The title page to the first edition of the King James Bible, by Cornelius Boel, 1611.

Moreover, despite Bloom’s assertion that the KJB, as attested to by its “errors,” is a “Protestant polemic” against ancient Judaism, one would be hard-pressed to point to more than a handful of possible examples, all challengeable. One that Bloom gives is the prophecy of the downfall of the king of Babylon in Chapter 14 of Isaiah, where we read in the King James, “Hell from beneath is moved for thee to meet thee at thy coming . . . How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!” And Bloom comments: “Hell is a Christian idea; the Hebrew says *she’ol*, akin to Homeric Dis or Hades, while . . . ‘Lucifer’ in the Hebrew is *helel* [*ben-shachar*], the shining morning star Venus.”

Bloom is right that the biblical *she’ol* denotes a shadowy underworld to which all descend after death rather than a place of future punishment, and that Lucifer is a Christian synonym for the Devil, whereas Isaiah’s *helel ben-shachar*, probably best translated as “bright son of the dawn,” has no such connotation. This does not add up, however, to a straightforward Christianization of an ancient Jewish text. To begin with, “Hell” and “Lucifer” are far from the King James’ inventions; as far back as John Wycliffe’s 14<sup>th</sup>-century Bible, the English language’s first, we have “Helle under thee is disturbed for the meeting of thi comyng” and “A! Lucifer, that risidist



eerli, hou feldist thou doun fro hevne,” and subsequent English Bibles went along with this. Nor was Wycliffe being original, either. He was drawing on Jerome’s Latin, which has *infernus subter conturbatus est in occursum adventus tui* and *quomodo cecidisti de caelo Lucifer qui mane oriebaris*.

Yet Jerome, too, was not a flagrant Christianizer. Although *infernus* had come by his age to be a Latin noun meaning Hell in the Christian sense, it still retained its older adjectival meaning of “of the underworld,” as when Virgil refers in the *Aeneid* to a tree at the entrance to Avernus, the Roman Hades, as being *Iunoni infernae dictus sacer*, “considered sacred to the [goddess] Juno of the underworld.” The Vulgate’s *infernus* is thus ambiguous, referring either to a place like Hades or to a Christian Hell, rather than an outright mistranslation.

As for Lucifer, ancient Jewish commentators on Isaiah 14 indeed understood *helel ben-shachar* to be an epithet for the planet Venus, as is already evidenced by the pre-Christian Greek Jewish Septuagint’s *Eosphoros*, the Morning Star—literally, the “bearer of dawn.” Translating this literally himself, Jerome coined *Lucifer* from Latin *lux*, light, and *fero*, to bear; only later did it become a name for Satan in Christian tradition. Although the KJB’s translators could have chosen to *de-Christianize* the text by rendering *helel ben-shachar* as “morning star” (as was done by Luther) and *she’ol* as “underworld” or (as they actually did several verses further on) “grave,” they can hardly be accused of Christianizing it in the first place. This was simply not their practice, neither here nor elsewhere.



Harold Bloom speaking at The City University of New York, 2003. (© Mark Mainz/Getty Images.)

The question of the KJB’s “baroque” style is more complicated, since 17<sup>th</sup>-century English and 9<sup>th</sup>-to-2<sup>nd</sup>-century B.C.E. Hebrew cannot easily be compared. Although it can be maintained that the KJB’s tone is not always that of the Hebrew, whose highly inflected grammatical compactness it could not

hope to match, the caveat must be added that, two or three thousand years later, the Hebrew’s precise tone is sometimes difficult to determine. Certainly, the KJB sought to get it right, aiming for simplicity when the Hebrew is simple and majesty when it is majestic. There is nothing “baroque” about “And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son,” while if there *is* a rhetorical elevation to “Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry into her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the Lord’s hand double for all her sins,” Isaiah’s Hebrew is rhetorically elevated, too. Are the two passages elevated in exactly the same way? There may be no answer to that (the question itself may be meaningless), but I can’t think of anywhere where the KJB reorchestrates the music of the Bible to suit an agenda of its own.

At heart, one suspects, Harold Bloom knows all this, which is why *The Shadow of a Great Rock* has a somewhat perfunctory air. It is a book whose author set out to make a case and understood only when it was too late to turn back that he had none. Bloom is by temperament a strong misreader himself. The Hebrew Bible is a mine of riches for him. The King James version of it, considered solely as the fine and faithful translation that it is, is less so.

*Hillel Halkin, who lives in Israel, is a translator, essayist, and author of four books. His first novel, Melisande! What Are Dreams? (Granta) will be published next spring.*

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# Next Year on the Rhine

BY ALLAN ARKUSH

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## GERMAN CITY, JEWISH MEMORY: THE STORY OF WORMS

by Nils Roemer

Brandeis University Press, 328 pp., \$35

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An American who wants to understand what the city of Worms has meant to the Jews of Germany might begin by thinking: Newport. Like the Rhode Island town, Worms is the quiet, waterside home of its country's most venerable synagogue as well as an old Jewish graveyard that irresistibly plucks the "mystic cords of memory." And much as Newport has symbolized for the Jews of the United States their early arrival on the American scene, Worms has for German Jews betokened their longtime presence on German soil. But the similarities don't go any further.

The American Jewish image of Newport is inseparably bound up with the famous letter in which President George Washington reminded the members of its Hebrew congregation that they lived under a government "which gives to bigotry no sanction" and "to persecution no assistance." In the German Jewish mind, as Nils Roemer reminds us in his sweeping tale of Jewish Worms and the way in which it has been remembered and recorded, the image of Worms is always tied to recollections of the First Crusade, when mobs led by Count Emicho either killed or prompted the self-destruction of hundreds of the city's Jews who were determined not to endure forced conversion to Christianity. And while the Jewish community of Newport never became famous for its cultural achievements, Worms was the temporary home during the 11<sup>th</sup> century of the great biblical commentator, Rashi, the dwelling place of the noted pietist Eleazar of Worms during the 12<sup>th</sup>, and both the birthplace and the final destination of the 13<sup>th</sup>-century rabbinical authority Meir of Rothenburg.

But if Worms was a place of special significance for Jews already in the Middle Ages, it was so mostly in the minds of its own inhabitants. The horrible events that took place in the city in 1096 were commemorated for centuries by a special day of fasting—but only locally. New catastrophes in subsequent centuries added similar fast days to the calendar of Worms' Jewry. For the city to acquire a unique importance for German Jews in general, it was first necessary for a united Germany to come into being, at least as an aspiration. Once it did, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and once the country's Jews began to hope that they could fully belong to the fatherland, they revamped their understanding of their people's history on German soil, drawing more distant from it in some respects and closer to it in others.

In Worms itself, the attitude toward the medieval martyrs underwent considerable change in modern times. Around 1815, at the time of German Jewry's first steps toward emancipation, the local

community cancelled the fast day that memorialized the martyrs of 1096. "Rabbi Koeppel of Worms approved the abrogation based upon a talmudic discussion that allowed the abolition of a previously accepted communal fast once the social and political conditions had changed." By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Jewish historians working at the Central Archive of the German Jews in Berlin were viewing their people's past through a thoroughly nationalist lens. For them, "Worms in particular seemed to reinforce the Jews' claim of belonging in Germany even when most of them had moved to the big urban centers. Worms' antiquity ornamented the notion that German Jews were one of the many German tribes (Stämme)."



*Jewish city dwellers in Worms, from Thesaurus picturarum by Marcus zum Lamm, ca. 1577-1606. (Courtesy of Hessische Landes und Hochschulbibliothek, Darmstadt, Germany and Brandeis University Press.)*

This effort to utilize medieval Jewish history to authenticate the Jews' German identity was not as pathetic as it may now sound. On the local level, it had plenty of Gentile support. There is, for example, the city archivist, August Weckerling, who "lamented at the 1883 conference of the Union of the German Historical and Antiquarian Societies the devastated status of Worms' famous *mikvah* (ritual bath)," which he would eventually help to renovate. On the national level, at the same time, the historian Theodor Mommsen vigorously responded to anti-Semites with the assertion that the country's Jews were one of its Stämme "no less than the Saxons, Swabians, or Pomeranians."

Several decades and one world war later, in 1925,

the city of Cologne organized a "Thousand-Year Exhibition of the Rhineland." Introduced by Cologne's mayor, Konrad Adenauer, it lavished attention on the Jews' rich history in the area, displaying among other things "copies of important documents from Worms, Herbst's photographs of the synagogue, and a model of Worms' *mikvah*." One of the major Jewish periodicals of the period hailed the exhibition for demonstrating that the "synthesis of *Deutschtum* and *Judentum*," i.e., German-ness and Jewishness, was not just a Jewish idea. In such an environment, it is not too surprising to find a local lawyer, Siegfried Guggenheim, publishing a beautifully crafted haggadah in which he noted that his own family in Worms replaced the traditional conclusion of "Next year in Jerusalem" with the sentence

"Next year in Worms-on-the-Rhine, our *Heimat*." The celebrated Viennese writer Stefan Zweig hailed this volume as one that merited a place "at any German exhibition on the art of the book."

But this spirit of concord would not last very long. The next major public celebration of the Rhineland Jewish heritage was the commemoration of the 900<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Worms synagogue, which took place on June 3, 1934, more than a year after the Nazis took power. With a couple of exceptions, this was an all-Jewish affair, one about which the local press remained silent. For the Jews who were present, the worst aspects of the past had suddenly reacquired a disconcerting relevance. In his opening speech, the community's rabbi, Isaak Holzer, "became almost defiant as he elaborated upon the religious devotion that had enabled the Jews of Worms to endure many challenges and even die as martyrs when necessary." The leaders of Congregation She'arith Israel in New York, America's oldest congregation, sent a message that showed that they were on the same wavelength: "In all the vicissitudes of its venerable history, from the martyrdom of the First Crusade to the sorrows of the present day, your community has withstood suffering with an unshaken faith and an unbroken courage that have been an inspiration to Jewish communities everywhere."

Surprisingly, Roemer, a professor of Holocaust Studies at the University of Texas at Dallas, dwells only briefly on the rest of the dismal decade that followed the Nazi takeover. He provides us with some statistics pertaining to the number of Jews who emigrated in specific years, and he takes note of the deportation of the city's last Jews in 1942, but his overall treatment of Worms' Jewry's worst years is cursory and sketchy. Roemer devotes some of his best chapters, however, to an account of the postwar efforts on the part of Jews and non-Jews alike to come to terms with the results of the Holocaust in Worms.

Of the more than five hundred Worms Jews





*The Jewish Cemetery in Worms, or “Heiliger Sand,” possibly the oldest surviving Jewish cemetery in Europe. The oldest legible tombstone dates from 1076, the last, 1940.*

who survived the Holocaust (out of a community of more than two thousand), very few came back to live there after the war. The story of postwar Worms Jewry therefore has more to do with relics than with people. The moveable ones—what survived of the community’s archives, manuscripts, and ritual objects—eventually came into the hands of the Israeli government, thanks to the intervention of Chancellor Konrad Adenauer. It was Adenauer, too, and other German officials who were mainly responsible for pushing ahead with the plans to rebuild the Worms synagogue, despite the reservations or opposition of


former members of the community, many of whom no doubt shared the feelings of Elke Spies. Writing in the New York-based *Aufbau*, Spies questioned who would benefit from the reconstruction: “Should these unscrupulous destroyers of Worms receive an object to view from which they can obtain income?”

Nevertheless, in 1961, around forty survivors of the community came from all over the world to participate in the rededication of what was to remain for a long time a tourist attraction, not a house of worship. As late as 1990, Cilly Kugelmann, co-editor of the German-Jewish journal *Babylon*, could

complain in a radio broadcast from the synagogue’s Rashi chapel about the artificiality of reviving a synagogue in the absence of a local Jewish community. Since then, however, things have changed. Worms is now home to approximately seventy Russian Jews, some of whom conduct a service in the synagogue every couple of weeks. A number of them also belong to the Warmaisa Society for the Promotion and Preservation of Jewish Culture, a local, mostly non-Jewish group founded in 1995 that “hosts literary readings and organized lectures, seminars, concerts, and excursions to sites of Jewish history in Worms.”

Reading about the activities of the Warmaisa Society, one might almost imagine that the best aspects of the pre-Hitler era were somehow being retrieved and brought back to life. But no one can really pretend that this is the case, except on the very smallest scale. For the handful of Jews who have found refuge in the city, Worms can never serve as an anchor in the way that it did for generations of German Jews between the dawn of the era of emancipation and its unhappy culmination. Nor, of course, can it do so for the exiles and their descendants. When Siegfried Guggenheim published a revised version of his haggadah in 1960, by then in his new home in the United States, he “excised the reference to his family’s tradition of replacing ‘Next Year in Jerusalem’ with ‘Next year in Worms-on-the-Rhine, our *Heimat*,’” and inserted into the text not “Next Year in Flushing” (where he had settled), but best wishes to the State of Israel.

*Allan Arkush is a professor of Judaic studies and history at Binghamton University, and the senior contributing editor of the Jewish Review of Books.*

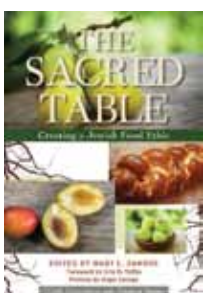


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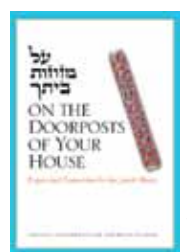


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# Minhag America

BY RIV-ELLEN PRELL

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## THE SYNAGOGUE IN AMERICA: A SHORT HISTORY

by Marc Lee Raphael  
New York University Press, 245 pp., \$30

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This “short history” of the synagogue in America is concise, fairly comprehensive, and the first of its kind. Marc Lee Raphael, a distinguished historian of American Judaism, has not only made use of much of the standard scholarly literature but has rummaged through countless boxes of materials of the kind seldom studied with care: synagogue bulletins, governing board minutes, and rabbis’ sermons in 125 locations throughout the United States. San Francisco, Omaha, and St. Louis get their due along with the more frequently discussed synagogues of Brooklyn, Savannah, Philadelphia, and other major cities. Raphael’s gracefully written book draws on all of these sources to offer a remarkably compact synoptic story, one that contributes a great deal to a full accounting of the American synagogue. (Some readers will regret the absence of footnotes in a work of such abundant scholarship.)

Other institutions have arisen over the years to make strong claims on this country’s Jews. For example, from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century through the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *landsmanshaften*, or hometown fraternal organizations, built communal relationships among Eastern European immigrant men, and often their families. These organizations filled their members’ lives with meetings and activities, as well as serving as mutual aid societies. But like many other ethnic organizations, they rarely attracted a third, or even a second, generation.

Yet synagogues continue to flourish. They have proven to be flexible—some would argue entirely too flexible—institutions that respond to, and on occasion, lead cultural, religious, and generational change. Still, as Raphael emphasizes more than once—but does not make it his aim to explain—synagogues have never succeeded in attracting the majority of American Jews.

By the early days of the Republic, there were already six synagogues in the United States. They were all Sephardic in their ritual and organization, as Raphael points out, even though the majority of their members were Ashkenazim, primarily from Germany. It was not until the 1820s that groups of Ashkenazim broke away from the established synagogues and started new ones in which their own communal customs would be maintained. Before long, however, many of these very customs fell victim—in the veteran synagogues as well as the ones created by 19<sup>th</sup>-century immigrants—to the passion for reform or reforming that gripped American Jewry.

This took place even within those synagogues

that remained Orthodox. From the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century onward, in all American synagogues, there was, for instance, a new concern with “decorum.”

## By the early days of the Republic, there were already six synagogues in the United States, all Sephardic.

The Hungarian-born rabbi Bernard Illoy, who served in synagogues from New York to New Orleans, and who was aptly called “a valiant champion of Orthodoxy,” is reported to have aspired to “a decorous and beautiful service . . . that could more than vie with that of any Temple in the land,” and repeatedly railed against the “indecorous scramble and rush to get out” of the synagogue “before the last echoes of the [closing hymns] had died away.” On occasion, the issue of decorum even rose to the level of constitutional importance. “The 1851 constitution of the newly formed Emanu-El of San Francisco, in Article IV, Section 3 (with its articles and sections, like so many others, it imitated the structure of the U.S. Constitution), required the trustees to ‘promote order and decorum during divine service.’”

Why decorum should have become a matter of such great concern is a question upon which Raphael does not reflect at length, but notes only that it may have been “spurred on by the protestantization of American Judaism” or been “just a general response” to the aesthetics of 19<sup>th</sup>-century culture. Perhaps he regards this issue, like the question of women’s place in the synagogue, as one that would necessitate historical and cultural interpretation of the kind for which there is no room in “a short history.” The reader, however, regrets the absence of a deeper engagement with the meaning of acculturation for Jews in this period, since what was really at stake both with respect to decorum and to gender was the question of how Jews shaped their culture to fit the norms and behavior of white, Christian Americans.

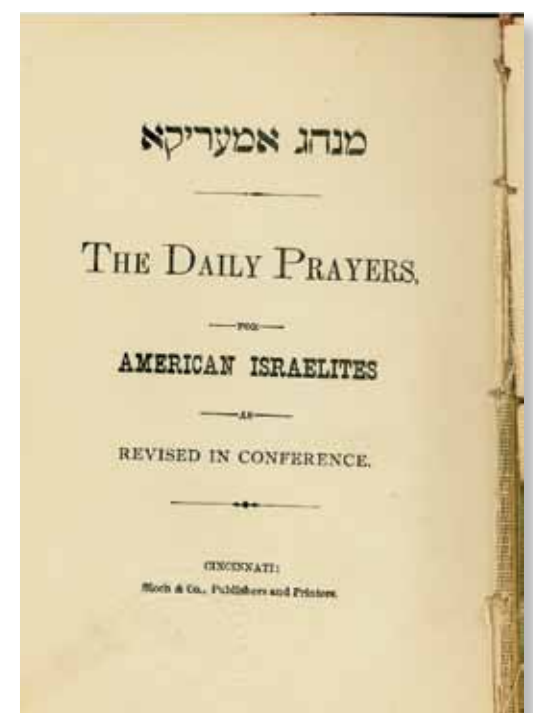
Proceeding at very different speeds, most of the mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century synagogues were on a trajectory pointing toward “Reform Judaism.” But when could they be said to have arrived there? “The rabbi and historian Leon Jick has suggested that ‘worship with uncovered head’ was the ‘hallmark of Reform,’” Raphael observes, “but dozens of UAHC congregations still required men to wear hats in 1879.” In 1894, a Reform rabbi was so thoroughly committed to the Americanization of his Chicago synagogue that he not only tossed out its ark, but also gave the Torah scroll to the University of Chicago Semitic Library, never planning to read from it again. Raphael has a striking, even disturbing, number of such anecdotes. His own criterion

takes a cue from the historian Marsha L. Rozenblit, and highlights the moment when a congregation abandoned the traditional, fixed liturgy in favor of a truncated new prayerbook as the “mark of a full-fledged Reform congregation.”

The 19<sup>th</sup>-century Reform leader Isaac Mayer Wise named his prayerbook *Minhag America* because he aspired to construct a liturgy that would serve as the “custom” of all American Jews. But by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the arrival in the country of masses of Eastern European Jews, who



Rabbi Bernard Illoy, ca. 19<sup>th</sup> century.



*Minhag America*, 1872, composed by Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise. (Courtesy of the Klau Library, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and New York University Press.)





*Congregation Emanu-El, San Francisco, 1866. (Lithograph by Geo. H. Baker, S.F. Courtesy of the Elizabeth S. & Alvin I. Fine Museum of Congregation Emanu-El, San Francisco.)*



*A synagogue in Maywood, Illinois, ca. 1905. (Courtesy of Chicago History Museum, DN-0002425.)*

were anything but Reform-minded, had clearly obviated the possibility of such an outcome. Solomon Schechter, who came to America with the hope of fortifying a Conservative Judaism that would serve as the umbrella for all synagogues and Jews not officially represented by the Reform movement—his “Catholic Israel”—saw his hopes dashed too. Up until the Great Depression, Jews continued to build synagogues where rabbis promoted visions for the Jewish future that were distinguished by greatly different orientations toward matters ranging from the language of prayer to prayerbooks to Zionism.

Raphael passes over the period of World War II rather quickly, noting only that “nearly everywhere, congregational bulletins and trustees’ minutes have little to say” about the war. The important political activities in which Jews were engaged during the war, he correctly observes, “were largely organized outside the synagogues of America.” But his narrative slows down when he comes to the postwar period, marked by the mass movement of urban Jews to what he calls “the *real* suburbs”—not marginally exurban zones but “newly developing areas, beyond city borders, that were reachable mainly by train and automobile.”

This migration (and not only of Jews) was due, Raphael provocatively argues, to the movement of “blacks into previously white neighborhoods.” And where the Jews went, the synagogues soon followed. With the notable exceptions of synagogues in Chicago’s Hyde Park, and Philadelphia, urban Reform temples and Conservative synagogues were transplanted to new suburban locales, where they constituted the core of their movements’ unprecedented growth. How ironic it was, then, that the dominant theme of Reform rabbinic Friday

night sermonizing during this period, including that of some Southern rabbis, was civil rights and racial injustice.

At the same time, the rabbis of the Conservative movement, whose synagogues were the more common choice of religiously affiliated suburbanites during the first postwar decades, devoted their sermons to more specifically Jewish themes, utilizing more traditional Jewish texts. While a count of the people that postwar Reform rabbis quoted most often included “Matthew Arnold, Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud, Martin Luther King, and Hasidic rabbis,” Conservative rabbis were more likely to call upon the Talmud and Maimonides, as well as Martin Buber, Zacharias Frankel, and Franz Rosenzweig. But, on the whole, neither Reform nor Conservative rabbis preached, except on the High Holy Days, to more than a small percentage of their congregants.

The Orthodox had this problem too. Interestingly enough, Raphael can tell us little about what took place in their synagogues at this time, largely because few of them bequeathed to posterity anything remotely resembling an archive. But we do have the transcripts of many sermons, and they often show us rabbis who chastised “their congregants for lax synagogue attendance and lax observance—what Rabbi Simon Dolgin in Los Angeles called ‘indifference to Judaism.’” Those congregants who did show up were often asked to grapple with difficult rabbinic sources (“did very many of the congregants understand?—doubtful.”)

**I**n his final chapter, “Reinventing, Experimenting, and Ratcheting Up,” Raphael brings the story of the American synagogue up to the present. His brief overview of the past four decades covers dramatic

transformations, including the integration of women in unprecedented ways across the movements, the increasing acceptance of gays, and a dramatic shift away from “decorum” that focused on informality in prayer services. He also examines the redrawing of the denominational map, the growth of Reconstructionism, a remarkable resurgence in Orthodoxy, and the decline of denominationalism.

Given the breadth and brevity of Raphael’s survey of the most recent developments, there are inevitable omissions. Too little attention is paid to forces such as Lubavitch Hasidism and Aish HaTorah that are crucial for an understanding of this era. Raphael also overlooks Mechon Hadar, whose support for a halakhic, egalitarian, non-denominational Judaism has played a critical role in the recent development of independent minyanim. This organization’s commitment to training leaders of these groups suggests that it is developing a vision, if not a movement, that aims to provide an alternative to denominational synagogues.

These omissions notwithstanding, *The Synagogue in America* offers a readable and concise history of the evolution of American Judaism in its synagogues, drawing on sources that allow a panoramic view. Raphael shows in detail how the nation’s religious pluralism has inevitably led to the development of the multiple Judaisms practiced within a wide range of synagogues. That 21<sup>st</sup>-century American synagogues have reformulated conceptions of decorum, prayerbooks, and theology, not to mention the meaning of acculturation, only underlines how dramatically these Judaisms are changing.

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# Red Rosa

BY ADAM KIRSCH

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## THE LETTERS OF ROSA LUXEMBURG

edited by Georg Adler, Peter Hudis, and Annalies Laschitza  
Verso, 609 pp., \$39.95

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In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Polish town of Zamosc produced two of the most extraordinary Jewish personalities of the age. The first was I.L. Peretz, the great Yiddish writer, best known to many readers for his bitter story “Bontshe the Silent.” In that tale, Bontshe is a modern anti-Job, a humble Jew who suffers an endless series of injuries and humiliations, but never raises his voice against God. When he dies and goes to heaven, even the prosecuting angel can find nothing to say against him, and the judge promises to give him anything he might desire. But all Bontshe can think to ask for is a hot buttered roll—whereupon the angels “hang their heads in shame at this unending meekness they have created on Earth.” Even in death, Peretz implies, Bontshe can’t grasp the lesson that the judge imparts: “You never understood that you need not have been silent, that you could have cried out and that your outcries would have brought down the world itself and ended it.”

If there is one reader who might have agreed wholeheartedly with this critique of passivity, who would have understood the right of the poor to cry out and remake the world, it was the other famous scion of Zamosc, Rosa Luxemburg. Starting as a teenager, Luxemburg devoted her whole life to overthrowing capitalism in Europe. As a theoretician, orator, and activist, she rose to a leading position in the socialist parties of Poland and Germany, and came to embody the hope—and, to her opponents, the dread—of Marxist revolution. To Lenin, whom she admired and criticized, she was “the eagle of the revolution”; to the German right, she was “Red Rosa,” an anti-Semitic hate figure, good for frightening children. Her legend was sealed in January 1919, when she and Karl Liebknecht, her fellow leader of the radical-left Spartacus League, were assassinated by right-wing soldiers, with the connivance of Germany’s nominally socialist government.

To Hannah Arendt, who was greatly influenced by Luxemburg, her murder was “the watershed between two eras in Germany; and it became the point of no return for the German left.” With her death, it seemed in retrospect, the possibility of a humane and democratic communism in Germany was foreclosed. Indeed, from that day to this, whenever people want to rehabilitate communism from its legacy of dictatorship and mass murder, they are drawn to Luxemburg as a symbol of the path not taken. Thus Trotsky—who never got along with Luxemburg in her lifetime, perhaps because they were too similar—declared that his Fourth International, the organization he founded to combat Stalinism, would fight

“under the sign of the three Ls”—Lenin, Luxemburg, and Liebknecht. After World War II, an influential group of anti-Soviet French Marxists named themselves “Socialism or Barbarism,” after a slogan used by Rosa Luxemburg in a pamphlet attacking World War I. She was a natural favorite of the New Left in

(“Letters to a Friend”). This small book consisted of 22 letters written to Sophie Liebknecht, Karl’s wife, during the years 1916-1918, which Luxemburg spent in prison as an anti-war agitator. “Whoever knows only Rosa Luxemburg the fighter and the scholarly author,” the publisher claimed at the time,

## Trotsky declared that his Fourth International would fight “under the sign of the three Ls”—Lenin, Luxemburg, and Liebknecht.

the 1960s. Today, Germany’s Left Party, the organizational descendant of East Germany’s Communist Party, has an educational wing named the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung. For PR purposes, this is a much better name from the German Communist past than, say, Walter Ulbricht.

The Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung is now helping to produce a complete, 14-volume English edition of Luxemburg’s writings, of which *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg* is the first installment. The book is not actually a comprehensive collected letters—that will apparently come later, and take up several volumes. Rather, *The Letters* is a compact introduction to Rosa Luxemburg, which, in the words of the editor Peter Hudis, “brings to life the depth and breadth of Luxemburg’s political and theoretical contributions as well as her original personality.”

In approaching Luxemburg through her private correspondence, rather than through her economic works like *The Accumulation of Capital* or her numerous articles and speeches, the editors of *The Letters* are continuing an old tradition. Luxemburg’s posthumous legend began to take shape in 1920, with the publication of *Briefe an Freunde*

“does not yet know all sides of her.” These letters revealed the inner Rosa, “the richness of the inexhaustible wellsprings of her heart.”

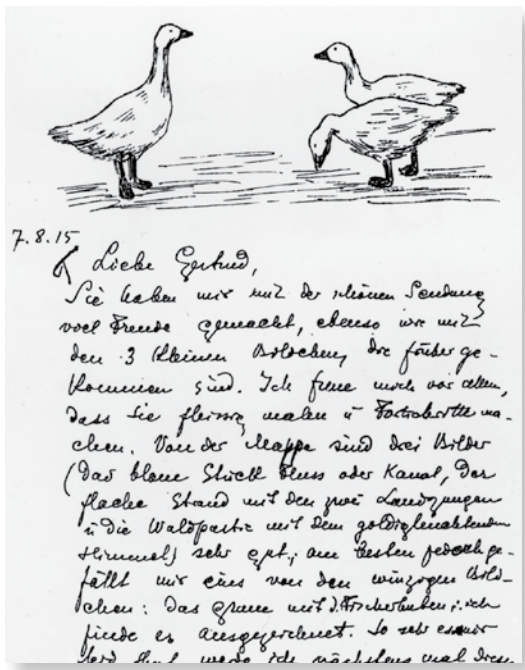
Many of those letters to Sophie Liebknecht are included in the new *Letters*, and they go a long way toward explaining the reverence in which Luxemburg continues to be held by so many. Shut up in virtual isolation, physically ill, spiritually devastated by a world war that had destroyed Germany’s socialist movement, Luxemburg finds courage and love in the little glimpses of nature she is allowed:

What I see from my window is the men’s prison, the usual gloomy building of red brick. But looking diagonally, I can see above the prison wall the green treetops of some kind of park. One of them is a tall black poplar, which I can hear rustling when the wind blows hard; and there is a row of ash trees, much lighter in color, and covered with yellow clusters of seedpods (later they will be dark brown). The windows look to the northwest, so that I often see splendid sunsets, and you know how the sight of rose-tinted clouds can carry me away from everything and make up for all else.



Rosa Luxemburg addressing a crowd, Stuttgart, 1907. (Courtesy of Verso.)





A letter from Rosa Luxemburg to Gertrud Zlotko, 1915. (Courtesy of Verso.)

Luxemburg's letters from prison are, in fact, so resolutely cheerful and gentle that they can become cloying. There is a solemn whimsy in her devotion to animals, for instance, that puts the contemporary reader helplessly in mind of Disney cartoons: "Recently I sang the Countess' aria from *Figaro*, about six [titmice] were perched there on a bush in front of the window and listened without moving all the way to the end; it was a very funny sight to see." Yet coming from "Red Rosa," this kind of thing struck the first readers of her letters with the force of a revelation. Here was a revolutionary who loved flowers and birds, and Hugo Wolf's *Lieder*, and the poems of Goethe. This Luxemburg offers the strongest possible contrast with Lenin, who famously said, "I can't listen to music too often . . . it makes you want to say stupid nice things, and stroke the heads of people who could create such beauty while living in this vile hell. And now you must not stroke anyone's head: you might get your hand bitten off. You have to strike them on the head, without any mercy."

Gender surely plays a role in the idealization of Luxemburg. Though she never had children, she was often maternal about animals—above all, her cat Mimi, which she doted on. ("Poor Mimi . . . impressed Lenin tremendously," she writes after a visit in 1911. "She also flirted with him, rolled on her back and behaved enticingly toward him, but when he tried to approach her she whacked him with a paw and snarled like a tiger.") Indeed, her tenderness towards animals can sound like another face of her compassion for the poor and oppressed. The connection is almost explicit in a letter she wrote to Sophie in December 1917, describing the arrival at her prison of a military wagon pulled by water buffaloes:

The soldier accompanying the wagon, a brutal fellow, began flailing at the animals so fiercely with the blunt end of the whip handle that the attendant on duty indignantly took him to task, asking him: Had he no pity for the animals? "No one has pity for us humans," he answered with an evil smile, and started in again, beating them harder than ever . . . [the buffalo had] precisely the expression of a child that has been punished and doesn't know why or what

for . . . No one can flinch more painfully on behalf of a beloved brother than I flinched in my helplessness over this mute suffering.

Reading *The Letters*, however, it becomes clear that Luxemburg would have been hugely, and rightly, offended to be thought of as merely compassionate. That mute buffalo might be her version of Bontshe the Silent, but she herself was anything but meek. On the contrary, she was more like Peretz's judge, urging the workers of the world to turn it upside down.

As it happens, Peretz makes one fleeting, and highly revealing, appearance in the biography of Luxemburg by Elzbieta Ettinger. A Polish socialist named Radwanski paid a visit to Luxemburg, and mentioned that he had taught himself Yiddish in order to communicate with the Jewish workers. Her response was furious: "Here is another madman, another goy who learned the Yiddish jargon." This led to a denunciation of "literature in jargon," and in particular "Peretz, that lunatic, who has the temerity to insult Heine with translation from the beautiful German language to that old-Swabian dialect, corrupted by a smattering of Hebrew words and garbled vernacular Polish."

This disdain for Yiddish as a "jargon" was typical of the educated Jewish bourgeoisie of Luxemburg's generation. She was born in 1871 as Rozalia Luksenburg, the youngest daughter of an assimilated Jewish family. Her mother, Lina Loewenstein, could allegedly trace her family line through seventeen generations of rabbis, all the way back to the 12<sup>th</sup>-century commentator Zerachya Halevi. But Lina's sacred

texts were Goethe and Schiller, and the children were raised speaking Polish, not Yiddish. In Warsaw, where the family moved when she was two years old, Rosa attended a Russian-language gymnasium.

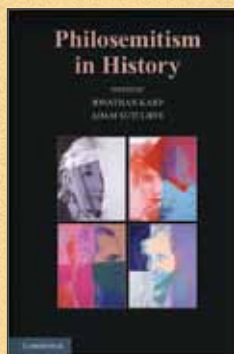
Already as a young girl, Luxemburg was involved in underground socialist politics. She once chided the ten-year-old daughter of a comrade, "At your age I didn't play with dolls, I made the revolution." This may have been an exaggeration, but only a slight one: she was only eighteen when she had to flee Poland to escape arrest. (The story goes that she won over the border guard by saying that she was running away from her family, who were trying to prevent her from converting to Catholicism.) From 1889 until the end of her life, Luxemburg lived in exile—first in Switzerland, where she helped found a small Marxist party called the Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania (SDKPiL), then in Germany, where she became a leader of the much bigger and more influential Social Democratic Party (SPD).

*The Letters* offers a wonderfully intimate view of Luxemburg as a young intellectual and politician on the rise. In her ambitions and hesitations, she could be any young man or woman from the provinces, newly arrived in the big city. In 1898, writing to Leo Jogiches, her lover and fellow SDKPiL leader, Luxemburg boasted of her triumphs in socialist Berlin:

Incidentally, I'm making a very big impression here—at least on my landlady—and what is most astonishing, everyone sees me as being extraordinarily young, and they're amazed that I'm already so mature . . . I feel as though I

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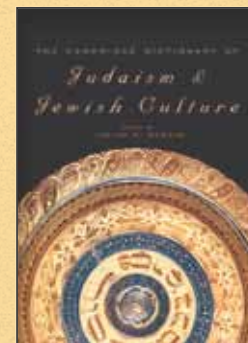
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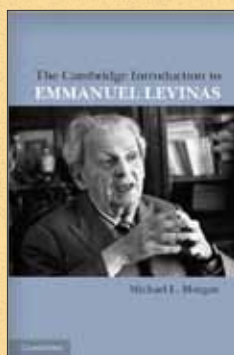


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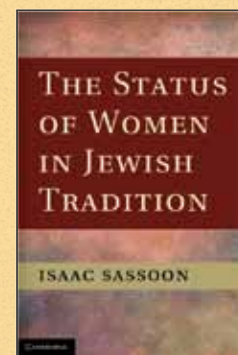


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have arrived here as a complete stranger and all alone, to “conquer Berlin,” and having laid eyes on it, I now feel anxious in the face of its cold power, completely indifferent to me.

The anxiety she kept to herself; it was her preternatural confidence that impressed the leaders of the SPD. Young, foreign, and female, still uneasy with the German language, Luxemburg made her name with blistering articles in the Party press and speeches at Party congresses. From the beginning, she fought for the two principles that defined her political creed. The first was her commitment to revolution, which put her at odds with the reformist tendencies in the rather staid SPD. In a series of articles, she savaged Eduard Bernstein, the “revisionist” socialist who argued that reforming capitalism was more important than overthrowing it. History, Luxemburg remained certain to the end, was on the side of the workers’ revolution—even though the revolution, like the Messiah, kept on not coming. Her very last article, published in January 1919 after the failure of the Spartacus uprising in Berlin, declared: “The whole road of socialism—so far as revolutionary struggles are concerned—is paved with nothing but thunderous defeats. Yet, at the same time, history marches inexorably, step by step, toward final victory!”

Luxemburg’s second principle, a corollary of the first, was that class always trumped nation as a political force. Nationalism, she insisted, was a purely bourgeois ideology, which the proletariat could never really share; the workers’ only loyalty was to the international working class. This belief pitted the SKDPiL against the much more popular Polish Socialist Party (PPS), which combined socialism with a commitment to the independence of Poland. Luxemburg’s doctoral thesis, *The Industrial Development of Poland*, used economics to argue that Polish independence was actually impossible, thanks to the interdependence of the Polish and Russian economies. “The struggle for the restoration of Poland [is] hopelessly utopian,” she wrote in 1905. The only solution to Polish problems was “a socialist system that, by abolishing class oppression, would do away with all forms of oppression, including national, once and for all.”

It did not escape anyone’s notice that Luxemburg, like Jogiches and most of the other leading figures in the SDKPiL, was Jewish, or that this might have something to do with her and their failure to share in the national aspirations of most Poles. In *The Letters*, it’s possible to trace the fallout of an especially vicious campaign that was launched against her in 1910, when a Polish newspaper used obscene anti-Semitic rhetoric to discredit the SDKPiL. Luxemburg’s party, the paper said, was “tied by race and family to the rest of the Jews; these purely an-

thropological ties are so strong that anyone who dares to question the ideology of any Jew is immediately confronted by an alliance of a Talmud Jew, a socialist Jew, and a liberal Jew.”

In response, Luxemburg solicited letters of support from leading Western European socialists. Writing to a Belgian party leader, she explains, “the entire liberal, progressive press has abandoned itself to an all-out orgy of anti-Semitism . . . As you see, it is a Dreyfus case in miniature.” Yet in the articles Luxemburg herself wrote about the Dreyfus Affair, it is striking how consistently she refused to view the case in Jewish terms. In an 1899 article about the Affair, for instance, she describes “militarism, chauvinism-nationalism, anti-Semitism, and clericalism” as “direct enemies of the socialist proletariat.” Even explicit anti-Semitism, it appears, cannot really be directed against the Jews, only against the proletariat; class, not nation or religion, is the only genuine reality. (The editors of *The Letters* comically share this willful blindness: a footnote explaining the Dreyfus Affair does not use the word “Jewish” even once, and defines the anti-Dreyfusards simply as the “chauvinistic

camp of reaction backed by the big bourgeoisie.”)

To read *The Letters* closely, in fact, is to see how dramatically wrong the anti-Semitic slander against Luxemburg was. Not only did she not represent a secret alliance between religious, liberal, and radical Jews, she was actually much more hostile to Jewishness, in any form, than she was to other expressions of nationhood, especially Polish ones. Writing to Jogiches about a visit to Upper Silesia in 1898, she rhapsodizes about Poland in terms that are anything but scientifically Marxist:

The surroundings here have made the strongest and most emphatic impression: cornfields, meadows, woods, broad expanses, and Polish speech and Polish peasants all around. You have no idea how happy it all makes me. I feel as though I’ve been born anew, as though I have the ground under my feet again. I can’t get enough of listening to them speak, and I can’t breathe in enough of the air here!

Compare her reaction to “Polish speech” with her reaction to “Yiddish jargon,” and you can gauge Luxemburg’s profound discomfort with everything Jewish. This hostility crops up again and again in *The Letters*. For instance, when she visits a resort in 1904, her pleasure at encountering “a genuine [party] comrade, a living and breathing one from Berlin,” turns to pain when she discovers that “unfortunately, he was also an even closer comrade in the sense of the faith of our fathers.” (“In such cases our forefathers’ custom would have been to utter a brief *mazel tov*,” she adds wryly.)

This disdain had political consequences as well as personal ones. Early on, when Luxemburg’s SDKPiL was a minor party whose leaders were mostly in exile, the Jewish Bund was one of the biggest socialist parties in Eastern Europe. Other Russian and Polish party leaders wanted to make an accommodation with the Bundists; Luxemburg disagreed, in accordance with her internationalist views. But there is more than principle at work in her unusually abusive descriptions of Bund leaders as “rabble” and “the shabbiest of political horsetraders.” That last word, the editors of *The Letters* note, is a translation of “*Schacherpolitiker*,” but they don’t explain that *schacher* was a word with strong anti-Semitic connotations, and had been used as such by Marx in his notorious essay “On the Jewish Question.”

Luxemburg’s fullest statement on the Bund comes in a letter to a Polish comrade in 1901:

Well, now, to put it briefly, this entire “Bund” . . . what they deserve *at the least* is to have any upstanding, respectable person throw them down the stairs the minute they open the door (and for this purpose it is best to live on the fourth floor) . . . they are individuals who are made up of two elements: stupidity and cunning. They *are incapable* of speaking two words to *anyone* without having the concealed intention of robbing them (in a moral sense).

Luxemburg’s political career was defined, in large part, by her struggle against the PPS, but she never writes about the Polish socialists in such venomously personal terms. It is unmistakable that Jewishness—even in the anti-Zionist form of the Bund’s Jewish socialism—provoked in Luxemburg



Rosa Luxemburg in prison. (Courtesy of Verso.)



Die Rote Fahne (The Red Flag) by Giangiacomo Spadari, 1973-1974. (© The Gallery Collection/Corbis.)



a visceral need to disassociate herself. Seen in this light, there is something more than simple humanitarianism at work in the famous lines she wrote from prison in 1917:

What do you want with this theme of the “special suffering of the Jews”? I am just as much concerned with the poor victims on the rubber plantations of Putumayo, the Blacks in Africa with whose corpses the Europeans play catch . . . Oh that “sublime stillness of eternity,” in which so many cries of anguish have faded away *unheard*, they resound within me so strongly that I have no special place in my heart for the [Jewish] ghetto. I feel at home in the entire world, wherever there are clouds and birds and human tears.”

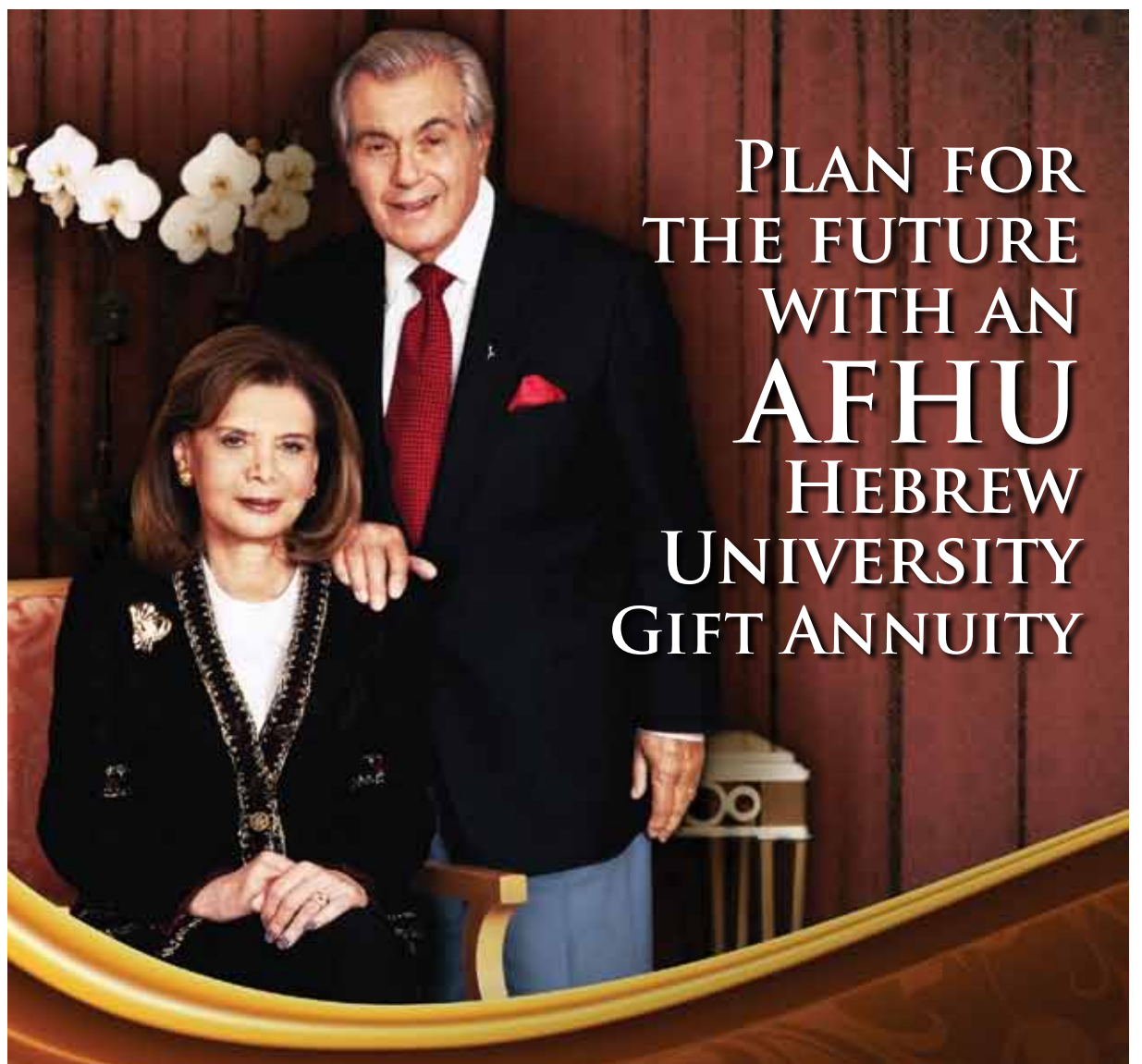
The crowning irony is that these lines were addressed to Mathilde Wurm, who was Jewish, as were almost all of Luxemburg’s closest friends and party comrades: Leo Jogiches, and her later, younger lover Kostya Zetkin, and Luise Kautsky, and Sophie Liebknecht, and on and on.

According to Arendt, writing about Luxemburg’s “peer group” in *Men in Dark Times*, “these Jews . . . stood outside all social ranks, Jewish or non-Jewish, hence had no conventional prejudices whatsoever, and had developed, in this truly splendid isolation, their own code of honor.” Even today, there are many Jews who admire this definition of Jewishness as a universal humanism, which prides itself on indifference to specifically Jewish interests. But *The Letters* lends less support to Arendt’s view of Luxemburg than to the view of J.L. Talmon, who wrote that Luxemburg’s “all-pervasive revolutionary internationalism appears to me an expression of the Jewish malaise of an outsider.”

More, it represents a failure of empiricism—an inability to reckon with the factors that shape political and psychological reality, for Jews and non-Jews alike. This failure exacted a large toll on Luxemburg’s political work, and falsified her hopeful prophecies. She viewed the Eastern European proletariat in wholly idealized Marxist terms: “The highest idealism in the interest of the collectivity, the strictest self-discipline, the truest public spirit of the masses are the moral foundations of socialist society, just as stupidity, egotism, and corruption are the moral foundations of capitalist society.”

But this was the common people as it should be, not as it was. One might say that Luxemburg failed to connect her proletarian ideal with the real soldier she saw whipping a helpless buffalo—a man brutalized by the war that was supposed to have radicalized him. The same mistake is what allowed her to tell Sophie Liebknecht, in late 1917, that the Russian Revolution could not possibly be dangerous for the Jews: “As far as pogroms against Jews are concerned, all rumors of that kind are directly *fabricated*. In Russia the time of pogroms has passed once and for all. The strength of the workers and of socialism there is much too strong for that. The revolution has cleared the air so much of miasmas and stuffy atmosphere of reaction that a new Kishinev has become forever passé. I can sooner imagine—pogroms against Jews here in Germany.” She was half right.

Adam Kirsch is the author of *Why Trilling Matters* (Yale University Press), forthcoming in October.



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# The Birthright Challenge

BY PHILIP GETZ

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## TEN DAYS OF BIRTHRIGHT ISRAEL: A JOURNEY IN YOUNG ADULT IDENTITY

by Leonard Saxe and Barry Chazan  
Brandeis University Press, 256 pp., \$24.95

## TOURS THAT BIND: DIASPORA, PILGRIMAGE, AND ISRAELI BIRTHRIGHT TOURISM

by Shaul Kelner  
New York University Press, 261 pp., \$35

## HOW TO UNDERSTAND ISRAEL IN 60 DAYS OR LESS

by Sarah Glidden  
Vertigo, 208 pp., \$19.99

## WHAT WE BROUGHT BACK: JEWISH LIFE AFTER BIRTHRIGHT, REFLECTIONS BY ALUMNI OF TAGLIT-BIRTHRIGHT ISRAEL TRIPS

edited by Wayne Hoffman  
Toby Press, 220 pp., \$14.95

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This fall, tens of thousands of American Jewish college students are returning to their campuses after enjoying an all-expenses-paid trip to Israel. For ten days, they traversed the country by bus, visited its holy sites, and hiked its mountains, all while being put up in hotels with bountiful buffet dinners. They were only the most recent beneficiaries of Birthright Israel, the \$600-million philanthropic initiative that has treated more than 260,000 diaspora Jews between the ages of 18 and 26 to educational tours of Israel since 1999.

In a little over a decade, Birthright Israel (referred to in Hebrew as “Taglit,” meaning discovery) has become one of the most well known Jewish organizations, and its trips a rite of passage for members of the tribe. Yet a widespread misconception—that Birthright’s main purpose is to encourage participants to make *aliyah* (move to Israel), or at least become Zionist activists—persists, even in the minds of many alumni. My own Birthright experience led me to make the same mistake when, on the third night of the trip, my forty-person tour group joined several thousands of our peers for what Birthright aptly calls its “megaevent.” A spectacular hybrid between a political rally and a dance party, the megaevent brings together scores of Birthright groups for an evening of welcome, thanks, and grinding to Israeli hip hop. In our case, the emcees of the evening were a knock-out immigrant couple (he from Brooklyn, she from Kiev), and the keynote speaker Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Towards the end of his impassioned “Welcome Home” address, the Prime Minister encouraged all of us to follow in the couple’s footsteps by finding a spouse on the dance floor—and making *aliyah*. But it was all a bit misleading.

While the Prime Minister’s message was a classically Zionist negation of Jewish life in the diaspora, it is precisely diaspora Jewish life that Birthright exists to boost. As sociologist Shaul Kelner writes in his prize-winning *Tours That Bind: Diaspora, Pilgrimage, and Israeli Birthright Tourism*, Birthright is a “*diaspora-building* enterprise” whose “raison d’être is to ensure the continued existence of vibrant, Israel-oriented Jewish communities abroad.”

Initiated in the mid-1990s by Seagram Company chairman Charles Bronfman and hedge fund manager Michael Steinhardt, Birthright was a direct response to the disheartening revelations of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS): rapidly increasing rates of intermarriage, decreasing rates of Jewish community involvement, and weakening attachment to the State of Israel. Since research showed the extraordinary impact educational tours of Israel can have on the Jewish identity of young people, Bronfman and Steinhardt decided to make the experience much more widely available. But, as Kelner makes clear, the idea has never been to persuade participants to immigrate:

The ticket that Birthright Israel provides is round-trip, not one-way. In this sense, although it is involved in bringing Jews to Israel, it is also very much in the business of flying them back out . . . The exhortations to make *aliyah* voiced by cabinet ministers at Taglit megaevents must be understood against this backdrop.

When I think back to the hikes, the discussions over dinner, and of course, the many hours on the bus, I realize that not a single Birthright staff member echoed the Prime Minister’s philomigratory message. Rather, they stuck closely to

the organization’s mission statement: “to diminish the growing division between Israel and Jewish communities . . . and to strengthen participants’ personal Jewish identity and connection to the Jewish people.”

*Tours that Bind* is only one example of the growing corpus of literature about Birthright. In the past three years, four books have been published on the topic, and since 2000, Brandeis University’s Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS), under the direction of Leonard Saxe, has produced regular evaluation reports that measure the impact the trips have had on participants. The first of these reports, published in August 2000, was based on information gathered by participant observers who accompanied the first trips in Winter 1999, and then conducted follow-up interviews with participants. Their conclusion: “this experiment in nurturing individual and collective Jewish identity has had very positive effects, at least in the short run . . . Whether the experience has long-term impact in shaping the Jewish engagement of young people is a question for future research.” Subsequent CMJS reports have been, on the whole, similarly upbeat.

This optimism also characterizes much of Saxe’s own writing about Birthright, including his 2009 book *Ten Days of Birthright Israel: A Journey in Young Adult Identity*, co-authored with Barry Chazan, the architect of Birthright’s educational curriculum. The two provide an informative insiders’ account of how Birthright has become an agency that works with 30 different organizations to design and administer trips tailored to different types of young Jews (religious, secular, LGBT, environmentalist, etc.) from 56 countries. But as Saxe and



Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu greets Birthright participants at a Taglit-Birthright megaevent, Jerusalem, January, 2011. (Courtesy of Amos Ben Gershon, GPO, Israel.)



Chazan are the first to acknowledge, this account is not without bias. “To be sure,” they write, “our objectivity has been affected, possibly even compromised by our involvement in the program design. But the central reason that this account is so positive is that we have been able to . . . watch thousands of young Jews take their journey through the Birthright Israel curriculum.”

Shaul Kelner, as it happens, led a team of those first participant observers in 1999, and continued

## Birthright has been an incredible success, but will it change the trajectory of Jewish diaspora life?

to research Birthright under the auspices of CMJS until 2004. Although a careful student of both Chazan and Saxe, he finds himself unable to share their euphoria. “After having spent the first years of this study trying to understand how diaspora homeland tourism succeeds in accomplishing its sponsors’ goals,” he writes in the book’s preface, “I spent the latter years trying to understand how it fails to accomplish them.” Drawing upon the sociological sub-field of “tourism studies,” Kelner takes us on a tour of tours, beginning each chapter, save the concluding one, with a depiction of a Birthright moment—a hike up Masada, a night in a Bedouin tent, a visit to the Western Wall—and uses it as a springboard to explain which aspects of tourism are at play.

His discussion of the *mifgash* (shared encounter with Israeli peers), for instance, goes beyond that of his predecessors and challenges their conclusions. Most Birthright groups are joined for several days by a troop of IDF soldiers who are often dressed in civilian clothes. This encounter, or *mifgash*, “has become known as ‘the jewel in the crown’ of the Birthright Israel trip,” according to Saxe and Chazan, and “the most striking way possible to exemplify Israel’s diversity.” Kelner’s view of the *mifgash* is more skeptical. He observes that it is rarely a pluralist moment because trip organizers “often select and prepare” participants “who will voluntarily reinforce the program’s core messages.” Kelner may be even more right about this than he realizes, particularly with regard to Birthright’s commitment to the diaspora. Sometime during the two days I spent talking with Yaeli, the soldier I befriended on the trip, she frankly expressed her own desire to live outside of Israel.

The open secret about the *mifgash* is that it creates a highly sexualized and flirtatious atmosphere, an element completely, perhaps deliberately, ignored in Saxe and Chazan’s book. Kelner, by contrast, emphasizes the way in which this atmosphere favors interaction between female tourists and Israeli male soldiers. There is “a mutuality of objectification,” he explains, “as male Israeli soldiers and American women fantasize each other as embodiments of macho sensuality, on the one hand, and feminine aggressiveness and promiscuity, on the other.” Why no such mutuality of objectification underlies how female soldiers relate to the American male tourists, Kelner doesn’t attempt to answer, but it certainly is not because the American men fail to fantasize. If there is something to Kelner’s claim that the sexual interaction is

“rooted in fantasies of eroticized exotic Others,” then perhaps we can see why a sensitive American male, for example, might be a non-eroticized other. While sensitivity may be an attractive quality to women seeking a committed relationship, the ephemeral nature of a five-day encounter with foreign tourists is not likely to encourage the female soldiers to think of the American visitors in these terms. Kelner may be overstating the whole phenomenon, but it doesn’t change the fact that these rules of attraction, while intensifying the experience for some, mean that young, Reform Jewish men—the demographic statistically most ambivalent about Jewishness—tend to get less out of the *mifgash* than do their female counterparts.

Kelner devotes most of his attention to the way in which the Birthright tourist encounters Israel “as a theater of thematically coherent signifiers.” Birthright, explains Kelner, employs the tools and symbols of the tourism trade—themed environments that display a specific lifestyle or period, guides who frame the narrative of the trip, souvenirs that represent the local style—in a way that encourages participants to ascribe meaning to the place, and to connect that meaning to their lives back home. And it is specifically the “semiotics of difference,” the signs that drive home to Birthrighters the distinction between the Jewish homeland and its diaspora, that prompts the young tourists to ponder the nature of their Jewish identity outside Israel.

Unfortunately, Kelner has brought along not only the insights of his field, but the academic jargon and the hyper-explanatory prose that come with it. Take, for example, this qualification:

From a retrospective vantage point, the tour cannot logically be said to have changed a life, considering that none of the alternative possible futures were ever lived out. Looking backward, we can speak of diaspora homeland tours as life changing only in a narrative sense, to the extent that former tourists position the trips as turning points in their stories of self.

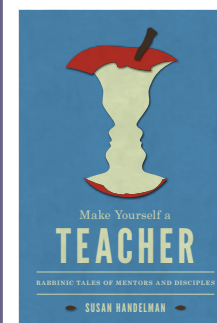
Kelner’s point here is not about diaspora homeland tours at all. It is as true about Birthright as it is about the prom or the SAT or the French Revolution.

Statements like this read as patronizing when juxtaposed with the long, verbatim block quotations from participants—studded with “like”s and “totally”s—that appear throughout the book. Though it’s clear that Kelner, like Saxe and Chazan, has developed a genuine affection for his subjects, this doesn’t prevent them from coming across, on the whole, as naïve, impressionable, and callow.

Sarah Glidden is one Birthright alumna who believes such characterizations. Her autobiographical graphic novel *How to Understand Israel in 60 Days or Less* tells the story of a left-of-center American Jew with a “goy” boyfriend” (Glidden’s words) named Jamil who spends her 2007 trip thinking deeply and honestly about everything she sees, from the Western Wall to the separation barrier. Of the Bedouin village visited by almost every Birthright group, she says, “it’s as if a piece of Epcot center broke apart from the mainland and somehow came to rest in the middle of the Negev.” It is a keen observation, and one that complements Kelner’s less vivid reflection that “although the Disneyland metaphor is not a perfect one, it helps reveal the fundamental nature of

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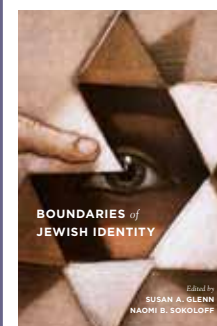
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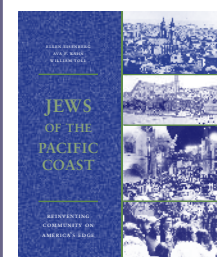


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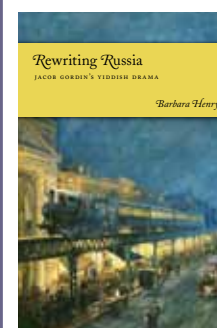
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Sarah Glidden entering a Bedouin tent on Birthright Israel. (Courtesy of *How To Understand Israel In 60 Days Or Less* by Sarah Glidden and Vertigo/DC Comics.)

the tourist engagement with Israel, which ultimately is built around the consumption of themed environments.” Glidden’s book can be read as a smart, whimsical companion to Kelner’s.

Perhaps the most delightful aspect of the book is the sincerity with which Glidden reflects not only on the sites she sees and the emotions she feels. At various points, she lets us in on the ongoing trial she is staging in her head about whether or not Birthright is trying to brainwash her. Walking around the city of Holon, she realizes, “The feeling of foreignness, the sticking-out-like-a-sore-thumbness that I normally have while travelling. Somehow I don’t feel it here.”

It is emotional moments like this one that Kelner has set out to investigate. Referring to a female participant’s statement that in Israel “everything seems to have meaning,” he comments, “Marx would call this fetishism.” Whether he needs Marx to make the point or not, Kelner is right to note that Birthright treats its participants as consumers:

Israel experience travel encourages the construction of diasporic Jewish identities

as consumer identities to be realized through the consumption of symbols, products, and experiences that are commodified in an Israeli market. The tours create an environment for expressing and developing an identification with the Jewish homeland and with Jewish culture through consumer acts like purchasing souvenirs, eating foods, viewing films, visiting museums, shooting photographs, and so on.

This helps to explain the gap between the extraordinary impact the trips have had on the attitudes of participants on the one hand, and the underwhelming influence they have had on their day-to-day behavior on the other. In Kelner’s words, “the trips generally have not met with unbridled success in translating the enthusiasm they generate into sustained, broad-based participation in Jewish religious, organizational, and political organizations.” Why not? Because “the tours primarily engage people in—and hence prepare people for—a narrow Jewish behavioral paradigm centered on consumption.”

Despite Kelner’s attempt to soften this conclusion, prefacing it as he does by saying that he is “doubly

wary of offering a post hoc explanation of a non-finding,” I would take it a step further. Treating Birthright participants as consumers has its limitations, but they aren’t really ordinary consumers, because they haven’t paid for the trip. If Birthright exists to persuade the next generation of Jews to take responsibility for the future of Jewish diaspora life, telling them that an all-expenses-paid trip is their, well, birthright, may have unintended consequences.

Nonetheless, Birthright has been an incredible success. The CMJS report published in February of this year (which excludes Orthodox respondents) showed that participants are 51 percent more likely than non-participants to marry a Jewish person. When co-founder Michael Steinhardt is introduced to Birthright participants and alumni, he often asks them whether they met their future spouse on the trip—and has also offered free honeymoons to those who have.

However, the report also showed that alumni below the age of 30 are actually less likely to be married than their peers who did not go on the trip. Since participants are more likely than non-participants to want to marry a Jew, they may “spend a longer time searching for a suitable partner and place more value on a non-Jewish partner’s willingness to convert to Judaism,” or so speculates the report. There is probably truth to this, but it raises (or evades) an obvious question: Is finding a nice Jewish boy or girl really so hard? The answer is probably “yes” when participants return to social circles that are not predominantly Jewish. They may find themselves searching for a Jewish spouse without having really made their lives more Jewish, anchored in the Jewish community.

In creating Birthright Israel NEXT, an alumni network whose mission is, in part, “to deepen their personal commitments to Jewish life, and find or form a community where Jewish responsibility, learning, and celebration thrive,” Birthright is trying to address this issue. The organization claims to “have attracted 70,000 young Jewish adults to cultural and educational events and home-based Shabbat meals,” just over a quarter of the number of all Birthright alumni. Kelner’s book, focused specifically as it is on the dynamics of the Birthright tour, says nothing about this initiative, but *What We Brought Back*, a small new collection of “reflections by alumni,” does.

The volume is eclectic, with essays, poems, plays, photographs, and even a comic strip. There is Ruby Marez, “a Puerto Rican, Panamanian, Polish, Russian, Spanish, African, Lithuanian, Palestinian, Jewish, first-generation American” comedian from St. Louis who returns from Birthright and studies at NEXT’s Jewish Enrichment Center in Manhattan. We meet M. K. Hall, the Harvard J.D.-turned-creative writer who completes her Jewish conversion classes only after the trip. There is even Jordan Fliegel, who returns to Israel two years after his Birthright trip to play basketball for Hapoel Migdal Jerusalem. It is a charming little anthology that gives testimony to Birthright’s power to enrich and even change individual lives. What it does not and cannot show is whether Birthright will change the trajectory of Jewish life in the diaspora.

Philip Getz is assistant editor of the Jewish Review of Books.



# The Nation of Israel?

BY RUTH GAVISON

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## 'AM KE-KHOL HA-'AMIM: LIKRAT HAKAMATAH SHEL REPUBLIKAH YISRE'ELIT (A NATION LIKE ALL THE NATIONS: TOWARDS THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN ISRAELI REPUBLIC)

by Moshe Berent  
Carmel, 346 pp., 110 NIS

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The famous phrase that serves as the title of this book has long been a touchstone of debates about the purpose of Zionism and the character of the State of Israel. For some Zionists, the transformation of the scattered and oppressed Jewish people into “a nation like all the nations” has represented the epitome of their aspirations. For others, these words have denoted a debased and impoverished version of the Zionist ideal, one that falls far short of the goal of being a “light unto the nations,” let alone the first stage of our redemption. The author of this book, the Israeli social scientist Moshe Berent, belongs to the former group. He wants above all to see the State of Israel catch up to the Western states on which it ought to be modeling itself. In order to do so, he believes, it will have to abandon its self-declared but unfortunately self-contradictory aim of being a “Jewish and democratic” state. Indeed, it will have to cease to be a Jewish state altogether and become an “Israeli republic.”

To people who keep a close watch on Israeli political discourse, none of this may sound very new. Readers with long memories may wonder if Berent's work marks a return of the notorious “Canaanism” of the 1950s. To others, Berent may sound like nothing more than a run-of-the-mill post-Zionist who has figured out a new way to package the familiar idea of a single “state of all its citizens.” But Berent does not fall so easily into either of these categories. If one had to pigeonhole the man, it would be most accurate to identify him as someone who has followed in the footsteps of his teacher, Joseph Agassi.

A philosopher married to the granddaughter of Martin Buber, Agassi took his bearings in Israeli politics from Hillel Kook, a.k.a. Peter Bergson, who was himself the less than orthodox nephew of the celebrated Abraham Isaac Kook. Best remembered in the United States as the leader of the “Bergson Boys,” who during World War II loudly and unsuccessfully demanded more vigorous action on behalf of Hitler's victims, Kook was someone who also, in Agassi's words, “demanded all his life that we establish an Israeli republic that will be a normal nation-state in the Western liberal democratic pattern.”

In the preface to his new book, Berent lauds Hillel Kook as “the last link” in the chain of political Zionists that stretches back to Theodor Herzl. He credits Agassi with having supplied the philosophical argumentation that enabled him to “see that nationalism is not only compatible with liberal principles, but can

serve as a most important instrument for the solution of political problems in general and the problems of Israel in particular.” He also takes a bow in the direction of Ernest Gellner, whom he describes as having taught that “nationalism is a necessary precondition

**Berent may sound like a typical liberal Zionist, but he is more of an Israeli nationalist than a Jewish one.**

for the establishment of liberal democracy.” Berent describes himself as an Israeli patriot, and applauds Zionism's great success in creating an Israeli nation. He only regrets that this victory has not been accompanied by the formation of a truly Israeli—and not merely Jewish—state and national identity.

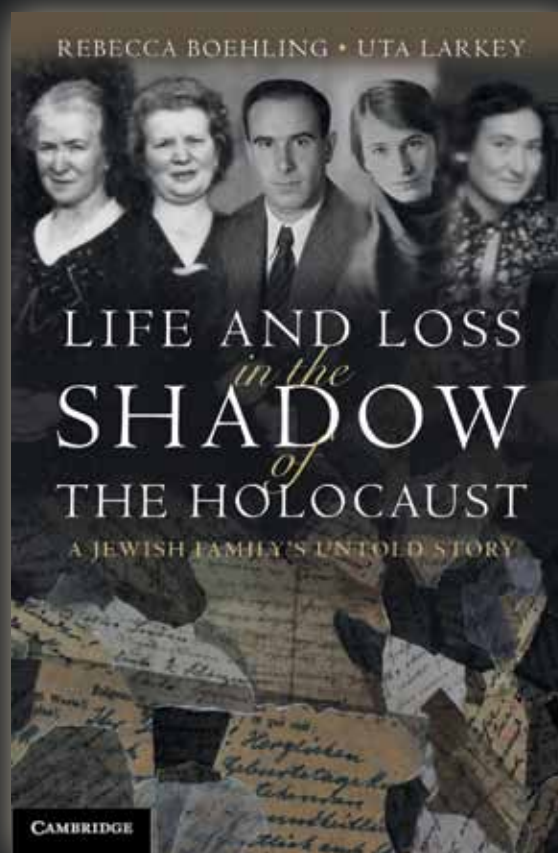
Aware that this kind of language could lead to him being mistaken for one of the “Canaanites,” Berent makes a special point of parting company with them. He acknowledges that his thinking resembles theirs insofar as it concentrates on the He-

brew culture of modern Israel, not Judaism or Jewish identity, as the force that ought to bind together all the citizens of the State of Israel. Unlike the Canaanites, however, he refuses to spurn the Jewish past in favor of some deeper and more ancient Middle Eastern cultural identity, and unabashedly recognizes that Israel is the product of the “historical Jewish people.” While he admits to being, in a certain sense, a “post-Zionist,” he strongly criticizes most post-Zionists for advocating the creation of a state that would assume an entirely “neutral” or “universalist” cultural stance devoid of all particularistic elements. This historically unprecedented notion of a “non-national state” leaves no room, Berent complains, for Israelis to exercise their democratic right to cultural self-determination.

So far, Berent might sound like a typical liberal Zionist. But it is important to observe that it is not the Jewish people's right to self-determination that he upholds, but the *Israeli* people's. While Jews constitute by far the largest component of the population of the State of Israel, this does not entitle them, as far as Berent is concerned, to have a Jewish state. In a normal nation-state, there must be a complete match between the *demos* (body of citizens) and the nation. Israel must therefore be an Israeli state, one whose

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citizenship is open to all without any distinction being made on the basis of ethnic origin or religion. The people who make up this *demos*, and only these people, ought to be considered members of the “Israeli nation.” Jews who are citizens of other states are members of their own civic nations and do not belong to the Israeli nation. By defining itself, as it now does, as the state of the Jewish people, Israel positions itself improperly with regard to foreign Jews at the same time that it discriminates against its non-Jewish citizens, and even against its non-religious Jewish citizens. But if Israel were to redefine itself as the state of the Israeli nation, it would have every right to utilize governmental means to fortify the state’s primarily Hebrew culture, a culture largely derived from—but by no means identical with—Jewish culture.

Such a transformation of Israel would bring with it, according to Berent, many theoretical and practical advantages. For one thing, it would allow Israel’s Arab minority to integrate itself fully for the first time into the Israeli nation-state, in which it could be included while holding onto its separate cultural identity. Not only would this be good in itself but it would also contribute greatly to the restoration of Israel’s legitimacy in the eyes of its critics around the world. The redefinition of Israel would also contribute significantly to the improvement of relations between Israeli Jews and Jews living in other countries, Jews who feel deeply and primarily connected to the non-Jewish nations of which they form a part but who nevertheless wish to maintain a special bond with Israel. It would likewise diminish the constant pressure placed on diaspora Jews to immigrate to Israel, especially those who regard themselves as Zionists.

The price that the Jews of Israel will have to pay in order to obtain these advantages is not, in Berent’s

eyes, a particularly high one. The secular Jewish national identity that they will need to abandon is not an age-old possession but a modern contrivance, the product of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century circumstances and dilemmas. As such, it was perfectly legitimate in its time. Berent does not, like Shlomo Sand and other post- and anti-Zionists, probe the roots of modern Jewish nationalism in order to discredit it. But he does regard it as obsolete and utterly disposable, an obstacle to progress in Israel. “It is important to remember,” he writes, “that national identities are not primary and are susceptible to change by constitutional means.” When Israel’s Jews “come to decide about their national identity, one has to persuade them to modify this identity and to revamp it in the way that such things are done in Western countries, to make it capable of encompassing within it non-Jews as well, and to show them that the need for a broad and inclusive national self-definition is an Israeli national interest of the highest order.”

This metamorphosis will not be as hard as it might sound. Indeed, Berent argues, it is to some degree already underway. He sees abundant signs, for instance, that even in an era when the old ideology of the “melting pot” has largely given way to a more multicultural outlook, “Israelification” remains a potent force, even among the country’s Arabs. “Here there is the interesting phenomenon of a community,” writes Berent, “that is not officially counted as part of the nation, i.e. that does not belong to the political nation, but more and more is identified and identifies itself with the sociological nation.” What is necessary, Berent argues, is that this process be brought to the level of consciousness and completed through the adoption of a new concept of the political nation.

**B**erent has presented a well researched and elaborately argued case for radical change in the State of Israel. It is one that is not altogether far-fetched. That some “Israelification” of the country’s Arabs is really taking place is indisputable, and it is not an unwelcome development. Whatever Berent says about the absence in Israel of any conception of a political entity that includes all of the state’s citizens, such an idea is very much present in Israeli life and discourse. It finds abundant expression in law, in administrative measures, and in Supreme Court decisions. I would not say that the state of affairs is entirely satisfactory. But there is a vast distance between deviations from an accepted ideal of civic equality and a situation in which such an ideal is unknown. What actually exists in Israel is a very delicate balance between integration and collaboration among Jews and Arabs, which creates both a common “Israelification” of the members of the two peoples and strongly defined areas of national and cultural separation.

This is the way that most Israeli Jews want things to be. Whatever aspirations some of the original Zionists may have had to distill a new Hebrew nation from the Jewish people, most Israeli Jews today believe that their state exists in order to create a framework in which it will be possible to live a full Jewish—not Israeli—life. A Jewish state provides the best possible arena, if not necessarily the only arena, for such a life, however one might choose to live it, and it is something that Israel’s Jews will not surrender willingly. As long as they constitute the large majority of the country’s population, and as long as they respect the individual and cultural rights of Israel’s minorities, they will have every right to refuse to do so.

For Israeli Arabs, too, Berent’s proposal may

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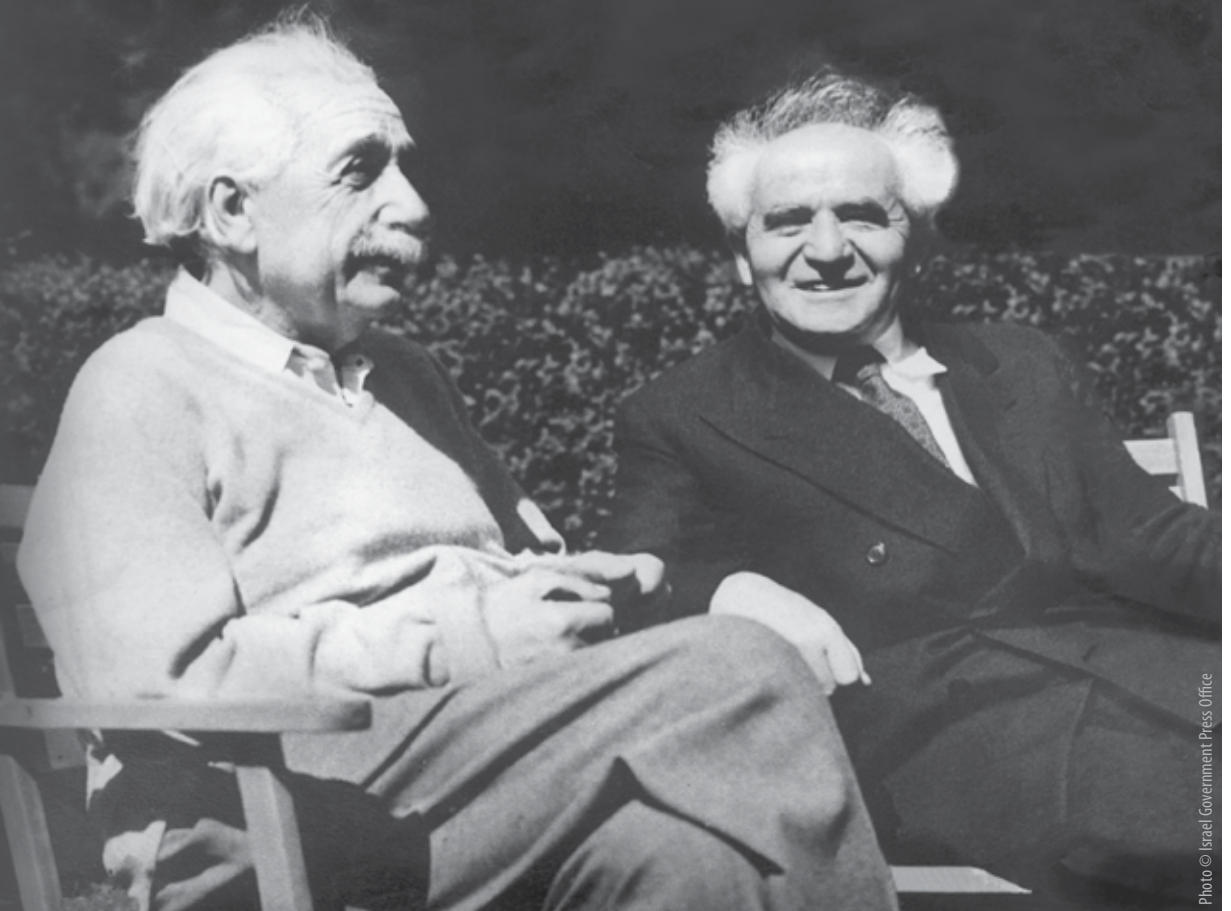


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represent something less desirable than the status quo, with all its rough spots. With their transformation into categorically undifferentiated members of the Israeli nation, they would acquire not only all the rights but all the duties of other Israeli citizens. They would retain the right to preserve their separate Arab culture, but they would also have the duty to serve in the IDF and to be ready to fight against Israel's Arab neighbors—or else, as Berent would have it, risk being deprived of citizenship. This prospect alone, it would seem to me, is enough to explain why Berent's notion of an Israeli republic is one that will not win the support of the Israeli Arab leadership. Arab intellectuals may happily cite his statements with regard to the impossibility of Israel being both Jewish and democratic, but they won't endorse his vision for the future.

Berent's solicitude for the Jews of the diaspora is

somewhat surprising. If he were consistent, it would seem, he would simply consign them to the foreign nations to which they now belong. But instead of disregarding them, he endeavors to liberate them from the dilemmas in which Jewish statehood supposedly places them. It doesn't appear to me, however, that that is what they want either, at least not those who wish to remain Jewish. Based on what I know about the committed Jews of the diaspora, I would expect that if Israel were to disavow its identity as a Jewish state, they would be left more than anything with a feeling that they had been orphaned, or perhaps divorced, but at any rate abandoned.

Despairing of the possibility of preserving a state that is both Jewish and democratic, Moshe Berent has advocated that Israel shed its Jewish character in order to perfect its democracy. While it is entitled, he says, to remain the nation-state of a particular

people, the people in question is not the one which created it but, rather, the one which the state itself has brought into being or, perhaps, has only begun to bring into being: the Israeli people. But what Berent proposes is not what today's Israelis—Jews, Arabs, or otherwise—now want. His solution, as he himself readily acknowledges, is one that has already been put forth and rejected, and there is every reason to expect that it will meet with the same fate again. If this book is at all worthy of note, it is only to the extent that its sketch of the road that we cannot take sheds some light on the one that we must travel instead.

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# The Audacity of Faith

BY YEHUDAH MIRSKY

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## BY FAITH ALONE: THE STORY OF RABBI YEHUDA AMITAL

by Elyashiv Reichner, translated by Elli Fischer  
Maggid/Koren Publishers, 377 pp., \$29.95

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**O**n May 27, 2005, some fifteen hundred of Rabbi Yehuda Amital's disciples and admirers gathered in Israel's International Convention Center to celebrate their teacher's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. Looking around at his former students, now leading rabbis, academics, activists, journalists, and soldiers, Amital, the *rosh yeshiva* (dean) of Yeshivat Har Etzion, was overcome by the thought of his passage from a Nazi labor camp to such a gathering, and spontaneously recited the *she-hecheyanu* blessing, praising God "who has granted us life and sustained us and permitted us to reach this time." Later in the day, a short film was screened in which Mordechai Breuer, doyen of Orthodox Bible scholars, was interviewed about his friend of 60 years. "Such powerful faith and powerful intellect, I never understood how they didn't clash, but with him, they didn't. I don't understand it even to this day."

By *Faith Alone: The Story of Rabbi Yehuda Amital*, Elyashiv Reichner's newly (and fluently) translated biography, is an attempt to understand an extraordinary man and his long, arduous path from a simple Jewish life in prewar Hungary to a unique and controversial place in Israeli religious and political life. It is essential reading not only for understanding Amital's own story and the history of Religious Zionism but also for its portrait of a religious virtuoso who combined deep faithfulness with great daring.

Amital was born Yehuda Klein in 1924, in the Transylvanian city of Grosswardein (Oradea), home to Ha-

sidim, acculturated and assimilated Jews, Jewish-Hungarian nationalists, and a large concentration of Hungary's Religious Zionists. After rudimentary schooling, he spent his childhood and adolescence in yeshiva, under the tutelage of Rabbi Chaim Yehuda Levi, who had studied in the great study halls of Lithuania and

## Yehuda Amital was a religious virtuoso who combined deep faithfulness with great daring.

brought their methods of conceptual analysis back to his native Hungary. At an early age, Amital discovered and was electrified by the writings of Abraham Isaac Kook, whose mix of passionate religious experience, Jewish nationalism, messianic fervor, and ethical universalism would set the terms for his later engagements.

His father was a tailor and he might well have become one too, had he not been forced to witness the murder of his culture. In May 1944, he was taken away to a brutal forced labor camp, but managed to sneak in an anthology of Kook's writings with him. His family was sent to Auschwitz. Having twice sworn during his time in the camp that if he survived he would study Torah in Jerusalem, home to his grandparents and two uncles, he made his way there after his liberation. He threw himself into his studies at the Hebron Yeshiva in Jerusalem, acquiring a reputation for fervent, independent-minded spirituality, and for his mastery of halakhic literature. (Rumor had it that he had thousands of lengthy rabbinic rulings memorized.) Eventually he moved to Rehovot, and, though a penniless, orphaned survivor from an undistinguished family, married into one of the most prominent rabbinic families of the time, by dint of his learning and piety (and personality).

The day after David Ben-Gurion declared Israel's independence, a Shabbat, Amital enlisted in the IDF. He fought in Latrun and in the Galilee in 1948, and founded a journal in which he published perhaps the first programmatic essay by anyone on being a Jewish soldier in a Jewish army. While savoring Jewish national self-defense in the wake of the Holocaust, he also projected Jewish law and values as a defense against the dehumanization and brutalization of wartime. In the Israeli assumption of Jewish responsibility for all of society, he saw the restoration of the primal force of biblical religion. His essay closed with Joshua's call to the people, "make yourselves holy, for tomorrow God will work wonders with you" (Joshua 3:5). A short while later he Hebraized his name to Amital, based on Micah 5:6: "And the remnant of Jacob will be among many nations (*amim*) like dew (*tal*) from God, like droplets on the grass . . ."

**T**hrough the 1950s, Amital taught in his father-in-law's yeshiva in Rehovot. In 1959, the two of them negotiated an arrangement (or *hesder*) whereby yeshiva students could alternate between military service and their studies. This arrangement blossomed into a widespread network of Religious Zionist educational institutions. In 1967, after the Six-Day War, Amital was asked to become the head of a new *hesder* yeshiva being established in the Judean hills near Bethlehem. The site of a number of (mostly religious) kibbutzim, Gush Etzion (the Etzion bloc) loomed large not only in biblical history but also in Israeli memory. After 1967, the children and survivors of the bitter fighting and massacres that occurred there in 1948 returned, and established Yeshivat Har Etzion in abandoned Jordanian army barracks.

Early on, Amital told the students that while Torah study was at the heart of their enterprise, the yeshiva would be a place where—in the words of

a Hasidic tale he often quoted—the cacophony of the study hall, literal and figurative, would never be allowed to drown out the sound of children’s cries. “Every generation,” Amital said, “has its own cry, sometimes open, sometimes hidden, sometimes the baby himself doesn’t know that he’s crying.” He also made clear that he was there to challenge and to be challenged, that he expected his students to forge their own religious paths. He had no intention, he said, of creating “little Amitals.”

In assuming the deanship of Yeshivat Har Etzion, Amital joined the leadership ranks of Religious Zionism, one of whose other major leaders was Zvi Yehuda Kook, son of Amital’s spiritual hero Abraham Isaac Kook, and successor as head of his yeshiva. Both Kook and Amital saw God’s hand in history, specifically in the 1967 War and the liberation of Judea and Samaria. But while Zvi Yehuda Kook saw the Holocaust, too, as part of God’s plan, having forced Israel from exile and bringing about the creation of the Jewish state, Amital refused to see those horrors the same way.

The Holocaust certainly deepened Amital’s sense of awe at the times through which he was living—he often said, “My beard had not yet gone white, and I had seen in the course of my life, a world built, destroyed, and built.” The Holocaust did not shake his faith in God, but it placed an unanswerable question mark on any attempt to read His mind. “I have no doubt that God spoke during the Holocaust,” Amital said, “I simply have no idea what He was trying to say.”

In 1971, in a mix of humility and self-confidence practically unheard of in yeshiva circles, Amital invited Aharon Lichtenstein, an outstanding Talmudist at New York’s Yeshiva University, to head the yeshiva in his place, offering to serve beneath the newcomer as *mashgiach ruchani*, spiritual tutor. Lichtenstein, ten years Amital’s junior, accepted on the condition that Amital continue to serve alongside him as co-head of the yeshiva. Lichtenstein and Amital were an exquisite study in contrasts. The former had a PhD in English Literature from Harvard, and, as son-in-law of Joseph B. Soloveitchik, was heir to a distinctive Litvak neo-Kantianism. He was a tall, reserved, at times severe, intellectual, who projected a nearly Jesuitical asceticism. Amital, whose formal secular schooling had not extended beyond fourth grade, was compact and exuberant, spoke in Hasidic aphorisms, and unapologetically enjoyed fine whiskey and a good cigar. The harmonious and deeply respectful collaboration of such wildly different figures was perhaps the most powerful lesson their yeshiva has ever imparted. The two shared a rare conviction, that it was their job to teach yeshiva students not only Talmud but also to think for themselves.

But the arrangement with the army inevitably brought war into the study hall. Eight students of the yeshiva, out of a total student body of some two hundred, were killed in the 1973 Yom Kippur War, and many more were wounded. Overcome with grief, Amital handed the yeshiva over to Lichtenstein, and spent the war and months afterwards traversing the fronts, visiting field hospitals, bases, and outposts, to be with his students.

Amital’s theological response to the war appeared in a slim volume entitled *Ha-ma’alot mi-Ma’amakim* (The Ascents from the Depths). “It is clear that we are in the process of redemption through the path of

suffering,” he wrote, adding “this obligates us in the mitzvah of crying out, of introspection, of contemplating our actions, so that we know that God awaits our repentance.” This soul-searching had to begin within the yeshivot themselves, especially with regard to ethics. One must ask, he wrote, “Not ‘who is a Jew?’ but ‘what is a Jew?’ . . . to ask questions bravely, with the bravery of the battlefield.”

The war quickened the messianic energies of the settler movement, which crystallized into the organization Gush Emunim (the Bloc of the Faithful), many of whose leaders and activists had been Amital’s early students at Har Etzion. His book, by framing the disastrous Yom Kippur War in eschatological terms, seemed to offer a way forward from the despair of the war, onto the hilltops of Judea and Samaria, and thus became a chief text for the settler movement. But Amital never entirely joined in, and his arguments with Zvi Yehuda Kook, Gush Emunim’s unchallenged leader, became even more significant. It was not only Kook’s

understanding of the Holocaust as part of God’s redemptive plan that disturbed Amital, but also his assertion of spiritual and halakhic authority when it came to politics. Moreover, in prioritizing the Land of Israel above almost every other religious value, Amital argued, Zvi Yehuda Kook had drained his father’s teachings of their universalistic elements. Amital’s Zionism was “redemptive,” but it was not “messianic,” and it placed the Jewish people and Torah before the land.

Through the 1970s, Amital continued to move further away from the settler vanguard. Reicher notes that in the wake of Sadat’s visit to Jerusalem in 1977, and the Knesset’s approval of the Camp David peace plan, Amital and Lichtenstein were the only *hesder* leaders who entertained the possibility of what would later be called “land for peace.” For Amital, the possibility of peace (or even the mere postponement of war), confirmed his sacred reading of Jewish statehood, since “the inner meaning of the

recognition of the State of Israel by some Arab nations is the recognition of God’s Kingship.”

In 1982, Amital’s anguish over seeing students go to war once again flared into outrage with his discovery of Ariel Sharon’s lying to the government about the aims and prosecution of the incursion into Lebanon. He publicly opposed the IDF’s assault on Beirut, and in response to the Sabra and Shatila massacres issued a public statement: “We now stand four days before Yom Kippur. My entire being quakes and trembles out of fear for the Day of Judgment, for as is known, Yom Kippur does not atone for the sin of *chillul Hashem* (desecrating God’s name).” He and Lichtenstein were practically the only rabbis to call for the inquiry into the massacres that resulted in the Kahan Commission. Many Religious Zionists increasingly saw Amital as a renegade.

Even on the Left, he was as unconventional, unpredictable, and free of clichés as he had been on the Right. In December 1982, he addressed the founding meeting of Netivot Shalom, a religious peace movement (fledgling, then and now) and inveighed against what he said were the three false messianisms stalking the land: Gush Emunim, Peace Now, and that of Ariel Sharon. Each, he said, presumed to solve complex questions with a single



Yehuda Amital visiting his students in the army after the Yom Kippur War, 1973. (Courtesy of Maggid Books, a division of Koren Publishers Jerusalem.)



Yehuda Amital with his students at the yeshiva’s 40<sup>th</sup>-year celebration. (Photo by Gershon Ellinson, courtesy of Yeshivat Har Etzion.)



simple answer, respectively: faith, good intentions, and force. But, he said, we need all three, and the wisdom of balance.

In 1985, at a conference marking the elder Kook's 50<sup>th</sup> *yahrzeit*, he laid out the theological foundations of his position. Like Kook's, Amital's Zionism was not a response to anti-Semitism:

The yearning for redemption is rooted not in the [Jewish] people's terrible suffering, rather the desire to do good for humanity is the essence of its soul.

This, from a Holocaust survivor, was astounding. Promoting a universal ethical vision, he said, must be of the essence of Zionism, not only to save

## Amital saw three false messianisms stalking Israel: Gush Emunim, Peace Now, and that of Ariel Sharon.

it from the moral hazards of violent chauvinism, but precisely because the ethical message is itself the divine word that Israel is charged with spreading. As he later explained to an interviewer, the difference between his vision of Israel as "a light unto the nations" and Ben-Gurion's, was rooted in the fact that without a divine foundation, ethical universalism would not survive.

In 1988, at the urging of supporters, Amital founded a political party, Meimad, offering a centrist religious voice on both political-diplomatic issues and relations between religious and secular Israelis. Everything that made the party appealing to well-wishers and observers—its non-dogmatic stance, the manifest absence of political ambitions on the part of its leaders, its mix of religious conviction with political liberalism—made it an electoral disaster in the rough-and-tumble world of Israeli politics. It failed to receive even one seat, though the party itself survived in truncated form, eventually resurfacing in the late 1990s as a one-man faction in the Labor party; today it no longer exists, and the moderation it represented is still a minority position at best within the world of Religious Zionism.

After the elections, Amital returned to his yeshiva and abandoned political life, until late 1995, when, in the wake of the Rabin assassination, he was asked to serve as a Minister without Portfolio in Shimon Peres' short-lived government. This he did, hoping that his presence would ease, even a little, the terrible fissures then rocking Israeli society, and counteract the desecration of God's name wrought by the yarmulke-wearing assassin. He pursued various initiatives in public health, education, Israel-Diaspora relations, and the ever-elusive goal of fostering dialogue within Israeli society. When the Peres administration was done, he returned to Har Etzion. His leftward moves cost him many supporters, and his natural role as the premier leader of Religious Zionism. But he was at peace with the course he had taken.

**A**mital concentrated his remaining energies on his yeshiva, only occasionally returning to public debate. In earlier decades, he had introduced elements of Hasidism and existentialism into Religious Zionist education. Now, he thought the pendulum had swung perilously close to self-

absorption, and he became a critic of what he saw as a fetish of personal authenticity. He still believed that one must bring one's own unique and individual personality to the religious life, but maintained that that very personal search must be anchored in social and political responsibility and a basic commitment to the tradition, even at its most prosaic.

In his late 70s, he proved his unconventionality once again by announcing that he would step aside, and let a search committee appoint his successor. In a yeshiva world regularly wracked by bitter succession struggles, often waged among sons and sons-in-law, this was, Reichner correctly says, a final instance of "his sober and realistic vision."

Amital published little, but his later years saw the appearance of several volumes by and about him:

*A World Built, Destroyed and Rebuilt*, a study of his thinking on the Holocaust by Mosheh Mayah; *Resisei Tal* (Droplets of Dew), a sampling of Amital's technical talmudic and halakhic writings; *Jewish Values in a Changing World* (the Hebrew title was the Psalmist's "And the earth He has given to humanity") in which he lays out his religious and educational credo; *Commitment and Complexity*, a collection of brief, topically arranged aphorisms, quotations, and excerpts on a wide range of issues; and a Hebrew booklet, *Between Religious Experience and Religious Commitment*, critiquing the neo-Hasidic and existentialist currents in the Religious Zionist world that he himself had set in motion decades earlier.

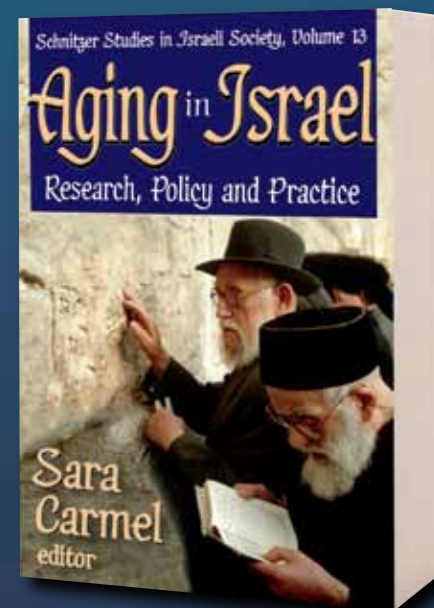
Further posthumous books are reportedly in the works, and a memorial volume of reminiscences and studies of him has just been published. The title of that collection, *Le-Ovdekhah be-Emet* (To Serve You in Truth), is that of Amital's favorite *niggun*, or tune, which he fervently taught generations of students. The words capture the rootedness of his bracing commitment to authenticity and questioning in a simple, pure faith. It is hard to imagine another figure on the Israeli scene who could bring Shimon Peres, the proponent of Oslo, and Shlomo Aviner, the Religious Zionist hardliner, within the covers of one memorial volume.

The faith and piety of Amital's Hungarian childhood never left him. Many of the questions at the center of modern Jewish thought simply didn't bother him. God's existence and providence, the divine origin of the Written and Oral Torah, the binding power of rabbinic tradition and law, and the Jews' unique role and destiny were all for him simply axiomatic. It was perhaps this unaffected, almost guileless faith and deep identification with "simple Jews" that freed him to embrace complexity, even as he expressed his ideas with powerful conviction.

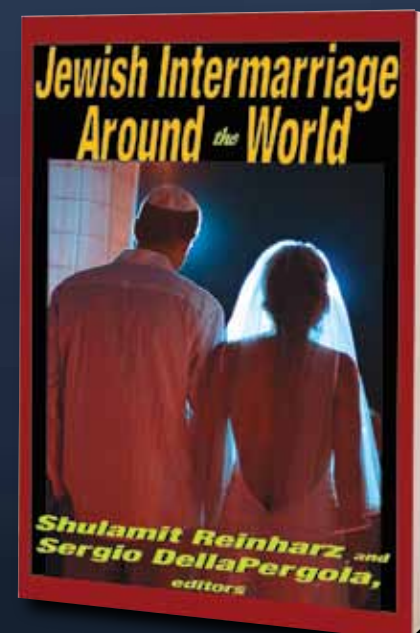
Amital did not leave behind him a system or set of doctrines, but a cluster of powerful, provocative ideas, and an example from which we can learn as we each go about building our moral and spiritual lives. He wouldn't have wanted it any other way.

*Yehudah Mirsky lives in Jerusalem, and is writing a biography of Abraham Isaac Kook, to be published by Yale University Press.*

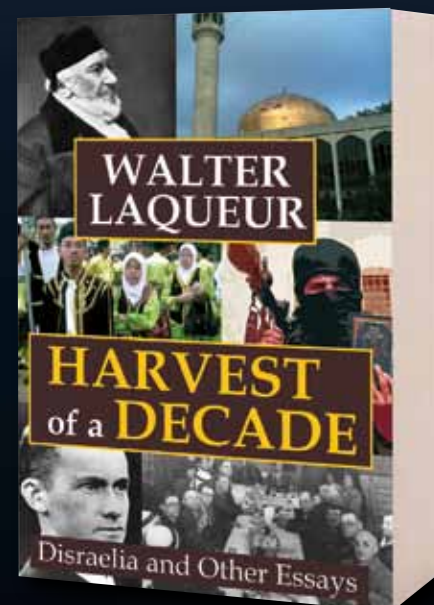
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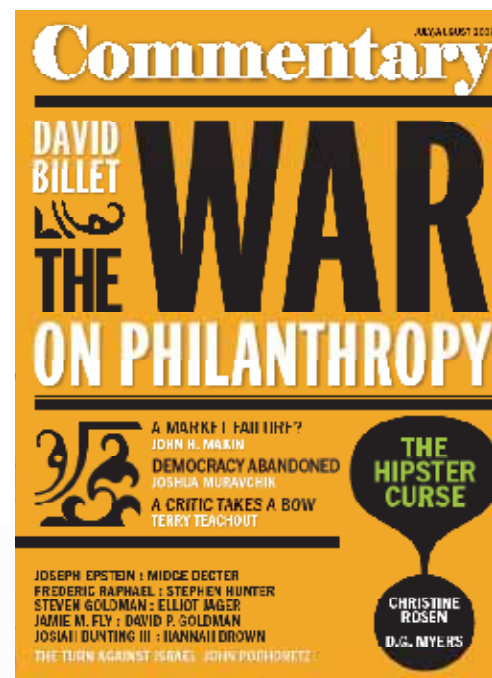
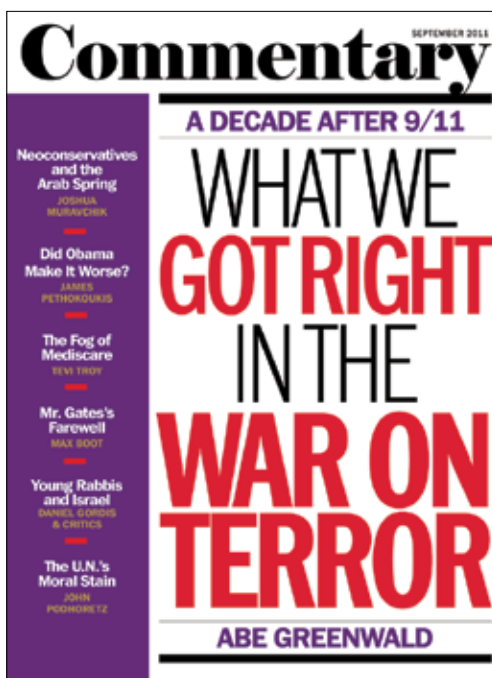
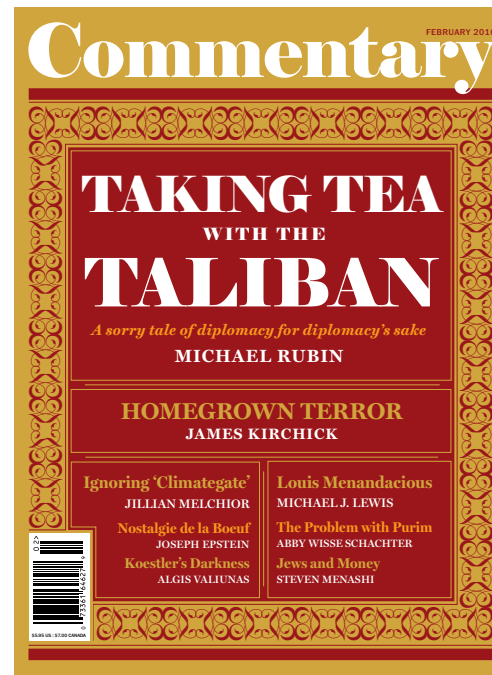
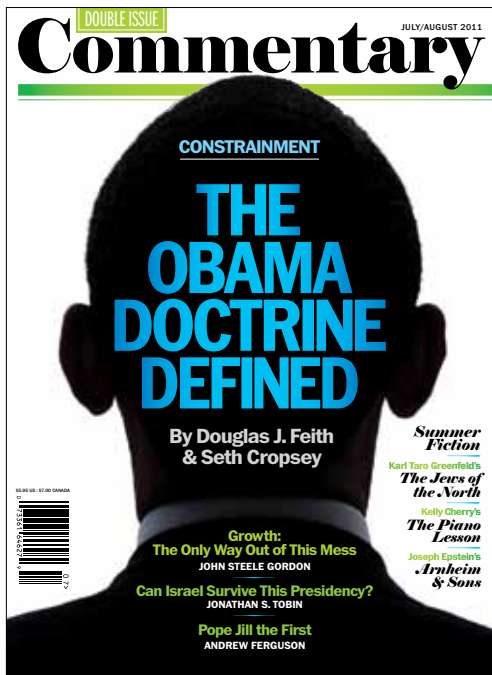


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# At the Threshold of Forgiveness: A Study of Law and Narrative in the Talmud

BY MOSHE HALBERTAL

**N**ear the end of tractate *Yoma*, the Mishnah limits the scope of the Day of Atonement:

For sins between man and God, Yom Kippur atones. But for sins between a man and his fellow, Yom Kippur does not atone until he appeases his fellow.

In a sense, the injured party becomes the master of his injurer's future, for only his pardon can make atonement possible. R. Elazar ben Azariah is quoted as having derived this principle from a biblical verse that describes the purifying force of the Temple service on Yom Kippur: "For on this day atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you of all your sins; you shall be cleansed before the Lord." (Leviticus 16:30)

In its plain sense, the phrase "before the Lord" simply refers to a place, the Temple, where atonement occurs. It probably also indicates that it is God who grants this atonement. But R. Elazar ben Azariah treats "before the Lord" as a restrictive clause, understanding it to mean that only sins against God—those that are "before the Lord"—are atoned for by Yom Kippur. Atonement for transgressions committed against other people depends not on God but on reconciliation with the injured party.

The Talmud develops this requirement for human forgiveness into a full-fledged legal institution. First, the request for forgiveness must be public: "R. Chisda said that he must placate his fellow before three lines of three people." This is, again, tied to the creative reading of a biblical verse, but the clear intent is to make the request for forgiveness a social fact. A single, casual encounter involving only the injurer and the injured will not suffice. The next talmudic statement ensures that, on the other hand, the injurer does not become a permanent hostage to the injured party: "R. Yosi bar Chanina said, 'whoever seeks forgiveness from his friend should not seek it more than three times.'"

The Talmud then emphasizes the centrality of the moral community to this process of effecting atonement for an offense against someone who has died:

And if [the injured person] has died, [the injurer] brings ten people, and has them stand next to his grave; he then says, "I have sinned against the LORD, God of Israel, and against so-and-so, whom I injured."

Here, the community serves as a substitute for the injured party, but there must also be the sense of a real encounter.

There are ethical and religious systems in which an encounter, public or otherwise, between the injurer and the injured party is not central to the idea of forgiveness. The Stoic, for instance, grants forgiveness as an expression of autonomy, foregoing what is properly due him. The point is not to restore a relationship but rather to free oneself from one,

and appease him." R. Huna met him. He asked, "Where is my master going?" He said, "To appease so-and-so." [R. Huna] said [to himself] "Abba [i.e. Rav] is going to kill a man!"

Rav went and stood over him. The butcher was seated, cleaning the head [of an animal]. He raised his eyes and saw him [Rav]. He said to

## Every request for forgiveness is preceded by some forgiveness that makes the request itself possible.

since the toxic force of a grudge might harm his inner life. In contrast, one who forgives as an act of Christian grace is concerned with the injurer's soul, ideally extending forgiveness in advance of any expressed remorse. The absence of any necessary encounter between injurer and injured makes these models of forgiveness quite different from the one formulated by the Talmud.

**T**he juxtaposition of law and narrative is a characteristic and important feature of the Talmud. After discussing the formal requirements for requesting forgiveness, the Talmud presents four brief stories of encounters in which rabbinic masters attempt to reconcile with those they have injured. Each of the stories raises the question of the power and limits of the law to structure such a complex human moment. I will focus on the first three of these stories, setting them down, as did the editors of the Talmud, one after another.

R. Jeremiah injured R. Abba. R. Jeremiah went and sat at R. Abba's doorstep. When R. Abba's maidservant poured out wastewater, some drops sprayed on R. Jeremiah's head. He said, "they have made me into a trash heap," and he recited, the verse "[God] lifts up the needy from the trash heap," (Psalms 113:7) as being about himself. R. Abba heard him and went out to him. He said to him, "Now it is I who must appease you, as it is said, 'Go abase yourself; and importune your fellow' (Proverbs 6:3)."

When a certain person injured R. Zera, he would repeatedly pass before him and invite himself into his presence, so that the injurer would come and appease him.

A certain butcher injured Rav, and he did not come before him [to seek forgiveness]. On the day before Yom Kippur, [Rav] said, "I will go

him, "Abba, go; I have nothing to do with you." While he was still cleaning the animal's head, a bone shot out, struck the butcher's neck, and killed him.

A simple historical observation will help us to see the issues that the editors of the Talmud were exploring in these anecdotes: Rav lived before R. Zera. The ordering of these stories is not chronological; it's conceptual.

**I**n the first incident, R. Jeremiah, who has come to ask forgiveness from R. Abba, is seated at the threshold, probably finding it difficult to enter, fearing that R. Abba will rebuff him, or worse, that his appearance will renew the injury. The humiliation he suffers at the hands of the maidservant suddenly reverses the situation; now, having been sprayed with dirty water, he is R. Abba's victim. His ironic recitation of the verse brought R. Abba out to ask *his* pardon, and the threshold (literal and figurative) was crossed.

The story seems intended to point out a serious problem with institutionalizing the requirement that forgiveness be requested. One can formulate rules that dictate how to ask for forgiveness, but these rules can only come into play when an encounter between the injurer and injured is possible. This requires a kind of preliminary appeasement. The narrative thus demonstrates the limitations of the law as it appears before us. One might say it places the law itself at the threshold. Every request for forgiveness is preceded by some forgiveness that makes the request possible. But how does the Talmud deal with the forgiveness that must precede forgiveness?

The next story, which follows immediately after that of R. Jeremiah, suggests an answer to this question. R. Zera used to indirectly invite himself into the presence of one who had injured him, providing an occasion for the injurer to reconcile with him. His action, which is presented as worthy of emulation, creates the conditions in which it will

be possible for the injurer to approach him. The injured party extends the forgiveness that precedes forgiveness without any assurance that the injurer will in fact be remorseful and request his pardon. But this act of grace does not obviate the remorse that must precede full reconciliation; it only makes it possible. Nor is it, apparently, legally required. The passage presents us with an exemplary story that expresses the greatness of grace without making it a binding norm.

The third story shows why R. Zera's practice was an act of pure grace that cannot be turned into law. The story tells of Rav, who, on the eve of Yom Kippur, was awaiting the arrival of the butcher who had injured him. When the butcher does not come, Rav decides to go to him. At first blush, Rav's action seems quite similar to R. Zera's. Knowing that Yom Kippur will not expiate the butcher's sin unless he appeases his fellow, Rav decides to waive his honor and go to the butcher himself. In fact, he does more than cross the threshold from the injured party's side to that of the injurer; he also crosses class lines. There is a vast class divide between Rav, the leading scholar of his generation, and the lowly butcher. Moreover, the timing of the story—the eve of Yom Kippur, the last minute for doing what needs to be done to make atonement possible—marks a threshold in time.

The reader's first impression of Rav's action as a model of generosity is undermined by the reaction of R. Huna, Rav's greatest student. Instead of seeing the initiative as an act of great generosity, R. Huna sees it as an act of violence. He says to himself that his master is going to kill the butcher, and events

bear him out. This fact compels us to see that the key to interpreting this subtle little story lies in the reaction of R. Huna, who understood exactly what was going to happen.

Perhaps Rav had been waiting all day for the butcher to come to him. Perhaps he had been waiting all year. On the eve of Yom Kippur, the affront remains intense, but the hour grows late, and he

### Moses Maimonides strips the Talmud's legal teaching of its crucial narrative element.

decides to go to him. Something about Rav's demeanor or his pace or the very hour, coupled with the disparity in status between Rav and the butcher, suggested to Rav Huna that this was an act of aggression.

The story of Rav and the butcher forces us to confront the ambivalence between sanctity and narcissism that inheres in any act of grace. Rav's appearance before the butcher turns out to be quite different from R. Zera's sensitive and indirect approach. Instead of giving the slaughterer an opportunity to request forgiveness, Rav backed him into a corner and brought about a terrifying opportunity for reciprocal injury. Knowing of Rav's closeness to God, R. Huna knew where this could lead, though

he was apparently incapable or unwilling to stop him. The combination of Rav's aggressiveness and Rav Huna's apparent passivity sealed the fate of the stubborn butcher who was not inspired to repent by the appearance of the eminent man in the doorway of his shop.

Jewish law and narrative have been joined since the Bible, and one can identify three paradigms for the relationship between them. The first and simplest is when the narrative provides a basis for the law. The story of the exodus from Egypt, for example, explains the meaning of the paschal sacrifice and the various rules of the seder. The second paradigm emphasizes the way in which the story permits a transition to a different sort of legal knowledge. A story allows us to see how the law must be followed; we move from "knowing that" to "knowing how." More than a few talmudic stories play that role, showing that it is sometimes no simple matter to move from text to action. The third paradigm is the most delicate. Here, the story actually has a subversive role, pointing out the law's substantive limitations. That is the paradigm for our series of stories of encounter and forgiveness.

The first story, as noted, shows the way in which there has to be a partial reconciliation before the full reconciliation, a forgiveness before the forgiveness. As a result of that limitation, the second story suggests a secondary, even saintly, norm, in which the injured person makes an effort to enable the crossing of the threshold by insinuating himself into the presence of the injurer. The third story then shows that solution to be limited, since the outcome of the intrusion could be a further injury. It may not be as drastic or seemingly supernatural as the butcher's tragic end, but a request for forgiveness can turn into a further insult all too easily.

The Talmud pointedly does not go on to formulate further legislation to resolve this issue. Would it be possible to use a further norm to structure the question of how to make the first step? Can one mark with any degree of generality the distinction between a delicate or indirect meeting and an accusatory intrusion? The law as a process of generalized rulemaking here reaches its limit. Requesting forgiveness ultimately requires tact, sound judgment, and a profound and precise analysis of one's own motives.

In Moses Maimonides' great medieval codification of the laws of repentance in the *Mishneh Torah*, the rules of requesting forgiveness are further formalized, while the stories of R. Jeremiah, R. Abba, R. Zera, Rav, R. Huna, and the butcher are left aside. Separating law and narrative in that way removes a layer of meaning, and flattens our understanding of the process of reconciliation. The Talmud's frequent joining of the two genres embodies a profound expression of humility, for the law thereby acknowledges its own limits. This is especially true in the case of forgiveness, which is a part of the complex and delicate fabric of interpersonal relationships.

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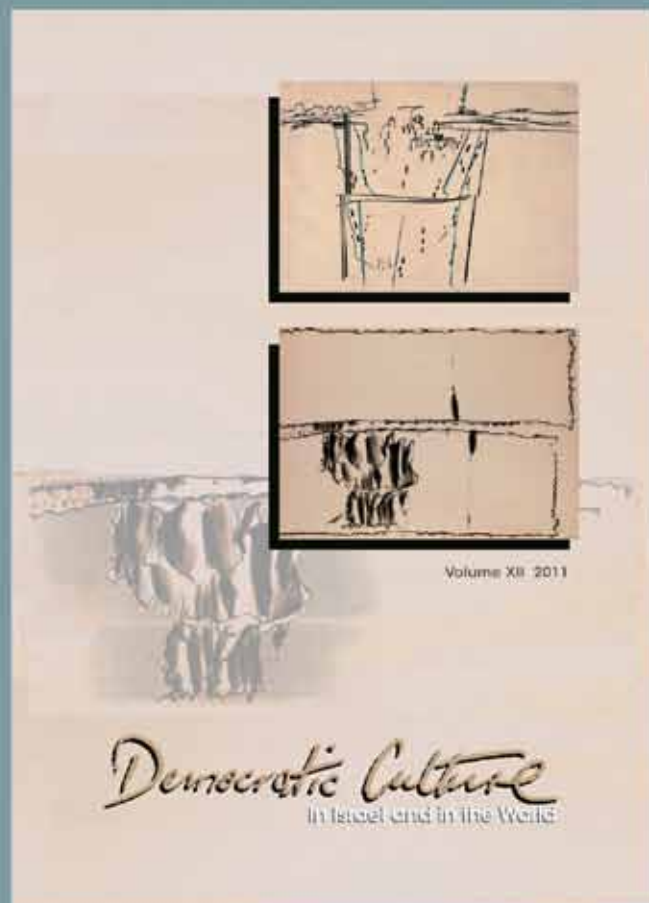


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# Yo's Blues

BY EITAN KENSKY

## LIFE ON SANDPAPER

by Yoram Kaniuk, translated by Anthony Berris  
Dalkey Archive, 400 pp., \$15.95

Midway through *Life on Sandpaper*, the fictional memoir of Israeli writer Yoram Kaniuk's time in 1950s bohemian New York, after nearly two hundred pages of befriending (and sometimes bedding) famous musicians, painters, actors, and directors, Kaniuk admits that he didn't fit in. "I was in the lives of these people by mistake . . . I was passing through." It's a strange admission for an artist so clearly on the make, someone endorsed by Meyer Schapiro, someone who appeared destined for fame or, at the very least, a post-obscure revival of interest. But we hear another version of this pronouncement at the end of the book when Kaniuk is told by a close friend, "For you New York could have been a new homeland, but you missed out on it." While the sentiment is the same, there's a noticeable difference. To "miss out" indicates that there was the possibility of belonging, even as the memoir persistently suggests that he could never find another homeland.

*Life on Sandpaper* is a good, if very uneven, book that will enthrall at least some readers with its amazing sense of motion while leaving others frustrated by the lack of a plot, incomplete character development, and dubious veracity. For most of the book, Kaniuk is less the hero of his autobiography than he is a vehicle for painting or performing American culture in the 1950s, often leaving New York for the wilds of the West. This is *On the Road* as re-imagined by an Israeli, filled with chance encounters and memorable adventures that attempt to capture bohemian life in mid-century America.

The son of the first curator of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Kaniuk arrived in New York as an aspiring painter shortly after fighting in the 1948 War of Independence. He is drawn by the excitement of the city, by jazz, Beat poetry, and new kinds of painting. The dream of New York is a chance to transcend racial or ethnic origins through art, and there are moments when it looks like he'll succeed. Billie Holiday renames him "Yo," and writes a song called "Yo's Blues" in his honor. Later he is invited to paint his friend Charlie "Bird" Parker, the only painting, we're told, for which Parker ever sat. Marlon Brando sleeps under a portrait of Kaniuk's mother, while James Dean spends hours in the studio just watching Kaniuk paint. In Kaniuk's America, the drunk next to you at the lunch counter is liable to be James Agee, rambling semi-coherently about American decline. Most remarkably, all these luminaries accept Kaniuk. Even Agee, who refuses to look at Kaniuk's paintings because he is an Israeli colonialist, gives him a rare copy of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. If this all seems a bit fantastic,

it probably is. The poet Hayden Carruth already publicly doubted some of Kaniuk's reminiscences years ago, describing the "absurdity" of one of his emotionally charged anecdotes.

how to "paint jazz, think jazz, breathe jazz," experimenting with ways to transfer its kinetic energy and rhythm into a static form, and this book would appear to be the literary extension of that project. The brief

## In Yoram Kaniuk's America, the drunk next to you at the lunch counter is liable to be James Agee, rambling about American decline.

Yet these unbelievable encounters with famous people are more than just great stories. (Though they are often emphatically that.) The use of real people helps to anchor Kaniuk's lively prose. Here he is describing Holiday:

The sad humor of the musicians. Billie Holiday reached for notes and sang them as if she were weaving a sad carpet and she'd take me on walks

mention of "Billie Holiday" lets Kaniuk emotionally wander and modulate without having to worry about character development; we know who Billie Holiday is, and carry everything we know about her into the scene, which Kaniuk can then enrich through digressions and detailed descriptions of peripheral actions. Perhaps it doesn't matter whether or not the events Kaniuk describes took place. The style gives us an image of 1950s America with an intensity that traditional realism—or traditional memoir—probably could not.



Photo of Yoram Kaniuk, taken by a friend of the author, ca. 1954, New York. (Courtesy of Yoram Kaniuk and Dalkey Archive.)

and I talked and she listened or maybe she didn't, and said she didn't understand that crap. We kissed. She said she'd had better kissers. I was there and she wanted to kiss somebody and I was nearest and I was talking and making a fool of myself.

We are in Minton's Playhouse, the legendary Harlem nightclub, when this reminiscence begins, but we end somewhere else, somewhere less material and more impressionistic.

Kaniuk writes that at the time he was learning

Though *Life on Sandpaper* is a memoir (or novel) of discovering America, Kaniuk can never transcend his national and ethnic origins. He was shot fighting for the Palmach in the War of Independence, and the wound makes it impossible for him to stop being an Israeli partisan. People either fall over themselves to do him favors because he is Israeli or they burst out into anti-Semitic tirades. In Las Vegas, Kaniuk and his friends are welcomed as heroes by Jewish gangsters. They give them food, drinks, even medals, in honor of their service for Israel. They sing Hebrew songs and invite them to their weddings. When Kaniuk and his friends win too much money, the Vegas Jews again show kindness to them by asking them *politely* to leave Nevada. For a few pages, he's a friend of Miles Davis, but Miles grows jealous of Kaniuk's friendship with Bird and seeks to undermine him by publicly launching into anti-Semitic diatribes.

As much as Kaniuk tries to see the world as a free Beat, he still has the mindset of a 1950s Zionist. This comes out most clearly in his description of New York's Jewish literary scene. Kaniuk takes a job as a go-between for rival groups of Yiddish and Hebrew authors at a cafeteria on the Lower East Side. The Hebrew authors despise Kaniuk and the Israelis for their corrupt Sephardic pronunciations, while the Yiddish writers are fighting their tragic losing battle. The two camps refuse to talk to one another, except at funerals, where they lovingly embrace over fallen friends. A woman in black sits at the entrance to the *Forward*, crossing off the names of the recently deceased from her subscription lists. This is a version of an old joke, reverently told by Cynthia Ozick in her story "Envy," that reads bitterly here. If you aren't an international bohemian like Norman Mailer (who sells Kaniuk a puppy), or an Israeli like Kaniuk, then you are a dying diaspora Jew, an ideological abstraction.



What makes this depiction of New York Jewish culture in *Life on Sandpaper* so frustrating is the actual vibrancy of Jewish literary life at the time. Isaac Bashevis Singer, improbably one of the Yiddish writers at Kaniuk's cafeteria, is just coming to mass attention, and is writing some of his most interesting stories and novels. This is the heyday of *Partisan Review* and the early years of *Commentary*, and Saul Bellow and Isaac Rosenfeld live only blocks away from Kaniuk and his circle. Kaniuk knows that this world exists; he mentions Clement Greenberg but only to deride his taste in art. Kaniuk apparently had no interest in participating in, or presenting, a living American Jewish culture. Readers interested in a more Jewish bohemia must turn elsewhere, to Wallace Markfield's novel *To An Early Grave*, or to Steven Zipperstein's recent biog-

raphy of Rosenfeld, *Rosenfeld's Lives*.

The moment in his story when Kaniuk can no longer be an international bohemian comes when, almost without warning, he abandons painting for writing. Painting, like jazz or dance, is a non-verbal medium, universally accessible. As long as he is a painter, he can be accepted by an international community, but literature forces Kaniuk back into Hebrew and into a fixed national identity. He stops being "Yo" and becomes Yoram K, the latest iteration of the Jew struggling to find his place in modernity. Mid-century icons still appear for their star-turn cameos in the second half of the book, but less frequently, and his circle of friends narrows until it is all-but exclusively Israeli. Kaniuk may have moved to America, but the Israeli artist only succeeded in creating a second exile. He has no choice but to return.

The story of *Life on Sandpaper* is that Kaniuk came to America to make it as a painter, only to realize that his true artistic self was in another language and country. He didn't "miss out" because he really was just "passing through." But the fun (and beauty) of the book is not in the narrative; it is in its style and vivid anecdotes. The second half of the memoir, after Kaniuk abandons painting and discovers he can't escape his Israeli identity, is significantly more coherent than the first. But the parts that will stay with you are the fragments, the momentary flashes of brilliance when Kaniuk evokes the rush of a night on the town with Bird and Lady Day.

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# Freedom Riders

BY ESTHER SCHOR

## NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORY

101 South Independence Mall East, Philadelphia, PA

The first Jew to arrive on North American shores did not stay long. Joachim Gaunse (or Gans or Ganz) was a Bohemian mining engineer who had been invited to England by the Royal Mining Company in 1581. In 1584, after the clever Gaunse achieved some notoriety by shrinking the time it took to purify copper ore (from four months to four days), he was recruited by Sir Walter Raleigh to join his expedition to the New World. Gaunse was part of the crew who settled and fortified the northern tip of Roanoke Island; chunks of smelted copper found by archaeologists are thought to have been his handiwork. But within two years, exhausted by short supplies, arduous heat, and attacks by indigenous tribes, he and the others abandoned the settlement and returned to England.

Back in England, while teaching Hebrew to gentlemen in Bristol, Gaunse was asked point-blank if he denied the divinity of Jesus Christ, the son of God. Exactly what possessed the savvy, seasoned Gaunse to quip, "What needeth the Almighty God to have a son; is He not Almighty?" is lost to time. But Gaunse's testimony that he'd been circumcised, "brought up in the Talmud," and *never* baptized suggests that he was counting on the time-honored immunity of the infidel; besides, he knew he had friends in high places. Indeed, his blasphemy case was remanded to the Queen's Privy Council, which appears to have let him off the hook. At least there is no record of penalty or punishment.

Gaunse's story epitomizes of the American Jewish story in many respects. It is a tale of enterprise and mobility, expertise and ingratiation, adaptabil-

ity and resourcefulness. But in the new National Museum of American Jewish History (NMAJH) in Philadelphia, Gaunse is simply a parenthesis for one reason: His is not a story of freedom, at least not of religious freedom. At the NMAJH, freedom—or what Abraham Cahan called "a chance to live in freedom"—becomes the key term for exploring the entirety of American Jewish life since 1654. The three-floor core exhibition, designed by Gallagher and Associates, is organized chronologically around three eras of freedom: Foundations of Freedom: 1654–1880; Dreams of Freedom: 1880–1945; and

Choices and Challenges of Freedom: 1945–Today. Toward the exit lies a sweeping, multimedia Hall of Fame focusing on what eighteen luminaries from Barbra Streisand to Menachem Mendel Schneerson have made of their Jewish American freedom. And à propos of freedom, these eighteen were selected democratically in a public web-election; I myself lobbied great-aunts and piano teachers to click on Emma Lazarus. Lazarus made it, though I later learned that the museum reserved the right to cook the books, presumably for gender balance.

Icons of freedom by two Jewish American artists



*Facing Independence Mall, the National Museum of American Jewish History is a glass prism, expressing both the openness of America, as well as the perennial fragility of democracy. (© Barry Halkin/Halkin Photography.)*

beckon the visitor from the ground level and the rafters: a pillar of marble by day and a pillar of light by night. On the east esplanade lies the monumental sculpture “Religious Freedom” of 1876, in which liberty, a mailed goddess, protects a childlike figure of religion, flanked by the American eagle avidly

## The triumphalism of the architecture epitomizes the theme of the museum: the triumph of freedom.

crushing the snake of tyranny in its talons. (As I learned from a docent, the sculptor, Moses Jacob Ezekiel, was a decorated Confederate soldier, and the first Jewish cadet at Virginia Military Institute.) Several floors above—and visible only at night—is Ben Rubin’s pulsating LED “Beacon,” a changing series of lit grids based on the fluttering of pages of the Talmud. Though commissioned by the architect to create an homage to the Statue of Liberty, Rubin has actually created a fiery *ner tamid* (eternal flame) out of the Jewish legal tradition.

Founded during the bicentennial year of 1976, the museum formerly occupied 15,000 square feet in a building shared with Congregation Mikveh Israel a few blocks from Independence Mall. An expansion was already afoot when the museum seized a spot of prime real estate directly on the Mall, diagonally across from the Liberty Bell. Once the museum was destined for that sacred space, the theme of freedom was pretty much locked in.

If ever there was a museum as bent on being seen from the outside as from inside, this is it. Its spectacular housing, enclosing 100,000 square feet of exhibition space, is its own most important exhibit. James Polshek’s postmodern building has not one, but two façades, perhaps a tribute to the duality of American Jewish life. From the Mall, we gaze on the west façade, a huge, proud, rectangle of glass—actually fritted glass with a woven pattern of its own—revealing a ghostly grid of supports. This façade is broken only by an off-kilter but rectilinear strip at the left; for this monument to Jewish continuity, none of the rents and gashes of Liebeskind’s Jewish Museum in Berlin. The north façade, however, shows a more homely face: broad, smooth panels of terracotta that reprise the terracotta capitals of the 1895 Bourse building next door. Though colored by the past, these rain- and sun-screening panels are especially designed to assure the artifacts within a future free from oxidation and mold. The elevation of the terracotta portion is distinctly humbler than the glass façade; in fact, what appeared to be the top floor of the building proves to be a clerestory that floods a six-story atrium with light.

In two visits to the museum, I heard docents start their tours with identical announcements: the architect had designed the interior to invoke not only freedom but also “the theme of mobility.” Accordingly, the atrium reveals not floors, but decks linked by high-walled stairways. (In fact, the atrium/stairway is a design feature Polshek had piloted in the Newseum in Washington, DC, though it is used here to better effect.) To enter each floor’s exhibition space is to move, for a time, from the light-flooded glass box into a warren of dark, carefully lit spaces. And after considerable encounters with artifacts, labels, credit panels, bannered quotes, ingeniously projected videos, ambient voices, and

“interactives” that range from role-playing an arrival at Ellis Island to clicking through a social network of deceased, famous Jews, there is some relief in emerging from the darkness back to the light—armed with a cliffhanging question and a handy timeline for review.

The triumphalism of the architecture, however nuanced and qualified, reverberates within the core exhibition’s conceptual design. In the words of Jonathan Sarna, who headed the advisory team of historians, “The National Museum of American Jewish History represents a sharp break from decades of focus on Jews as victims and outsiders.” Inevitably, to portray Jews as agents and insiders is to send home the fact that the Jews were players, even when they were (in the words of the museum’s website) “a tiny minority [who] sought, defended, and tested free-



Barbra Streisand at the opening of the National Museum of American Jewish History, Philadelphia, November, 2010. (© Ricky Fitchett/ZUMA Press.)

dom.” Jews’ achievements, contributions, innovations, entrepreneurship, leadership, and philanthropy are lauded in virtually every room; here is Philip Roth’s “anticipated American future that . . . unrolled out of the solid American past, out of each generation’s getting smarter—smarter for knowing the inadequacies and limitations of the generations before.” Here also is Moses Seixas’ famed letter entreating George Washington to affirm religious liberty; here are Brandeis and Frankfurter and Ginsburg; here are the movie moguls who gave America its celluloid dreams of heart, hearth, and family. And the third and final section of the core exhibition, “Choices and Challenges of Freedom,” features a series of large, open halls with loud music and wide screens. Our tour through this floor is desultory and undemanding; the museum does not exhibit objects so much as

furnish us with them, a miscellany of all the Jewish kitsch that filled my own suburban childhood home in the 1950s and ‘60s. As it happens, this museum rather likes what we’ve done with our freedom since 1945: emigrate to the suburbs and the sunbelt; bank-roll the State of Israel; celebrate ourselves through lifecycle rituals and summer camping; agitate for the *refuseniks*; campaign for civil rights and women’s liberation; build imposing synagogues and JCCs. With home movies ingeniously projected onto a Formica kitchen table and a backyard grill, we’re invited to be comfortable with ourselves and our freedom, rather than being shown a mirror in which to glimpse ourselves and our power—afew, and strangely. Given its ringside seat on Independence Mall, this museum expects, and is already receiving, a large complement of non-Jewish tourists. How many of the three million tourists who visit the Mall complex each year (400,000 of them from other nations) will come away with a sense of American Jewish complacency and self-congratulation remains to be seen; probably not a few?

Sometimes the stories we purport to tell have yet other stories to tell. Woven through this narrative of collective triumph and freedom is a story of individual survival and necessity; *Le-dor va-dor* with a Darwinian twist. If the story of America’s Jews is exceptional against the dark abyss of Jewish history—which seems very much the point here—it is because American Jews enjoyed their freedom as liberal individuals rather than as a licensed or tolerated community. From Washington’s reply to Moses Seixas to Robert E. Lee’s refusal to grant Jews *per se* High Holiday leave, and on to the challenges of assimilation and conversion, America’s Jews have made existential, consequential choices based on both interest and conscience. The family- and congregation-centered communities of New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston that we encounter in the first part of the exhibition swiftly yield to impromptu arrangements and expanded options. By the 1830s, having internalized democratic practices and values, some Jews reformed synagogue charters while others seceded to start new congregations—or leave the fold entirely. Here we find Jews adapting to environments that could be decidedly hostile and unfathomable: a world of Christian suitors for Jewish daughters, of blue laws guarding someone else’s sabbath; the harsh, bleak world of the prairie; a world divided into slaves and their owners, into United and Confederate States. And although Jewish exceptionalism is writ large here, the exhibition sends home the point that Jews faced the same dilemmas as non-Jewish Americans did on the crucibles of slavery and disunion. Of course, we think; of course three rabbis (Einhorn, Raphall, and Wise) could come up with as many rationales for and against slavery. And yet it is shocking to read the angry words of one Eleanor H. Cohen of Charleston following Lincoln’s assassination—“Our worst enemy is laid low . . . God grant so may all our foes perish”—and to view the portrait of Rabbi Max Lilienthal in which a Confederate Jew, in a blotted scrawl, defaced the legend “The Lord is my Banner” to read “Abe Lincoln is your banner. May 28, 1861.” Then again, these 19<sup>th</sup>-century American Jews are the same Jews who made a shambles out of Isaac Mayer Wise’s efforts to bring all of American Jewry under one *minhag America*. And they are also the same Jews who could not agree on whether



American soil would be a fruitful place for reviving Judaism, or whether Jewish life in America would become, in Saul Bellow's pregnant phrase, "the life of Americans who are also Jews."

Sometimes, in the face of violent threat, adaptation and compromise were simply not possible. In general, Jews chose flight over fight. In 1740, under threat of attack from the Spanish (and fear of a revived Inquisition), all but two Jewish families of Savannah high-tailed it out of town. During the Revolution, Loyalist Isaac Touro fled to Jamaica with his British protectors. Judah P. Benjamin, the attorney general of the Confederacy—and owner of 140 slaves—was the sole Confederate bigwig to flee treason charges after the war. He settled in England and was buried in Paris under the name "Philippe Benjamin."

And the most egregious incidents of anti-Semitism—Grant's Order No. 11 of 1862, which demanded the immediate expulsion of Jews from Kentucky, Tennessee, and Mississippi; the Seligman affair of 1877, in which banker Joseph Seligman refused rooms in Saratoga's Grand Union Hotel—left such a divot in the American Jewish psyche that Emma Lazarus found it hard to persuade her fellow Jews to embrace the cause of the impoverished Jewish refugees arriving in New York from the Russian pogroms of 1881.

A similar moment of truth came for the family of Atlanta playwright Alfred Uhry, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Driving Miss Daisy*. Uhry's great-uncle, Sigmund Montag, owned the pencil factory

in which Mary Phagan was murdered in 1913. Leo Frank, the Jewish superintendent who was accused of murdering Phagan, was unable to flee, and he didn't think it was necessary either. He wrote to his



View of the second-floor exhibit, Choices and Challenges of Freedom: 1945-Today. (Photo by Ilana Blumenthal, courtesy of the National Museum of American Jewish History.)

wife Lucille, "The public will tire of thinking about the case after a while. They can't have blood in their eyes always." Six weeks later, he was lynched. And of all the myriad of videos and archival film screened in the core exhibition, the most startling is a film of marching Nazi youth—marching, that is, in one of twenty-five American summer camps organized by the German American Bund.

If the story of Jewish American freedom is hard to manage, well that is the nature of stories. The National Museum of American Jewish History is a smart museum, conceived and designed by smart people (including Deputy Director Josh Perelman) who know that the freedom to triumph is some-

thing less than the triumph of freedom. They know too that museums both tell and show, and in the end, it is the artifacts thrust before us—an 1866 photograph of Jewish railroader and interpreter Otto Mears seated beside Chief Ouray of Colorado; the menu from the famed 1883 "Trefa banquet" of Hebrew Union College boasting oysters, clams, shrimp, and frogs' legs; the mysteries of baseball explained in a diamond-shaped diagram with the positions labeled in Yiddish; the biretta and caftan of Jean Gornish, the "Sheindele Chazzanit" who sang only from stages, not bimas; a *New York Daily News* photo showing the Rosenbergs' sons scanning a headline about their parents' death sentence; and Bella Abzug's Queen Mary of a hat. There is also a 1922 internal memo from the Yale admissions office warning:

the ethical code of a large proportion of the individuals of this race differs from that of the average student especially in matters of student honor and financial honesty. ... There seems to be no question that the University as a whole has about all of this race that it can well handle.

In fact, it was a drop of blood that stayed in my eyes long after I left the museum: the tiny stain left in 1884 on the lacy circumcision gown of a certain Harry Hoffberger of Baltimore.

The museum is fully accessible and is open on Shabbat, when tickets can only be obtained online or at the Bourse Building next door. The museum's shop—a version of the contemporary college bookstore that sells very few books—is also open on Shabbat. But not to worry: credit cards will not be processed until after sundown.

*Esther Schor, professor of English at Princeton University, is the author of Emma Lazarus (Nextbook/Schocken), which won the 2006 National Jewish Book Award in American Studies. Her book, Strange Nursery: New and Selected Poems (Sheep Meadow), is forthcoming in 2012.*

## Marginalia

BY ELLI FISCHER AND SHAI SECUNDA

### HEARAT SHULAYIM (FOOTNOTE)

directed by Joseph Cedar

United King Films

103 minutes, (Hebrew with English subtitles)

Robert De Niro and his fellow judges at Cannes are not generally known for their interest in Jewish studies, but an Israeli film set in the Hebrew University's Talmud department won the award for "Best Screenplay" at the prestigious French film festival this spring. Since its opening in June, *Hearat Shulayim (Footnote)* by director and screenwriter Joseph Cedar has, not surprisingly, been the subject of incessant discussion among Israeli academics, but it

has more on its mind than academic gossip. It is at once a family melodrama, a playful comedy, and a serious philosophical inquiry, as well as a series of winks and nods to those familiar with the academic subculture it portrays.

As the film begins, words in a font characteristic of academic Hebrew footnotes are typed across the screen informing viewers that they are about to witness "the worst day of Professor Scholnik's life." The scene shifts to a ceremony held at The Israel Museum to mark the induction of Professor Uriel Scholnik (superbly acted by the Israeli film star, Lior Ashkenazi) into the Israel Academy of Sciences. Uriel is an accomplished and gregarious professor of Talmud at the Hebrew University, whose carefully unkempt mane, designer glasses, solid maroon knit yarmulke, and salt-and-pepper beard reflect the well-cultivated

image of a Jerusalemite public intellectual. Indeed, a later scene in which Uriel removes the yarmulke upon entering his home office may cause viewers to wonder whether Uriel is, to adapt a famous phrase, "a Jew in the street but a man in the home." He stands at the podium and accepts the honor with the kind of self-deprecating humor and sardonic wit born of confidence and a strong sense of self-worth.

Sitting in the audience is Scholnik's father, Professor Eliezer Scholnik (perfectly played by Shlomo Bar-Aba), an excruciatingly pedantic and methodical scholar on the faculty of the same university Talmud department as his son, though he is far less prolific, and for that matter, less popular. The peak of his career was his appearance, decades earlier, in a footnote in J. N. Feinstein's magnum opus, *Introduction to the Text of Tannaitic Literature* (a riff on the father of

modern, critical talmudic research, J.N. Epstein's two books, *Introduction to the Text of the Mishnah* and *Introduction to Tannaitic Literature*). Close-ups of Bar-Aba's talented, old-school face-acting (he is first and foremost a stage comic) call attention to the senior Scholnik's palpable discomfort as he sits slumped in a chair, listening enviously as his son pays homage to

frame with a slack posture, and usually spends his nights sleeping alone on a couch in his study, apart from his somewhat masculine wife (played by Aliza Rosen), with whom he rarely talks. But from the moment Eliezer learns of his prize, no swordsman's costume can hide Uriel's emasculation.

Cedar cleverly hides an explicit reference to

Public disinterest in such pedantry is voiced by the TV host Jacky Levy (also perfectly casted, since he plays himself) interviewing Eliezer in the wake of his newfound celebrity. As the Israel Prize winner attempts to correct slight inaccuracies in the teleprompter's summary of his work, Levy responds with a dismissive "blah, blah, blah."

## Footnote's footnotes perform many of the roles that written footnotes do: citation, background exposition, and, of course, name-dropping.

the father who set him on his course. Although the identity of the "Professor Scholnik" who is experiencing the worst day of his life is initially ambiguous, it is clear by the end of the scene.

In addition to their strained filial relationship (one that occasionally feels more appropriate for siblings than for father and son), Uriel and Eliezer represent two different conceptions of the role of the academic. Is the professor's primary place in the classroom or in the bowels of the library (or laboratory)? In the language of the film, is he a teacher or a philologist? Eliezer hearkens back to the old, German-style ivory tower scholar, while the extroverted Uriel represents a younger generation of socially engaged intellectuals. The tensions are heightened by the fact that the differences between father and son, teacher and philologist, intellectual and scholar, go virtually unnoticed by the rest of the world outside their rarefied discipline. This enables the tragicomic case of mistaken identity that drives the film's plot. And so, after setting up these oppositions, Cedar undermines them by forcing Uriel and Eliezer to trade places.

The reversal begins, we are told in the same scholastic font as the film's first announcement, on "the best day of Professor Scholnik's life." As Eliezer walks from his home to the library along the same route that he takes every day, rain or shine, he is informed that after decades of neglect he will be awarded the Israel Prize, the country's highest honor, whose national significance has no real North American parallel. Though he promptly sets off for his regular haunts in the library, everything has changed for Eliezer. Mysteriously, he is no longer stopped by security guards, who throughout the film function as gatekeepers, determining who has achieved the status of insider. Try as he might, Eliezer is also too excited to operate the microfilm machines on which he normally takes great pains to compare medieval talmudic manuscripts. Instead, he shares the news over lunch with a silver-haired woman in a semi-secluded university garden. Meanwhile, Uriel emerges from a campus health club shower wearing a towel, only to realize that he has been robbed of his clothes. Improvising, he borrows some fencing gear, complete with rapier, from the studio next door and ventures forth, only to stumble upon his father sharing a romantic moment with his mysterious lady friend.

This scene marks the most obvious example of Cedar's return, in *Footnote*, to his fascination with the issue of Jewish-Israeli masculinity. Until this point in the film, Uriel has been presented as a symbol of manhood and virility. Even the midwife flirts with him as his wife labors to deliver their baby. Eliezer, on the other hand, carries his smallish

these gender constructions in plain sight. Early in the film, Eliezer overhears a cocktail party conversation at the Israel Academy of Sciences ceremony in



Israeli poster advertising *Footnote*.

which Uriel and others discuss controversial Berkeley professor Daniel Boyarin's *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*, a study of Jewish masculinity whose central thesis is that Zionism has unfortunately replaced the idealized effeminate, scholastic, Jewish male with the new Hebrew warrior. This is just one example of a strategy that Cedar deploys throughout the film, which we might call a cinematic footnote. *Footnote's* footnotes perform many of the roles that written footnotes do: citation, background exposition, and, of course, name-dropping. This technique makes for some of the film's quirkiest and most amusing moments. Characters are fleshed out in expository asides introduced by written text, voice-overs, and rapidly scrolling microfilm.

Footnotes, however, serve as more than a cinematic device here. The Hebrew term for footnotes, "hearot shulayim," literally means "marginal notes" or "marginalia," and it captures the sense of marginality that is at the core of Cedar's critique of the academy. The film is set in the Hebrew University Talmud department, whose faculty characteristically publishes articles buttressed by exceptionally long footnotes, and even footnotes upon footnotes.

Cedar studied philosophy at the Hebrew University, and *Footnote* contains many thinly veiled and playful alterations of real people and events famous (or infamous) at the university and within the actual Talmud department. The barbs hurled by professors at their hapless students are genuinely funny, but they will also have a familiar ring to those who have heard (or even been victims of) these recycled witticisms. Thus, Uriel's reprimand of a graduate student for not having addressed the works of Baer, Ben-Sasson, and Bonfils, "to mention only those whose names start with B," calls for a footnote to a famously cutting review in the field. Passing reference is also made to the real and tragic case of a young graduate student to whom the department refused to grant a PhD even though she was on her deathbed. The film also pays tribute to Menahem Stern, a Hebrew University historian and Israel Prize winner who was tragically murdered during the first Intifada while walking to the university, and whose memorial plaque Eliezer passes on his daily route.

Cedar's intimate familiarity with his subject's unique sub-culture turns the university itself into a sort of character. In some Hollywood films, universities are virtually interchangeable, but in the case of *Footnote*, to replace the libraries and lecture halls of Hebrew University with those of another would be to alter the film beyond recognition. Like Bialik, Grade, Sabato, and perhaps Potok (to mention only those whose name is Chaim), Cedar succeeds in producing a compelling portrait of the talmudic academy, as only an insider can.

The most dramatic (and funniest) scene in the film takes place in a cramped office in the Ministry of Education. There, and later in a book-lined study, Uriel learns something that forces him to question what really lies at the heart of the scholar's quest: truth or recognition? To one who is genuinely searching for truth, should accolades matter? And if not, what explains the intense competition over such prizes among researchers ostensibly engaged in precisely such pursuits? Is the value of recognition rooted completely in the fellowship of the recognized, and does such fellowship itself depend on the exclusion of the ostensibly inferior? In another brilliant scene, Cedar sets up a rehearsal ceremony where prize recipients practice shaking the Prime Minister of Israel's hand, but grasp nothing but air. (One wonders if he thought about it while receiving his own award in Cannes.)

To its credit, *Footnote* leaves its viewers with a lingering uneasiness about its core dilemmas, without making an attempt at resolution. Though its characters belong to the academy, their unresolved anxieties about their own worth and marginality are profoundly and broadly human.

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# What is a Jew? The Answer of the Maccabees

BY ABBA HILLEL SILVER

**“Who is a Jew?”** David Ben-Gurion asked in a letter he dispatched to fifty Jewish leaders and thinkers around the world in 1958. He had good political reasons to launch such an inquiry, and equally good reasons to expect answers or attempts at answers. Isaiah Berlin wrote back, and so did the Jewish scholar Alexander Altmann, the novelist S.Y. Agnon, and the Lubavitcher Rebbe, as well as many others. But Abba Hillel Silver, the prominent Reform rabbi and American Zionist leader who had represented the Jewish Agency before the United Nations a decade earlier did not respond to Ben-Gurion’s missive—not directly, anyhow.

On December 7, 1958, the first day of Hanukkah, Silver explained to his Cleveland congregation, Temple Tifereth-Israel, why he did not think it was the business of the State of Israel, or any state for that matter, to formulate an answer to Ben-Gurion’s question. What really mattered, in his eyes, was not the legal definition of “Who is a Jew?” but rather a genuine understanding of “What is a Jew?” in both Israel and the diaspora. More than fifty years have passed since Silver delivered this sermon, but, as one scarcely needs to emphasize, it resonates deeply with our contemporary situation and retains all of its relevance.

The sermon was rediscovered by Professor Ofer Schiff of Ben-Gurion University, in the Abba Hillel Silver Archives at the Western Reserve Historical Society in Cleveland, Ohio. Schiff’s forthcoming book, *Abba Hillel Silver: The Defeated Zionist (Resling)*, is scheduled to appear in 2012.

**M**y dear friends, a heated debate has been going on in [...] the State of Israel on “What is a Jew?” and “Who is a Jew?” A cabinet crisis has developed within the government over this question. Ministers have resigned and the issue has spilled over the borders of Israel into the lands of the diaspora.

At first glance it appears to be sort of an academic question, and one which is asked rather late in the day—after thousands of years. [...] Actually, to Israel it is a practical question, [...] with the establishment of the state ten years ago, a law was enacted called “The Law of Return”—a law which permits every Jew from any part of the world to enter Israel and automatically to become a citizen of the State of Israel. [...]

In this declaration “The Law of Return,” the term Jew is not defined. And as you know, hundreds of thousands have come to Israel in the last ten years from all parts of the world—the vast majority, of course, unquestionably Jews. On the other hand, there have been half-Jews and quarter-Jews who

have come—children of mixed marriages who were not raised as Jews. Non-Jewish women who had married Jews in the diaspora but who had never been converted. Now, “The Law of Return” did not exclude any of them. But soon some problems began to develop—for example, there was the case of a Monk in a Catholic Monastery who acquired Israeli citizenship under legislation which grants automatic citizenship to all Jewish immigrants. This monk was an apostate—he had been a Jew—and by default he got away with his claim that by converting to Catholicism he had switched only his reli-

gious affiliation but had not relinquished his Jewish nationality. [...] Thus, for purposes of marriage and divorce, and all other situations involving personal status, the rabbinic courts, which have exclusive control over these matters, will not recognize as Jews all whom “The Law of Return” has accepted as Jews.

And this situation came to a critical head this year when the Ministry of the Interior—now under the leadership of one who is not a deeply religious Jew [...] asked all citizens of the State of Israel to fill out cards of identity and to indicate what religion they belonged to—Jewish, Chris-



*Abba Hillel Silver and Temple Tifereth-Israel, Cleveland, Ohio. (Illustration by Val Bochkov © Val Bochkov.)*

gious affiliation but had not relinquished his Jewish nationality. [...] And there were quite a number of these cases—not of Monks of course, but similar cases which brought the question of “The Law of Return” into a focus whereby a clear definition had to be given as to who is a Jew.

And a more serious problem appeared here. As you know, the rabbinic court in Israel retains all authority in matters of marriage and divorce, and in all matters of personal status. [...] These rabbinic courts follow, of course, rabbinic law and tradition in rendering their decisions. [...] A Jew, according to rabbinic law, is a person born of a Jewish mother—irrespective of the father’s religion—or, of course, one who is born not a Jew, who was formally converted to the Jewish religion according to the pre-

scribed ceremony of conversion [...] the ministry stated that for the purposes of this registration it was sufficient for a man to declare in good faith that he is a Jew—and in the case of adults, that he does not belong to another religion [...]

Now, because of the wide-scale protest which developed in Israel over this matter, and because of the danger of a tragic rift in the Jewish community, the card had been temporarily suspended, and the government is now consulting with religious leaders—both in Israel and in the diaspora—as to how to handle the difficult problem and how to define, for the legal purposes of the state “Who is a Jew?”

Except for the fact that the government has turned over to the rabbinic court all matter of per-

sonal status [...] the definition of "Who is a Jew?" would not be within the province of the state—and it is for the spiritual leaders throughout the world to decide this question; it is a religious question. The government of Israel can define only "Who is an Israeli?"—just as the government of the United States can decide "Who is an American?"—not who is a

which they are trying to solve. But for the Jewish people throughout the world, "Who is a Jew?" cannot be defined by the law of the land. In fact it requires no definition. It is not a legal question at all. A Jew is one who accepts the Jewish religion, who feels himself a Jew, who throws in his lot with the Jewish people, who wants to be identified with the Jewish

covenant, to be a Kingdom of Priests and a Holy people. They were unique in a heathen polytheistic and idolatrous world with its low standards of morals and ethics. They were reaching out for Jews who were prepared ... to die for their faith rather than to forsake it. That was their criterion—their test of "Who is a Jew?" [...]

## The government of Israel can define only "Who is an Israeli?"—not who is a Christian or who is a Jew.

Christian or who is a Jew. This belongs to the leaders of the respective religious communities.

Now, I believe that sooner or later the Parliament of Israel, the Knesset, may have to interpret "The Law of Return" a little more closely, because of these problems which have arisen—although it is doubtful in my mind whether it will be able ever or willing ever to give a full and concise definition of the term "Jew." If it gives any definition at all, it will be, in my judgment, a very liberal and commonsense view—not at all the rigid, traditional rabbinic view upon which the religious authorities in Israel insist. And as far as leaving all matters of personal status to the rabbinic court, which has given rise to these serious problems, I for one see no other solution for it than permitting civil courts to act in matters of marriage and divorce, which they do in the United States, for all such as do not wish to resort to rabbinic courts. This, I believe, will come in time, but only after a long and bitter conflict. A modern state cannot leave these basic questions of marriage and divorce to an ecclesiastical body.

But in Israel, this is an urgent legal question,

community. It is a voluntary acceptance of historic commitments. [...]

Now the Maccabees faced not a similar problem in their day, but a sort of related problem. Their problem was not "Who is a Jew?" but who is a true Jew and a loyal Jew—because there were many Jews in their day born Jews, racially Jews against whom these Maccabees had to wage war because they were assimilated Jews. They were Hellenized Jews [...] who turned their backs upon the Jewish code of high and stern morality of clean living, of compassion for the weak and the needy, of reverence for all life and all the exacting ethical teachings of the Torah. These Jews, nominally Jews, were destroying Judaism. And the Maccabees, zealous for the law, rose and waged war not only upon the Syrian who ruled the country but upon the Jews within Palestine, who cooperated with these rulers. [...]

The Maccabees felt that they possessed a mandate from the God of history to preserve some great spiritual truth for mankind; that they and their fathers before them had entered into an enduring

That is a spiritual definition of the term Jew. Good Jews, my dear friends, are never concerned, are never worried about definitions. They ask themselves not "Who is a Jew," but "How can I be a true Jew and a loyal Jew?" "What can I do to be a better Jew, to be more loyal to my heritage?" "What can I do to bring better service to my community and better Jewish education to my children?" How can I make my life conform more closely to the ideals of the Torah?" How can I help spread the light of brotherhood, of justice and peace in the world which my prophets and the seers of my people first gave to mankind?" "How can I kindle more lights in the world which is the sanctuary of God and where so many lights have been extinguished?"

That is the problem, which the Maccabees set for themselves, and that's the answer they gave. And that's the problem which the Jewish people in the entire world—inside of Israel and outside of Israel—face today, not a legal problem. Not to define a Jew in relation to a "Law of Return" or in relation to marriage and divorce, but how to be Jews in relation to their great historic destiny. And the Maccabees have told us how to be such loyal Jews. To dare to stand alone, to be prepared to make sacrifices, not to be afraid because we are few in number, but to move forward with the help of God. To preserve the integrity of our spiritual heritage, and to transmit it to the world. [...]

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# Kabbalah in 18<sup>th</sup>-Century Prague: A Response

BY SHARON FLATTO

There must be something about the magical atmosphere of Prague that does not allow the myths and misconceptions it evokes, beginning with the non-existent Golem, to be laid to rest. Skewed scholarly portrayals of this center's rich early modern rabbinic culture, and the neglect of the prominence of mysticism within it, provide the latest case in point. Instead of the empty dogmas and distortions preached by old guard historians, a new appreciation of the seminal role Kabbalah played in this milieu is long overdue.

Kabbalah was not the sole possession of isolated figures but rather the prevailing theological framework of many rabbinic leaders and lay individuals in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Eastern and Central Europe. Mystical doctrines shaped rabbinic authorities' practices, and informed the teachings they shared with their congregants and students. Due to historical biases regarding Kabbalah during this period and to the lack of critical rabbinic biographies, studies of Prague's towering Chief Rabbi, Ezekiel Landau (1713-1793), (including Aryeh Leib Gelman's *Ha-Noda' bi-Yehudah u-Mishnato*, Jekuthiel Kamelhar's *Mofet hador*, and Solomon Wind's *Rabbi Ezekiel Landau*) as well as broader histories of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Jewry, accepted at face value Landau's oft-repeated claim that he did not engage in esoteric matters. In my book, *The Kabbalistic Culture of Eighteenth-Century Prague: Ezekiel Landau (the 'Noda Biyehudah') and his Contemporaries*, I offer a necessary revision. Still, many of the past biases persist, as can be seen in Allan Nadler's review of my book (*Jewish Review of Books*, Summer 2011).

The free use of kabbalistic tenets in the writings of Landau, which are mistakenly identified by Nadler as cosmetic or incidental, are, in fact, authentic expressions of deep mystical yearnings and accurate markers of the culture and beliefs of numerous Ashkenazic rabbis who took these concepts seriously. This understanding of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish culture is apparently difficult for latter-day Maimonideans to accept, and poses a challenge to the next generation of scholars who are open to engaging with these texts on their own terms.

This is not the venue in which to elaborate upon the many flaws in Nadler's problematic review. Nevertheless, I will briefly touch on several of his most glaring errors.

1) *Failing to adhere to scholarly protocols.* Much of Nadler's review is based on an article by Maoz Kahana and Michael Silber in "the latest edition" of the journal *Kabbalah*, an article that challenges a central component of my book on the evidence of a lone sermon of Landau's. Nadler, however, inexplicably failed to keep up with the scholarship. The *actual* latest edition of *Kabbalah*, published last February, included my extensive twenty-page response article in which I dismantle the Kahana/Silber argument piece by piece (see below). In his

haste to shoot down a work that challenges prevailing opinions, Nadler crossed the line from dogmatism to scholarly malpractice.

## Landau's free use of kabbalistic tenets are authentic expressions of his deep mystical yearnings.

2) *Misreading and misquoting.* Nadler makes serious errors in his readings both of the primary materials and my expositions of them. A particularly egregious example is his discussion of Landau's responsum (*Noda' bi-Yehudah, Tinyana, Yoreh De'ah*, no. 164) on the mystical concept of *gilgul neshamot* (transmigration of souls), or simply *gilgul*. He completely misreads this responsum and misquotes my carefully crafted synopsis on pp. 124-125 of my book. Specifically, Nadler asserts that Landau "flatly dismisses" the notion of *gilgul* "as superstition" in this responsum. Where exactly? Any competent reader of rabbinic literature

will immediately see that it is Nadler who has 'misconstrued' this responsum. Nadler then imputes to me the claim that Landau permitted the exhumation of an infant who died before his eighth day (in order to circumcise him) on the basis of *gilgul*. In fact, I clearly explain in my book that Landau believes that a possible *gilgul* is the reason why *cherdat ha-din* (the dead's fear of judgment) may apply in this case, which would militate against circumcision. This consideration, however, is outweighed by the prospect of the dead baby's future resurrection, which will engender shame if he remains uncircumcised. In sum, Landau's responsum factors in *gilgul*, and never dismisses it. (Incidentally, his acceptance of the doctrine of *gilgul* here is in complete accord with the various other sources in his work where he refers to this mystical concept, which are examined in chapter 10 of my book.) If you are going to challenge a reading of a rabbinic responsum in print, you had better get it right!

3) *Missing the centrality of Kabbalah for Landau.* Nadler's claim that Landau's use of kabbalistic terms is simply part of rabbinic jargon misses the

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point and distorts the truth. For Landau does not just use kabbalistic terms. This highly influential halakhist (legalist) espouses central kabbalistic and mystical tenets, which shape his observance, his interpretation of biblical and rabbinic narratives, and his worldview. Landau's approach to essential religious themes, such as the meaning of exile, the role of evil, redemption, converts, and the messianic age are largely shaped by Zoharic, Cordoverian, and Lurianic teachings. In fact, he declares that "the purpose of the entire Torah and its commandments" is to facilitate the kabbalistic goal of *tikkun* (cosmic restoration), and that nothing less than the structure of the universe, reward and punishment, and the nature of the next world are implicated in the mystical ideal of *devekut* (cleaving to God). Moreover, the kabbalistic goals of redeeming the *shekhinah* (literally God's presence; the tenth divine emanation, or *sefirah*) and elevating the divine sparks are the prism through which he views the aim of religious activity. He repeatedly implores his community to observe the commandments, pray with tears, repent, and fast in order to achieve these goals. I discuss all these motifs at length in my book, but even a cursory glance at a number of his sermons (for instance, the second sermon in *Ahavat Tzion*, and the twentieth sermon in *Derushei ha-Zelah*) should suffice.

Landau's other sermons and many of his glosses are similarly replete with, and informed by, kabbalistic teachings, despite his repeated protestations that he does not engage in these matters. What Nadler mocks as Straussian, namely my pointing to the tension between revealing and concealing Kabbalah in Landau's work (a phenomenon found throughout the oeuvre and not "especially in his later writings," as Nadler claims), is inherent to the esoteric enterprise. This dialectic is manifest in

most works addressing Kabbalah, not just Landau's. Since the centrality of Kabbalah in Landau's writings (notwithstanding these tensions) is an inconvenient truth for Nadler, he entirely ignores most of my book (particularly Parts III & IV).

4) *Leaning on shaky foundations.* As mentioned above, Nadler hangs much of his argument on an article in the journal *Kabbalah*, co-authored by Maoz Kahana and Michael Silber. That article builds a far-reaching argument (that by 1770 Landau had undergone a dramatic shift regarding Kabbalah) upon one section of one sermon. Clearly, this is untenable when so many other contemporary sources tell a

different story. Further, it is outrageous that Nadler, relying on his reading of Kahana and Silber, accuses me of paying insufficient attention to the dates of Landau's writings—and hence the evolution of his thinking—when most of the materials are neither dated nor in chronological order.

Aside from the methodological problems of using one source to establish such a drastic shift, the source itself is problematic. It is a polemic against several mystical groups flourishing at the time, particularly the Sabbatians, Frankists, and newfangled Hasidim. (While the Hasidim were not, as Nadler notes, in Prague, they were spreading rapidly in nearby Eastern Europe.) As one of the leading rabbinic authorities contending with

various threats to rabbinic culture by these mystical groups and others, Landau used harsh words against Kabbalah that must be understood in their political context. In addition, this sermon fragment is riddled with further problems, including questions of authenticity, censorship, provenance, and publication (all of which I address in my published response in *Kabbalah*). Moreover, in the rush to draw an exaggerated contrast between my work and that of Kahana and Silber, Nadler fails to mention that they too concede, largely based on my research, Landau's favorable attitude towards and immersion in Kabbalah well into his adult life. Finally, there is much evidence in the writings of

## The writings of Landau and his disciples indicate his immersion in Kabbalah and support of its practices up until his death in 1793.

Landau and his disciples confirming his ongoing immersion in Kabbalah and support of its practices up until his death in 1793.

5) *Further problems.* Regarding Nadler's other unfounded points and criticisms, I can only briefly mention a few below. Pace Nadler, Landau gave certain book *haskamot* (approbations) that unambiguously reflect his knowledge of the kabbalistic content of the books he approved. Nadler's comments on the Brody *kloyz* (study house), particularly the issuing of the anti-Frankist ban, are also misleading. It was not the Brody *kloyz* who issued the ban but a regional rabbinic assembly in Brody. Intended to limit—but not stop—the study of Kabbalah, this ban reflects the rabbinic crisis triggered by its perceived misuse by the Sabbatians and Frankists, a phenomenon stressed in my book. Further, the *kloyz's* position towards Kabbalah post-1756 did not change as simply as Nadler suggests. During the following decades, its members continued teaching, using, and supporting the publication of key kabbalistic texts, including the first printing of the classic Lurianic *Etz Chaim*. Finally, Nadler's overlooking of my lengthy discussion of the history and culture of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Prague (i.e. the period of Joseph II, the *Toleranzpatent*, etc.) and the nature of Landau's public career there reflects the narrowness of his perspective. It is precisely through my comprehensive study of Prague's rabbinic and communal materials—in their historical context—that I was able to shed light on this heretofore-neglected prominent community and the deep mystical values at its core.

6) *What is at stake.* My book presents a fundamentally different perspective from that of Nadler's own historical work on the *mitnagedim* (opponents of Hasidism). Building on the important studies of Mendel Piekarz, Moshe Rosman, and others, my book calls for a revision of scholarship's understanding of the nature of late-18<sup>th</sup>-century non-Hasidic Ashkenazic Jewry, including many of the *mitnagedim*. It argues that Kabbalah and kabbalistic practices played a much larger role in these Jews' day-to-day lives than Nadler and others have described. (We can quibble about the term *mitnagedim*. I, like other scholars, use it to denote Ashkenazic Jews with wide influence who

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opposed Hasidism publicly. Of course, this relational term is one that is often utilized only retroactively. In reality, most contemporary opponents of Hasidism viewed themselves simply as traditional Ashkenazic Jews.)

My book displays the indispensability of understanding Kabbalah—not just its terminology—for comprehending the 18<sup>th</sup>-century non-Hasidic traditional world, its theology, values, and even practices. This touches a nerve, to which Nadler responds with a reckless assault. Evidently, the issues animating the tensions between the Hasidim and *mitnagedim* are still present with us today.

To conclude, the field of early modern Jewish

history must jettison the old rigid paradigm that defines spiritual figures either as creative Kabbalists or non-Kabbalists. A figure such as Landau, whose primary focus, to be sure, was Talmud and halakha but whose thought and mode of worship was shaped by Kabbalah points to a more nuanced reality. The existence of rabbinic leaders such as Landau also challenges the notion that it was only the Hasidim who disseminated Kabbalah to wider audiences. Landau, and others like him, inhabited a world that was much richer than the tired typologies of *mitnaged*-Hasid would suggest. A critical assessment of the multifaceted nature of early modern traditional society will only occur when scholars stop viewing its thick

literature (in the Geertzian sense) solely through their rationalistic and talmudic lenses. The writings of numerous leading 18<sup>th</sup>-century rabbis, including the majority of Landau's sermons and many of his glosses, show that Kabbalah was at the center of their beliefs and practices, and was not just window dressing. It is time to do these rich texts and this complex cultural world justice.

Sharon Flatto is an associate professor of Judaic studies at Brooklyn College, and the author of *The Kabbalistic Culture of Eighteenth-Century Prague: Ezekiel Landau (the 'Noda Biyehudah')* and his Contemporaries (*Littman Library*).

# Kabbalah in 18<sup>th</sup>-Century Prague: A Rejoinder

BY ALLAN NADLER

It comes as little surprise that Sharon Flatto was not pleased with my tough critique of her book, and she is certainly entitled to rise in its defense. What is however both surprising and disconcerting is the stridency, not to mention the *ad hominem* tone. While firmly criticizing what I viewed as Flatto's many tendentious arguments that (his own protestations notwithstanding) Ezekiel Landau, the Chief Rabbi of Prague, was a fervent, lifelong kabbalist, who harbored a covert agenda to promote Kabbalah to the masses, I did not engage in any personal slurs.

Unfortunately, with the exception of her dispute with my reading of a single responsum found in Landau's *Noda Biyehudah*, Flatto says nothing new here. As in her similarly redundant response to Maoz Kahana and Michael Silber's elucidation of a hitherto censored and strongly anti-kabbalistic sermon in the journal *Kabbalah*, there is no novelty, and there are certainly no concessions to be found in her response. Nothing she has now written refutes my substantive and strictly scholarly criticisms of her book.

Flatto seems to be under the impression that repeating an argument—no matter how flawed—often enough, and with ever more strident insistence on its “truth,” will validate it. This is not a mode by which scholars ought to operate, and therefore I see no point in reproducing the content of my review in different words. However, her unfortunate personal assaults on my own academic integrity and scholarly competence do demand a riposte.

Here then is a partial list of Flatto's depictions of me and my work:

I am a biased “old guard” historian who belongs in the company of dead 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century hagiographers of Landau who preach “empty dogmas and distortions.” In my critique of her work, I have failed “to adhere to scholarly protocols.” Worse, I have “crossed the line from dogmatism to scholarly malpractice” for having not addressed Flatto's response to Kahana and Silber's article in *Kabbalah*. (As so often happens in the world of academic pub-

lishing, my review was submitted to the *Jewish Review of Books* long before her response appeared; I did indeed read it before my review went to press, and although she now claims to have “dismantle[d] the Kahana/Silber argument, piece by piece,” I found her response painfully redundant, entirely unconvincing, and occasionally insulting—especially

when she went so far as to question the authenticity of the text published by Kahana and Silber.)

I am also, somehow, a “latter-day Maimonidean” and, at the same time, an old-school *mitnaged* who “distorts the truth,” the “truth” being whatever Flatto insists upon. Finally, I am not a “competent reader of rabbinic literature.”

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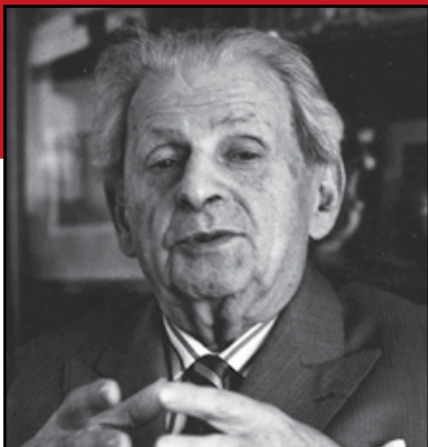


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# So . . . what am I thinking?



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That final insult brings me to the sole point in Flatto's incensed response that merits a detailed rejoinder: her insistence that I have been "misreading and misquoting" the responsum (whose blatantly incorrect reading she has now simply rehashed, while admonishing me for "not getting it right") concerning the exhumation and circumcision of a child who died before the age of eight days. This very brief responsum addresses the question largely from the perspective of the doctrine of *cherdat ha-din* (the dead's fear of judgment), which Lan-

## Nothing Flatto has written refutes my substantive and strictly scholarly criticisms of her book.

dau concludes is not a factor, so long as the body has not decomposed to the point that its exhumation would constitute *nivul ha-met* (degradation of the dead). Having made his argument and permitted the exhumation based on balancing these two dialectical halakhic concerns, and having referred the questioner to legal precedents written by two famous opponents of the popularization of Kabbalah, Zvi Ashkenazi and Yair Chaim Bachrach (respona that Flatto would have benefited from reading, but which would have made her misuse of Landau's responsum even less tenable), Landau insists that his permission to exhume stands "even according to the kabbalists . . . who believe that there exists the transmigration of souls (*akh le-fi da'at ha-mekubalim . . . she-yesh gilgul neshamot*) and, if so, every [deceased] infant would also experience the fear of judgment for its [sinful] actions in a previous life," because "*nivul*, which is the [critical] issue, would also apply to all infants, because, in my opinion, the living are also affected when they see that the end of all men is such a degradation (*sof ha-adam le-nivul ka-zeh*)."

Flatto strangely sees here an active promotion of the doctrine of *gilgul*, as she does in her reading of countless other texts, whose plain meaning notwithstanding, Flatto rallies to prove her book's central thesis. My reading of this particular responsum is that Landau, referring dismissively to the kabbalists in the third person, and deflecting any relevance of the doctrine of *gilgul* to the halakhic question at hand, in fact reflects a degree of irritation with such kabbalistic interventions in matters of Jewish law. The final words of this uncharacteristically brief responsum betray somewhat less patience: "due to the great burden I shall be brief (*u-lerov ha-tirdah akatser*). " It is, I would hope, understandable that in this dispute I empathize with Landau's fatigue and will say no more, beyond inviting readers to purchase her book, read it carefully alongside both the primary sources and Maoz Kahana's truly brilliant doctoral dissertation (as I have done, painstakingly, despite Flatto's repeated, demeaning accusation that my review was based on Silber and Kahana's single article in *Kabbalah*), and decide for themselves.

Allan Nadler is a professor of Jewish studies at Drew University, and the Norman and Gerry Sue Arnold Distinguished Visiting Professor at the College of Charleston.

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# Quibbles

BY ABRAHAM SOCHER

**O**n March 17, 1955, Harry Austryn Wolfson walked into the Appleton Chapel of Harvard's Memorial Church to preach a little sermon (or "sermonette," as he called it) on Psalms 14:1, "The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God."

The fool, who in the Scripture lesson this morning is quoted as saying to himself "There is no God" was not a fool in the ordinary sense of the term . . . He was a fool in the sense of being perverse and contrary. He denied what others affirmed . . . People, he knew, believed in God; and by God, he knew, they meant a Being above and beyond the world, the Creator and Governor of the world, a God who revealed Himself to men and told them what to do and what not to do . . . This, he knew, is what people believed in and this is what he did not believe in. And so honestly and bluntly he said to himself and to others, "There is no God" . . . He did not start to quibble about the meaning of God. He did not offer a substitute God.

This is an unusual way to begin preaching, even at Harvard. The fact that Wolfson had, by that time, been Harvard's most visible and distinguished Jewish scholar for decades, and still spoke with a strong Yiddish accent, must have made it even more surprising.

Wolfson proceeded to dismiss the work of medieval Jewish, Christian, and Muslim "scriptural philosophers" to whose "quibbles" he had devoted a lifetime of scholarship. He then turned to the prejudices of the theologians of his own time, whom he called "verbal theists." "I wonder," concluded Wolfson, "how many of the things offered as God by the lovers of wisdom of today are not again only polite but empty phrases for the downright denial of God by him who is called fool in the Scripture lesson this morning!"

What—aside from late-career second thoughts and innate chutzpah—inspired Wolfson to preach this sermon? Some of his targets were probably local: current and past Harvard colleagues. Among the empty phrases he mentions as being offered by contemporary theologians in place of God are "the principle of concretion," a slogan of Alfred North Whitehead's, and the "Ground of Being," which, at the time, was particularly associated with Paul Tillich, who had just been brought to Harvard to occupy a distinguished University Professorship. Another one of Wolfson's targets was probably the Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, who had been teaching at Harvard since the late 1940s.

At "Wolfson's Table" in the Faculty Club, his friend Morton White called those who took seriously Niebuhr's pronouncements about the implications of man's inherent sinfulness while ignoring their theological foundation "atheists for Niebuhr." "The great political and economic issues of our time," he later wrote, "are not likely to be settled by an appeal to a

theological dogma . . . not shared by all honest and intelligent participants in the debate." If Wolfson was provoked by what he read as empty phrases masquerading as deep thought about God, White was exercised by the idea that such thinking could go on to tell us anything deep about humanity.

**I** was reminded of this bit of mid-century intellectual history or, if you prefer, gossip, while reading John Patrick Diggins' new book *Why Niebuhr Now?* just out from University of Chicago Press.



Harry Austryn Wolfson. (Illustration by Mark Anderson.)

(As is the way with book publishing, Yale University Press is coming out with a book by Charles Lemert called *Why Niebuhr Matters* later this fall.) Diggins, who passed away before the book was published, was a smart, contrarian American historian, and might have made a stronger argument if he had been able to see the book all the way to press, but as far as I can see, this is an argument on behalf of latter-day "atheists for Niebuhr." In a typical passage, Diggins writes:

Niebuhr explained that man's Fall precluded the possibility of any ultimate triumph. Were Americans to lose sight of the limits to their knowledge and power, they would fall victim to the sins of vanity and cupidity.

Elsewhere, he says that Niebuhr understood the Bible to be "an authentic mythology containing paradoxical wisdom" about how sin came into the world and the extent to which it can be overcome. Diggins contrasts this with the naïve optimism of John Dewey and those who came under his influ-

ence. I am inclined to grant Diggins that Niebuhr had a deeper understanding of the relationship between human limitations and freedom than Dewey did, and that it gave him a more realistic approach to the ironies of American history and the requirements of foreign policy. But this doesn't amount to an argument that there is such a thing as authentic mythology or paradoxical wisdom, or that they ought to play a role in public policy (or that Niebuhr's distinctively Protestant version of such wisdom is the right one).

**I**n a massive new book of political and religious philosophy, *Divine Teaching and the Way of the World: A Defense of Revealed Religion*, Samuel Fleischacker argues for the wisdom and indispensability of traditional religion, and Judaism in particular. Fleischacker takes the title of his book from the famous saying in *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers), "Rabban Gamliel, the son of Rabbi Judah the Prince, says the study of Torah is good together with *derekh erez*."

The plain meaning of this is that it is good to divide one's time between study and gainful employment, but as Fleischacker notes, *derekh erez* literally means the "way of the world," and connotes good manners or common human decency. Drawing on Enlightenment philosophers, especially Kant, together with a somewhat idiosyncratic reading of rabbinic texts, he argues that "there can be no proper devotion to or interpretation of divine teachings independent of a commitment to ordinary human decency, but also that divine teaching can offer something to a secular ethic that it needs, but cannot itself provide."

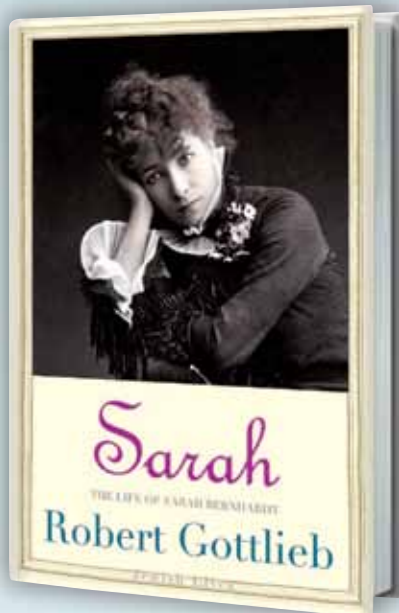
This claim sounds ambitious, but is, perhaps, not quite as bold as it sounds. In the first place, it would appear that "divine teaching" covers a wide array of texts and non-texts. In fact, although he makes some cogent points along the way, it isn't clear to me that Fleischacker tells us what makes a teaching divine. Moreover, his argument turns out to be that such teaching—whatever it is—does not and cannot add anything to our knowledge of ethics, politics, art, or anything else. A secular ethic doesn't *need* any of that. What it needs, but cannot itself provide, is an assurance that life is ultimately worth living, a distinctive version of what Charles Taylor has called "hypergoods," a justifying vision of the whole enchilada.

Fleischacker's book raises deep questions and repays close reading, (we will almost certainly run a full review in a future issue), but one is left wondering whether he has exchanged quibbling about the meaning of God for quibbling about the meaning of Torah. The question of whether, and to what extent, the wisdom—paradoxical or otherwise—of divine teaching ought to affect the way of the world abides.

Abraham Socher is the editor of the Jewish Review of Books.

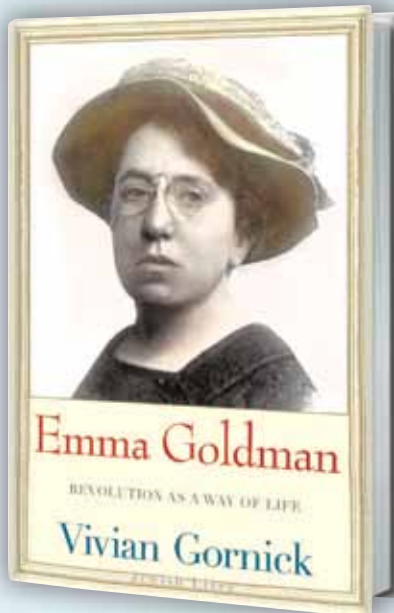


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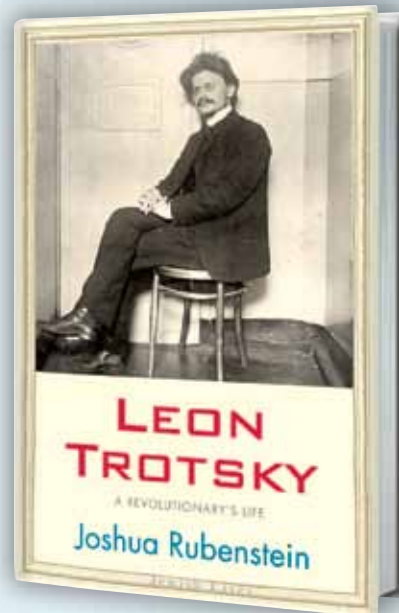
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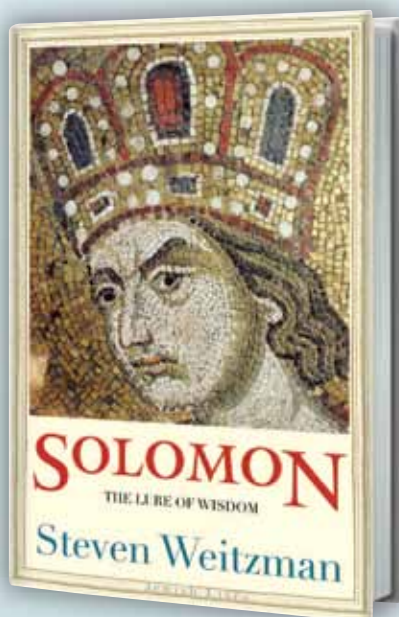
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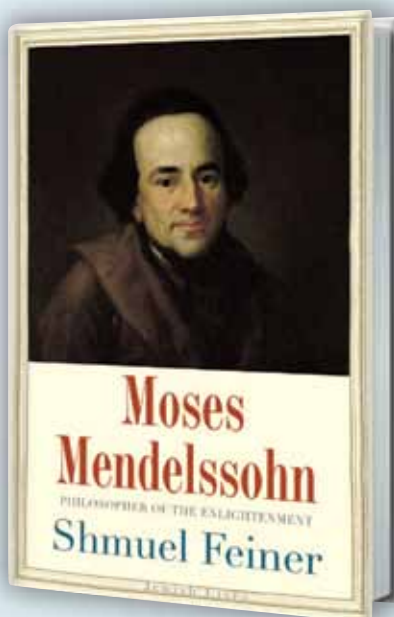
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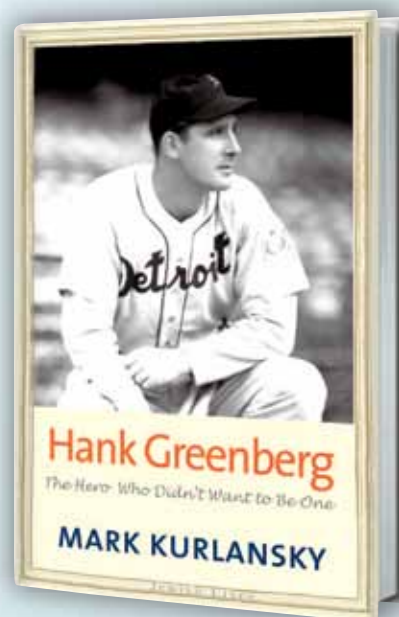
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