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The Chabad Paradox

Alan Mintz
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On the cover: "Kaffeeklatsch," by Hadley Hooper.
From left: David Grossman, Franz Kafka, The Lubavitcher Rebbe (Menachem Mendel Schneerson), and Lionel Trilling.

Inside back page: "Altneuschul," by JT Waldman.

Defending Steinberg

One of the many extreme opinions Ben Birnbaum shared in "Posthumous Prophecy" (Summer 2010) is his belief that Steinberg was not a storyteller. This is startling. Steinberg's first novel, *As a Driven Leaf*, is required reading on course lists for many day schools, confirmation classes, adult education programs, and rabbinical schools. Milton Steinberg's consummate storytelling has enabled contemporary readers to link our religious dilemmas with those of our rabbinic sages. Those same storytelling talents and skills were the ones Steinberg, the preacher, used to deliver his sermons and build his pulpit.

There is a long tradition of bringing out the unfinished works of writers we greatly respect (Agnon's *Shira,* Nabokov's *The Original of Laura*, Heine's *Rabbi of Bacharach,* and Kafka's works, to name a few). Yet the publishing of an unfinished work is often a controversial act, and rightly so. It should never be taken lightly or with solely commercial interests in mind. We don't know what *The Prophet's Wife* would have looked like had Steinberg taken it through all the steps to completion. He was, as a writer, brilliantly able to infuse philosophical and theological ideas into his fiction. According to Steinberg's son Jonathan (writing in the *Jewish Quarterly Review),* at the time he was writing *The Prophet's Wife,* the author was in the process of formulating a modern systematic theology. We can only guess at what interplay of ideas and emotion Steinberg might have been trying to create with this not yet completed work.

All we have are uncertain clues. Even so, I have no doubt in my mind that publishing Steinberg's novel-in-progress was the right thing to do.

Beth Lieberman
Project Editor, *The Prophet's Wife*
Los Angeles, CA

Years ago, I implored my writing students: "Read what the writer does, not just what the writer doesn't do." Ben Birnbaum's mean-spirited review of Milton Steinberg's *The Prophet's Wife* violates the principle to absurdity.

In his novel, Steinberg creates a new midrashic reading of Hosea, one of the harshest texts in the Bible. "Go and marry a harlot," God says. Traditional reading sees Gomer as Israel, whoring after false gods, deserving hideous punishments. In Steinberg's creation, Gomer is not a harlot. She is a loved wife, though forced into marriage, and seduced into adultery by Hosea's brother. Steinberg permits her to live as a woman, and permits Hosea to be merciful to her. On the sword-edge of the Holocaust, Steinberg wished, I believe, to mitigate the hardness of God's voice.

Steinberg had the idea that if he made Gomer a prisoner of her zeitgeist, and Hosea a merciful husband, he would have something important to add to the interpretation of the narrative, and to the theological dialectic of justice and mercy. From details furnished by Steinberg for the inner lives of his characters we see new dimensions to the story we had been too quick to understand too simply.

Gomer is granted more life by Steinberg than the Bible narrative that crushes her into symbol. A beginning has been made in breaking up the cement of received ideas about the inexorable need for punishment of the people of Israel, and about the use of a woman as exemplar of faithlessness and filth.

Birnbaum complains about what he perceives as Steinberg's writerly shortcomings, but he never addresses the question of what Steinberg reached for in his novel, the theological daring of it, or why Steinberg struggled on his deathbed to complete it. He grants it nothing at all. Possibly he dislikes fiction, the necessary coarseness, compared with the clean abstractions of the essay. He insults the novel and its commentary, the Steinberg family, and the publisher by cynically seeing *The Prophet's Wife* as a ploy to exploit the enduring success of *As a Driven Leaf*.

Birnbaum jeers down the rabbi novel-writer who tried to make us see what he imagined: Gomer—the blundering Jewish people—worthy of mercy and love. The forties was not a time to accept the notion that evil inflicted on Jews was the fault of their own sinning—nor, post-Holocaust, can it ever be again. To shift the balance in the dialectic of justice and mercy is, I believe, the triumph of Steinberg's novel.

The Prophet's Wife is radical new thinking poised against traditional reading. Milton Steinberg, the esteemed rabbi, polished writer of theological tomes, had the humility to step away from his exalted image and write a novel that would illuminate, as only fiction can, the daring ideas he passionately held. He had the brains and spirit and courage—the guts—to do it, and that is why, as a novelist, I honor the novelist in him.

Norma Rosen
New York, NY

Ben Birnbaum Responds:

Contrary to Ms. Lieberman's contention, I do not object on principle to the publication of posthumous and unfinished works, but her comparison of Milton Steinberg with Agnon, Nabokov, Heine, and Kafka is hard to credit. As for Ms. Rosen, her efforts—here and in her "commentary"—to make of *The Prophet's Wife* a display of "radical new thinking" that views women and the fate of Jews more cogently than do books rooted in the Bronze Age is, in a way, admirable. Unfortunately, whatever Steinberg's intentions and Ms. Rosen's hopes, the broken volume he produced (and, which Behrman House made little effort to buttress) just isn't strong enough to carry the theological freight. I do agree that Steinberg grants Gomer more life (however thin) than does the Tanakh, but given that Gomer's name is mentioned only once in Hosea, and her actions restricted to silently bearing illegitimate children offstage, it hardly seems an achievement worthy of real celebration.

Spy Stories

I would like to add two additional notes to Steven Zipperstein's comprehensive account of Mark Zborowski in "Underground Man" (Summer 2010).

Zborowski was one of the very few persons who knew where Leon Trotsky's archive was located in Paris. It had been deposited there by the Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, which was the depository of almost all the radical papers in Europe. When Zborowski complained to his Russian handlers that the theft of Trotsky's papers might reveal his role as the spy inside the Trotskyist movement, they replied, "Well, we wanted to give Stalin a birthday present."

There is also a very good account of Zborowski written by Elisabeth Poretsky, the wife of Ignace Reiss, the murdered former director of the GRU in Western Europe, in her book *Our Own People: A Memoir of 'Ignace Reiss' and his Friends*, with a preface by Sir William Deakin, the first Warden of St. Antony's College, Oxford.

Daniel Bell
Cambridge, MA

Rashi & Richard the Lionheart

In "Rashi and the Crusader: A Legend" (Summer 2010), Professor Matt Goldish reproduces a version of the Rashi-Godfrey legend from R. Gedaliah ibn Yahya's *The Chain of Tradition*. For those who wish to find more about this fascinating story, please see our article "Rashi and The First Crusade: Commentary, Liturgy and Legend" (*Judaism*, Spring 1999).

The version you printed is an abridgement of the original with several inaccuracies, including the name "Gottfried in the Greek Tongue," the Greek part being an inept "correction" of the text by a scribe ignorant of the city of Bouillon. Gedaliah's full-length version offers rich historical detail. It appears a composite of a plausible connection with Rashi in Spring 1096 joined to the failed campaign of Richard the Lionheart nearly a hundred years later. (It contains a verbal map of Godfrey's route to Palestine that is actually a very accurate depiction of Richard's!) History tells us that Richard returned to Europe accompanied by only a few bodyguards after losing his army. A "great warrior" was thus humiliated, as Rashi predicts, but it was not Godfrey.

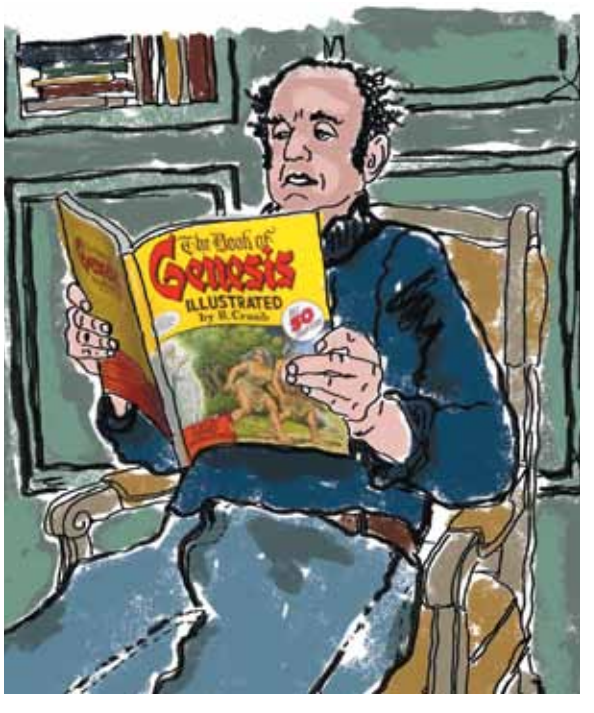
Gedaliah may have gotten the legend through his father, a disciple of Rabbi Yehuda Mintz (d. 1508), Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi of Padua, Italy, whose name indicates his family's origin in the Rhineland. The composite legend itself probably dates to the 1190s.

Harvey Sicherman, Ph.D.
Gilad J. Gevaryahu
Lower Merion, PA

Matt Goldish Responds:

Many thanks to Dr. Sicherman and Mr. Gevaryahu for this important reference. The lack of much clear evidence about the events in this story renders any historical conclusions largely speculative. My friend Menachem Butler has also pointed out the detailed discussion of Lucia Raspe, "A Medieval Sage in Early Modern Folk Narrative: The Case of Rashi and Godfrey of Bouillon," in *Raschi und sein Erbe*, edited by Daniel Krochmalnik, Hanna Liss, and Ronen Reichman.

Harvey Pekar (1939-2010)



The Jewish Review of Books *mourns the passing of Harvey Pekar whose comics—with Tara Seibel's gorgeous illustrations—graced our first two issues. We will miss him.*

The Chabad Paradox

BY ABRAHAM SOCHER

THE REBBE: THE LIFE AND AFTERLIFE OF MENACHEM MENDEL SCHNEERSON
by Samuel Heilman and Menachem Friedman
Princeton University Press, 382 pp., $29.95

OPEN SECRET: POSTMESSIANIC MESSIANISM AND THE MYSTICAL REVISION OF MENAḤEM MENDEL SCHNEERSON
by Elliot R. Wolfson
Columbia University Press, 472 pp., $35.00

The Hasidic group known both as Lubavitch, after a town in Russia, and as Chabad, an acronym for the three elements of human and divine intelligence, *Chochma* (wisdom), *Bina* (understanding), and *Da'at* (knowledge), is not just the most successful contemporary Hasidic sect. It might be the most successful Jewish religious movement of the second half of the twentieth century.

While mainstream Orthodox Judaism has seen extraordinary growth through the *ba'al teshuvah* movement of "returners" to religious observance, the foundations were laid by Chabad. And while Orthodox Jews often express disdain for Chabad and its fervent *shluchim* (emissaries), they also rely on them for prayer services, Torah study, and kosher accommodations in out-of-the-way places from Jackson,Wyoming to Bangkok, Thailand, not to speak of college campuses around the world.

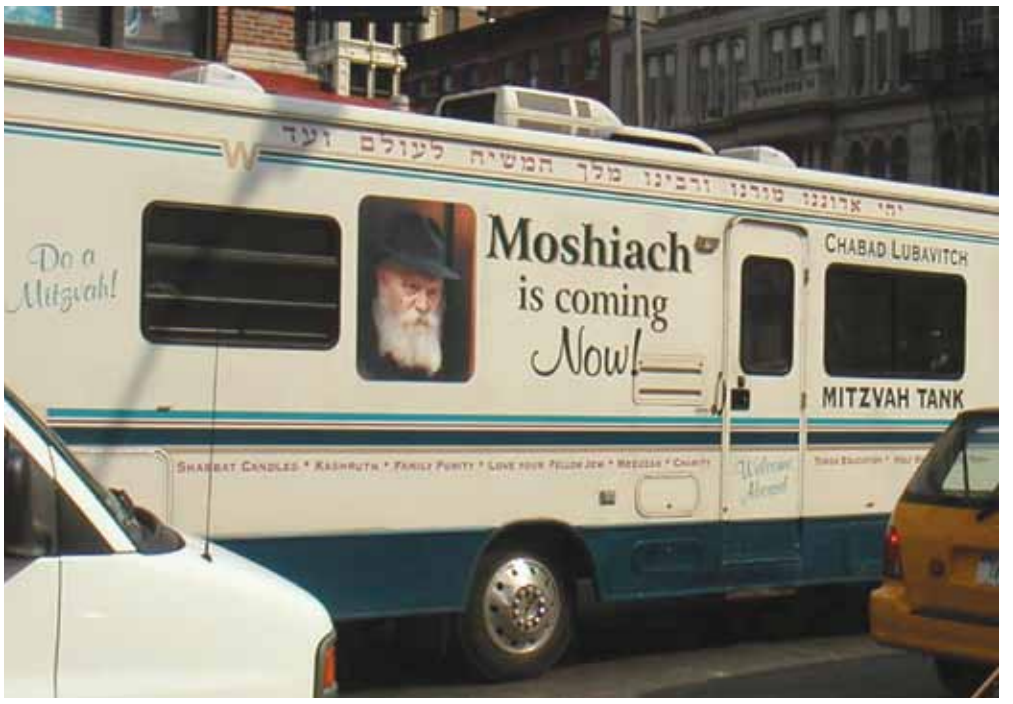
The Conservative movement historically caters to moderate suburban traditionalists. But many suburbanites now find themselves more comfortable at Chabad's user-friendly services. Once the source of a distinctive middle-class Jewish nightmare—that one's child might come home with *tzitzis*, a fedora, and extraordinary dietary demands (an "invasion of the Chabody snatchers," as a joke of my childhood had it)—Lubavitch is now a familiar part of the suburban landscape.

For decades, the Reform movement has defined its mission as *tikkun olam*, "repair of the world," understood not as metaphysical doctrine but as social justice. And yet it is the unabashedly metaphysical Chabad that opens drug rehabilitation centers, establishes programs for children with special needs, and caters to Jewish immigrants, to name just three of a seemingly endless list of charitable activities.

Finally, the charismatic founders of the groovy Judaism that arose in the 1960s, from the liberal Renewal movement to Neo-Hasidic Orthodoxy, were Rabbis Shlomo Carlebach and Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. Both began their careers as *shluchim* of the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe in the late 1940s and continued under his successor before branching out on their own. Although neither remained within Chabad, both retained its can-do entrepreneurial flair, as well as a spark, as it were, of the Rebbe's charisma.

Each of these points needs qualification, but each could also be amplified. Despite its tiny numbers—at a generous guess, Lubavitchers have never comprised more than one percent of the total Jewish population—the Chabad-Lubavitch movement has transformed the Jewish world. It also has enviable brand recognition. This extends from the distinctive black suits, untrimmed beards, and genuine warmth of Chabad *shluchim* to renegade but still recognizably Chabad-ish figures like the reggae pop star Matisyahu and religious pundit Shmuley Boteach. But, most of all, Chabad is recognized in the saintly and ubiquitous visage of the late seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, which has become, almost literally, a kind of icon.

By almost any conceivable standard, Chabad-Lubavitch has been an extraordinary success, except by the one that it has set itself: It has not ushered in the Messiah.



A Chabad Mitzvah Tank makes its rounds in Brooklyn.

By almost any conceivable standard, then, Chabad-Lubavitch has been an extraordinary success, except by the one standard that it has set itself: It has not ushered in the Messiah. It has, however, been the source of the greatest surge of Jewish messianic fervor ("We want Moshiach now and we don't want to wait!") since the career of Shabbtai Tzvi, the failed messiah of the seventeenth century. In fact, there are an indeterminate number of messianist Lubavitchers (*meshikhistn*) who continue to believe that the Rebbe did not truly die in 1994, and will return to complete his messianic mission. This is repudiated by the central organization of Chabad, though not as unequivocally as some critics would like. In any case, a successor to Schneerson seems inconceivable even to such moderates.

This raises a large question. It is often said of Chabad that the success of its institution-building and good works are unfortunately marred by its ardent messianism during the Rebbe's life and especially after his death. But what if this messianism was the motivating force that actually made their success possible? If so, we would be presented with a kind of paradox: the belief that underlies the Lubavitchers' success may yet undo them entirely.

None of this would have been likely or even possible had the movement not been headed, since 1951, by the subject of sociologists Samuel Heilman and Menachem Friedman's ambitious and already controversial new biography, *The Rebbe: The Life and Afterlife of Menachem Mendel Schneerson*.

Menachem Mendel Schneerson was born in 1902 in Ukraine to a distinguished Lubavitcher family. Heilman and Friedman sketch his early life, but their most striking biographical claims come in the chapters on his young adult years. It used to be said that in the 1920s and '30s, Schneerson had received degrees from the University of Berlin and the Sorbonne. Actually, Friedman and Heilman show that when Schneerson left Russia for Germany he did not have a diploma and so was unable to seek regular admission to a university. Instead, he applied to

audit courses at the neo-Orthodox Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminary, which in turn allowed him to audit courses at Friedrich Wilhelm University. Later, in Paris, he received an engineering degree from the Ecole Supérieure de Mécanique et d'Electricité, and went on to study mathematics at the Sorbonne before being forced to flee the occupying Nazis.

It was while auditing courses in philosophy and mathematics in Berlin that Schneerson married Moussia (or Chaya Mushka), the daughter of Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe (the bride and groom were distantly related). Here Heilman and Friedman strive mightily to show that, far from being destined to succeed his father-in-law as Rebbe, Menachem Mendel and his new wife were trying out a less Hasidic, more cosmopolitan lifestyle. They write that "visitors of the few Hasidic congregations" in Berlin never saw Schneerson in attendance, and that he and Moussia liked to go out on the town on Monday nights. They also scant his Jewish study, and, almost as provocatively, strongly suggest that he trimmed his beard. In these chapters, Schneerson is described as leading a "double life."

This is interesting, and may be true in some sense, but it would be more persuasive if Heilman and Friedman really had the goods. When one checks the endnote for who didn't see Menachem Mendel Schneerson in shul, the only name turns out to be that of Yosef Burg. In the 1980s, the prominent Israeli politician told Friedman that he did not remember seeing Schneerson—a half century after the fact. What about those nights out in Weimar-era Berlin? They are mentioned on the authority of the "recollections of Barry Gourary," a nephew who was five years old, lived in Latvia at the time, and later became bitterly estranged from his aunt and uncle.

The question of Schneerson's rabbinic learning, his beard, and the couple's years in Berlin and Paris have been the subject of a furious dispute between Samuel Heilman and Chaim Rapoport on a popular Orthodox blog site, *Seforim*. Although somewhat self-righteous and bombastic, Rapoport has gotten the better of the exchange. Even on Heilman and Friedman's account, for instance, it emerges that during the period when Schneerson is supposed to have avoided Hasidic *shtiblekh*, he was piously fasting every day until the afternoon. Heilman and Friedman hypothesize that this was because he and Moussia were childless, but as Rapoport points out, he began the practice immediately after marriage. The fact that the Schneersons never had children is of extraordinary biographical and historical importance (if they had, the possibility of an eighth Lubavitcher Rebbe might have seemed more thinkable), but Schneerson would have had to be a prophet to begin worrying about this in 1929.

More importantly, Rapoport shows that remarks such as "a look through [Schneerson's] diary . . . reveals that he had been collecting and absorbing the myriad customs of Lubavitcher practice for years" seriously understate the extent of Schneerson's learning and piety. Schneerson's posthumously published diary, *Reshimot*, along with his learned correspondence with his father and father-in-law, present a picture of someone thoroughly engaged in the intellectual worlds of rabbinic thought, Kabbalah, and Hasidism. Occasionally, one even finds him working to integrate all of this with his scientific studies. In one such entry, he links the fluidity of one's inner experience to the traditional comparison of Torah with water, as well as to Pascal's law of hydrostatic pressure.

Menachem Mendel Schneerson might not have become the Rebbe. There was significant opposition to his succeeding his father-in-law, starting with his mother-in-law.

This is hardly to deny that Schneerson contemplated leading a life devoted to engineering and science rather than religious leadership; the years of difficult schooling are inexplicable otherwise. But it is a failure of biographical research and imagination on Heilman and Friedman's part not to have critically culled Schneerson's correspondence and journals to give a sense of his inner life in all of its fluidity. He was an aspiring engineer and a kabbalist, but since Heilman and Friedman take an extremely selective approach to the letters and journals of this period of his life, they fail to portray the second half of the equation. In part, this is because the sources were edited within a Chabad movement zealously dedicated to the memory of its Rebbe, but it plainly also has to do with the difficulty of the material.

Their circumstantial approach to biography reaches its height, or depth, in Heilman and Friedman's account of the Schneersons' years in Paris. The couple chose to live in the fourteenth *arrondissement*, far from synagogues but just moments from the café Le Select where "one could find the most outrageous bohemian behavior" and within hailing distance of some of Sartre and Beauvoir's favorite haunts. "Could the Schneersons have remained completely ignorant of this life around them?" Heilman and Friedman ask. Based on the evidence presented, my guess would be mostly yes. (One *would* like to know more about Moussia, who read Russian literature and attended the ballet, but she remains a cipher throughout the book, as does the Schneersons' marital relationship).

As for whether Schneerson cut his beard as a young man, I remain agnostic, if not apathetic. A photograph from the period shows a dapper Schneerson in a brown suit, light-colored hat, and short beard, standing on a bridge and looking out at the water. But Lubavitchers sometimes comb their beards under and pin them to achieve a neat look. Hedging, Heilman and Friedman describe the beard as "trim-looking," but they clearly think scissors were involved and that his father-in-law was furious. Yet in pictures taken two decades later, after he had already become the Rebbe, Schneerson still looks well-groomed. In one, he stares back at the camera, his eyes framed by a sharp black hat and a trim black beard, looking a little like a rabbinic Paul Muni.



The sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, signs his citizenship papers as his son-in-law and successor, Menachem Mendel Schneerson looks on. (Photo © TheRebbe.org/ Chabad.org.)

Lives of saints have a sense of fatedness or inevitability that Heilman and Friedman are certainly right to avoid. Menachem Mendel Schneerson was not predestined to become the seventh Rebbe, let alone the Messiah.

There was, in fact, significant opposition to his succeeding his father-in-law. In the first place there was his mother-in-law. Nechama Dina Schneersohn favored her other son-in-law, Rabbi Shmaryahu Gourary (the above-mentioned Barry's father), who had been at her husband's side while Schneerson was studying in Berlin and Paris. Schneerson's ascension was not immediate, and his eventual victory left a deeply divided family. Symbolically, his mother-in-law refused to allow him to wear her husband's *shtrayml*, the fur hat worn on Shabbat, Holy Days, and important occasions.

Heilman and Friedman describe Schneerson's pragmatic response with a rare sense of admiration:

> Rabbi Menachem Mendel handled this as he handled other challenges, with creativity. He simply removed the use of *shtraymls* from Chabad rabbinic practice and was forever after seen only in his trademark black snap brim fedora.

Schneerson was clearly an inspired tactician and executive, with a genius for public relations. Again and again, Heilman and Friedman show, he was able to inspire and empower his followers to strike out in the world and spread the message of the need to perform more ritual commandments and acts of lovingkindness. But they also see a pattern. Near the end of his great twelfth-century code of Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides lays out the criteria for the true Messiah:

> If a king arises from the House of David who delves deeply into the study of the Torah . . . if he compels all Israel to walk in [its ways] . . . and fights the wars of God, he is presumed to be the Messiah. If he succeeds and builds the Holy Temple on its site and gathers the scattered remnants of Israel, then he is certainly the Messiah.

If one identifies the "kingship" of Lubavitch with that of the House of David, then the Rebbe's missionary work through his many public campaigns—to encourage the lighting of Shabbat candles, the wearing of *tefillin*, and so on—can be seen as steps toward fulfilling the second criterion. And what of "the wars of God"? The Chabad youth group *Tzivos Hashem*, or the "Army of God," was established under the leadership of a Rebbe who also dispatched "mitzvah tanks" emblazoned with inspirational slogans. Perhaps more speculatively, Heilman and Friedman also argue that the Rebbe competed with the State of Israel by taking spiritual credit for its military victories. In short, the overarching goal of Chabad's activities was to make the Rebbe the presumptive Messiah and "force the end" of history, to use a classic (and disparaging) Rabbinic phrase.

Certainly, this is how many if not most of his Hasidim seem to have understood these activities at the time. Although he often rebuked those who publicly urged him to declare his Messianic kingship, what they took him to mean was "not yet." They were probably right. It is a Chabad doctrine that there is a potential savior in every generation, and it seems unlikely that Schneerson thought that it was somebody else. Friedman and Heilman say that he hinted at this when he used the Hebrew word *mamash*. The word means really, or actually, but it can also be taken as an acronym for the name Menachem Mendel Schneerson. Thus, on the occasion of being honored by President Ronald Reagan he said that the "Messiah is coming soon, *mamash*," and he is reported to have later repeated the assurance, adding "with all its interpretations."

The parsing of such proclamations may sound trivial, but the radical seriousness with which Schneerson and his followers took their spiritual task should not be underestimated. He really does seem to have felt responsible for all Jews and to have conveyed a sense of this deep caring to virtually each of the thousands who sought an individual audience, or "yechidus," with him. His followers took this same sense of care to the streets and around the world, and continue to do so.

Schneerson's charisma was palpable even to non-followers. Norman Mailer, a connoisseur of charisma if not of theology, felt it when he and Norman Podhoretz visited Chabad headquarters at 770 Eastern Parkway for *kol nidrei* in 1962. The willingness of non-Hasidim to tell miraculous tales of the Rebbe also suggests an extraordinary personality that is sadly not on display in *The Rebbe*. Even if he was not the Messiah, the Rebbe may have been the most influential Hasidic leader since the founder of the movement, Israel Ba'al Shem Tov. Heilman and Friedman's biography simply doesn't show us how Schneerson became that person.



Menachem Mendel Schneerson, 1954. (Photo © TheRebbe.org/Chabad.org.)

The Rebbe does show that the messianism, which burst into public awareness in the 1970s and '80s, was present from the outset of Schneerson's leadership, and had its roots in his father-in-law's understanding of Hasidism.

In 1751, the Ba'al Shem Tov described a vision in which he ascended to heaven:

> I entered the palace of the Messiah, where he studies with all the Rabbinic sages and the righteous . . . I asked, "when are you coming, sir?" He answered me: " . . . [not] until your teaching has become renowned and revealed throughout the whole world . . . I was bewildered at this [and] I had great anguish because of the length of time when it would be possible for this to occur.

Gershom Scholem, the great historian of Jewish mysticism, saw this postponement as evidence that Hasidism was, in part, an attempt to neutralize the kabbalistic messianism of Shabbtai Tzvi and his followers while retaining its popular dynamism. His interpretation has been the subject of much scholarly controversy but it fits the *Tanya*, the first work of Chabad Hasidism, by its founder Schneur Zalman of Liadi. The "Alter Rebbe," as he is known within Chabad, describes messianic redemption as the final illumination of the revelation begun at Sinai, but it does not sound imminent.

However, by Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn's reign there had been seven generations of Hasidic Rebbes who had followed the Ba'al Shem Tov, and six generations of Lubavitcher Rebbes. As early as 1926, Yosef Yitzchak emphasized the importance of a midrashic statement that "all sevens are dear to God." In the 1940s, after experiencing the depredations of Communist rule and seeing some of his family and much of his world destroyed by the Nazis, he coined the slogan *le-alter le-teshuvah, le-alter le-geulah* ("repentance now, redemption now").

Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak's last work was entitled *Basi Legani*, or "I have come into my garden," after the biblical verse, "I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride" (Song of Songs 5:1), understood as a poetic allegory of the consummation of the love between God and Israel, and also that between God and his exiled (feminine) presence, the *Shekhina*. It was delivered posthumously by Schneerson on the anniversary of his father-in-law's passing, in what was to become his first address as Rebbe. Schneerson consoled his father-in-law's Hasidim and himself by emphasizing that "the seventh is cherished." Just as Moses and his generation had followed Abraham by seven generations, so too this generation was now the seventh Hasidic generation, whose task was to complete the process of drawing down the *Shekhina*. The end of the address is worth quoting at some length.

> This accords with what is written concerning the Messiah: "And he shall be exalted greatly . . ." even more than was Adam before the sin. And my revered father-in-law, the Rebbe, of blessed memory . . . who was "anguished by our sins and ground down by our transgressions,"—*just as he saw us in our affliction, so will he speedily in our days . . . redeem the sheep of his flock simultaneously from both the spiritual and physical exile, and uplift us to [a state where we shall be suffused with] rays of light* . . . Beyond this, the Rebbe will bind and unite us with the infinite Essence of God . . . "Then will Moses and the Children of Israel sing . . . 'God will reign forever and ever,'" . . . All the above is accomplished through the passing of tzaddikim, which is even harsher than the destruction of the Temple. Since we have already experienced all these things, everything now depends only on us—the seventh generation. *May we be privileged to see and meet with the Rebbe here in this world, in a physical body, in this earthly domain—and he will redeem us.*

Heilman and Friedman (who don't discuss the discourse in its entirety) understand Schneerson to have been asserting from the very outset of his career that as the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe he was destined to be the Messiah. But perhaps we ought to take him at his word here. In the sentences I have italicized, he is clearly describing his father-in-law as the Messiah who will "speedily in our days . . . redeem the sheep of his flock," and will do so, moreover, "in a physical

body, in this earthly domain." So who was the beloved "seventh"? Schneerson may have been saying that it was his father-in-law—counting seven generations after the Ba'al Shem Tov and either placing himself as a mere member of that seventh generation under his father-in-law, or, perhaps, merging himself with his father-in-law as he does in the text. This is personally more modest but theologically bolder than the alternative, for it already sets the precedent for one of the features of present-day Lubavitcher messianism that many find so objectionable: the promise that a Messiah who has died will return a second time to complete the redemption.

Schneerson continued to elaborate on the themes of *Basi Legani* every year on his father-in-law's *yahrzeit*. It would be interesting to see if and how the interpretation evolved, but Heilman and Friedman have little time for textual analysis of any kind. Unfortunately, this is a biography of an intellectual (Schneerson was immersed in the reading and writing of abstruse texts throughout his life) that shows little interest in his intellectual biography.

What did Schneerson think the Messianic era would look like? Elliot Wolfson's recent book, *Open Secret: Postmessianic Messianism and the Mystical Revision of Menahem Mendel Schneerson*, provides an astonishing answer. Wolfson has little interest in court politics or the externals of Schneerson's biography, but he has read his mystical writings very closely. This is not easy work. Not only did the Rebbe write an extraordinary amount (the collected Hebrew and Yiddish discourses alone comprise thirty-nine volumes), but he wrote in a rebarbative style that goes all the way back to the *Tanya*. Joseph Weiss once described it as "marked by long sentences, extremely condensed in character, with the main subordinate clauses often mixed up, and frequent anacoluthic constructions." This sounds about right, as long as one adds the penchant for deliberate paradox, though there are also sudden moments of beauty.

Wolfson is a difficult writer himself but he has read the Rebbe with extraordinary sympathy and erudition. To explain the notion of primordial essence in Chabad metaphysics, he cites "Schelling's notion of 'absolute indifference' of the being or essence (*Wesen*) that precedes all ground and is thus referred to as the 'original ground,' the *Ungrund*, literally the *nonground*." On Wolfson's reading of Schneerson, in the Messianic era all differences—those between man and woman, Jew and gentile (though Schneerson was not as consistent as he would like here) and even God and the universe—will not be erased but rather returned to something like the original nonground of Schellingian indifference.

And how will the Messiah do this? Wolfson's interpretation is an act of hermeneutic chutzpah:

> In my judgment, Schneerson was intentionally ambiguous about his own identity as Messiah . . . Simply put, the image of a personal Messiah may have been utilized rhetorically to liberate one from the belief in a personal Messiah . . . Schneerson's mission from its inception is about fostering the "true expansion of knowledge," an alternate angle of vision . . . marked by progressively discarding all veils in the effort to see the veil of truth unveiled in the truth of the veil.

The king, as it were, has paraded without clothes in order to show that there is no difference between being clothed and naked, or as Kafka said, "the Messiah will come only when he is no longer necessary." One notes the postmodern resonance, but could this really be the message Menachem Mendel Schneerson tried to teach for four decades?

In 1991, a frail 89-year-old Rebbe addressed his Hasidim poignantly:

> What more can I do? I have done all I can so that the Jewish people will demand and clamor for the redemption, for all that was done up to now was not enough, and the proof is that we are still in exile and, more importantly, in internal exile from the worship of God. The only thing that remains for me to do is to give over the matter to you. Do all that is in your power to achieve this thing—a sublime and transcendent light that needs to be brought down into our world with pragmatic tools—to bring the righteous Messiah, in fact immediately (*mamash miyad*).

I can see how to read this like Wolfson, but I can't buy it. The Rebbe, I believe, meant the Messiah *mamash*.

Gershom Scholem once described messianism as an anarchic breeze that throws the well-ordered house of Judaism into disarray.

Gershom Scholem once described messianism as an anarchic breeze that throws the well-ordered house of Judaism into disarray. Although the official position of the Chabad movement is that Menachem Mendel Schneerson did in fact pass away and is not (or at least not so far) the Messiah, its house remains disordered. As I write, *yechi Adoneinu Morenu ve-Rabeinu Melekh ha-Moshiach le-olam va-ed* is chanted at prayer services in the Rebbe's own synagogue in the basement of Chabad headquarters. Their master and teacher and rabbi, the King Messiah will live forever. Meanwhile, the central Chabad organization, which occupies the rest of the building, seems to be nearing the end of a six-year legal battle to evict the *meshikhistn*. Of course the messianism extends beyond Crown Heights. My son has a handy card with the *tefillat ha-derekh*, the prayer for travelers on one side and a picture of the Rebbe over the word "Moshiach," which was thrust into his hands in Jerusalem. In recent months I have seen messianist banners, bumper stickers, posters and yarmulkes in Los Angeles, Florida, and Cleveland.

To its great credit, Chabad's worldwide operations have continued to expand in the sixteen years since the Rebbe's death. But this fact does not quite undermine the paradox with which I began. Although many, perhaps most, within Chabad no longer live in an ecstatic anticipation of redemption, the Rebbe still seems to be the mainspring for all of their activities. It is not just that there is no eighth Lubavitcher Rebbe and is not likely to be one until the Messiah comes (after which, as Kafka might say, we might no longer need one), but that the fervent devotion to the previous Rebbe seems perilously close to crowding out other religious motivations.

Could Chabad continue to thrive if the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe was no longer at the center of his followers' spiritual universe? If they came to see him in a light no different than that of his predecessors—a great leader but not the Messiah, a great rebbe but not irreplacable? Can the apparently superhuman achievements of the Chabad movement continue if its Hasidim lose their superhuman inspiration? This is a problem that only Chabad can address but it is a dilemma that all Jews must confront. At stake are not only the spiritual lives of Lubavitcher Hasidim but also the camps, schools, synagogues, and programs that now serve Jews around the world.



Prayers and petitionary notes at the graves of the sixth and seventh Lubavitcher Rebbes, Queens, New York. (Photo courtesy of Samuel Heilman.)

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Love and War

BY ALAN MINTZ

TO THE END OF THE LAND
by David Grossman, translated by Jessica Cohen
Knopf, 592 pp., $26.95

Rarely has a major work of fiction arrived carrying such baggage. During the final hours of the Second Lebanon War, while he was working on the original Hebrew version of *To the End of the Land*, David Grossman learned that his younger son Uri had just been killed in battle along with the rest of his tank crew. In a laconic endnote, Grossman relates that after the shiva he returned to his manuscript. "What changed, above all," he writes, "was the echo of the reality in which the final draft was written." This echo made it difficult, if not impossible, for Israeli readers, already so embroiled in life-and-death matters, to prise fiction apart from life.

Grossman is, after all, not just a distinguished writer of fiction but a public intellectual who joins his older colleagues Amos Oz and A. B. Yehoshua as a writer on the Left whose pronouncements have even higher visibility in Europe and America than at home. Oz, Yehoshua, and Grossman are, to be sure, brilliant and morally passionate polemicists, but their statements would garner far less attention if issued by figures who were not also preeminent novelists. Writing great fiction confers its rewards, and it is a confirmation of the health of Israeli literature that in the case of each of these three writers their best novels are often more complex and subtle than their public statements.

Since it appeared two years ago, the novel has been read by Israelis with a ferocious emotional intensity that further blurs the boundaries between the public and the private. Set against the background of military call-ups, this is a novel whose very subject is bereavement and the anticipation of loss. For the members of any family whose sons serve in combat units, as well as for girlfriends and wives, there can be no more fraught territory than this, and when it is explored by the workings of the best fiction, it is little wonder that the experience of reading becomes an act of catharsis.

The appearance of *To the End of the Land* in English, crisply translated by Jessica Cohen, poses the question of whether the novel's elemental power will have a comparable impact on American readers. Much has been written recently about the accelerated drift of young American Jews away from Israel. Even as the reasons for the attenuation of the bond are hotly debated—is it Israel or intermarriage?—the disturbing fact of distance and disaffection is conceded by all. Yet even among those American Jews for whom the founding of the state and its subsequent struggles and achievements are matters of deep and abiding concern, there remains an inescapable point of difference. With distinguished exceptions, American Jews, together with the educated and professional classes in America generally, do not send their children to fight for their country. So no matter how passionately, from either the Left or the Right, we identify with the fate of Israel, there remains a divide we cannot cross. We simply don't know what it is like to live through prolonged periods in which our children are exposed to violence and death.

This is surely knowledge that no one should have to acquire; yet it remains the daily price Israeli families pay for the existence of Israel. One of the great contributions of *To the End of the Land* is to grant those of us who stand on the other side of this line an intimation of what that reality is like. But if this makes reading the novel sound like grim moral homework, the opposite turns out to be the case. *To the End of the Land* is a breathtaking evocation of the love and solidarity and plain joy of family bonds. It is precisely because Grossman invests his considerable novelistic gifts in realizing the antic goodness at the heart of all decent families that he can take us into more harrowing territory.

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At first glance, the premise of the novel can seem hysterical, even outrageous. Ora is a woman approaching fifty whose younger son Ofer volunteers for a military operation near the Lebanon boarder just when his three-year compulsory service has been completed. She has lived with the anxiety of her two sons' exposure to danger for six consecutive years, and now she is consumed by the premonition that this time something terrible will happen. She dreads the knock on door when the army's "notifiers" come to deliver the terrible news. In an act that is a combination of denial, desperation, and superstition, Ora flees her home. This is underscored by the novel's Hebrew title: *Ishah borahat mi-besorah*, a woman flees from the news; *besorah* is a fateful announcement. She had planned to spend a week with Ofer backpacking in the Galilee to celebrate his release from the army. Now she collects Avram, her longtime friend and former lover, and sets out for the North, leaving her cell phone behind and avoiding newspapers and radio broadcasts. In doing so, Ora cuts herself off from "the Situation" (*ha-matsav*), the military and political conditions under which Israeli citizens lead their lives, as well as from her soldier son at a time when he most needs his mother's anchoring presence at home. Neither her estranged husband Ilan nor her older son Adam is available either; they are on a trip together to the Galapagos Islands, making their own escape from the Situation.

But what may have been merely impulsive denial and magical thinking turns into a mission of high purpose. Ora uses the fortnight of their walk to unwind and reexamine the tangled skein of her relations with Ilan and Avram and, through a complex and ambitious act of narrative recollection, to mitigate the losses they have each suffered. The story of the relationship among the three is tangled indeed. They first met as sixteen-year-olds during the Six-Day War when they were confined together in a hospital isolation ward. In the grip of high fever from unnamed illnesses and slipping in and out of consciousness, they are cut off from the rest of Israel and, exposed only to the taunting Egyptian radio broadcasts played by their Arab nurse, they are not even sure their country still exists. The feelings they share under these extraordinary conditions forge an indissoluble bond among them once they have recovered and returned home.

The life of each is marked by loss and neglect. In a situation familiar to readers of Grossman's earlier novels, the three are cut off from adult life and left to rely on one another. Both Avram and Ilan possess intellectual and imaginative gifts expressed in the witty and fertile language games they play with each other and in the zany radio plays they write and perform. Ora basks in the attention lavished on her by the brilliant but short and stocky Avram, but she is attracted to the artistic and wiry Ilan.

On the eve of the Yom Kippur War in 1973, Ora is studying at the Hebrew University while Avram and Ilan, both assigned to intelligence units stationed along the Suez Canal, are serving out the final weeks of their compulsory conscription. Avram's outpost is overrun on the second day of the war when the Egyptian tanks sweep across the Canal. His comrades are killed and he is left for dead. Ilan deserts his post and tries to rescue his friend, but all he can do is listen via walkie-talkie to Avram's desperate pleas and his declarations of love for Ora. When Avram is eventually captured, he is not shot but kept alive because he is in intelligence. During the weeks of his captivity, he is tortured by methods far more gruesome than those familiar to us from recent headlines, while being left unsure whether Israel has survived the war.

After being returned to Israel in a prisoner exchange and undergoing innumerable surgeries to repair injuries from the torture, Avram remains a broken man, existing on the margins of the dropout culture of Tel Aviv. He leads a brittle and inert life that never strays from the absolute present. Ora and Ilan give him support and advocate for him at every stage in his recovery, even as they live together as a couple in Jerusalem and, eventually, have a child.

Yet the moment that they bring their infant son back from the hospital, Ilan abandons mother and child for two years; he is so consumed by guilt for the horror of Avram's ordeal and the randomness of his own survival that he cannot function as a father or allow himself the joys of parenthood. The circumstances under which he returns to the marriage are similarly perverse. During their separation, Ora and Ilan have continued to care for Avram and make separate weekly trips to Tel Aviv. Concerned that Avram's trauma has left him sexually dysfunctional, Ora arouses him, and they sleep together once. She becomes pregnant. Instead of becoming outraged, Ilan is overjoyed at the opportunity to raise Avram's child. Ilan becomes a model father to both sons, and Ofer is never told that Ilan is not his biological parent. In the meantime, Avram has withdrawn into his own restricted world and cut off relations with Ilan and Ora and the boys. Twenty-one years later, as Ofer reenlists, Ora sets off to trek in the North with Avram in tow.

The Land is a ground that can absorb the anguish emptied into it even as it can enable the growth of new life.

Now, this is a leviathan of a backstory, and one that presumably needs to be conveyed to the reader before the import of the present action of the novel, the Galilee hike, can make sense. But telling things in their turn is a comfort that Grossman conspicuously and magisterially declines to provide. The freighted details of the rondo of relations among Ora, Avram, and Ilan, and the terrible events of 1973 are disclosed in discontinuous spurts and out of temporal order throughout this lengthy novel. For example, the anguished and heart-thumping story of Avram's capture and torture, which explains so much, is not related until the end of the novel. No less a fact than Ofer's biological parentage is not revealed, and then only matter-of-factly, until a third of the way into the book when Ora and Avram are already well into their journey. The reader is frequently whiplashed by sudden shifts in the time frame and by the late disclosure of facts that change everything.

One has the right to wonder whether Grossman is holding us captive to postmodernist high jinks, which have not been beneath him in the past. Yet these manipulations prove to be masterful, and, because of them rather than despite them, the reading of this novel becomes a thrilling experience. Grossman uses these bold narrative devices in the service of a large point about the cross-contamination of the personal by the political in the Israeli reality. The human situation is continually being mugged by the Situation. Or, as Ora puts it more concretely when remembering Avram's capture, "This country, with its iron boot, had once again landed a thundering foot in a place where the state should not be." The triangulated desire of the three friends can therefore never be disentangled from the unspeakable trauma that befell one of them. These narrative jolts and dislocations, moreover, induce in the reader something of the disorientation that is experienced by the characters. At many points in the novel, the characters are pushed to epistemic extremities. The three young people in the hospital quarantine in June 1967 don't know if Israel still exists, just as Avram in his bunker does not in 1973, and this is the same blankness that Ora chooses to inhabit when she cuts herself off from the media and from news of her son's fate. The open-endedness of the novel's conclusion, which declines to satisfy our desire for knowledge of what befalls the characters, would seem to be part of Grossman's same strategy.

Almost everything we know of these tangled affairs comes from what Ora tells Avram as they wade through streams, clamber up mountains, and lay out their (separate) sleeping bags. Although her initial reasons for undertaking the trip may have been rooted in panic and denial, a very different motive soon becomes clear. By telling one affecting anecdote after another about Ofer's childhood, Ora aims to do nothing less than create within Avram the feeling of paternity he has been fleeing for over twenty years. By slow stages and with a mixture of charm and provocation, Ora's stories eventually succeed in stimulating an emotional capacity that has lain dormant since his ordeal. Although a part of Avram does come back to life, Grossman is wary of exaggerating how much can truly be recouped.



David Grossman at Mishkenot Sha'ananim in Jerusalem, 2007. (Photo © Kobi Kalmanovitz.)

Accompanying the stories of Ofer's childhood is an entire chronicle of one Israeli family. Ora's narrative is so large and inclusive because it addresses not only Avram's crisis but her own. Ilan and her older son Adam are estranged from her; Ofer's fate is unknown. The family she has devoted herself to building is now crumbling, and she is impelled to reassure herself of the wonder of what she and Ilan had created and to savor their good fortune under the shadow of the Situation ("We had twenty good years. In our country that's almost a chutzpah, isn't it?"). Grossman's exploration of the subtle dynamics of a happy family is his finest accomplishment in this very fine novel. Here is one beautifully described domestic moment:

> She takes him straight there, to the boys' messy room, roiling with the tumultuous preparations for the difficult, complicated sail into the night, with its shadows and foreignness, and the exile it imposes upon every child in his little, separate bed. After giving them one last hug, another cup of water, pee-pee again, and one more nightlight, and another kiss for the teddy bear or the monkey, and after Adam and Ofer had finished chattering and finally fallen asleep . . .

What parent does not know this seemingly endless bedtime ritual? Yet in "sail into the night" Grossman's empathy for the children's experience catches the menace and uncertainty that accompany the kisses for the teddy bear.

There is no smug idealization in this family portrait. Grossman succeeds because he is wickedly acute and hilarious in probing the complex politics of ordinary family life. One of the most brilliant scenes in the novel is an extended account of the simple act of going out to eat at a restaurant. During the several hours of the meal, we witness all the combinatorial possibilities for alliances among the two parents and the two boys (both already soldiers), separately and together, the emotional minefields skirted, the idiosyncrasies pricked and kidded, the gratuitous cruelties to parents atoned for, and the opportunities for laughter seized upon. Grossman conjures up the everyday heroism of creating a "little underground cell in the heart of the Situation" while never letting us forget that there is no escape.

The cost of all this to Israeli women is one of the chief themes of *To the End of the Land*. Ora has staked her worth and her identity on what she has given to her sons and her husband, and with no regrets. Yet

the truth of what it takes to sustain a family is more than sobering.

> Most of what she'd done for twenty-five years was mop up everything that poured out of the three of them, each in his own way, everything that they spat out constantly over the years into the family space, namely into her, because she herself, more than any of them, and more than three of them together, *was* the family space . . . so many toxins and acids she'd absorbed, all the excrements of body and soul, all the excess baggage of their childhoods and adolescence and adulthood. But someone had to absorb all that, didn't they?



Hermon River Trail in Northern Israel. (Courtesy of Israel Ministry of Tourism.)

What rankles is not the sacrifice itself, which is shared and necessary, but the fact that it occupies no space in the national narrative and registers on no one but herself.

Ora's narrative draws together two key threads: family and adolescence. Adam and Ofer are now the same age as when Ora, Ilan, and Avram underwent their fateful ordeal. Her account of Ilan and Avram as teenagers in the years before 1973 draws a picture of two young men, outliers bereft of parents, who create themselves out of their own wit and imagination. The banter between them plays like a crazy mix-tape put together from their voracious and promiscuous rifling of Western literature, the Hebrew Bible, and Israeli popular culture. They are drunk on words and jazz, both smitten with Ora and their destinies as artists. For readers of Grossman's earlier novels, this is wonderfully familiar ground. As he showed in his earlier novels, *The Book of Intimate Grammar, Zig Zag Kid,* and *Someone to Run With*, there are few writers today who so empathically understand the alchemical process whereby children become adults. The failure to negotiate this passage is the subject of *Be My Knife* and *Her Body Knows*, Grossman's most recent fiction. These stories about thirty-somethings mired in obsession have turned out to be interesting but unsatisfying works of art that give the sense of emotional material insufficiently mastered. Grossman's feeling for adolescence—one is tempted to say, his identification with it—has been so brilliantly intuitive that the imagining of adulthood has scarcely been possible. In *To the End of the Land*, Grossman makes his breakthrough. Although their lives are weighed down by guilt and loss, Ora and Ilan are shown undertaking the hard adult work of creating a family in which their own sons can find their way, one fervently hopes, among the landmines—figurative and literal—of the Situation.

Ora is an outsized figure who is endowed with Grossman's prodigious narrative energies. There is an irony not to be missed here. During adolescence, the verbal electricity flowed between the poles of Avram and Ilan while Ora stood by, illuminated by the sparks. With Avram's spirit destroyed and Ilan out of the picture, Ora becomes the source of a superabundant narrative energy and a kind of native novelist in her own right, populating the intimate space around her with words that aim not only to illuminate but also to heal. The setting for Ora's recollections is a crucial if enigmatic part of the novel. The name of each micro-wadi in the Galilee is registered together with whole catalogues of rare flora and fauna. For the English reader, these exotic particulars are mesmerizing but remote, as I daresay they are for most urban Israeli readers. The land in the English title of the novel is, after all, the Land. In rooting his story in the streams and flowers of the Land of Israel, Grossman is both employing and questioning deep biblical and Zionist metaphors. Ora flees to the "end of the Land" in order to evade Jerusalem, the notifiers, and the Situation, but what she finds at every step in her journey, in addition to primitive and unsullied natural beauty, are the ruins of Arab villages and private memorial plaques to soldiers fallen in Israel's wars erected by their bereaved families. In a riveting scene early in the trek with Avram, Ora, shaking with rage, frantically digs a hole in the earth with her bare hands, thrusts her face into the dirt and howls. Only after this catharsis can she begin to tell her story. The Land is a ground that can absorb the anguish emptied into it even as it can enable the growth of new life.

That Grossman immerses us in these difficult Israeli lives is something for which we should be grateful. Many Israeli authors write with one eye on their reception in Europe and America. But the pain and joy that infuse *To the End of the Land* are wholly domestic. For American Jews who care about Israel, this novel performs the signal service of allowing us to see the everyday struggle to create love and meaning under conditions of threat and uncertainty.

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

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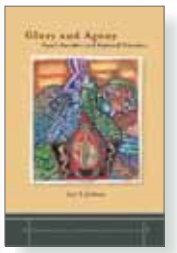

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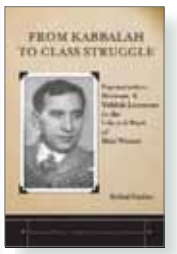

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Palestine Portrayed

BY ITAMAR RABINOVICH

PALESTINE BETRAYED
by Efraim Karsh
Yale University Press, 336 pp., $32.50

For a long time, the 1948 War was the defining event of the Arab-Israeli conflict. By the time the fighting ended in July 1949, the Jews had consolidated their control of a state with much more expansive borders than those drawn by the United Nations in 1947. The Arabs of Palestine did not fare as well. Instead of acquiring a country of their own alongside Israel, they emerged from the 1948 War stateless, fragmented, and dispersed. Since neither they nor the neighboring Arab states were prepared to accept the permanency of this situation, the Arab-Israeli conflict seemed destined to endure—until the Six-Day War in June of 1967 broke the stalemate. The swiftness and magnitude of Israel's victory, the extent of the territories captured, the ramifications for the Soviet-American competition in the Middle East, and the blow dealt to Pan-Arab nationalism all combined to overshadow the events of 1948.

Lately, however, the 1948 War and the problems it left unresolved have returned to the top of the agenda for both diplomats and historians. It is in this context that one has to situate *Palestine Betrayed*, the new book about the events of 1948 by Efraim Karsh, who heads the Middle East and Mediterranean Studies program at King's College, University of London.

To understand the renewed attention to 1948, we must first reconsider the complex outcome of 1967. With all of mandatory Palestine west of the Jordan River in its hands, Israel could conceivably have worked toward the creation of a Palestinian state along the lines of the one that was supposed to have been established in 1948. But the overall effect of the Six-Day War was to lessen the likelihood of such an eventuality. Many Israelis concluded from the crisis of May-June 1967 that it would be unsafe to return to the narrow prewar borders. A homegrown messianic movement that regarded the retention of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip as a sacred duty quickly took shape, generating bitter divisions in Israeli society.

Meanwhile, Palestinian nationalism enjoyed a dramatic resurgence. The leaders of the PLO became full-fledged players in Arab politics; and Jordan, as a consequence, relinquished its claim to the West Bank, which it had held from 1948 to 1967. Israel's Arab minority (almost 20% of the state's population) underwent a process of radicalization as a result of its interaction with the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza and with the larger Arab world. As time went on, criticism of Israel's continuing control of a Palestinian population and its project of settling Jews in the West Bank and Gaza mounted within Israel itself, in the Jewish Diaspora, and in the international community.

The 1948 War and the problems it left unresolved have returned to the top of the agenda for both diplomats and historians.

After Israel signed peace treaties with Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994), negotiated with Syria, and normalized relations with Arab countries in the Persian Gulf and North Africa, it had expected to reduce the scope and intensity of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Unfortunately, that didn't happen. As Olivier Roy has pointed out, instead of diminishing it, these diplomatic breakthroughs served only to transform the conflict into an "Israeli-Palestinian one." Striking evidence of this unanticipated development can be heard in President Barack Obama's formulation of the issue in his 2009 Cairo speech last year. "The Arab-Israeli conflict," he declared, "should no longer be used to distract the people of Arab nations from other problems. Instead, it must be a cause for action to help the Palestinian people develop the institutions that will sustain their state, to recognize Israel's legitimacy, and to choose progress over a self-defeating focus on the past."



David Ben Gurion reads the Israeli Declaration of Independence on May 14, 1948. (Photo by Kluger Zoltan, Israel National Photo Collection.)

The 1948 War had given birth to two conflicting narratives that dominated the discourse for the following two decades. For the Palestinians and the Arab world in general, 1948 was a *nakba*, a catastrophe. The term first appeared in 1945 as a warning against the disaster that would result from a Jewish victory in the struggle for Palestine, and gained currency after it was used by the Syrian intellectual Qustantin Zurayq. His book, *Ma'na al-Nakbah* (The Meaning of Catastrophe), famously castigated the Arab world for the weakness, division, and corruption of the old order that made a Jewish-Israeli victory possible.

For Israel, the 1948 War was the War of Independence, the culmination of the Jewish people's quest for statehood and "return to Zion," and liberation from increasingly hostile British control. The war appeared to have been a miraculous victory of the few against the many, a vindication of the Jewish right to a sovereign, safe haven after the Holocaust, and a morally justified victory over Arab foes who had rejected the UN's partition resolution, launched a civil war in Palestine, and then invaded the territory of the young Israeli state.

In their effort to boycott, isolate, and de-legitimize Israel, the Arab states made the issue of the Palestinian refugees the cutting edge of their diplomatic offensive. The most basic questions—How many? How was the problem created? Were they expelled by Israel? Did they leave? Were they encouraged to do so by their own leadership or the Arab states?—were the subject of annual debates in the UN, innumerable brochures, and book after book. In response to this propaganda onslaught, the Israeli establishment and mainstream historians dealt very guardedly with the subject. If Israeli historiography of the 1948 War during the 1950s and 1960s was largely subordinated to political concerns, Arab and Palestinian historiography of the war was quite scant.

Far more significant was the appearance of a revisionist Israeli school that set out to challenge the standard Israeli version of what happened in 1948. The first signals of change were the publication of Tom Segev's *The First Israelis* in 1984 and Simha Flapan's *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities* in 1987. Segev, a journalist and popular historian, depicted the seamy side of Israel's early history and sought, among other things, to cast doubt on the new state's readiness to make peace with all of its neighbors. Flapan was a political activist, a member of the left-wing Mapam party and affiliated with the journal *New Outlook* who set out to destroy what he regarded as the seven Israeli myths about 1948: the Zionists accepted the UN partition and planned for peace; the Arabs rejected the partition and launched war; the Palestinians fled voluntarily, intending reconquest; all of the Arab states united to expel the Jews from Palestine; the Arab invasion made war inevitable; defenseless Israel faced destruction by

the Arab Goliath; Israel has always sought peace, but no Arab leader has responded.

Flapan was not a scholar and his book was full of flawed arguments and historical errors, but it was not long before three academics, Benny Morris, Ilan Pappé, and Avi Shlaim, came out with books and essays that tried to inject academic substance into Flapan's arguments. The three soon became known as Israel's "new historians." In an article published in the magazine *Tikkun*, Benny Morris explained the rationale and purpose of the group's mission and the special emphasis put on the 1948 War:

> Inevitably, the new historians focused their attention, at least initially, on 1948 because the documents were available and because that was the central, natal, revolutionary event in Israeli history. How one perceives 1948 bears heavily on how one perceives the whole Zionist-Israeli experience. If Israel, the haven of a much-persecuted people, was born pure and innocent, then it was worthy of the grace, material assistance and political support showered upon it by the West over the past forty years—and worthy of more of the same in years to come. If, on the other hand, Israel was born tarnished, besmirched by original sin, then it was no more deserving of that grace and assistance than were its neighbors.

The new historians did indeed benefit from the opening of Israeli, American, and European archives. But they also wrote in the shadow of the controversial war on Lebanon in 1982 and the first Intifada, which began in 1987. Contemporary political debates and agendas echo throughout their works. Morris' *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* had the greatest and most long-lasting impact, for he dealt a heavy blow to the Israeli argument that the Palestinian refugees had "left" and not—except in a few minor cases—been expelled. The carefulness of his research and his measured academic tone distracted many readers and critics from his political agenda (implicit in the book and trumpeted in the *Tikkun* article) and his failure to put the book's topic and findings into context. Morris left unmentioned the expulsion of most of the Jewish population from Arab countries and neglected to note that the other, much larger post-World War II refugee problems in Europe and the Indian subcontinent had long ago been resolved.

The offensive of the new historians met with a counter-offensive, led by David Ben Gurion's biographer Shabtai Teveth and Efraim Karsh, the title of whose first book on the subject, *Fabricating Israeli History*, speaks for itself. Teveth, Karsh, and others accused the new historians of deliberately misrepresenting evidence, doing sloppy archival work, and politicizing history. Karsh's attack on the new historians was particularly harsh, and was met, especially by Morris, with a strident response. Indeed, the debate at times seemed to have become a personal feud between Karsh and Morris.

As the controversy generated by the new historians subsided in the 1990s, its impact continued to be felt in two principal ways. It inspired the work of several Palestinian intellectuals who were clearly embarrassed by the fact that the *nakba* was being revisited and given new prominence by Israeli, rather than Palestinian, historians. More significantly, it prompted less ideological Israeli scholars to take a fresh, more skeptical look at the traditional historiography of 1948. This group included scholars such as Mordechai Bar-On (a former IDF senior officer, and a left-wing critic of Israel's post- but not pre-1967 policies), Yoav Gelber (a University of Haifa historian), and—of all people—Benny Morris. Yasir Arafat's conduct at the Camp David summit of July 2000 changed Morris' mind. His recent book, *1948*, diverges from his earlier work in several ways, most importantly by putting the war's (and the controversy's) major issues in their larger historical context.

Benny Morris' former colleagues, however, remain unrepentant. Avi Shlaim has modified some of his views, but on the whole has continued to publish in the same anti-Israel vein. Ilan Pappé has gone further afield. He has left Israel to teach in Britain and published a book with the disgraceful title of *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*. If Morris in his original incarnation failed to put the issue of the Palestinian refugees in historical context, Pappé gives it a fictional one. Not only, in his opinion, were expulsion and premeditated population transfer inherent in Zionist thought, but the founders of Israel actually put into practice Bosnia-like ethnic cleansing, including real atrocities. To support these unwarranted conclusions, Pappé makes cavalier use of the evidence at his disposal. A particularly egregious example of his methods is Pappé's description of a secret meeting in the "Red House" building in Tel Aviv on March 10, 1948, when Ben Gurion and his cabal ("The Consultancy") supposedly "put the final touches to a plan for the ethnic cleansing of Palestine." Pappé leaves to the reader's imagination what his text hints at but does not make explicit: the comparison to the Nazi conference at Wannsee.

Karsh has invested several years in archival research in order to come up with a radical, counter-revisionist reading of the 1948 War.

It is against this backdrop that Efraim Karsh sets out to demolish the whole edifice of *nakba* literature. Unsatisfied with the balanced accounts of Gelber and the new Morris, Karsh has invested several years in archival research in order to come up with a radical, counter-revisionist reading of the 1948 war. He argues that the Palestinian people and their cause in the years 1920-1948 were betrayed not by Britain or by the Zionist movement but by their own leaders and by the Arab states.

The vast majority of the Palestinians, Karsh reports, were not opposed to the Zionist enterprise. There were even times during the Mandate years when it would have been possible to lay the groundwork for peaceful and harmonious relations between Jews and Arabs. In late 1939, for instance, after the flight of the Mufti of Jerusalem to Nazi Berlin, and the suppression of the revolt he had instigated, "ordi-

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Palestinian refugees return to their village after the 1948 War. (Photo © STF/AFP/Getty Images.)

nary Palestinians sought to return to normalcy and reestablish coexistence with their Jewish neighbors." Jewish and Arab citrus-growers and planters collaborated on economic plans. "In April 1940, the first ever Jewish-Arab hockey match was held in Jaffa, to the cheers of a big crowd of Arab spectators." At the same time, "Jews rented accommodations in Arab villages and opened restaurants and stores with the villagers' consent." Even some "former rebel commanders and fighters made their peace with their Jewish neighbors." Unfortunately, however, this amicable spirit found no political support on the Arab side.

After World War II, the Mufti and his allies succeeded in reasserting their control over the Palestinians. They repeatedly spurned any notion of compromise with the Zionists and called for their destruction. Together with the leaders of the Arab states, who had their own designs on Palestine, they rejected the UN partition resolution and went on the warpath. In the course of the subsequent fighting, the Palestinian Arab community collapsed. According to Karsh, most Arabs left Jewish-controlled territory of their own volition, although there were also some instances of expulsion.

Karsh further argues that in the immediate aftermath of the 1948 War the Palestinians did not perceive their calamity as a "systematic dispossession of Arabs by Jews." They understood that the blame lay with their own leadership. "It was only from the early 1950s onward," he writes, "as the Palestinians and their Western supporters gradually rewrote their national narrative, that Israel, rather than the Arab states, became the Nakba's main, if not sole, culprit."

Much of what Karsh says is true and needs to be said. The Palestinian leadership, headed by the Mufti, committed a long series of moral and political blunders. Had it responded positively to British efforts to construct political institutions in Mandatory Palestine when the Palestinian Arabs constituted a large majority of the population, the course of history would have been different. Had it accepted the partition resolution, a Palestinian state would probably have been established. The Arab states and their leadership likewise committed a long series of mistakes and misdeeds, as the Palestinians themselves knew better than anyone else. And it is also true that many Palestinians were willing to cooperate and collaborate with the Yishuv (the pre-state Jewish community in Palestine) and were dragged into a disastrous conflict by their leadership.

But all of this and more does not negate the significance of Israel's own role as the other protagonist in a classic national conflict. The Zionists' entrance into Ottoman Palestine in order to build their own state inevitably brought them into conflict with another national movement, to whose emergence they themselves made a major contribution. If the early Zionists originally believed that they were "a people without a land" coming to "a land without a people," they discovered soon enough that this was not the case. Ever since the publication in 1907 of Yitzhak Epstein's "A Hidden Question," Zionism's leaders and ideologues have had to grapple with what came to be known as "The Arab Question." This essential dimension of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is obscured by Karsh's emphatic and exclusive insistence on the "betrayal of Palestine" by Palestinian and Arab leaders in the events leading up to 1948.

Karsh similarly oversimplifies matters when he turns to the years after 1948 and especially to the contemporary political situation. Drawing a straight line from the Mufti to Arafat and Abu Mazen, he accuses the latter two of obstructionism and thus with responsibility for the perpetuation of the conflict and the plight of the Palestinians. He is right about Arafat; but Abu Mazen has yet to be fully tested and Salam Fayyad may well represent a new phenomenon. Yet here, too, one should remember that Israel is the other actor in the unfolding drama, and that in Israel there is a powerful political camp that is fiercely opposed to a solution based on compromise with the Palestinians.

Benedetto Croce's dictum that "all history is contemporary history" rings particularly true with regard to the 1948 War. The events and consequences of that war continue to shape Arab-Israeli relations and the war's historiography is a political battlefield. Efraim Karsh is a veteran of this academic combat. In *Palestine Betrayed* he has reentered the trenches, his arsenal replenished with archival data. His agenda is clear: to go beyond (the new) Morris and Gelber and to destroy the entire edifice of the *nakba* literature. What Karsh has failed to realize is that in the battle of ideas, the surgeon's scalpel is often more efficient than the demolition squad's sledgehammer.

Karsh may not be a delicate historian but his book has significance beyond the genuine archival work he has done. The Middle East sections of campus bookstores and libraries are full of the works of irresponsible critics of Israel such as Pappé, whose flawed arguments and outright falsehoods slip all too quickly into the media and onto the web. A twenty-second internet search yields such gems as an op-ed piece by an English professor named William Cook, entitled "Born to Deception." According to Cook, "[w]hat should be obvious by now, after the carefully researched and scholarly work of Ilan Pappé in his *Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* and the equally well researched work of Benny Morris in his *Righteous Victims* . . . is the truth about the creation of the state of Israel." The appearance of *Palestine Betrayed* on bookstore shelves will make it easier for inquisitive readers and web-surfers to see for themselves that the truth about the founding of Israel is not as simple as some of its professional and amateur critics would like to make it.

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Misreading Kafka

BY PAUL REITTER

WHY YOU SHOULD READ KAFKA BEFORE YOU WASTE YOUR LIFE
by James Hawes
St. Martin's Press, 256 pp., $23.95

BURNT BOOKS: RABBI NACHMAN OF BRATSLAV AND FRANZ KAFKA
by Rodger Kamenetz
Schocken, 384 pp., $25

CHANGING MY MIND: OCCASIONAL ESSAYS
by Zadie Smith
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THE TREMENDOUS WORLD I HAVE INSIDE MY HEAD—FRANZ KAFKA: A BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY
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S. Fischer Verlag, 726 pp., € 29.90

"Germany declares war on Russia—in the afternoon, swimming lessons," Franz Kafka wrote in his diary on August 2, 1914. The line has often been cited as an expression of Kafka's estrangement from life, of his *Weltfremdheit*. And why not? After all, the incongruity conveyed in the line jars us like the one we encounter at the beginning of *The Metamorphosis*, where Gregor Samsa wakes up as a "monstrous vermin" and wonders: How will I ever get to work on time?

But if the famous journal entry feels Kafkaesque, it hardly leaves us with an accurate sense of what Kafka thought about the war. Indeed, a former classmate of Kafka's recalled seeing him at an early demonstration in support of the war, "looking oddly flushed" and "gesticulating wildly." Max Brod, his closest friend and most fervent admirer, allowed that within their circle of Jewish literati, Kafka alone had believed the German and Austrian forces would necessarily prevail. So when Kafka put a chunk of his savings into war bonds, he aimed to perform his civic duty and turn a profit.

The timing of the war, on the other hand, couldn't have been crueler, as Kafka saw it. For months, he had been trying to resolve to quit his job. His plan was to escape its bureaucratic tedium and the scrutiny of his parents, and relocate to Berlin, where he would, or more likely wouldn't, manage to marry Felice Bauer. In July, Kafka finally made the decision to leave. He even drafted a letter to his parents notifying them that he would finally be moving out (at the age of 31). Now Kafka was stuck in Prague for the foreseeable future.

It could have been worse, of course. Deemed fit to serve, Kafka was spared active duty through the intervention of his supervisors at Prague's Accident Insurance Institute, who got him categorized as an indispensable worker. With the Institute now understaffed and overwhelmed with new, war-related tasks, Kafka really was indispensable and lost his prized perk: afternoons off. Finding time and psychic energy to write, which had always been a challenge, now became almost impossible. By 1916, Kafka's literary production had dwindled badly, and he was beside himself. He demanded either a leave or a release into the army. Kafka was demanding, in effect, vacation or death. He got a vacation.

Thus it seems fair to claim that Kafka's response to the war does, indeed, bespeak a *Weltfremdheit*, just not quite in the way it is supposed to. We can say much the same thing about many Kafka myths—such as the idea that Kafka's talent was generally unknown during his lifetime or that his father was a psychological bully. They are sort of true, and this leaves would-be myth-busters in an awkward position. Announcing that you will be overturning an established notion is more exciting than telling readers that you are going to subtly revise one. But in the case of Kafka, more often than not, revising is the activity that makes sense. Unfortunately, in order to present themselves as being properly myth-busting, a number of recent works on Kafka engage in quite a bit of myth-building.

James Hawes, who has a doctorate in German literature but left academia to become a novelist, tells us that his slim volume, *Why You Should Read Kafka Before You Waste Your Life*, "isn't going to *argue* that the K.-myth has wildly skewed our view of Kafka and his writings. It's going to *show* it—where necessary by using some long-lost dynamite that no one, not even the best modern German scholars, has ever used before." What is this "spectacularly fake" K.-myth? Among the ten "building blocks" that Hawes lists, in lazy bullet point form, are these:

- Kafka was imprisoned, as a German-speaking Jew in Prague, in a double ghetto: a minority-within-a-minority amid an absurd and collapsing operetta-like empire.

- Kafka's works are based on his experiences as a Jew.

- Kafka's works uncannily predict Auschwitz.

- Kafka's works were burned by the Nazis.

The general idea here is that we've made Kafka into a martyred prophet, whose art owes everything to Jewish persecution and marginality. This is laying it on pretty thick. You don't need to have studied up on late-Habsburg Prague to know that its German-speakers, whose language was that of the Habsburg government, didn't constitute a beleaguered minority. That Kafka's writing has his "experiences as a Jew" as its sole cause isn't really a dominant critical impression. After all, the word "Jew" never appears in his fiction, which is often understood as revealing precisely the plight of the representative everyman. As it happens, *Representative Man* is the title of one of the first major Kafka biographies. I have, by the way, just provided more evidence to support my point than Hawes gives to underpin the argument of his book.

Kafka was demanding, in effect, vacation or death. He got a vacation.

Hawes tries to illustrate the claim that for many influential readers, Kafka augured Auschwitz, but all he produces is this:

> So when a recent biographer (Nicholas Murray) writes with a straight face of 'the long-standing debate about whether Kafka foresaw the fate of the Jews in Nazi Europe,' I throw his book across the room.

Hawes' apoplectics would be hard to take seriously even if Murray were guilty of actual myth-mongering. But because Murray was merely referring to a critical exchange, the histrionics are silly. At the very least, Hawes ought to have brought up the most influential advocates of the Kafka-as-oracle-of-doom position, Ernst Pawel and George Steiner, but of course that would require sustained argument with formidable critics. As to the myth of Kafka's works falling victim to Nazi book burnings—which I can't recall having encountered—it sounds like a reasonable historical assumption, rather than "rubbish."

What, finally, about that dynamite Hawes promises to set off? There is nothing new about the idea that Kafka's life had its normal features. For many years, critics have been pointing out that Kafka was interested in fashion, the movies, and, as a young man, prostitutes. Nor has the fact that he kept a stash of erotic magazines—or "porn," as Hawes calls it—gone unnoticed. Yet Hawes acts as though broadcasting this will blow things wide-open. His claim that the source of Kafka's famous bug figure can be found in the work of Heinrich von Kleist is, in any case, several megatons short of explosive. Kleist has been overlooked, Hawes implies, because critics want to view Kafka as part of

Jewish literature, not Western literature. Yet much has been said about Kafka's debt to non-Jewish authors. Kafka himself improbably remarked that the model for his work *Amerika* was Dickens: "It was my intention, as I now see, to write a Dickens novel, but enhanced by the sharper lights I would take from the times, and the duller ones I would get from myself."

In trying to deracinate Kafka's work, Hawes asserts that "very little in the actual writings should make us think—as so many critics have claimed—that, to understand these stories properly, we need to reach for our Torah or our Hasidic tales. What makes us think this is not anything in his *writings* but our knowledge of his *life*." Well, Kafka did give an eloquent lecture on Yiddish theater ("I want to tell you, ladies and gentleman, how very much more Yiddish you understand than you think you do"), tried to study Hebrew, read Martin Buber, and even visited the Belzer Rebbe and so on, but does any serious critic really claim this? Theodor Adorno famously said that Kafka's fiction was like "a parable whose key has been stolen," and it would be nice to know whom the Judeocentric critics are who disagree. When Walter Benjamin (reflecting on his conversations with Gershom Scholem) discussed one of Kafka's brief parables with Bertolt Brecht, it was Brecht whose reading seemed forced in its determination to avoid the subject of revelation. The exchange was brilliantly discussed by Robert Alter in his 1991 book *Necessary Angels*, which showed that one could discuss Jewish motifs in Kafka's work without reducing it to them.

If anyone might be thought to be guilty of over-Judaizing Kafka, it might be Rodger Kamenetz, whose *Burnt Books* (the newest volume in Schocken's Nextbook series) compares Kafka with Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav. Rabbi Nachman was the great grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, and a writer of odd, powerful, and parabolic folk-inspired tales himself. Kamenetz is a poet best known for his book *The Jew in the Lotus*, which chronicles the discussion between the Dalai Lama and leading rabbis on the challenges of exile. Kamenetz has also long been interested in the connection between Kafka and Kabbalah, and teaches a course on the topic at Kafka's *alma mater*, Charles University in Prague. But Kamenetz doesn't try to convince us that Kafka was a kabbalist or a proto-Neo-Hasid. He just wants to put Kafka into conversation with Jewish traditions and theologians. The goal isn't so much arriving at a "proper" understanding of Kafka as it is mutual illumination.

Following Scholem, Kamenetz wants to read Kafka's works as employing Jewish forms and motifs (commentary, allegory, the ineffability of revelation) in such a way that, among other things, they offer inspired commentary on the fate of Jewish tradition in modernity. This was Alter's project, too; and it is hard to see how Kamenetz advances the argument. On the other hand, Alter's *Necessary Angels* reads like what it is: a collection of academic lectures. In addition to providing more in the way of biographical storytelling (especially welcome for the non-specialist) and imaginative associations, the prose in *Burnt Books* is snappier. Here is Kamenetz giving the kind of qualification that, according to Hawes, we never find in "Jewish readings" of Kafka: "What can any reader do, except scare up another ghostly face to haunt Kafka's literary remains, guided by personal obsessions and projections?" Kamenetz doesn't go very far beyond such intelligent haunting.



Graffiti renderings of Kafka in Prague. (Photo © Barry Lewis/CORBIS.)

Zadie Smith's essay "F. Kafka, Everyman" first appeared in *The New York Review of Books*, and is included in her collection *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays*. Like Hawes, Smith tries to make the case for a more "quotidian Kafka." In doing so, she leans on another young novelist and critic, Adam Thirlwell:

> It is now necessary to state some accepted truths about Kafka and the Kafkaesque . . . Kafka's work lies outside literature: it is not fully part of the history of European fiction. He has no predecessors . . . These fictions express the alienation of modern man; they are a prophecy of a) the totalitarian police state, and b) the Nazi Holocaust. His work expresses a Jewish mysticism, a non-denominational mysticism, an anguish of man without God. His work is very serious. He never smiles in photographs . . . It is crucial to know the facts of Kafka's emotional life when reading his fiction. In some sense, all his stories are autobiographical. He is a genius, outside ordinary limits of human behavior. All of these truths, all of them, are wrong.



A postage stamp issued in Czechoslovakia in 1969 shows Kafka against the cityscape of medieval Prague, with tombstones of the old Jewish cemetery in the foreground.

Thirlwell holds Brod responsible for establishing these mistakes, and ridicules the hagiographic excess of Brod's 1947 biography, its talk of "ultimate things," "angels" laughing, and Kafka's "metaphysical smile." Smith is fully on board with this. She writes, "These days we tire of Brod's rough formulations: for too long they set the tone. We don't want to read Kafka Brodly, as the postwar Americans did so keenly."

But have we ever really read so Brodly? It was more than a decade ago that new English translations of Kafka's major works supplanted the Muirs' renderings, based on Brod's German editions. Furthermore, the authority of Brod's word on Kafka was never self-evident. Despite his commercial success as an author, Brod always had a talent for calling forth critical derision. The Viennese satirist Karl Kraus was probably the first to mock Brod's literary sensibility via his surname. In 1911, he wrote, "*Geist* smeared on Brod is *Schmalz*." Nor is it true that postwar Americans read Kafka as a Jewish saint. Heinz Politzer's *Franz Kafka: Parable and Paradox*, which *Time* glowingly reviewed in 1952, doesn't reinforce a single one of Thirlwell's "Brodish" truths.

On the other hand, if people want to see Kafka

as a singular genius and his writings as expressing the alienation of modern man, well, so what? Are such interpretations really so outlandish? What business do we have pronouncing them not simply flawed or superficial, but outright "wrong"? To her credit, Smith gives a candid answer. She allows that behind the desire to debunk Brod's banal pieties there is a Kafka "purism"—that is, more Kafka reverence.

For Smith, what makes Kafka universal is that he captured quotidian experience. His ability to speak to us all has to do with how well he conveyed the very local alienation of being an assimilated German-speaking Jew in Prague, who didn't fully "belong" anywhere, rather than with his evocation of some vague modern existential malaise. Making much of Kafka's famous image of German-Jewish writers sticking "with their back legs" to Judaism and reaching "no new ground" with their front ones, and sounding more than a little pious herself (even as she freely mixes Kafka's bug metaphors), Smith concludes:

> For there is a sense in which Kafka's Jewish question ('What have I in common with the Jews?') has become everybody's question, Jewish alienation is the template for all our doubts. What is Muslimness? What is Femaleness? What is Polishness? What is Englishness? These days we all find our anterior legs flailing before us. We're all insects, all *Ungeziefer* now.

Never mind that Kafka didn't include himself among those German-Jewish authors whom he saw as flailing about with their anterior legs. Hasn't Smith once again made Kafka into a prophet—a prophet, that is, of the post-everything age? How is this better than reading him Brodly?

Smith's essay is primarily an appreciative review of Louis Begley's biographical volume *The Tremendous World I Have Inside My Head*. While far less sensationalistic than Hawes' book, and not as catty as Thirlwell's writing, Begley's work also relies on some dubious generalizations to make a case for its own importance. One notable instance comes in the middle of its chapter on Kafka's Jewish identity. Begley writes that Kafka's "intermittent self-lacerating and provocative pronouncements," as well as his oft-mentioned "qualms" about the ability of Jews to write effectively in German, "have been used by scholars to buttress the argument that Kafka was himself a Jewish anti-Semite, a self-hating Jew."

Kamenetz doesn't try to convince us that Kafka was a kabbalist. He just wants to put Kafka into conversation with Jewish tradition.

Begley, by contrast, wants us to see Kafka's response to the Jewish questions of his day as normal, but his efforts are less than concerted. For example, in commenting on Kafka's fantasy of stuffing all Jews (himself included) "into the drawer of the laundry chest" and "suffocating" them, Begley writes that the "outburst" was probably just a function of the "fatigue" that stems from living with anti-Semitism. Such exhaustion might account for a desire to achieve individual release, but Kafka is dreaming of genocide, which, obviously, is something else. Maybe he was expressing some kind of self-hatred. Or maybe Kafka's line, which occurs in a letter to Milena Jesenská, is a provocation meant to elicit a revealing response from his non-Jewish married lover—the attraction Jews held for her fascinated Kafka endlessly.

One thing that Hawes is right about is the importance of Reiner Stach's masterful German language biography-in-progress, the first two volumes of which devote more than fourteen hundred pages to tracking the last fourteen years of Kafka's life. When the first installment of Stach's biography appeared, back in 2002, no full-scale life-of-Kafka had been written in German. In that volume, *Kafka: Die Jahre der Entscheidung* (Kafka: The Decisive Years), Stach reflects at length on this odd fact and his biographical goals. Stach's account of his aims gives the reader an early taste of both his modesty and his interpretive good sense: He speaks of having to "anticipate failure," of the real but limited value of biographical inquiry for understanding Kafka's prose, and of having as his main end "to

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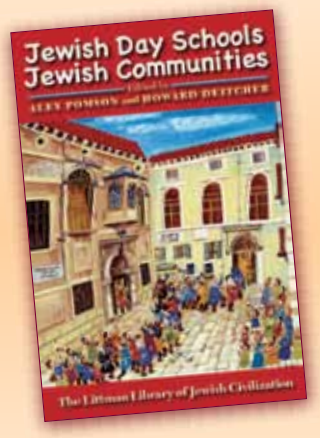

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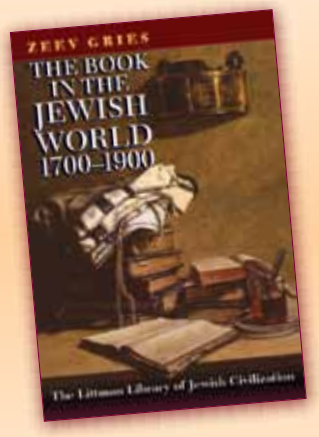

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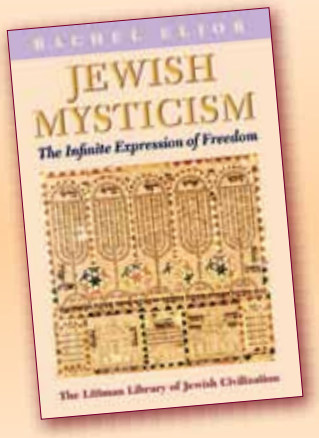

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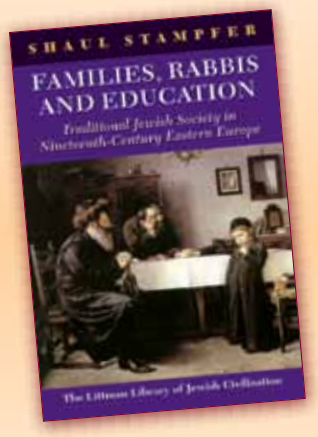

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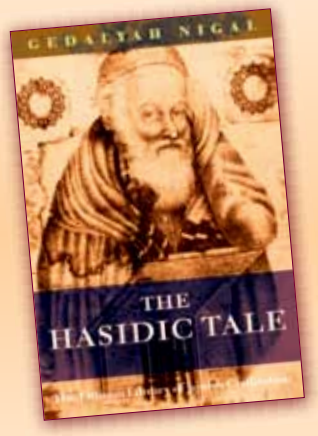

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explain how a consciousness that is set thinking by everything could evolve into a consciousness that set everyone thinking." Less satisfying, however, is Stach's answer to the question of why he has no predecessors writing *auf Deutsch*. His theory centers on the relative lack of movement in Kafka's life. Kafka, as Stach writes:

> . . . wrestled his whole life with the same problems, and seldom took on a new one. Father conflict, Judaism, illness, the struggles with sexuality and marriage, work, the writing process, literary aesthetics: One doesn't need to carry out an extended analysis to identify the key themes of this life, which appears so static that one could ask, and one has asked, whether it makes sense to talk of any sort of development here at all.

But if Kafka's stasis was really so intimidating in this case, then why didn't it scare off biographers writing in languages other than German? It is true, on the other hand, that the seemingly given character of Kafka's driving concerns makes it nearly impossible for Stach to achieve his goal of tracing the emergence of Kafka's "consciousness." Stach has good reason to brace for failure. But he also shows how much Kafka's positions on his "burning issues" did, in fact, develop, how much they shifted and evolved over the years—hence the titles "the decisive years" (1910-1915) and "the years of knowledge" (1915-1924), the latter of which is scheduled to appear in English in 2011. Or rather, Stach does this brilliantly, producing as engaging a literary biography as I have read, one that is every bit as good as Leon Edel's magnificent, multi-volume account of Henry James' life.

Stach does everything well. His prose is lucid and his learning is vast. Without compromising the flow of his biographical narrative, he manages to work in a wealth of information about both Kafka's cultural context and the people who mattered in his life. He sketches important life scenes in vivid detail, right through to the drama of Kafka's last hours, during which he suffered terribly and demanded a lethal dose of morphine.

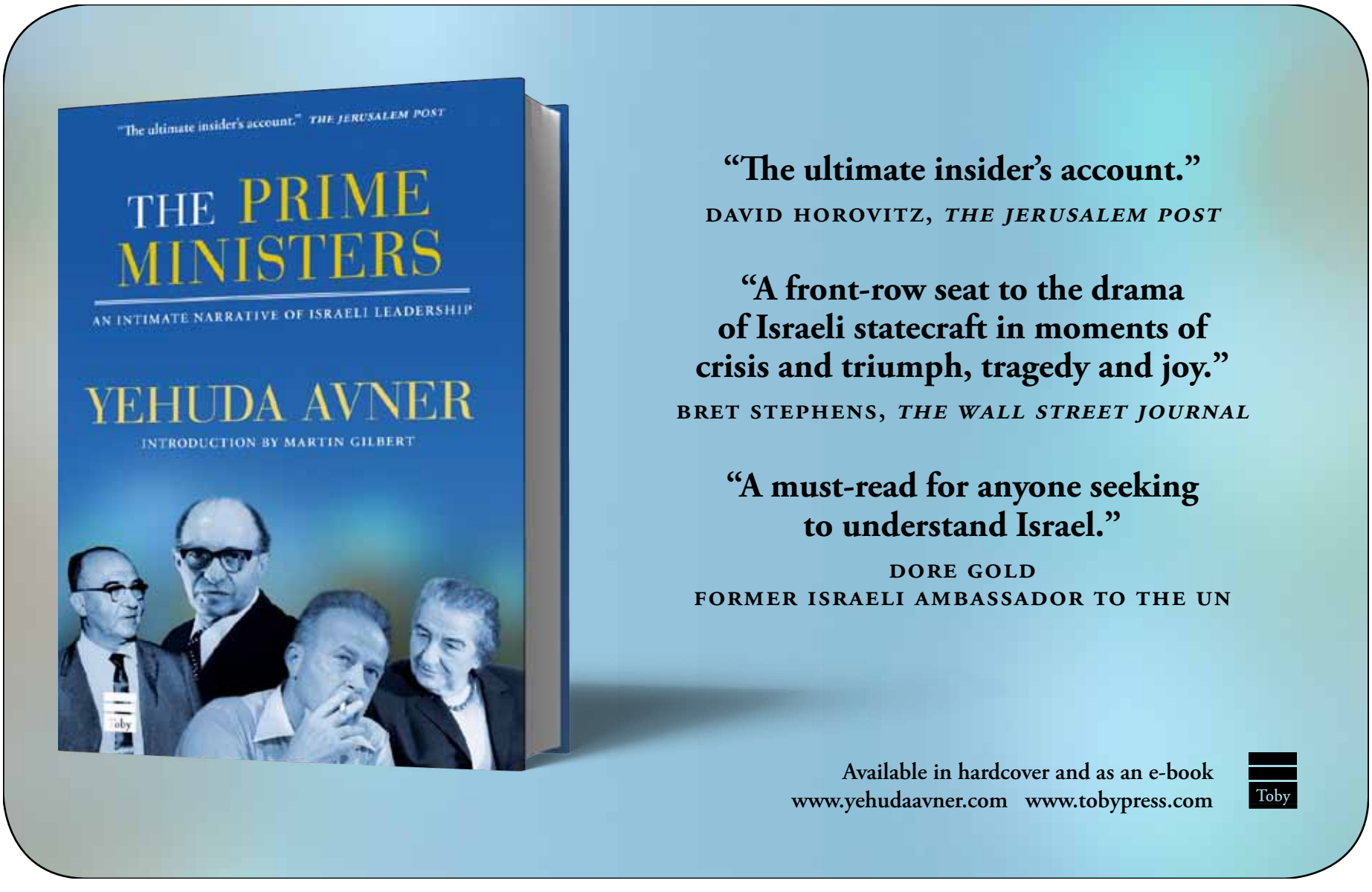
Moreover, Stach is an astute reader of Kafka's fiction, and his interpretations generally both point to the connections between life and text, and demonstrate why those links don't hold out the key to revealing the text's meaning. Finally, through thick biographical description, Stach shows how Kafka was able to create works that were seen by his circle as being about distinctively Jewish problems, and by other readers as being about "the human condition." He also effectively addresses the issue of why Kafka was so committed to doing things that way:

> Kafka always maintained that literary writing and propagandizing were utterly incompatible. The task of the writer isn't to discuss what he has experienced, but rather to *represent* it in the purest form possible—to achieve a kind of "self-forgetting," as Kafka remarked to Brod . . . Kafka's aesthetic ideal mandated keeping all the experiential connections in his writings indeterminate: personal, Jewish, or simply "human," and for this reason he confronted everything explicitly Jewish with a taboo. The concept doesn't occur in his literary works.

It may be that at the end of *Die Jahre der Erkenntnis* (The Years of Knowledge) we get a deeper, if less direct, explanation as to why this magisterial work is the first major German Kafka biography. Stach concludes the book with an epilogue that is about the effect of the Holocaust on what had been Kafka's life world. We are told that if Kafka had managed to survive tuberculosis and, unlike his three sisters, the camps, "he would have recognized nothing at the end of the catastrophe. His world no longer existed. Only his language lives."

Writing the life of Kafka is, among other things, a special kind of memorialization, one that may be especially difficult to carry out in his language. After all, Kafka is not the only great, much-discussed German-Jewish author of his era whose German biography was either written just recently or remains to be written. This group includes Karl Kraus, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Siegfried Kracauer, and a host of others. Maybe, then, the Holocaust has mattered in Kafka studies as much as the myth-busters say, just not in the way that it is supposed to.

Paul Reitter teaches in the German Department at Ohio State University. He is working on a book about the concept of Jewish self-hatred.



The One and the Many

BY JON D. LEVENSON

GOD IS NOT ONE: THE EIGHT RIVAL RELIGIONS THAT RUN THE WORLD—AND WHY THEIR DIFFERENCES MATTER
by Stephen Prothero
HarperOne, 388 pp., $26.99

"Belief in one God is the cornerstone of all religions," wrote Gandhi, and decades later the idea remains widespread that all religions teach essentially the same thing. Those afflicted with this notion either lack knowledge of the maddening differences among the religious traditions of the world or think that the differences amount to nothing more than cultural and linguistic variations on the same spiritual truth (if they like it) or pernicious falsehood (if they don't).

Now Stephen Prothero, a specialist in American religions at Boston University, has written a spirited and highly accessible volume to challenge this common misconception head-on. Against the notion of universal monotheism Prothero points to forms of Buddhism that have no god and of Hinduism that have thousands and observes the opposite natures that different gods actually have, ranging from violent to mild-mannered, from personal to impersonal, from male to female (or even both), and, for that matter, from describable to utterly indescribable. To Prothero, this dizzying diversity of religious phenomena gives the lie not only to Gandhi's myopic formulation but also to the more subtle and substantial argument of scholars like Huston Smith, who wrote that "differences in culture, history, geography, and collective temperament all make for diverse starting points . . . But beyond these differences, the same goal beckons." As Prothero sees it, the religions of the world, despite some commonalities, are different all the way down—and all the way up.

The goal, then, is to bracket one's own preconceptions and convictions as best as one can in order to give a fair account of traditions other than one's own (and of the forms of one's own tradition that one does not accept). In his discussions of eight major religions, Prothero follows his own strictures fairly well, and when he delivers judgments on them, most of the time he makes it clear that he is speaking personally, not professionally. He provides informative, if brief accounts of the Five Pillars of Islam and the origins of the Sunni and Shia communities, for example, or the various collections of Hindu scripture and the Confucian classics. Readers interested in acquiring the most basic information about the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism or the differences among evangelical, fundamentalist, and Pentecostal Christianity will find *God Is Not One* useful. Unlike most books of this genre, this one also includes a discussion of Yoruba religion, a much-disparaged tradition practiced by many millions in its West African homeland and Latin America as well.

Prothero's own preferences tend to align him with the movement that in the 1960s came to be called the "youth culture" or the "counterculture." "I revel in individual freedom," he tells us, "and rebel against the rhetoric of duty and obligation, particularly when that rhetoric comes from voices outside my own head." Not surprisingly, he stresses experience over doctrine, and variety over conformity, and seems least critical of traditions that are doctrinally protean. Daoism (which he terms "the most allergic to doctrine") and the Yoruba traditions thus come in for little or no censure, whereas Christianity, with its longstanding tendency to formulate creeds, takes more hits. Writing of Christianity and Islam, for example, Prothero observes that "together they account for roughly half of the world's population, and for more than half of the world's suicide bombers and drone attacks." Only the most inflexible ideologue would deny that some forms of Islam motivate nearly all the suicide bombers of late, but is Christian theology really behind the American drone attacks on the terrorists themselves? And is there a moral equivalence between those who target civilians and those who target the murderers and their support structure?

Given his predilections, if Prothero understood the Jewish tradition better, he would almost certainly hold a lower opinion of it.

Writing of the difference between the Qur'an and the New Testament, Prothero raises a fascinating point, "Whether in the abstract it is better to rely on a scripture that regulates war or a scripture that hopes war away is an open question." He goes on, however, to imply a most dubious answer, "but no Muslim-majority country has yet dropped an atomic bomb in war." Was the pacifistic streak in the New Testament really a cause of the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and given the staggering loss of life on both sides that an invasion of Japan would likely have entailed, would a Muslim-majority nation facing the same challenge have shown more restraint? One gets the sense that Prothero, having acknowledged the belligerent strains in Islam with exemplary honesty (refusing, for example, to define jihad as only "the spiritual struggle against pride and self-sufficiency"), feels an unfortunate need to compensate for his political incorrectness with his treatment of modern Christianity. His acknowledged loss of the Christian faith of his youth and replacement of it with the academic study of religion may be a factor here. Either way, the result is not convincing.

One might expect a scholar who rebels against the rhetoric of duty and obligation to look askance at a tradition that is so focused on law and commandment as Judaism, but Stephen Prothero takes a different tack. For him, "If Christianity is to a great extent about doctrine and Islam about ritual, Judaism is about narrative," so that "to be a Jew is to tell and retell a story." But storytelling does not have the determinate character that law, doctrine, and ritual do; it does not require a change of behavior, at least not in any direct and explicit way. When, as in Prothero's telling, narrative becomes uppermost—aggada, in rabbinic parlance, trumping halakha—the picture that results is of a community of loquacious participants in a benign argument that never needs to reach any kind of resolution. He seems unaware that Jewish tradition from the rabbinic period until the last two centuries prioritized halakha over aggada (as Orthodox Judaism does to this day). Writing of a debate between the schools of Hillel and Shammai, he thus quotes the famous end of the Talmudic passage, "Both are the words of the living God, but the law is in accordance with the view of the house of Hillel," without reckoning with the obvious point of that second clause: the Torah makes normative behavioral demands and cannot be fulfilled by engagement and argument alone. Indeed, one might go further and suggest that it is precisely the carefully-guarded common discourse and the normative legal framework that endow rabbinic argumentation with its phenomenal vitality and longevity. I have the sense that, given his antinomian predilections, if Prothero understood the Jewish tradition better, he would almost certainly hold a lower opinion of it.

His discussion of Judaism is further weakened by other questionable judgments and a few errors. His generalization that "Israelite religion (also known as biblical Judaism) was a priestly tradition focused on sacrifice," for instance, applies better to the Second Temple period than to the First but fails to cover all genres, social sectors, or locales in either. Prothero's statement that with the Roman destruction "in 70 C.E. . . . the Jews were sent once again into exile" leaves one wondering where in the world the Mishnah and the Jerusalem Talmud (both of which he mentions) were ever formulated. And then there is his observation that "neither Abraham nor Moses arrives in the Promised Land." The statement about the events of 70 C.E. suggests that Prothero is less distant from his Christian childhood than he thinks, for the church long taught that the Temple was destroyed and the Jews sent into unending exile because of their rejection of Jesus (who was executed about the year 30 C.E.) The howler about Abraham suggests, conversely, that our author is too distant from the religion of his youth and could benefit from rereading Genesis.



Traditional Yoruba celebration of ancestors in Ondo State, Nigeria. (Courtesy of Prince Bamidele Bajowa and the Yoruba House Project.)

Both the title and the subtitle of this book are teasers, but in ways that are troubling. To begin with the subtitle, the eight religions it treats do not "run the world." The world is much too secular and technocratic for that grand generalization to hold, and in the case of Judaism, for example, with its miniscule numbers, and the Yoruba tradition, with its mostly impoverished adherents, the claim that they do is especially forced and potentially dangerous. As for the title, Prothero never advances an argument that "God is not one." All he shows is that the world's religions are diverse in important ways and that some of them are not monotheistic. To any informed adherent of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, this will not come as news. Already in the prophetic collections of the Hebrew Bible, it is usually assumed that the masses are polytheistic and idolatrous and those loyal to the God of Israel alone constitute an embattled minority. Prothero, it would seem, wants to move in the opposite direction from that of the prophets, from the empirical fact of religious diversity to its legitimation, and to do so without the theological argument that such a move requires. For, alas, there is no simple transition from descriptive to prescriptive pluralism. It is one thing therefore to say that we all (including the prophets) hold simplistic and reductionistic views of other religions so that, in our ignorance, we are dangerously prone to make negative judgments about them. It is quite another thing, however, and a highly dubious one, to say that we are obligated to find the same amount of truth in all of them.

Although Prothero revels in the bewildering diversity of the world's religions, he is rightly concerned about the pressing problem of how to bring about peace between communities with incompatible worldviews. In a coda, he rejects secularization and the banishment of religion, the solution advanced in recent years by the New Atheists, whom he sees as close-minded, angry, intolerant, and quixotic. The very different solution of those called "Friendly Atheists," with their live-and-let-live philosophy, appeals to him, however, for it upholds tolerance without imposing a false unity of belief. If such tolerance is simply a pragmatic arrangement to secure the civic peace, it will, to be sure, command the loyalty of most of those who continue to believe that God really is one. If, on the other hand, tolerance requires adherents of all religions and philosophies to relinquish their universal truth-claims and to desist from critiquing the beliefs of others, its prospects are indeed dim. And those whose traditions affirm that God is one are unlikely to cease longing and working for the day when the truth of that affirmation is recognized by all.

Jon D. Levenson is the Albert A. List Professor of Jewish Studies at Harvard Divinity School and the author of Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life *(Yale University Press).*

Hidden Master

BY DANIEL LANDES

RADICAL JUDAISM: RETHINKING GOD AND TRADITION
by Arthur Green
Yale University Press, 208 pp., $26.00

In recent years, the movement variously known as Jewish Spirituality, Jewish Renewal, and Neo-Hasidism has surged forth from independent prayer groups and study-based communities into the mainstream liberal synagogues. Along the way, it has helped pry the Holocaust and Israel from their central place in American Jewish identity. A decade ago the philosopher Michael Morgan made an important observation about the movement's serious commitment to religious experience and traditional ritual practices, and apparent disinterest in theological questions. "These trends point to God, the divine and especially to questions about our access to transcendence or our experience of God," which "*should* point to the notion of divine revelation and compel us to a careful reconsideration of it, [but] I do not see much activity of this sort."

For a while, at least, it apparently sufficed if God was merely hummable. Now Arthur Green, a distinguished scholar of kabbalistic and Hasidic thought, former dean of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, and current rector of the Rabbinical School at Hebrew College, has provided a systematic theology for the movement of which he has as much claim as anybody to be the intellectual leader. In *Radical Judaism: Rethinking God and Tradition*, Green presents us with a Judaism built on the familiar three pillars of God, Torah, and Israel. But the closer we look, the less familiar they turn out to be.

In his introductory autobiographical remarks, Green briefly relates how his childhood faith in a personal God succumbed to "theodicy and critical history." By the time he was in college, he realized that he could no longer believe in an all-powerful God who permitted the occurrence of tragedies such as his mother's early death and the Holocaust. At the same time, the critical study of Jewish sacred texts convinced him that they were man-made. The experience was not entirely disheartening. His reading of Nietzsche inspired him to feel some "joy at the death of my childhood God and liberation from all that authority."

The loss of this particular God marked not the end but only the beginning of Green's quest for something that he could still call "God." He has persisted because he refuses to deny "the possibility and irreducible reality of religious experience." Green treasures moments when the "*mask of ordinariness* falls away, our consciousness is left with a moment of nakedness, a confrontation with a real-

ity that we do not know how to put into language." In *Radical Judaism*, he aims to provide a theology that makes sense of such experiences without trying to express them.

Even a Neo-Hasid needs a "rebbe" for such a quest, and Arthur Green has three: Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter (the Gerrer Rebbe) of the late-nineteenth century; Hillel Zeitlin, a theological journalist and activist who was martyred in the Warsaw Ghetto; and Green's own teacher, the renowned theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel. Green gratefully recognizes all three and one hears echoes of each in his prose. His serious puns and literary inversions recall Alter's classic work of Hasidic thought *Sefat Emet*; his impassioned argument recalls Zeitlin; and, occasionally, he reaches for the soaring poetry of Heschel. However, as we shall see, his theology is really more indebted to a fourth anti-mystical, and almost hidden, master.

Green presents us with a Judaism built on the familiar three pillars of God, Torah, and Israel. But the closer we look, the less familiar they turn out to be.

To determine what it is that one is undergoing in moments of true religious experience, Green looks not only inward but outward as well. God, for him, is a personification of "the inner force of existence itself, that of which one might say: 'Being *is*.'" He refers to it "as the 'One' because it is the single unifying substratum of all that is." God is the "life force that dwells within the universe and all its forms, rather than a Creator from beyond who forms a world that is 'other' and separate from its own Self." This One "lies within and behind all the diverse forms of being that have existed . . . clothed in each individual being and encompassing them all." Green's theological position is, as he aptly describes it, one of "mystical panentheism."

One cannot, of course, ask of such a God what It wants of us, but one can talk about what knowledge of It ought to elicit from us. This is something that Green explains in the context of a discussion of evolution that has an oddly teleological, almost Hegelian, ring to it. Evolution, for him, is not a process indifferent to our well-being but one that we can perceive to be "meaningful." God does not direct nature or Being, consciously planning how complex life forms, especially humanity, will evolve. The One, or Being, or "unifying substratum"—Green uses all three, along with "God," almost interchangeably—is rather "the underlying *dynamis* of existence striving to be manifest ever more fully in minds that it brings forth and inhabits, through the emergence of increasingly complex and reflective selves."

We human beings are therefore called upon by "the One manifest within us" to respond to the question God posed to Adam in Eden: "*Ayekah?*"—"Where are you?" What this question means is: "Are you extending My work of self-manifestation, participating as you should in the ongoing evolutionary process, the eternal reaching toward knowing and fulfilling the One that is all of life's goal?"

Fully aware of how remote from Judaism his mystical panentheism may seem to his readers, Green devotes an entire chapter of his book to a "Jewish history of 'God'" designed to demonstrate its indigenous roots. The chapter moves from the Bible through medieval philosophy, Kabbalah, and Hasidism, highlighting theological moves in the direction of panentheism, and culminates in an announcement that "the time has arrived for Jewish panentheism to come out of the closet, as it were."

That may be so, but Green's chosen masters would hardly have agreed. His "most revered teacher" Abraham Joshua Heschel was a champion of theological "dualism." Heschel understood God to be in search of man, relating to him from almost the fullness of His being. "Almost," because Heschel reserved God's inner space, His most true being, to Himself. He taught that real relations between God and man can only exist on the basis of dual identities. Indeed, Heschel had the prophets respond to God's pathos with sympathy for the Divine's plight in being affected by this concern for man. Green tells us that when he became enamored of Christian radical death of God theology, Heschel suggested that he begin with the Hasidic masters, including the *Sefat Emet*. But this seems to have been Heschel's attempt to save a brilliant student from what he termed "blasphemy," not a suggestion that this was the real endpoint of Hasidic thought.

Hillel Zeitlin did indeed express a Hasidic panentheism in which the world dwells within God. "The light of the unlimited (of whom we know not a thing)," he wrote, "fills and surrounds everything." But he also wrote that "aside from the world of appearance . . . there are many other worlds more sublime . . . secret and hidden." For Green, on the other hand, there is only one universe and it, or its substratum, is God.

Green's hidden master is a bit like his God in that he is hiding in plain sight. Mordecai M. Kaplan, who taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary where Green was ordained, founded the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, which Green later led. In a footnote, Green tells us that he omits any discussion of Kaplan's work because he was "alienated from the mystical tradition and did not see the earlier roots it might have provided for a different approach to the question of God." And yet listen to Kaplan in *Judaism as a Civilization*:

> *There is only one universe within which both man and God exist.* The so-called laws of nature represent the manner of God's immanent functioning . . . God is not an identifiable being who stands outside the universe. *God is the life of the universe, immanent insofar as each part acts upon every other and transcendent insofar as the whole acts upon each part.* [emphasis in the original]

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The echoes of this are real in Green's *Radical Judaism* rather than rhetorical, as they largely are in the cases of Alter, Zeitlin, and Heschel. For Kaplan, as for Green, what is real is the immanent life of the universe. Kaplan's "transnaturalism" is reconstructed in Green's panentheism. Kaplan's God transforms chaos into order, while Green's allows for the evolution of higher complexity. For both, God is only transcendent in that we don't see Its presence as well as we should. For both, reality is the Immanent, which means the unity of all reality, with man at its self-conscious peak. For both Kaplan and Green, God is a "what" rather than a "who." For both, the universe is constructed so that human beings can find "salvation" (Kaplan's term for man's self-fulfillment). Both present optimistic theologies that have no sense of the tragic, and tend to ignore evil.

The close similarity between Kaplan's transnaturalism and Green's panentheism ought to be a cause for concern on Green's part. For Kaplan's doctrine, which was first received with so much excitement, has disappeared. The main reason for this is that it's boring. There is no actual God with whom one can have a relationship. The God of the Bible and the Rabbis asks, entreats, and demands, and is saddened when His people fall short. And there are times when God doesn't seem to be fulfilling His part of the covenant. But when things go right and also when we imagine how it will be when things go right—Shabbat and holidays—joy and tranquility are manifest.

The spiritual life of classical Hasidism is arguably even more dramatic. Every action—moral, ritual, trivial—and preparation can provide a moment in which union with God, *devekut,* is achieved. And not to strive for it is no less than tragic, for then you and the universe are lost and harm is caused on high. And for both those who believe in the demanding God and for those who seek *devekut*, evil is real enough and has to be fought.



Arthur Green at the Rabbis for Human Rights-North America Conference, 2008. (Photo by Lloyd Wolf.)

If Green's God bears little or no real relationship to the God of Israel, the same is true of his Torah. Viewing the Torah, as he does, not as the literal word of God but as a purely human response to "the wordless divine call," he interprets its text very freely. Consider, for instance, his interpretation of the seventh commandment:

> *Do not commit adultery*. Would-be spiritual teachers . . . always need to be aware of human weakness, their own before that of all others. Sexual energies are always there when we flesh-and-blood humans interact with one another, anywhere this side of Eden. Check yourself always. Be aware; know your boundaries. Precisely because good teaching is an act of love, the teacher is always in danger. Make sure that all your giving is for the sake of those who seek to receive it, not just fulfilling your own unspoken needs, sexual and other.

What we are hearing here is, I think, an effort to counter the problem of sexual mischief that has arisen from time to time in the spiritual precincts of Renewal or Neo-Hasidic Judaism with which Green is well acquainted. And it is in itself unobjectionable. But is this admonition sufficient?

There are dangers lurking in the kind of rhetoric that Green and like-minded thinkers employ. When Green urges, for instance, that we must "let others know that we and they are part of the same One when we treat them like brothers and sisters, or like parts of the same single universal body," he is perhaps contributing to the arousal of energies that may prove difficult to control. The dismissal of clear legal norms as nothing more than a transitory response to a wordless call, or the replacement of a firm prohibition of adultery with nothing more than self-selected boundaries ("make sure that all your giving is for the sake of those who seek to receive it"), is a failure to reckon with the power of temptation and the function of law, human or divine.

Both Kaplan and Green present optimistic theologies that have no sense of the tragic, and tend to ignore evil.

Compared with Green's God and his Torah, Green's Israel seems more familiar. It is still the people descended from Abraham. But it exists in some tension with what he calls "my Israel." The latter consists of the people he describes as "you for whom I write, you whom I teach, you with whom I feel a deep kinship of shared human values and love of this Jewish language." Green admits, "(partly in sadness!) that it no longer suffices for me to limit my sense of spiritual fellowship to those who fall within the ethnic boundaries that history has given us." He is, indeed, prepared to say:

> I have more in common with seekers and strugglers of other faiths than I do with either the narrowly and triumphally religious as the secular and materialistic elements within my own community.

Thus Green calls for a broader "Israel," imagining "an extended faith-community of Israel, a large outer courtyard of our spiritual Temple."

Although Green himself is a person who is clearly attached to the Jewish people, the logic of his position is disturbing. It leads him to privilege people possessing the proper spiritual consciousness, "my Israel," over the actual people of Israel. When Green lectured a decade ago at the Pardes Institute, where I am the current director, he spoke beautifully of Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter's *ahavat Yisrael* (his love of Israel, or solidarity with fellow Jews), but I find no doctrine of *ahavat Yisrael* in Green's radical theology.

Where does the State of Israel fit in this picture? Green acknowledges that it is necessary for Jewish survival, both now and for the foreseeable future, but it has no real place in his Judaism. Green defines himself as a secular Zionist, which is astonishing, because nothing else in his book is secular. Every mosquito, rock, indigenous religious practice, every person, place, or thing, is given a spiritual status. The "Jews of the Diaspora" (Green proclaims the "Exile" to be over) have the spiritual dignity of meeting God out "in the field" and of gathering the "divine sparks" as their moral voice continues to shatter idols. But Israel is presented as an abstract entity, lifeless, as if there are no "Jews of Israel." Green does not share in his teacher Heschel's notion of Israel as "an echo of eternity."

The State of Israel is, for Green, something of a problem, probably because Israel is always also about survival, making messy choices, taking risks (above all, for peace) and sometimes not (for the downside is the abyss). Thematically, all this runs counter to Green's hopeful evolutionary narrative, and to where he believes the evolution of Jewish consciousness in particular should take us. Israel exposes ruptures in "the unity of reality" in ways stark (we have enemies), necessary (we need to survive), and human (sometimes we do well and sometimes we don't). It just doesn't fit into his sunny evolutionary spiritualism, so he calls it "secular" (read: virtually non-existent).

Green's God of Evolution is a jealous God. It devours the personal God of the Bible and the Rabbis, and spits out all parts of the Torah that are not conducive to the worship of "the unity of being." It denies the election of Israel and denies the spiritual significance of the people of Israel's resurrection and first experience of autonomy in two millennia. Pursuing the logic of its insatiable appetite for "Oneness," it may even consume Green's own platform of radical Neo-Hasidic Jewish mystical learning and practice as being too particularistic. After all, there may be faster and more direct approaches to the Source available in the constant hum of the universe. And what is a Jew to do then?

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Let My People Go

BY YEHUDAH MIRSKY

WHEN THEY COME FOR US, WE'LL BE GONE: THE EPIC STRUGGLE TO SAVE SOVIET JEWRY
by Gal Beckerman
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 608 pp., $30.00

On July 14, 1978, moments after his brother Anatoly (now Natan) received a thirteen-year sentence for treason, Leonid Shcharansky called across the Moscow courtroom to him: "Tolya! The whole world is with you!" This was something of an exaggeration, but no delusion. The world's most famous refusenik had a vast base of support, both within and outside the USSR. This could not prevent his conviction on trumped-up charges and his dispatch to the gulag instead of the Jewish State.

How Natan Sharansky (from Shcharansky) and a host of heroic figures like him, emerged from under the rubble of Soviet rule, suffered for their cause, how Jews throughout the world—and many non-Jews as well—rallied around them, and how they ultimately helped liberate Soviet Jewry is the gripping story that Gal Beckerman tells in his thoroughly researched book. It begins in the early 1960s and unfolds mostly on two main stages: the Soviet Union itself and the US. In both places the story is at first one of small clusters of people finding themselves drawn to asserting Jewish identity and solidarity in what seemed to be hopelessly quixotic ways. It ends in the early 1990s with the mass migration of the bulk of the Jews of the former Soviet Union to freedom in Israel and other Western countries. Beckerman's book is especially welcome in light of the remarkable speed with which the colossal moral struggles of the Cold War are fading from memory.

Behind the scenes, the Israeli government played a crucial role in setting things in motion: its opaquely-named *lishka* ("bureau") maintained contacts and provided resources throughout the USSR during the 1950s and early 1960s, utilizing "agricultural attachés" from the Moscow embassy to travel throughout the Soviet Union to "distribute Israeli mementos such as miniature Jewish calendars and Star of David pendants, which were usually handed off in a handshake." In a country where Jews were constantly reminded of, and often penalized for, their Jewishness but forbidden to express it, these little tokens meant a great deal. Elsewhere, in the Free World, the Israelis were similarly surreptitious but more sophisticated. Among other things, they facilitated the work of a New York-based intellectual, Moshe Decter, whose articles in *The New Leader* and *Foreign Affairs* first brought the persecution of Soviet Jews to the attention of journalism and policy elites as well as ordinary citizens. The hope was that they would do what Israel could not risk doing on its own.

But—and this is the heart of the matter—in both the USSR and the US it was the passions and commitments of individuals far removed from elites that really launched the struggle. Within the Soviet Union, Beckerman sees the origins in Latvia, whose period of interwar independence left living memories of vibrant Jewish life. Banding together to construct a Holocaust memorial in a forest outside of Riga where thousands of Jews had been murdered by the Nazis, young Jews developed a sense of identification with their people. In Leningrad, essentially deracinated young Jews, stung by their experience of anti-Semitism, began to prowl around the only remaining synagogue in an effort to find out what it was that made them unacceptably different. They eventually found their way to some of the city's elderly remaining Zionists and organized new cells of their own. In these and other cities, homespun translations of Leon Uris' *Exodus*, "a blockbuster in the samizdat circuit," provided both a crash course in modern Jewish history and something to dream about.



Refuseniks, 1976. Front row, from left: Vitaly Rubin, Anatoly Shcharansky, Ida Nudel, Alexander Lerner. Second row: Vladimir Slepak, Lev Ovsishcher, Alexander Druk, Yosef Beilin, Dina Beilin. (Photo courtesy of Beit Hatfutsot Photo Archive.)

At roughly the same time, in the US, a Cleveland-based NASA scientist named Lou Rosenblum and his friend Herb Caron, a young assistant professor of psychology, were electrified by their reading of a different book, Ben Hecht's *Perfidy,* with its fierce denunciation of world Jewry's passivity in the face of Nazism. Reading Decter's articles spurred them to action and in 1963 they created the first grassroots organization to press both the Jewish establishment and the US government on the issue: the Cleveland Committee on Soviet Anti-Semitism. In New York, a restless British intellectual named Yaakov Birnbaum began to agitate and organize among Orthodox students at Yeshiva University, and then at Columbia, arguing that Soviet Jewry could be their way to channel the gathering revolutionary spirit of the times. He also asked the Hasidic troubadour Shlomo Carlebach, then at the beginning of his musical career, to compose an anthem for the movement, which he did, writing *Am Yisrael Chai* in a Prague hotel room, wrapped in his tefillin on the morning-after of an ecstatic Purim concert in 1965. Meanwhile, on another plane altogether, Jewish Senators Jacob Javits and Abraham Ribicoff and Justice Arthur Goldberg began to take up the issue, while Abraham Joshua Heschel, haunted by his own narrow prewar escape to America and the placidity he found there, began to exercise his prophetic rhetoric on Soviet Jewry's behalf.

Emboldened by their overseas supporters, Israel's victory in the Six-Day War of 1967, and the Soviet regime's readiness to open a small safety valve of emigration, more and more Soviet Jews began to clamor for permission to leave the USSR. But even though it sometimes opened its country's doors much more than a crack, the Soviet government was never prepared—until the very end—to allow a truly massive exodus of Jews. Figuring out how to force it to do so became the enduring preoccupation of the fighters for Soviet Jewry everywhere.

Outside the Soviet Union, the activists stuck, for the most part, to conventional and peaceful means of protest, including mass rallies in New York City of up to 200,000 people. Meir Kahane's Jewish Defense League assumed a more threatening posture, and even resorted to violence against Soviet missions in the US as well as other targets. Kahane himself may have had nothing to do with the worst of it—the fatal bombing in 1972 of the of-

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fices of Sol Hurok, the impresario who had brought the Bolshoi Ballet to America and American artists to the USSR—but this attack deprived him of all credibility and, in Beckerman's words, "the power to dictate the direction of the Soviet Jewry movement in America."

This power was exercised, for a crucial few years, by Senator Henry Jackson, the standard-bearer of American liberal anti-Communism, for whom the Soviet Jewish cause exemplified the moral heart of the Cold War—a struggle for basic civil and cultural freedom. At times he promoted the issue more strongly than did the Jewish organizations themselves. In opposition to the wishes of the Nixon Administration, he successfully tied human rights to something that mattered deeply to the Soviets: trade. The passage in 1974 of the bill that he pushed through Congress did not in the end have the desired impact on immigration but it did succeed in putting Soviet Jewry foursquare in the middle of superpower politics.

A year later, the so-called "Third Basket" of the 1975 Helsinki Accords linked acceptance of basic human rights to acceptance of the Soviet order in Europe. The Soviets, concerned above all with trade and solidifying their empire, thought reasonably that the Third Basket's rhetoric would be no more damaging to their tyranny than the liberal-sounding provisions of their own constitution. Yet the Accords created an opportunity, however small, to at long last hold the Soviets accountable to the universal principles they cynically declaimed, and as Jackson had seized it from above, the dissidents, Jewish and non-Jewish, did so from below.

Sharansky, for one, helped to set up Moscow Helsinki Watch, which put a spotlight not only on the persecution of Jews but on human rights abuses throughout the Soviet Union. His contacts with the Western press and his starring role in a documentary film entitled *A Calculated Risk* made him both a celebrity and an inevitable target of the Soviet government. But neither his conviction nor his incarceration kept him from continuing to be a thorn in the side of the regime. Even as he was trapped in the gulag, communicating through toilet pipes with Riga's Yosef Mendelevich and Hillel Butman of Leningrad, who had been imprisoned since their foiled hijacking attempt in 1970, he was making waves overseas. His wife Avital, who had been permitted to emigrate before he became well-known, was conducting an extraordinary world-wide campaign on his behalf. "By the mid-1980s she had made Shcharansky into a household name. For most young people coming of age at the time, the Soviet Jewry movement was Shcharansky. Every Jewish schoolchild could recognize his face." The witty, cosmopolitan, chess-playing democratic dissident and the newly-Orthodox and kerchiefed, passionate crusader together came to symbolize the two facets of the movement and its romance: a universal struggle for ethical ideals of human rights, and the renewal of Jewish identity in Zionism.

In the 1980s the Soviet regime, increasingly defensive at home and aggressive abroad, and resentful of being nagged about Soviet Jewry by the US government and the court of world public opinion, brutally cracked down on the movement, arresting nearly all of its leaders, and practically halted emigration. "Throughout the second half of 1984, Jewish activists and Hebrew teachers were arrested on all kinds of trumped-up charges—pushing someone, sexual assault, illegal drug possession." Demoralized and scared, a group of forty refuseniks in Leningrad issued a desperate plea to "the Jews of the West:

> You, the sons and daughters of a nation which has suffered the most terrible blows that human madness can inflict, take the truth of the Messiah out of the sheaths of your souls and beat it into the iron will of deeds. Who, if not you, can help us remove the stone from the mouth of the well?



Poster by Israeli artist Dan Reisinger, 1969. (Courtesy of Beit Hatfutsot Photo Archive.)

American Jews, above all, kept up the pressure, to which the Reagan administration was highly responsive. But it was only the ascent to power of Mikhail Gorbachev, who sought release from the international isolation in which the Soviet Jewry movement had helped to place the USSR, that made real change possible. Reagan's Secretary of State, George Shultz, turned out to be as committed a friend as Henry Jackson, even if he spoke in less rousing terms, couching his plea to the Soviets in terms of the realities of the new open societies of the information age. In his first meeting with Gorbachev, he straightforwardly asked if he could take Sharansky and another famous refusenik, Ida Nudel, home with him to the US. This mix of moralism and appeals to mutual interest found a receptive audience in a new generation of Soviet leadership. Materially and ideologically bankrupt, they sought a way out of confrontation and understood, at long last, that Jewish freedom was part of the price.

A brief review can scarcely compass the breadth and richness of Beckerman's narrative or do justice to the unimaginable physical and moral courage and the resourcefulness of the dissidents and refuseniks crowding his pages. His honest recounting of their human failings and rivalries makes their achievement all the more remarkable. Beckerman also reminds us of the extent to which contemporary American Jewry was shaped by this history. Struggles create leaders and the Soviet Jewry movement was no exception. His book constitutes a veritable who's who of American Jewish leaders, who early in their professional lives came of age, in one way or another, in the movement: Irving Greenberg, Malcolm Hoenlein, David Harris, Avi Weiss, and Morris Amitay, to name only a few. No less moving is the historical due that Beckerman renders the lesser-known heroes of the movement, such as Glenn Richter of the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry, and Yuli Kosharovsky, who ran a network of Hebrew teachers throughout the USSR in most dangerous times, and many, many more.

The Soviet Jewry movement was a successful example of the transnational humanitarian advocacy on behalf of persecuted Jews that began in the nineteenth century. It played a substantial role in creating the global concept that today goes by the name of human rights. The movement also illustrates a key feature of the human rights enterprise: the invocation of avowedly universal principles on behalf of very specific groups. A complicated relationship between the universal and the particular lies at the heart of Jewish experience, and accounts for much of the world's and many Jews' enduring difficulties in coming to terms with that identity. In the Soviet Jewry movement, that this dynamic found an empowering and even healing resolution, at least for a while.

American Jews, once they gained their sea legs, operated here as an advocacy group within a democratic society, one whose identity and ethnic politics spoke in the register of American liberal values. American Jewry is a voluntary community, sustained in no small part by its ability to appeal to moral values, and, as it did in the case of Soviet Jewry, fuse hard power with the romance and ethical pull of the counterculture. Sharansky put it succinctly to a congressional committee in 1986: "Exactly as it was in my case, the final exchange, my final release was reached in quiet diplomacy in exchanging of spies, but as you all understand it, it would never take place if there wasn't such a strong campaign."

Toward the end of the book, Beckerman describes the massive rally on the National Mall in December 1987, in which American Jewry came together in a remarkable display of unity and purpose. There was that day a "feeling of collective strength [that] simply would have been impossible twenty-five years before . . . They had come to do something together, and they had done it." What they had done, through a fractious process that was the exuberant opposite of social engineering and social planning, was grasp the deep political and cultural currents of their times and fashion a new Jewish politics that deftly united the imperatives of physical and cultural survival. Nothing, he notes, has united them in the same way ever since.

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Dirty Hands in Difficult Times

BY ALLAN ARKUSH

THE UNSPOKEN ALLIANCE: ISRAEL'S SECRET RELATIONSHIP WITH APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA
by Sasha Polakow-Suransky
Pantheon, 336 pp., $27.95

Arthur Goldreich was an undercover ANC operative and close collaborator of Nelson Mandela until he was caught and imprisoned by the South African government in 1963. He soon escaped custody and fled to Israel, where he remained a vocal opponent of apartheid. In 1976, when South African Prime Minister John Vorster made his first visit to the Jewish state, Goldreich took action. Among other things, he plastered telephone poles in Jerusalem with posters juxtaposing Vorster's name with swastikas. While he was busy doing this, a Holocaust survivor with a number tattooed on his arm approached him, angrily spat on one of the posters, and proclaimed, "We will make agreements with the devil to save Jews from persecution and to secure the future of this state." Goldreich, Sasha Polakow-Suransky informs us, was left speechless.

Who knew better, Goldreich or the anonymous survivor? Polakow-Suransky unmistakably identifies more with the former's fully justified moral indignation than with the latter's cold and amoral realism. But he does not rush to judgment. While he provides abundant proof of what he surely sees as Israel's deplorable closeness to apartheid-era South Africa, he also supplies no small amount of evidence that its leaders acted consistently with their country's best interests when they chose in this case to "deal with the devil." His book ends on a surprisingly ambiguous note. Instead of voicing a clear opinion regarding how Israel should have handled the morally charged political choices it faced in dealing with South Africa, he changes the subject from Israel's relation to the apartheid regime to what he supposes to be its growing resemblance to it. Just why he does this is not entirely clear.

A young scholar with impressive academic and professional credentials, Polakow-Suransky is very much in tune with the times. His book is primarily an account of the Israel-South Africa relationship from the late 1960s to the late 1980s, yet he tries to establish the overall context of this political story by offering his own brief history of the political realities of post-independence Israel. In doing so, he relies on Avi Shlaim and other "new historians" for his basic scheme of things. If anything, he goes even further than his mentors in offering a simplistic, one-sided history that saddles Israel with all the blame for everything that has gone wrong. His summary of Israel's relations with its neighbors in the mid-1950s, for instance, focuses mostly on Israeli actions and lists only two relatively small Arab provocations: the seizure of an Israeli ship that attempted to pass through the Suez Canal and the murder of two Israelis in January 1955 by Jordanians who had sneaked across the border. Of the years of murderous fedayeen raids into Israeli territory, of Nasser's anti-Israel incitement and his massive arms deal with the Soviet bloc in 1955, Polakow-Suransky makes no mention.

Without attempting in any way to explain Israel's aims in the Sinai campaign in 1956, Polakow-Suransky declares it to have been a "miserable failure." But was this really the case? The operation was admittedly less than completely successful, but it did result, among other things, in the opening of the Straits of Tiran to Israeli vessels. That this was no small matter is something that Polakow-Suransky himself tacitly acknowledges in his subsequent discussion of the origins of the Six-Day War. When Nasser once again closed the straits in May of 1967, he reports, he was cutting off "a commercial lifeline for Israel." Doesn't that confirm that the operation that had eleven years earlier led to this lifeline's first being opened to Israeli traffic was something better than a miserable failure?

Anyone who is the least bit familiar with the Revisionist Zionist writings knows how greatly Polakow-Suransky overstates the similarity between Likud ideology and the principles of apartheid.

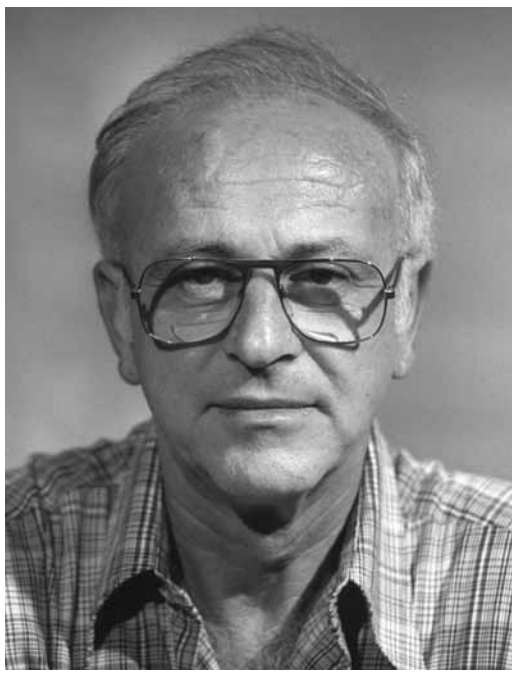
When Polakow-Suransky moves to the main subject of his book, the account becomes more reliable and more original. Turning from war to diplomacy, he focuses his attention on Israel's benevolent policy during the 1950s and 1960s toward the newly independent nations of Africa, to which it gave a very substantial amount of foreign aid. He is particularly impressed by the firm stand that Israeli leaders took at this time against apartheid and other manifestations of the belief in white supremacy. Full of admiration, he describes how Foreign Minister Golda Meir, on a visit to Africa in the early 1960s, refused the offer of Rhodesian officials to show her their side of Victoria Falls when they excluded from their invitation the black African dignitaries with whom she was traveling. He also relates, however, how African nations nevertheless began to distance themselves from Israel after the Six-Day War, calling it "a Western imperialist stooge" and an oppressor of the Palestinians. But "it wasn't until after the Yom Kippur War that the African strategy so carefully crafted by Golda Meir and Abba Eban was left in tatters," as one African nation after another broke off diplomatic relations with Israel.

All of this left many Israelis with a very strong feeling that they had been betrayed by their erstwhile beneficiaries, and accounts in part for the fact that Israel began at this time to establish closer ties with South Africa, where its military exploits were making Israel ever more popular. In the following years, as Polakow-Suransky's impressive research shows, the two countries developed a relationship that came to be of enormous significance for both of them. At its heart were multi-million dollar arms deals, the vast extent of which was carefully hidden from public view. Consisting mostly of advanced weaponry, "Israel's average annual exports to South Africa between 1974 and 1993 amounted to approximately $600 million per year," Polakow-Suransky tells us, "placing South Africa in the company of the United Kingdom and Germany as Israel's second or third largest trading partner after the United States." This was a "huge boon" for the Israeli defense industry, one which was vital to its prosperity. South Africa, for its part, supplied Israel with crucial assistance in the nuclear area. In 1976 it lifted safeguards on yellowcake previously stored in Israel and thereby made it possible to use it in the fabrication of "enough reprocessed plutonium for dozens of nuclear bombs." There is also strong evidence, according to Polakow-Suransky, that Israel tested its nuclear weapons in remote South African territory in the late 1970s. In addition to selling arms to the South Africans, Israel supplied them with indispensable assistance in upgrading their aging Mirage III fleet and producing what came to be known as the "Cheetah" jet. It apparently helped the South Africans to advance their own nuclear weapons program. And at the very least it also discussed with them "a potential deal for riot prevention equipment to use against black protestors in the townships."

For certain Israelis, including some who were at the time fully in the know (and Polakow-Suransky's book is very much about what was for a long time a very largely concealed relationship), any ties with the apartheid regime were extremely unpalatable. For others, however, most notably the Likud government leaders from the late 1970s into the 1990s, the existing links posed no problem whatsoever. Indeed, according to Polakow-Suransky, "Likud ideology fit perfectly with the worldview of South Africa's white rulers." Begin, Shamir, Sharon and the others were not racists, to be sure, but they were ethnic nationalists who could "stomach racist apartheid policies because they were part of a larger nationalist project designed to protect a minority group that believed its survival was threatened." Their strong support for the apartheid regime only came to an end, as Polakow-Suransky shows, when the United States government and American Jewish organizations forced their hands.

Anyone who is the least bit familiar with the Revisionist Zionist writings of Vladimir Jabotinsky knows how greatly Polakow-Suransky overstates the simi-

larity between Likud ideology and the principles of apartheid. The ideological forefather of the Likud, Jabotinsky had always affirmed the equal rights of non-Jews in a Jewish state, and Begin and his other main disciples never repudiated that idea. If Likud leaders displayed a greater capacity to deal with South African leaders than their Laborite predecessors, it was mostly because their pragmatism stretched further, especially in what they perceived to be emergency situations. One can see this most clearly, I think, if one takes a closer look at two of the right-wing leaders whom Polakow-Suransky most strenuously seeks to expose as having been too sympathetic to the apartheid regime because they "drew inspiration from the political tradition of Revisionist Zionism"—Ariel Sharon and Rafael Eitan. As Polakow-Suransky may or may not know, both of these men were the products not of Revisionist but of Labor Zionist upbringings. Their subsequent moves to the right were not the outcome of ideological ruminations but of very



Elazar Granot, 1981. (Photo by Herman Chanania, Israel National Photo Collection.)

down-to-earth thinking about the dilemmas Israel faced. It would not be worthwhile, however, to pursue this point and to attempt a comprehensive defense of Likud ideology against Polakow-Suransky's allegations. For he himself recognizes throughout his book that it was primarily material interests and not ideology that "gave birth to an alliance that greatly benefited the Israeli economy," and only incidentally, as far as the Israelis were concerned, "enhanced the security of South Africa's white minority regime."

But was a close relationship with South Africa really to Israel's overall advantage, even from a purely pragmatic point of view? The Africa scholar and (in later years) left-wing politician Naomi Chazan addressed this question in a penetrating article that appeared in *African Affairs* in 1983. Her unequivocal conclusion was that the very limited material gains from the link with South Africa were greatly outweighed by the "palpable harm to Israel's global standing and credibility that it has unleashed." While Polakow-Suransky seems to be on the whole disposed to see things from a similar point of view, he nevertheless finds fault with Chazan's article. "There was a blind spot," he writes, "in her analysis: the crucial role the arms industry played in Israel's economy. As Chazan may have discovered later, after she joined the Knesset, South Africa's massive export market for Israeli weapons made the returns on the relationship anything but ambiguous."

For those Israelis who were already privy in the 1970s to the information unavailable to Chazan in 1983, there were obviously strong temptations to deal with the South African devil. Indeed, Golda Meir herself, the very symbol of the anti-apartheid stance, eventually became persuaded of this. In 1976, after she had left office, Shimon Peres (one of this book's main villains) convinced her that closer ties with South Africa were now necessary. Polakow-Suransky, for his part, evidently understands quite well how a realistic assessment of Israel's struggling economy and its lonely and exposed international position during the 1970s and 1980s could have led reasonable and even highly principled statesmen to endorse an amoral policy toward an utterly reprehensible country like South Africa that had so much to offer to it. But he will not do so himself.

What he does choose to do, however, is to conclude the final chapter of his book with a story that illustrates the complexity of this issue. It is based on a fairly recent interview with Elazar Granot, who had been a left-wing (Mapam) member of the Knesset in the 1980s and served in 1994 and 1996 as Israel's ambassador to post-apartheid South Africa. Polakow-Suransky's account is worth quoting at length:

> Looking back, Granot says he fully understands the Israeli policy that he protested so vehemently in the 1970s and 1980s. It is a surprising admission coming from an icon of the Israeli far left. While he does not approve of the military cooperation, Granot claims that it was of vital importance to Israel. His knowledge is grounded in the four years he served on the Knesset's Defense Committee from 1984 to 1988, during which he had nearly unfettered access to sensitive military documents and participated in high-level discussions of Israel's defense doctrine.
>
> Toward the end of our six-hour conversation, after a leisurely lunch at the kibbutz's communal cafeteria, Granot sits me down in his small living room. Reclining on his sofa and gazing out the window at the late afternoon sun he confesses, "I haven't told you what I know, and I wouldn't . . . until there is peace in the Middle East." But for a moment he lets down his guard. "I had to take into consideration that maybe Rabin and Peres were able to go to the Oslo agreements because they believed that Israel was strong enough to defend itself," says Granot, uncomfortably. "It wasn't the Americans and it wasn't the French and it wasn't the English. Most of the work that was done—I'm talking about the new kinds of weapons—was done in South Africa."

Polakow-Suransky makes no comment whatsoever about what Granot said to him. After this report there is nothing in the text of *The Unspoken Alliance* other than an epilogue. Upon turning to it, I expected to find that the author had followed up his narrative with political-philosophical ruminations about what Michael Walzer has famously labeled



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"the problem of dirty hands." Just how amoral are political leaders entitled to be, I thought he would ask, for the sake of what they perceive to be a good cause? But I was surprised instead to see that the book's final words are about something altogether different from its main subject. From a treatment of the relationship of Israel to apartheid South Africa in the past the author turns to the much-discussed question of its current resemblance to it.

Here he doesn't really have anything terribly significant to say that hasn't already been said countless times by assorted scholars, pundits, political activists, and ex-Presidents. I am happy to be able to report that his general portrait of the current Israeli scene places him closer to the admonitory than the accusatory end of the spectrum of opinions on this matter. The problem for him is not that Israel is like the old South Africa but that it is in danger of becoming so. But even if one is reassured by the relatively moderate character of his criticism, one still has to ask: what is it doing in this book about an "unspoken" but now defunct alliance?

At the end of the book's prologue, Polakow-Suransky does indeed assert that Israel's ties with "some of the world's most reviled regimes," especially "its intimate alliance with apartheid South Africa," played a part in advancing the "moral decay" manifested in the expansion of settlements in the West Bank and Gaza. But there is nothing in the following pages, as far as I can see, that even begins to support such a claim. Nor does he reiterate it in his epilogue, where he dwells at greater length on the similarities (as well as the very significant differences) between Israel and apartheid South Africa. In the epilogue's final pages, however, he introduces a less dubious link between his book's main content and its final message. It has to do with the lesson that Israelis can learn from the way in which their country's relationship with apartheid South Africa ultimately came to an end.

"Only when realpolitik of a higher order intervened," he writes, "in the form of the 1987 American threat to cut military aid to Israel, did the Jewish state begin to retreat slowly from its military alliance with South Africa. Israel's gradual distancing was also the result of pressure from the left and from American Jewish organizations like AIPAC." And what can be learned from this experience? Today, too, "Israel would do well to heed the criticisms of friends who disapprove of its excesses," make the compromises necessary for the achievement of peace, and thereby regain a high standing in world opinion.

Polakow-Suransky has written a book that at least points to the truly complicated character of the situation he has chosen to describe.

The case Polakow-Suransky makes for doing these things is too perfunctory to warrant a detailed consideration of his recommendations. What is worth noting, however, is that the man who couldn't quite bring himself either to accept or reject a realpolitik argument for cooperation with South Africa could easily make one with regard to the disposition of the West Bank (an argument that in the context of his book cannot help but remind us of the pragmatic case for breaking with South Africa made by Naomi Chazan decades earlier). But whatever he has or has not done in his epilogue, Polakow-Suransky has written a book that at least points to the truly complicated character of the situation he has chosen to describe.

That the people who will be sure to mine *The Unspoken Alliance* for evidence incriminating Israel will pause to take note of this complexity is something for which we cannot dare to hope. It is all too easy to guess who will delightedly pounce on a book by a scholar affiliated with the Council on Foreign Relations that demonstrates—it will no doubt be said—how Israel learned from its long, admittedly unsavory association with South Africa the lessons in apartheid that it is applying now in the West Bank. One cannot of course blame Polakow-Suransky, who is himself no enemy of Israel, for the fact that other people are likely to misuse his book in this way, but one can regret that he has made it so easy for them to do so.

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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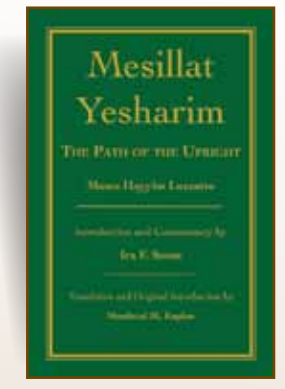

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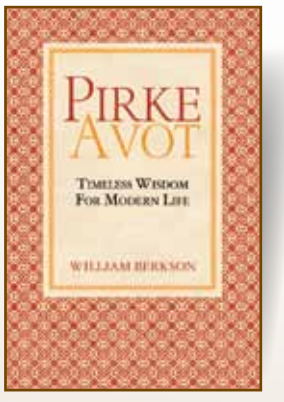

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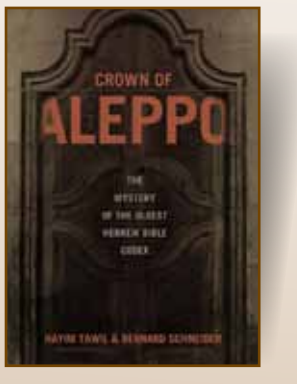

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Early Modern Mingling

BY MOSHE ROSMAN

EARLY MODERN JEWRY: A NEW CULTURAL HISTORY
by David B. Ruderman
Princeton University Press, 336 pp., $35

Jewish historians writing in the postmodern key seem determined to cut their subject down to size. Jewish history, for them, is like politics for Tip O'Neill: it's all local. Rather than treat individual Jewish communities as constituent parts of a worldwide Jewish people, they see them as discrete entities embedded within dominant cultures and societies. There are, they maintain, Jewish histories, not Jewish history. They hold the former to be, as David Ruderman (who disagrees) puts it, "radically singular, diverse, and heterogeneous, lacking common features," except insofar as they reflect "general trends located in non-Jewish society." But such embedded and indebted micro-history is hardly the stuff of the "exciting and compelling" story that he believes the Jewish past has to tell.

Ruderman, who is a professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania and the director of its Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies (full disclosure: I have twice been a most happy fellow there), boldly opposes the historiographical *zeitgeist*. In *Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History*, a book dealing with the period from the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492 to the advent of Jewish emancipation in Central Europe in 1782, he aims to uncover "not merely a Jewish history specific to a Polish context or an Italian or an Ottoman, but a history of the Jews and their cultural legacy as a whole." In order to do so, he employs the idea of "connected histories." Other historians have taken this approach both to highlight the political, economic, social, and cultural diversity of different peoples, and to identify a characteristic cluster of big historical "processes" or "experiences" that nonetheless connect them. Such an approach can show that each Jewish community of the period was indeed distinctly Polish, or Italian, or Ottoman (or whatever), but also categorically Jewish. We are in Ruderman's debt for introducing this useful—and currently contrarian—concept into Jewish historical discourse.

Ruderman focuses on the following five factors of "Jewish cultural formation," which, he argues, determined the cultural history of the interconnected Jewish people in the early modern period and devotes a chapter to each of them: mobility, communal cohesion, the explosion of knowledge, the crisis of rabbinic authority, and the advent of mingled identities.

In discussing the first of these factors, Ruderman sketches the main Jewish migratory vectors of the period: Sephardim moving from the Iberian Peninsula to Italy, the Ottoman Empire, Western Europe, and the Americas; Ashkenazim from the German lands to Poland-Lithuania. He gives special attention to the "conversos" who often switched identities from Christianity to Judaism and back again as they shuttled among centers that varied in the degree of hostility and hospitality they demonstrated toward Jews. The "circulation and exchange of individuals, ideas, goods, and institutions" were, Ruderman says, the defining features of the Sephardic diaspora. He notes how Jews brought their economic and technical skills to new areas, pioneering in fields such as textiles, winemaking, banking, printing, commerce, and management. He also highlights the formation of "multicultural" Jewish communities such as Venice, Amsterdam, Safed, and Izmir where different Jewish ethnic groups (Sephardic, Ashkenazic, Italian, Romaniot) lived together and influenced each other in unpredictable ways.



Seventeenth-century woodcut of the Jews of Salonika repenting for following the false messiah Shabbtai Tzvi.

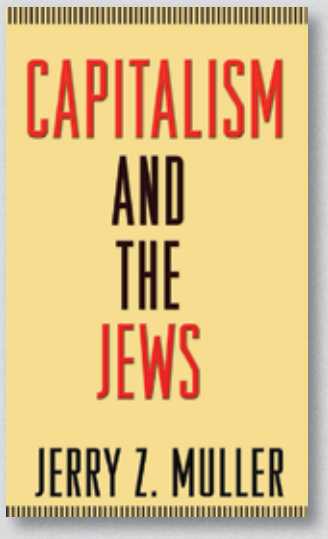
After presenting a long list of itinerant rabbis and scholars, extending from the sixteenth-century Isaac and Leone (Judah) Abravanel and Joseph Karo to the eighteenth-century Israel Zamosc and Isaac Satanov, Ruderman suggests that it was the reaction of such luminaries to new cultural contexts that accounts for the renaissance of Jewish culture in this period. These scholars produced works that contributed to the creation of a universal Jewish legal tradition (most notably through Karo's *Shulchan Arukh*), but also planted some of the seeds that eventually blossomed into the Jewish Enlightenment, as when the sixteenth-century physician and polymath Azariah de' Rossi insisted on distinguishing between rabbinic midrash and history.

The new forms of Jewish communal cohesion that Ruderman locates in this period found expression from Amsterdam to Cracow to Istanbul in autonomous Jewish institutions, which developed on a larger and more ramified scale than in previous eras. This often occurred with the support and even encouragement of the non-Jewish authorities. Ruderman describes this as an outgrowth of the "new political landscape of early modern Europe, its religious wars, the movement of populations, the rise of new governments hospitable to the influx of new immigrants, and the struggle for power between kings and noblemen."

Eventually, as kings consolidated their power and regimes stabilized, they decided to assume more direct control over their Jewish populations and by the second half of the eighteenth century Jewish autonomy everywhere was under attack, and the early modern period was over.

Ruderman's explanation of how the advent of print fostered the connection between Jewish communities and made Jewish culture trans-regional and pan-European (at least) is especially interesting. "Classics of the Sephardic library" were thus made available to Ashkenazic readers. Later, the process was reversed, bringing Ashkenazic classics to the far-flung centers of the Sephardic world. Print also brought kabbalistic works—and especially the ritual practices they fostered—into the hands of semi- and unlearned Jews, and made the everyday languages of such Jews, Yiddish and Ladino, into ones in which Torah was now also discussed. Finally, print engendered a new dialogue between learned Christians and learned Jews. In short, print created a "knowledge explosion" that redefined both the content and the contours of Jewish culture.

To illustrate the crisis of rabbinic authority Ruderman focuses on the eighteenth-century controversies surrounding figures such as the Sabbatian prophet, Nehemiah Hayon; the talmudist, Sabbatian sympathizer, and apparent dabbler in Christian theology, Jonathan Eybeschütz; and the messianic pretender, Jacob Frank. Following Matt Goldish, Ruderman presents these characters not as genuine heirs of Shabbtai Tzvi, but rather as the instigators of struggles over the legitimacy of religious enthusiasm. They inspired fear in the hearts of rabbinic authorities, who felt themselves to be surrounded by intellectual and cultural threats, especially prophecy and messianism. The rabbinate's response was to denounce and delegitimize those it deemed to be heretical, "declaring itself the only authentic form of Judaism." Thus, in the eighteenth-century writings and actions of such traditional authorities as Rabbis



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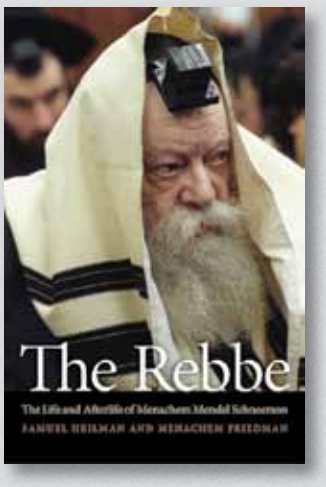

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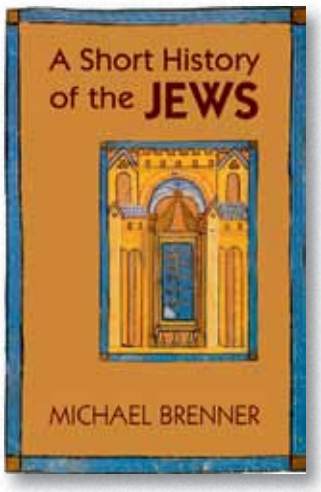

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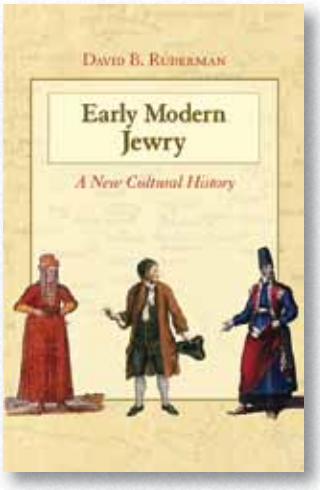

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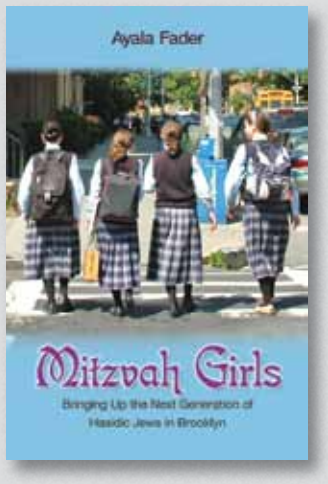

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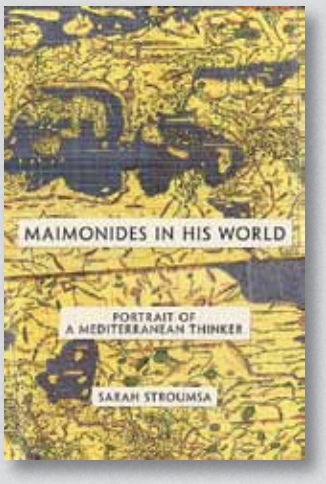

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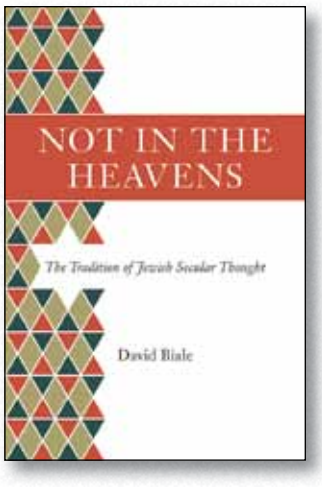

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Moses Hagiz, Jacob Sasportas, and Jacob Emden, Jewish "Orthodoxy" was born.

The boundary crossings of conversos, Sabbatians, Christian Hebraists, and Jewish converts to Christianity drew new borders for Judaism and Christianity and led to the formation of "mingled identities," Ruderman's fifth feature. In this chapter, he introduces us to people like Samuel Pallache (d. 1616), who Edward Kritzler has called the "pirate rabbi." Born in Morocco but of Spanish converso descent, he was the first self-declared Jew to settle in Amsterdam, yet he "easily adopted the religious identity of his surroundings," whatever they happened to be, "viewing it solely pragmatically as a kind of business cost." Nehemiah Hayon "espoused a triune notion of God" based on ideas found in the Zohar, "presenting an allegedly Jewish belief that easily appeared to some as identical with that of Christianity." Glückel of Hameln's grandson, Moses Marcus, like many learned converts, made his living in the Christian world as a self-proclaimed expert on Judaism and maintained "fiercely loyal and warm feelings for Jews and their beliefs."

The boundary crossings of conversos, Sabbatians, Christian Hebraists, and Jewish converts to Christianity led to the formation of "mingled identities."

In a coda, Ruderman claims that his five factors of cultural formation capture "a sense of the whole" of early modern Jewish history "in relation to its parts." I am in sympathy with Ruderman's grand objective, and see much evidence in his book that the histories of early modern Jewish communities were interconnected. However, Ruderman's declaration that it is precisely *these* five factors that connect the history of *all* of the early modern Jewish communities is somewhat exaggerated. Indeed, Ruderman almost admits as much in several places. At one point, for example, he describes his five factors as being "at best, my own intuitive sense of what was distinctive and unprecedented about this era." And despite all the emphasis that he places on the signal cultural importance of mobility, he regretfully concedes, "all of these examples do not establish beyond any reasonable doubt that there was a direct link between traveling people and traveling ideas." It might have been wiser for Ruderman to give more weight to his own reservations and to have lowered expectations by speaking of *some* important characteristics of Jewish early modernity.

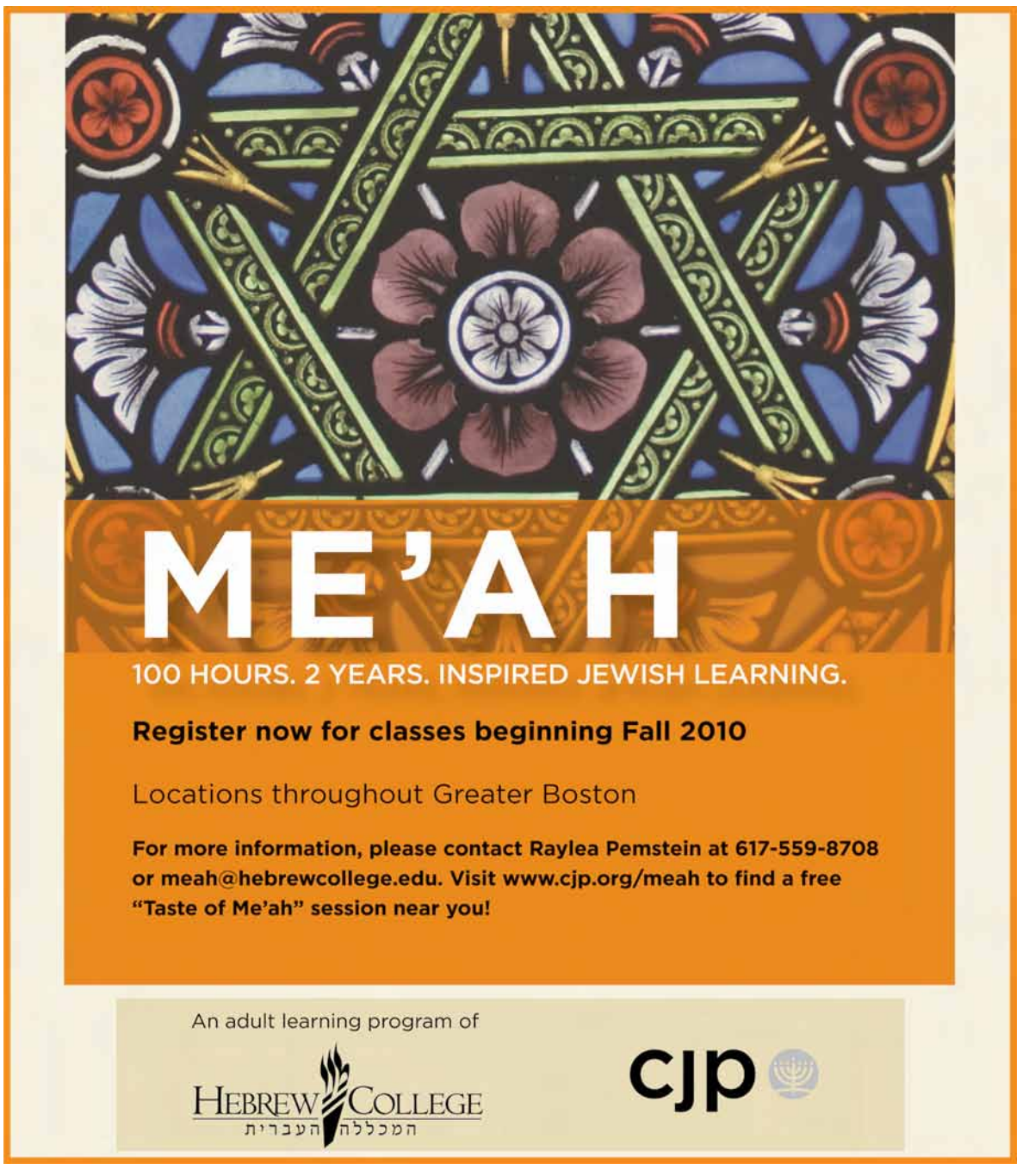
Moreover, in attempting to provide a comprehensive cultural history, Ruderman steps into territory that doesn't seem to hold much interest for him. With the exception of the second chapter on communal cohesion, his treatments of Ashkenazic, Polish, and Ottoman Jewry (together composing the vast majority of Jews in the early modern era) are cursory in comparison with cosmopolitan Sephardim living in Amsterdam and on the Italian peninsula; those he terms "carriers of culture" (migrant rabbis, medical students, itinerant preachers, skeptical authors, printers and book dealers); and, of course, the conversos, Sabbatians, Christian Hebraists, and converts. Given the declaration on the first page of the book that the lure of the early modern period for him is its display of "radical change, social and cultural crises, and the complex and often unexpected mingling of the old and new," Ruderman's emphasis is perhaps understandable, but not fully justified.

Other related questions follow upon the issue of Ruderman's relative neglect of large parts of the early modern Jewish world. For instance, if, as Ruderman maintains, the borders between Judaism and Christianity were redrawn in the early modern era, why was the absolute number of Ashkenazic and Polish converts so low? Nineteenth-century English missionary reports from Poland and Russia reveal the frustrating experiences of those dedicated to converting Jews. They certainly weren't any more successful in earlier centuries. And was the resurgence of popular Jewish pietism in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Ashkenaz/Poland entirely about enthusiasm and not about tradition? The religious ferment that Ruderman spotlights so sympathetically seems to have led, in the North and East, at least, more to an obscurantist, crude, popular mysticism than to a secularized, renewed, creative, rationalized religion.

A history, like Ruderman's, that purports, "to capture a sense of the whole in relation to its parts," but remains preoccupied with change and the intellectual *avant-garde,* leaves itself open to a criticism once voiced by Gershon Hundert:

> Historians have placed too much emphasis on change and focused too much on ideology. . . they have concentrated too much on regions where few Jews lived and not enough on areas where most Jews lived.

In a book aiming to present the cultural history of early modern Jewry, one would expect more attention would be given to many more categories of people, starting with women of all kinds, whose poor representation in this volume cannot be excused by Ruderman's claim in his introduction that scholarship on Jewish women during this period "is still in its infancy." Any reader of Glückel of Hameln's celebrated seventeenth-century memoir knows what an important part women played in—to begin with—Jewish mobility, the knowledge explosion, and the mingling of identities. Moreover, it seems to me that at the very least a sixth factor cries out for analysis: the persistence



of new iterations of traditional texts and forms.

This leads us to another set of questions that Ruderman doesn't fully address. Why, in Central and Eastern Europe and the Ottoman Empire, did the knowledge explosion result in a wave of new inflections of traditional Jewish texts and doctrines (for both men and women), but relatively little openness to new non-Jewish ones? (Rabbi Moses Isserles in sixteenth-century Cracow, for example, was forced to defend his modest—and outdated—reference to the physical sciences by insisting that he had learned it by reading Maimonides and not, God forbid, any non-Jewish author.) To what audience did the "carriers of culture" carry it? Did it include the minimally educated or uneducated Jews, the small-time merchants and artisans, the daily synagogue goers? How did it resonate with them? What forms did it take? Were there significant gender differentiations? How aware was the audience of the new religious borders, the crisis of rabbinic authority, or the mingled identities that Ruderman has elucidated? How did these affect their lives?

As a means of understanding the connected histories of Jewish communities, Ruderman's five-part paradigm may actually fit our own era better than any earlier one. It calls to mind our ultra-mobile world, with its hyper-organized Jewish community; web-powered knowledge explosion; ubiquitous challenges to authority; and accelerated mixing of identities. Indeed, one might wonder whether it is not our contemporary Jewish experience that triggered David Ruderman's "intuitive sense" of what was going on in the early modern period. Such large questons aside, his intuition has given birth to a brave, stimulating, highly erudite, and informative, if less than completely satisfying, book.

Moshe Rosman teaches in the Koschitzky Department of Jewish History at Bar Ilan University. His most recent book is How Jewish is Jewish History? *(Littman Library).*

Lamed-Vovnik

BY RUTH FRANKLIN

THE MORNING STAR
by André Schwarz-Bart, translated by Julie Rose
Overlook, 192 pp., $23.95

Some writers who take the Holocaust as their subject return to it again and again: Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi, Imre Kertész. Others visit it just once. The Holocaust "seems to expel certain writers from its provenance after a single book," the literary scholar Alvin Rosenfeld has observed. For writers like Jerzy Kosinski (*The Painted Bird*), Sarah Kofman (*Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*), and Cynthia Ozick (*The Shawl*), one devastating engagement with the Holocaust seems to have been sufficient. Until now, André Schwarz-Bart—a French-Polish Jew who joined the Resistance as a young teenager after his parents were deported to Auschwitz and killed—has been the definitive example of this category.

Schwarz-Bart's remarkable first novel, *Le dernier des justes (The Last of the Just*), which was published in France in 1959 and awarded the Prix Goncourt, re-imagined the legend of the Lamed-Vovniks. The legend, which has its origins in the Talmudic statement that thirty-six men "daily receive the Divine Countenance," holds that in each generation there are thirty-six "just men" who are responsible for the preservation of the world (the Hebrew letters *lamed* and *vov* correspond to the number thirty-six). As Gershom Scholem explained in a classic essay, these men are normally depicted as both unaware of each other's presence and also ignorant of their own special status. In some versions of the legend, the future of the world itself relies upon their good deeds. In times of great danger, according to yet another version, a Lamed-Vovnik can use his powers to defeat the enemies of the Jews.

In Schwarz-Bart's account, the Levy family of Zemyock, a town in Poland, is blessed—or cursed—by the presence of a just man in each generation. Unlike the Lamed-Vovniks of tradition, many of the Levys are aware of their exceptional qualities, which largely consist in an almost supernatural ability to feel compassion for the sufferings of others. "The Lamed-Vov are the hearts of the world multiplied," Schwarz-Bart writes, "and into them, as into one receptacle, pour all our griefs." To them, "the spectacle of the world is an unspeakable hell." Andalusian Jews in the seventh century were known to venerate a teardrop-shaped rock, said to be "the soul, petrified by suffering," of one of the Lamed-Vovniks. Another Hasidic story holds that when a just man rises to heaven, God must warm his frozen soul for a thousand years before it can open itself to paradise. "It is known that some remain forever inconsolable at human woe, so that God Himself cannot warm them," Schwarz-Bart continues. "So from time to time the Creator . . . sets forward the clock of the Last Judgment by one minute."

Schwarz-Bart's chronicle of Jewish suffering starts with a massacre in York, England, in 1185 and continues through the Holocaust, focusing on the fate of Ernie Levy, the last of the line, who dies at Auschwitz. The novel's style has the dreamlike quality of folklore; its scenes of torment are depicted as if in a Chagall painting. Perhaps this is what enables Schwarz-Bart to take the book's most dramatic step: He imagines the gas chamber itself, a place few novelists have permitted themselves to enter. Depiction of the gas chamber has come to be regarded as the last remaining taboo of Holocaust literature—impossible to represent, because no one survived to tell the story. As if offering penance for his transgression, Schwarz-Bart ends his novel with a now-famous passage offering a broken prayer for the "millions, who turned from *Luftmenschen* into *Luft*": "And praised. *Auschwitz*. Be. *Maidanek*. The Lord. *Treblinka*. And praised. *Buchenwald*. Be. *Mauthausen*. The Lord. *Belzec*. And praised. *Sobibor*. Be. *Chelmno*. The Lord. *Ponary*. . ." And so on. And so on. And so on. Schwarz-Bart's litany of suffering has the effect of transforming the reader into a kind of Lamed-Vovnik, a vessel shuddering with the empathy of the ages.

The Last of the Just has dropped off the radar in recent years, but at the time of its publication it was an international bestseller, and was immediately recognized as a classic of Holocaust literature. Yet Schwarz-Bart appeared to have had enough of the subject. After his marriage in 1961 to Simone, a woman from Guadeloupe, he wrote several books together with her, including *Pork and Green Bananas* and an essay series called *In Praise of Black Women*. She may also have collaborated with him on his second novel, *A Woman Named Solitude*, about a young West African girl sold into slavery who becomes a martyr figure similar to the Lamed-Vovniks. He died in 2006 without publishing another book about the Holocaust.

Until now. In an introductory note to *The Morning Star*, Simone Schwarz-Bart explains the story of "the genesis of this work, which very nearly didn't exist." Her husband, she writes, would dictate episodes to her and their son Jacques, but would then destroy them. "We asked ourselves . . . what on earth is stopping him from finishing this book?" In the book's final pages, its main character, a Holocaust survivor, answers the question himself. Clearly a stand-in for the author, he has lived in French Guyana and then in the Caribbean; after publishing a few books, he now lives like a "schlemiel, a man who had lost his shadow." He is "in mourning for literature, in mourning for himself," because he has spent his life trying to answer the impossible question of how to talk about Auschwitz. "How to express his impressions of a heap of dead bodies? Or simple: a day in Auschwitz?" By the end, he has two chests full of manuscripts that comprise hundreds of different approaches, all ultimately unsatisfactory."

What made this writer, who once did not hesitate to represent the very nearly unrepresentable, so reluctant to continue? Simone Schwarz-Bart writes that after André's death, she realized that for her husband, finishing his book meant, in some way, abandoning the dead. "I have to keep all of that inside me," he wrote in a note that she found among his papers. "So much work, so many vigils, so much pain, day after day, night after night, for nothing." Like the Lamed-Vovniks of his first novel, Schwarz-Bart suffered on behalf of his characters, unable to

admit that their suffering was without meaning.

Yet in the meantime Schwarz-Bart had come up with an extraordinary device to solve his literary problem: He wrote his wife into his book. She appears as a researcher in the year 3000, after the death of planet Earth through contamination with nuclear waste, overpopulation, and finally some vague, unspecified calamity involving bombs. Its inhabitants, who had already "taken to the stars" and there reconstituted Earth's atmosphere, are dispersed throughout the galaxy. There, mysteriously, they have discovered the secret of immortality, and reproduction takes place through cloning. But they are nostalgic for the old earthly traditions, and some of them return to the planet to dig through archives.

It is in the ruins of "a foreign country, known successively by the names of Judea, Palestine, Israel," that a historian bearing Simone Schwarz-Bart's middle name discovers "traces of a strange massacre that had occurred about a thousand years earlier." Sorting through chests of manuscripts found in the attic at Yad Vashem, she is astounded by the records of this lost civilization of wanderers, against whom "nearly all the tortures ever invented by men since their birth in the Rift Valley were directed . . . during the brief period of the Great Massacre." And yet, "even on the edge of the abyss," these men and women wrote poems and stories; they conducted clandestine religious services and schools. "The people of wanderers had disappeared: but they had lived, humbly, beautifully, as best they could."

The prophet Elijah appears at various key moments; when the Nazis invade, Haim Lebke expects an angel to stay the hands of the Germans as it once did for Abraham when he was about to sacrifice Isaac.

The text derived from the wreckage—it is unclear whether the researcher discovers it or writes it herself—makes up the body of Schwarz-Bart's slender book. Even more elliptical than *The Last of the Just*, it tells the story of the Polish village of Podhoretz, from the mid-nineteenth century until its destruction in the war. Again it follows a family line, this time the descendants of a man named Haim Yaacov, who are unexceptional apart from their capacity for mystical experience. The "inexplicably merry" Haim Yaacov "looked at a face and heard a melody, he looked at the sky and heard a different melody and, even when he closed his eyes, the melody of the world did not desert him." Later he will spend two years reconstructing a broken violin and another two learning how to extract a "Jewish sound" from it, but when he does his music attracts people from miles around.

Like *The Last of the Just*, *The Morning Star* draws on Jewish tradition. The prophet Elijah appears at various key moments; when the Nazis invade, Haim Lebke expects an angel to stay the hands of the Germans as it once did for Abraham when he was about to sacrifice Isaac. As the war progresses, the Jews in the ghetto wonder if the world is coming to an end, a prospect that evokes both dread and joy. "All these people, all these events, seem today to be covered in a mantle of sweetness, tenderness, like the golden veil of legend," the narrator comments.

Yet the book never veers into kitsch or treacle. Schwarz-Bart's language can be downright earthy, but more often it attains a lyricism that feels all the more otherworldly in the brutal context of its subject. In the final Auschwitz scene, Haim Lebke, lying ill in the infirmary, has a vision of himself back at home, at the Shabbat table; as he reaches for the food, it turns to ashes.

> And as he expressed astonishment to his father,
> to his mother, to his brothers with their ever-
> dreamy eyes, wonderfully warm and loving,
> the ashes of evil also claimed the humans, one
> after the other, reducing the tablecloth to dust,
> the glasses, the plates, the knives and forks and
> spoons, the chairs, doors and windows, and the
> house and the trees, the mountain, the plain
> in the distance and the clouds, the whole wide
> world, right up to the invisible stars.

Schwarz-Bart's ambivalence about the very act of writing about the Holocaust is all the more perplexing in the context of this exquisite book. Perhaps he felt some residual guilt about the best-

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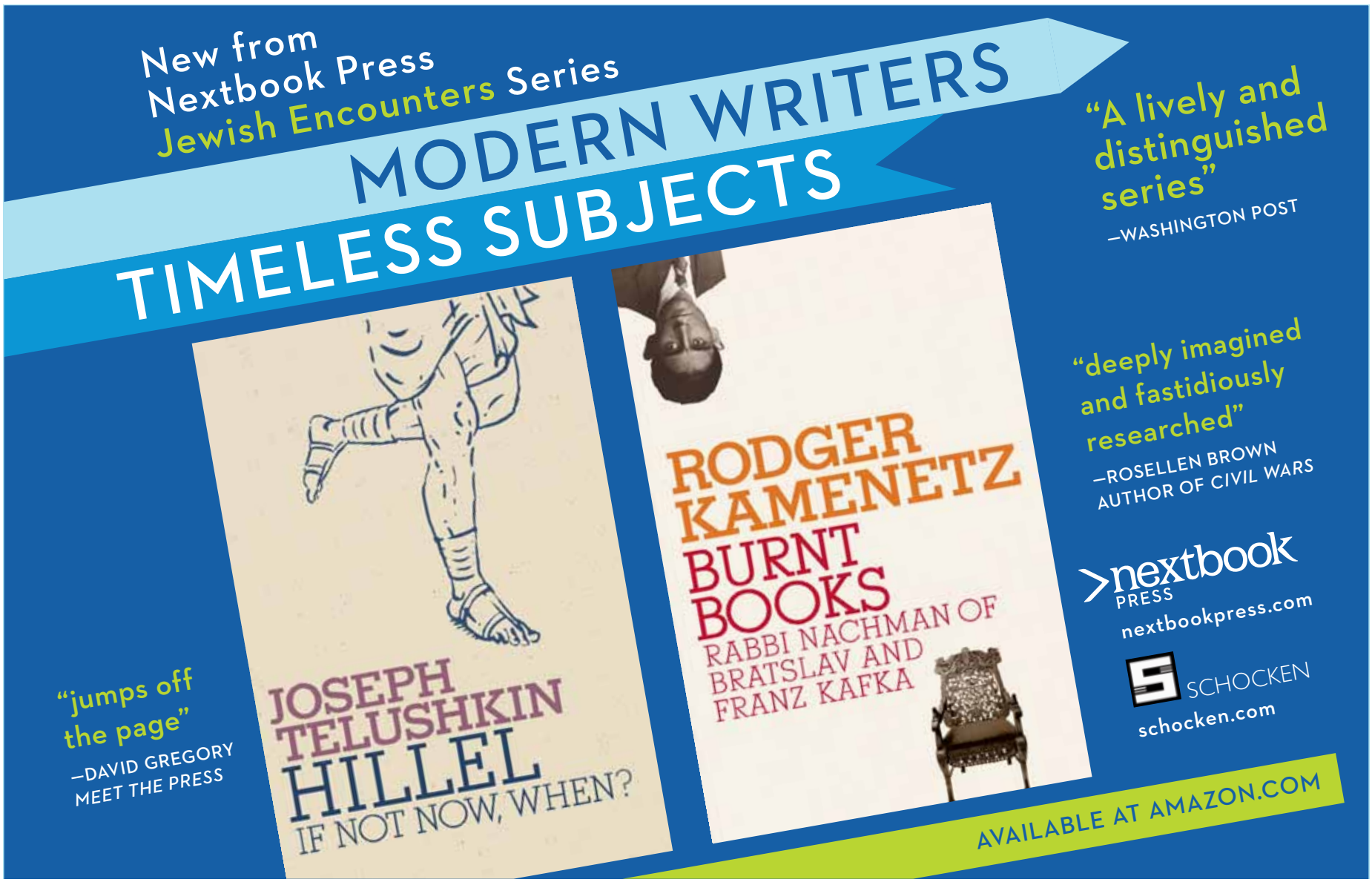
Writers Simone and André Schwarz-Bart, June 1976. (Photo © Sophie Bassouls/ Sygma/Corbis.)

selling success of his first novel. But it may also have had something to do with his outlook on the Holocaust itself—and his decision, on its face bizarre, to frame his Holocaust story in a narrative of future dystopia. The real dystopia, it turns out, may not be an Earth without human beings, but rather an Earth without Holocaust survivors. "The day the last survivor disappeared, there would be nothing left but images and words," one character says towards the book's end. "Then the words and images would die, and the earth itself would stop turning." The survivors, then, are like the Lamed-Vovniks, responsible for the future of the world. Their compassion, their suffering, is Earth's motor.

So we need stories about the Holocaust, then, regardless of the cost of telling them. "Literature dealing with the inhuman should conform to the human heart, show humanity toward the reader," Haim Lebke, speaking for his creator, concludes toward the novel's end. As a result, it has to "leave an area of shadow hovering and introduce or enhance the part of light, so that the area of shadow that subsists is bearable to the eye of the average reader" without risking his transformation into a petrified teardrop.

The conflict over the ethics of aestheticizing horror is as old as genocide itself, but Schwarz-Bart has come up with a unique literary solution. For it is through her studies of the Holocaust that the clone who frames his story realizes what was lost with the transformation of human beings into immortal but emotionally insensate automata. She longs to experience the "relentless love of life" that she finds in these texts; in comparison with a life lived coldly, even anguish in the face of death can feel like a kind of exhilaration. What finally emerges from Schwarz-Bart's book is a celebration of life in all its transience, as the clone decides to return to Earth to be reborn as a member of the lost race of humanity—thus metaphorically fulfilling Haim Lebke's dream that the Jews in the ravine where he was nearly slaughtered be resurrected. With this vision of death and rebirth at its heart, *The Morning Star*—agonized over by Schwarz-Bart for years and finally reaching us only posthumously—is the most hopeful work of Holocaust literature that I have read.

Ruth Franklin is a senior editor at The New Republic. *She is the author of* A Thousand Darknesses: Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction (*Oxford University Press*).



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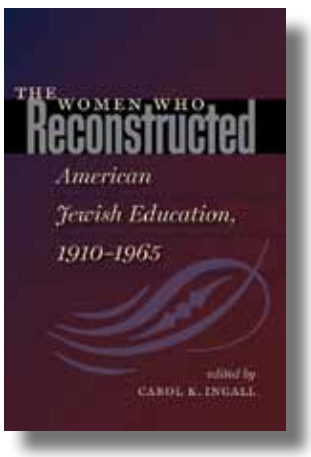

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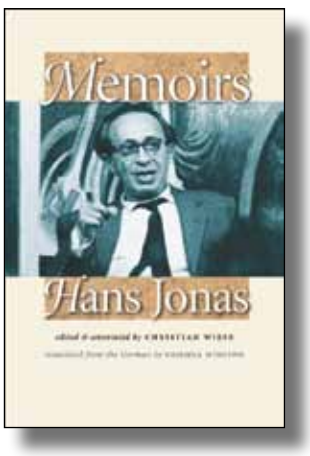

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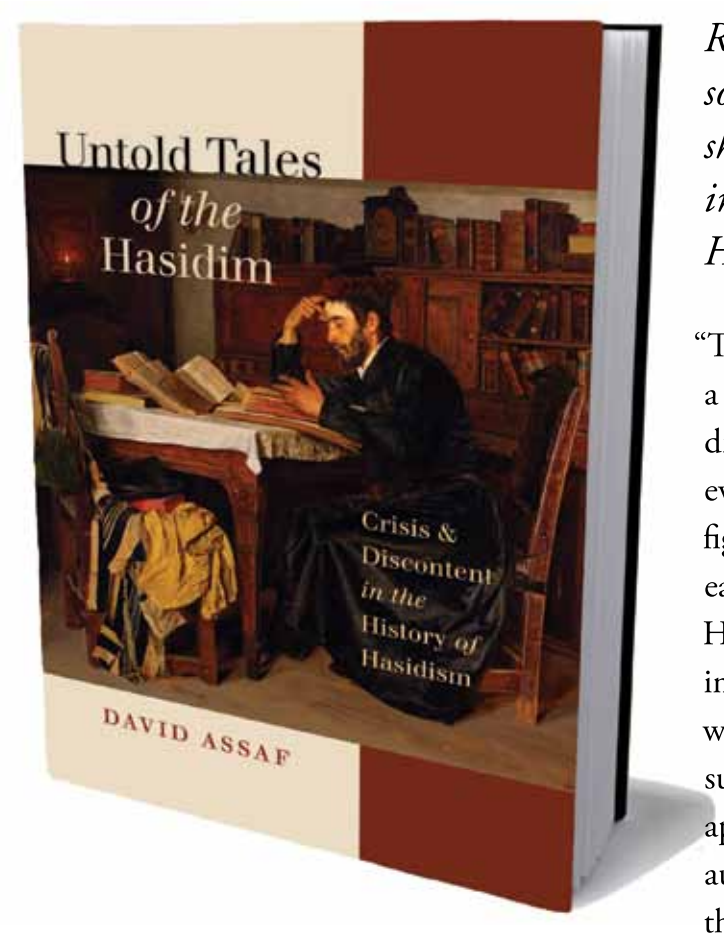

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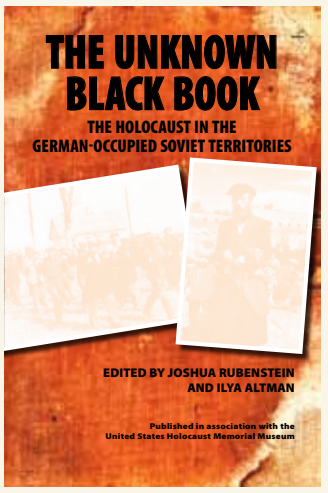

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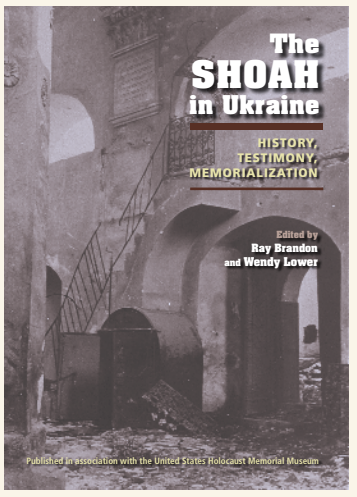

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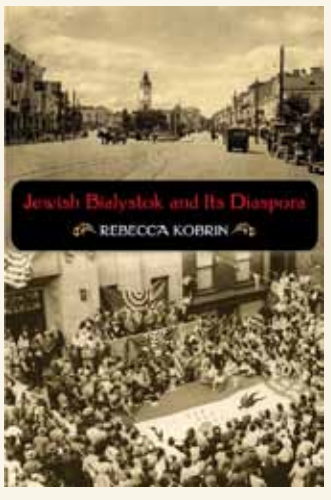

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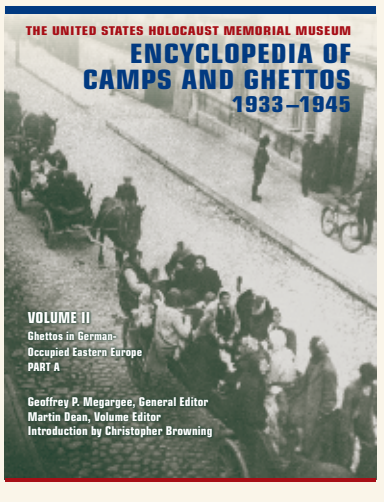

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The Bible Scholar Who Didn't Know Hebrew

BY ANTHONY GRAFTON

ELIAS BICKERMAN AS A HISTORIAN OF THE JEWS: A TWENTIETH CENTURY TALE
by Albert Baumgarten
Mohr Siebeck, 397 pp., €99

Many giants walked the crumbling streets of Morningside Heights in the 1960s and 1970s: Salo Baron and Saul Lieberman, Paul Oskar Kristeller and Meyer Schapiro, Richard Hofstadter and Morton Smith. None of them cut a more striking figure in the humdrum American academic scene, and none of them was more alienated from it, than Elias Bickerman. This Russian historian of the ancient world, born in Kishinev and educated in St. Petersburg and Berlin, had taught in Berlin and Paris before he came to the United States. He spoke English with a heavy accent and when words failed him he invented new ones. Bickerman disliked most American students and could be harshly critical of the few who wrote dissertations for him. A man of the right, he liked to talk about how he had fought Communists as a young officer in the White army during the Russian civil war and to state his conviction that women's "scholarly careers would always be aborted by biology"—not postures designed to win him friends in the largely liberal world of the university. In demeanor he had less in common with the sovereign German émigrés who transformed the humanities than with Vladimir Nabokov's Pnin: the Russian scholar bumbling through a landscape in which he could never be at home.

Though Bickerman worked closely at times with masters of Jewish studies, he refused to learn Hebrew—even when, in his last years, he began to spend a portion of each summer in Bat Yam, outside Tel Aviv. Though he did not observe the commandments or the Sabbath, he turned up at the Jewish Theological Seminary synagogue to hear the Book of Esther read at Purim—but refused to take off his tallit even when told it was not customary to wear one in the evening. Yet this specialist in some of the most arcane areas of classical studies, who proclaimed that he had "lost the holy tongue," was internationally revered as one of the greatest historians of the Jews. And rightly so. As Albert Baumgarten shows in his rich and fascinating biography, no scholar of the twentieth century did more than Bickerman to transform our understanding of Jewish life and thought after the return from the Babylonian exile.

It is not easy to see Bickerman whole. Like so many of the great European scholars of his generation, he liked to tell stories about himself. Many of them were exaggerated, some wholly false. Sometimes simple vanity inspired Bickerman's bragging. He liked to describe his dramatic escape from occupied Europe on an airplane, accompanied by a female "friend" whom he had fought to bring with him. In fact, Bickerman crossed the Atlantic on the SS Nyassa, with his wife. Baumgarten suggests that he drew his story from the movie "Casablanca." The son of a prominent Russian Jewish journalist who became an articulate opponent of the Bolsheviks, Bickerman hated the fact that so many of the leaders of the Revolution were Jewish: He shared his father's loathing of the "Kommikike" conspiracy. Yet, as Baumgarten shows, it is most unlikely that the notoriously anti-Semitic Whites allowed Bickerman to join their forces. In fact, he probably served in the Red army.

As if Bickerman himself had not confused matters enough, his friends, colleagues, and students also liked to tell stories. Many of these were infected by Bickerman's lies and exaggerations, and others by the sort of secondary elaboration that grows up around great scholars, as around saints. Though Baumgarten admires Bickerman, with whom he studied at Columbia, he also knows the great man's weaknesses. (When he checked Bickerman's footnotes for a collection of his articles, he found that 10% of the references were wrong.) He is at once an admiring and a critical biographer, and his approach yields impressive results. By imaginative and unrelenting research in public and private archives around the world and close reading of documents in many languages, he has sifted the wheat in the oral tradition from the larger amount of chaff, devised a credible narrative of Bickerman's life, and proposed a complex, largely cogent account of his accomplishments.

Bickerman liked to describe his dramatic escape from occupied Europe by plane, with a woman he had fought to bring with him . . . Baumgarten suggests that he drew his story from "Casablanca."

Like many of the great Jewish scholars who transformed American and British universities, Bickerman devoted himself, when he was young, not to Hebrew and Aramaic but to Greek and Latin. Like many of them, too, he found his intellectual home in the world of German scholarship. He began studying ancient history at St. Petersburg with Michael Rostovtzeff, a pioneer in interdisciplinary history who taught him to combine archaeological with historical evidence. After Bickerman's family left Russia for Berlin, he soon won the respect and support of the papyrologist Ulrich Wilcken and the universal scholar Ulrich von Wilamomitz-Moellendorff. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the rubbish dumps of Egypt yielded vast numbers of texts written in Greek on papyrus, ranging from works of literature or philosophy that had previously been unknown to public or private documents that revealed the everyday life of Greeks, Jews, and Egyptians. Bickerman learned how to date, authenticate, and read these rich but difficult texts. He had a gift for solving the puzzles papyri posed. More important—so he himself believed—he had an even more unusual gift for extrapolating from them. Given random series of official documents, Bickerman could reconstruct the bureaucracies that had produced them with an almost magical precision. Where hypercritical German scholars had made their careers doubting the official documents that the Jewish historian Josephus and other writers quoted, Bickerman compared them to the papyri and proved that they were basically genuine.

Yet the arc of Bickerman's career was anything but smooth. The Berlin faculty rejected the work that he submitted for his "Habilitation"—the second process, subsequent to the awarding of the doctorate, which traditionally gave German scholars the right to teach. Though they accepted his second effort, and his articles had already established his international reputation, Bickerman did his best to cover up his failure, and pretended that he had been on the verge of being appointed a professor in Germany when the Nazi takeover forced him into a second exile. Though French scholars admired Bickerman's work immensely and the Rockefeller Foundation and the École des Hautes Études provided financial support, he found that he would need to earn yet another degree—this time the French Doctorate of Letters—before he could receive a long-term post. He showed immense fortitude in these dark times. Through the French defeat and the initial occupation of Paris, he continued to do research and to publish work of formidable quality. Finally Rostovtzeff, who was now at Yale, persuaded the Rockefeller Foundation to bring Bickerman to the United States, just in time. After spells of poorly paid and sometimes miserable teaching at The New School and the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, he landed at Columbia in 1952. There, with unwearied industry, he continued his exploration of the Jewish world that took shape in the Hellenistic period, under the successors of Alexander the Great, and the "strange books of the Bible," as he called them, that were written then.

Bickerman always described himself as an ancient historian—a specialist in the interpretation of Greek and Latin sources and an expert on the history of the ancient pagan world. But he always loved to take what he described as holidays, working on specifically Jewish sources. And when on holiday he always noticed things that others had not. In 1937, he brought out a short and magnificently polemical book called *The God of the Maccabees*. In the second century B.C.E., the Seleucid King Antiochus IV supported the introduction of Greek customs, such as naked athletic practice and the worship of idols, into Israel. By doing so he unleashed a revolution. Antiochus, Bickerman argued, did this not because

The Morning Star

By the author of the classic novel *The Last of the Just*



"It would take no less than a poet with an evolved spirit and keen sense of history to add new insights on the Holocaust. Andre Schwarz-Bart (1928-2006), a Polish Jew whose parents and brothers were victims of the Nazis, was just such a man. His best-selling, widely translated Holocaust novel, ***The Last of the Just***, earned him the Prix Goncourt in 1959. ***The Morning Star***, written in his last days, is perhaps unfinished.... but as a statement and work of art, the work is complete."

–Foreword Reviews

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he himself wanted to change the way Jews lived: that was not normal Seleucid policy. Rather, he accepted an invitation that came to him from the wealthiest and most influential of the Jews themselves, who wanted to make their people cosmopolitan. When the Maccabees resisted him, they were preserving Judaism from an internal, not an external, threat.

Much later, Bickerman turned to the genealogy of religious authority that appears at the start of Pirkei Avot: "Moses received the Torah at Sinai; and handed it down to Joshua; Joshua to the elders; the elders to the prophets; and the prophets handed it to the men of the Great Assembly. They said three things: 'Be careful in judgment; raise up many disciples; and make a fence for the Torah.'" In earlier times, Bickerman argued, Jews had not devoted themselves collectively to study. The priests interpreted the Law. In Greece, by contrast, independent philosophers began very early to see their discussions as central to the discovery of truth. They soon began to draw up genealogies that described how each thinker in turn had learned from and disagreed with his teacher. The Pharisees, Bickerman argued, adapted this Greek view of teaching and came to see themselves as a school in the Greek sense—even as they continued to find the truth in the Law and its interpretations. In this and other cases, central Jewish intellectual practices emerged not from an autonomous community but from one whose leaders knew they lived in a changing world and searched for ways to bring their message up to date.

From the start, Bickerman's interpretation of the Maccabees provoked criticism. He rested his case primarily on late sources, and he could not explain why the Book of Daniel failed to mention the cosmopolitan rebels against the Law whom he conjured up. But no better thesis has yet been devised, and the *God of the Maccabees*—which reportedly gave Salman Schocken more pleasure than any other book he published—continues to stir debate. Bickerman's interpretation of the tradition of the Pharisees has found widespread assent and continues to stimulate new work, as do many of his other arguments about Jewish texts. Very few of Bickerman's colleagues are still living presences in research. He is.

And here is the real mystery. Bickerman knew little Hebrew and Aramaic. He had no direct access to the interpretative traditions or to scholarship in Hebrew. Yet he reinterpreted texts and events with such insight that he transformed the way scholars understood Jewish history. The legendarily critical historians at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem seem to have tried to create a job for him as early as the 1930s. Jewish scholars continued, throughout his life and after, to learn from and respond to his work. It sounds like a story by a Jewish version of James Thurber: Walter Mitty wakes up one day and decides that he will become a great historian of the Jews. He tells his rabbi, who threatens to put him in the booby hatch. In the end, though, the rabbi winds up in the booby hatch, while Walter Mitty bestrides the crumbling sidewalks of Morningside Heights, thrilling readers of the learned journals.

Baumgarten—a modest and self-critical scholar who has thought hard about the gaps in the biographical record—does not venture to explain this mystery in full. He does make clear that Bickerman's interest in Jewish studies derived from a strong, if peculiar Jewish identity. A lovely piece of scholarly detective work enables him to connect Bickerman's view of the Maccabees and their opponents to the world in which he lived. Antiochus and the Hellenizers, Bickerman argued, wanted to root out "everything which smacked of separation, of the 'ghetto'": Sabbath observance, for example, and beards. Ancient Jews were often mocked for refusing to fight on the Sabbath, never for wearing beards. But in nineteenth-century Russia and Germany, modernizers urged Jews to shave. Evidently, contemporary conditions inspired Bickerman to explain why the martyrdom of the Maccabees had been worthwhile. Archival detective work enriches the picture. In later years, Bickerman wrote on the backs of old correspondence. Many of these letters came from Jewish charitable institutions, to which he clearly contributed: further evidence of his commitment to Judaism.

Close reading of Bickerman's works reveals that he chose particular masters from the past scholarly tradition: the Renaissance scholar Joseph Scaliger, for example, and the nineteenth-century philologist and Orthodox Jew Jacob Bernays, who had written Scaliger's biography. Like Bickerman, these men had never pursued a narrow classical agenda. They studied an ancient world populated by Jews as well as Greeks and Romans, and used Jewish texts as deftly as they did pagan ones. Bickerman's loyalty to these models was so great that he deliberately deceived himself about them, ignoring Scaliger's many remarks about the mendacity of Hellenistic Jews in favor of his passionate efforts to interpret Jewish sources in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek and to set them in a context that assumed that Jews and non-Jews interacted. Evidently, Bickerman's carefully constructed self-image virtually forced him to study Jews as well as Greeks and Romans.

Yet part of the mystery remains. Bickerman, it seems, had a kind of occult natural ability to see texts as they were and to recreate the circumstances in which they were created. When Richard Feynman contemplated a problem in physics, he knew, somehow, what to do—even when he had read none of the literature. When Bickerman read a Jewish text, something similar took place. He may have come as a hobbyist, but he stayed as a historian, conquering a whole world of texts and problems in his spare time.

One of the sages of the Second Temple period, Antigonus of Socho, taught: "Do not serve the master on condition of receiving a *peras*." Maimonides and other commentators traditionally explained *peras* as a reward over and above what is earned—which made Antigonus the sponsor of a neat moral lesson. But in 1951 Bickerman argued in the *Harvard Theological Review* that the traditional interpretation was wrong. Antigonus offered Jews who despaired under persecution a harsh morality: They must serve God even if they received absolutely nothing in return, not even a bare living. For all his insistence that he visited both Jewish tradition and the State of Israel when on holiday, Bickerman devoted himself to Jewish history at times when he had almost nothing to live on and no reward to hope for. Somehow, he turned his complex, sometimes arcane scholarship into a distinctive and rewarding form of Jewish life.

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Running the Books
by Avi Steinberg
(Doubleday, 399 pp., $24.95)

Avi Steinberg decided to change his life—and headed to prison. The South Bay Prison in Boston needed a librarian, and Steinberg needed health insurance. Steinberg, a Harvard graduate raised in a middle-class, Orthodox Jewish home, quickly realized the difference between the libraries of his youth and a prison library: books in tatters, graffitied walls, and patrons who do not always cooperate when you say "Shhh." Steinberg's missteps and mishaps produce their intended chuckles. Yet, for all the differences Steinberg found between his prison library and those in which he grew up, it is the similarities that are striking. In prison, books also provide solace, an escape, and information (the legal section is, naturally, the most popular). After two years, Steinberg finds himself enmeshed in his prisoner-patrons' lives, and he writes of them with real feeling. The book's best moments are in its small observations, as when Steinberg discovers the practice of "kiting," leaving notes in books for fellow prisoners to find. When he reveals something of his own background a prisoner tells him how much he respects the Hasidic "gangs" of Brooklyn—"those dudes guarded their neighborhood by any means necessary." Another prisoner agrees, "Yeah! You ever see them dudes rolling, like four in a car, matching beards, man, matching pimpin' hats, music bumpin' . . ."

Gilded Lions and Jeweled Horses: The Synagogue to the Carousel, Jewish Carving Traditions
by Murray Zimiles
(Brandeis University Press, 196 pp., $50.00)

This sumptuous coffee-table book, based on an exhibit at the American Folk Art Museum, begins by reconstructing the lost ritual artworld of Ashkenazic Jewry in Central and Eastern Europe. We are shown gorgeous black and white and color photographs of painted synagogue walls and ceilings; intricate paper-cuts to be hung on a synagogue's Eastern wall; elaborately carved arks to hold the Torahs, and, most of all, adorning those arks, lions, often holding the two tablets of the Ten Commandments. The lions, which also appear on the decorated walls, the mizrachs and even Ashkenazic gravestones are sometimes stylized and often terrifying.

What happened to the largely anonymous artist craftsmen who were responsible for this art when they came to the New World? Murray Zimiles, an artist, and his collaborator Vivian Mann, an art historian, have an interesting, emblematic, even melancholy story to tell. There was some market for their skills in American Ashkenazic synagogues but certainly not a large one, and, in any case, these artisans were now set free in "a society more interested in what they could produce than in what religion they practiced." Some of them went on to produce "the greatest carousel animals the world has seen." The artistic virtuoso of the book is the improbably named woodcarver Marcus Charles Illions (1865/74-1949) whose lions' tails twitch and muscles strain as if they are about to pounce, whether they are on Coney Island or guarding the holy ark at Brooklyn's Anshe Emeth Synagogue.

The Living Fire: New and Selected Poems
by Edward Hirsch
(Knopf, 237 pp., $27.00)

Czeslaw Milosz wrote that "the purpose of poetry is to remind us how difficult it is to remain just one person." The one hundred poems gathered here celebrate the career of an eclectic and masterful poet who has done just that. Reluctant faith and artful praise thread through poems that vary wildly in subject matter: insomnia at four in the morning, the memory of his grandmother's bed, the drama of the Garden of Eden, morning coffee in a town square in Krakow. In several poems, the avowedly secular Hirsch describes a reluctant theology of literature. In "The Reader," an ode to books and libraries, with their "well-thumbed periodicals and crumbling theology texts," Hirsch navigates the space between literary works and "an emptiness which he would not call God." In his haunting "Two Suitcases of Children's Drawings from Terezin, 1942-1944," Hirsch writes: "The wisdom lives in the pencil / and the pencil remembers everything."

Zichronot Aharei Moti (Memories After My Death)
by Yair Lapid
(Keter, 285 pp., 90 NIS)

Yosef "Tommy" Lapid acquired the status of a minor international celebrity after the surprisingly successful performance of his radically anticlerical Shinui Party in the 2003 elections and his subsequent appointment as Israel's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Justice. Non-Israelis who recognize his name are more likely to be familiar with his rather brief appearance on the political stage than with the exploits that preceded it. Retold by his son Yair (in a book that assumes the guise of a posthumous autobiography), Lapid's immensely colorful life story spans two continents and many professions. The boy from a thoroughly acculturated Hungarian Jewish background who narrowly escaped death at the hands of the Nazis morphs in what seems like no time into a major Israeli media personality. He founds a leading women's magazine, writes by far the most popular Hebrew guidebooks to Europe, serves as director-general of Israel's Broadcast Authority, becomes the lightning rod of Israel's most widely viewed political talk-show, and does innumerable other things before launching, in his seventies, his own political career. His roster of close Israeli friends extends from the satirist Ephraim Kishon to Ehud Olmert. But the relationship that best puts his life in perspective is perhaps his friendship with a pal from the Budapest ghetto, Tom Lantos, who went on to become the only Holocaust survivor ever to serve in Congress and chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. "Look where we are now," Lantos says in Hungarian to Lapid, when they meet in the latter's ministerial office in Jerusalem for the first time. And Lapid quietly asks himself (or so his son reports) what would have happened if, after World War II, "he had gotten on my boat and I had gotten on his."

Innovation in Jewish Law: A Case Study of *Chiddush* in *Havineinu*
by Michael J. Broyde
(Urim, 166 pp., $19.95)

The first-century rabbinic sage Rabbi Yose told the following story: "Once I entered the ruins of Jerusalem to pray. Elijah [the prophet] came and guarded the entrance until I finished my prayer. Afterward he said to me . . . you ought to have prayed a shortened prayer." The prayer in question, at least initially, appears to have been *havineinu* ("Grant us, Lord . . ."), a condensation of the *shemoneh esrei*, or eighteen benedictions which are at the center of Jewish prayer. But matters of Jewish law are rarely simple. Michael J. Broyde, a pulpit rabbi, leading halachic decisor in the Modern Orthodox community and law professor at Emory, traces the discussion of this prayer and the circumstances under which it is permissible to substitute it for the *shemoneh esrei*, from moments of extraordinary danger to simple booklessness or outright illiteracy. As Broyde points out, "prayer in an ancient, dangerous, and bookless society is quite different from prayer in a modern, safe, and text-rich place." Nowadays the prayer is so little-used that it doesn't even appear in the *ArtScroll Siddur*. Discussions of change in Jewish law are often driven by big issues, in particular the equal treatment of women. It is precisely Broyde's aim to observe and anatomize the process when the ideological stakes are lower. His case study is a tour de force, though it will leave those large disputes about the relationship between Jewish law and contemporary morals unaltered.



Carousel Lion by Marcus Charles Illions. Coney Island, Brooklyn, New York, 1910. Paint on wood with glass eyes. Mary Youree Trust, Oregon. (Courtesy of Brandeis University Press/University Press of New England.)

Trilling, Babel, and the Rabbis

BY ADAM KIRSCH

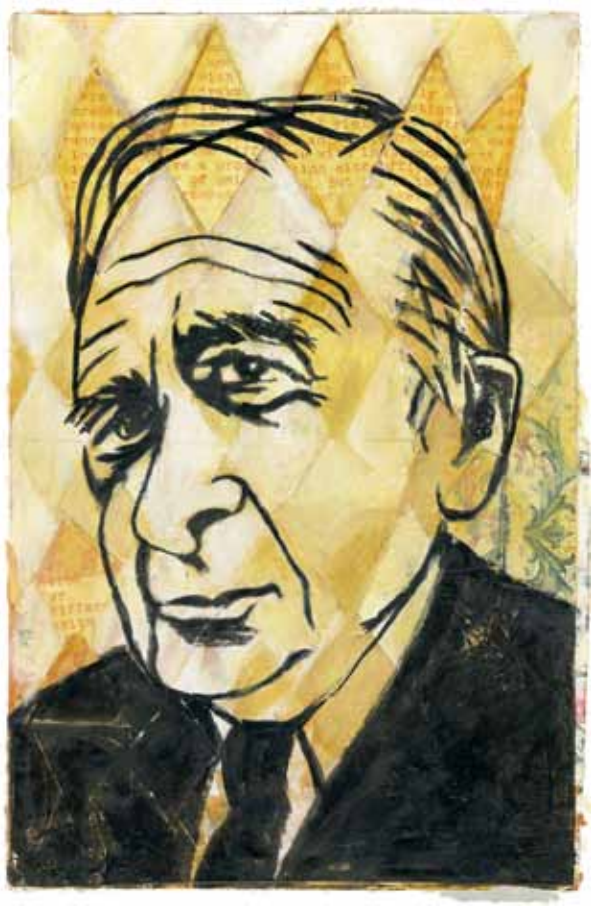
When *The Middle of the Journey* was published in 1947, one of the criticisms made of the novel was that Lionel Trilling had erred in not making his characters Jewish. The intellectual circles in which Trilling moved in the 1930s and 1940s, where he found the originals of the novel's fellow-traveling liberals, were largely made up of first-generation American Jews, like himself. While he taught at Columbia, then still a Protestant bastion, Trilling published his essays in *Partisan Review* and *Commentary*, the house organs of the New York Jewish intellectuals. Yet "not one of the essential characters is, incredibly, a Jew," complained Leslie Fiedler, "though much of the flavor of the Communist experience in America is their flavor."

This may not be entirely correct. There is, in fact, a glancing allusion to Jewishness in the novel, when John Laskell, the character who comes closest to being the author's proxy, is quizzed about his name by his British nurse, Miss Paine. "'It sounds quite English,' Miss Paine said. She spoke it again, as if testing it. 'John Laskell,' she said. 'It sounds like a Lancashire name. Are you English?'. . . No, he was not English. There was a modification he might make—his mother had been born in the first year of his grandparents' long English visit. But that did not make her English, or him." This is Trilling's own history: His grandparents had emigrated from Eastern Europe to England, before moving finally to New York. It seems we are to deduce that, like his creator, Laskell bears a Jewish name that happens to function as Anglo-Saxon camouflage.

The sound of his name helped Trilling early in his career, when he was the first Jew to be hired in the Columbia English Department. As Diana Trilling wryly observed, "Had his name been that of his maternal grandfather, Israel Cohen, it is highly questionable whether the offer would have been made." But the very Englishness of the name sometimes raised suspicions that it must have been adopted as a disguise—a corollary to Trilling's reserved, imposing, professorial demeanor.

In fact, Trilling went through life with the name his father and grandfather bore—unlike many of the New York intellectuals, whose family names really had been changed to sound less Jewish. Yet the suspicion of trying to "pass" does not attach itself to, say, Irving Howe (born Horenstein). For Alfred Kazin, part of Trilling's mystique came from the way he seemed "to be a Jew and yet not Jewish"—Jewish, here, meaning immigrant poverty, of the kind Kazin wrote about in his memoir *A Walker in the City*. "For Trilling I would always be 'too Jewish,' too full of my lower class experience. He would always defend himself from the things he had left behind," Kazin wrote, himself sounding a little defensive. It would be hard to tell from this description that, as Diana Trilling further explained, Trilling's father was a tailor, and he grew up in circumstances nearly as humble as Kazin's.

Yet it is true that Trilling expressed strong resistance to being described as a Jewish writer. In 1944, he was asked to contribute to a symposium in the *Contemporary Jewish Record*, a magazine that was the predecessor to *Commentary*, on the subject of "American Literature and the Younger Generation of American Jews." His short essay, republished in later collections as "Under Forty," comprehensively declines any Jewish identification, in a way that seems strange and even suspicious in our own confidently multicultural age. Trilling may have felt it



Lionel Trilling. (Illustration by Hadley Hooper.)

to be a "point of honor" to acknowledge his Jewishness, to make clear that "I would not, even if I could, deny or escape being Jewish"—a gesture of solidarity that was morally imperative, with "the Jewish situation as bad as it is." But this kind of Jewishness is strictly formal, not substantive, and Trilling insists, "I cannot discover anything in my professional intellectual life which I can specifically trace back to my Jewish birth and rearing. I do not think of myself as a 'Jewish writer.' I do not have it in mind to serve by my writing any Jewish purpose. I should resent it if a critic of my work were to discover in it either faults or virtues which he called Jewish."

This repudiation is all the more striking given that he actually began his career as an editor and writer for a Jewish magazine, *The Menorah Journal*. This publication was edited in the 1920s by Elliot Cohen, who would go on to found *Commentary* in 1945, and it attracted an impressive group of young contributors. Some of Trilling's earliest criticism, collected after his death in *Speaking of Literature and Society*, appeared in this Jewish venue, and dealt directly with Jewish subjects. Yet decades later he remembered the magazine, and the effort at "Jewish self-realization" that it represented, as being "sterile at best."

In this judgment, he is quite faithful to the way he felt and wrote even at the time. In a review, published in *The Menorah Journal* in 1929, of a novel called *The Disinherited*, Trilling was already impatient with the way American Jewish novelists wrote as though being Jewish, and accepting one's Jewishness, is an interesting accomplishment in itself. "As soon as the Jewish writer gets his hero to be a Jew," Trilling complains, "he wraps him up warm in a *talith* and puts him away . . . the Jewish hero is lifted out of life and made to goggle his eyes in functionless ecstasy at the fact that he is a Jew." Trilling believes that the Jewish novel requires "poetry, passion, a little madness. It will support greatness"—as though looking forward to Jewish writers like Bellow and Mailer, whose triumphant "mishigas" or craziness he would later envy.

But American Jewish writing in the 1920s was not what it would become in the 1950s. In the era of Mann, Proust, and Eliot, Trilling was impatient with a literature that boasted Ludwig Lewisohn as its brightest light. On the other hand, he was too intellectually rigorous to believe that he could be nourished by the legacy of Judaism, when he knew almost nothing about it. It is not unusual for secular Jewish literary critics to wonder if their profession is just the latest incarnation of the Judaic intellectual tradition—the Talmudic tradition—with its emphasis on textual explication and intellectual controversy. Harold Rosenberg, one of the leading New York intellectuals, felt legitimated by the notion that "for two thousand years the main energies of Jewish communities . . . have gone into the mass production of intellectuals." But Trilling, precisely because he respected the legacy of Judaism, refused to make a spurious claim on it: "I can have no pride in seeing a long tradition, often great and heroic, reduced to this small status in me," he wrote.

Trilling's intellectual life, he already saw in the 1920s, would lie among the great works of American, English, and European literature; and while this literature could be Christian, post-Christian, or secular, it was virtually never Jewish. This was the discovery he confirmed to himself in an essay written in 1930 but not published until after his death, "The Changing Myth of the Jew." This study of the treatment of Jews and Judaism in English literature, from Chaucer to George Eliot, is not one of Trilling's important works. In fact, it is surprisingly cursory and detached. But then, the verdict of the essay is precisely that English literature has never truly engaged with the Jews, even when it claims to portray them. "The Jew in fiction," Trilling concludes

with some irritation, "was always an abstraction, a symbol, a racial stereotype created by men whose chief concern was obviously much less to tell the truth about the character of the Jew than it was to serve their own political and economic interests and their own emotional needs. In short, the Jew in English fiction is a myth."

Where Trilling differs from most Jewish readers, certainly today, is in denying that the prevalence of this myth has any effect on the way that a Jew encounters English fiction. A myth, Trilling judges severely, is simply an untruth, a non-being; and the only thing to do with a non-being is to ignore it. "What importance has an account of material which is confessedly merely mythological? The importance to the historian, the psychologist, the sociologist, the political thinker is obvious. But to one interested chiefly in literature, the answer is not so plain." Perhaps his failure to publish the essay represents Trilling's final judgment on the whole subject: the question of a specifically Jewish perspective on English literature, and vice versa, is just not worth talking about.

In this refusal of a parochial attitude towards universal questions—of politics as well as aesthetics—Trilling was typical of the Jewish writers associated with *Partisan Review*. Looking back on his early Jewish milieu in the 1970s, he valued it mainly for leading him, indirectly, to a broader, quasi-Marxist perspective. "The discovery, through *The Menorah Journal*, of the Jewish situation had the effect of making society at last available to my imagination. It made America available to my imagination . . . One couldn't, for example, think for very long about Jews without perceiving that one was using the category of social class."

The irony, of course, is that in their very repudiation of Jewishness, the New York intellectuals were making a universalist gesture that appears, in retrospect, as the very insignia of their Jewishness. By 1973, Philip Rieff, in his eccentric and passionate polemic against the spirit of the 1960s called *Fellow Teachers*, could identify Trilling as the archetypal "Jew of culture"—Trilling, who had started out denying that his Jewishness and his culture had anything to do with one another.

But this denial was less absolute than Trilling sometimes made it sound. It is hardly an accident that, in two of his most personal and significant essays, Trilling approached modern literature and the modern spirit from an explicitly Jewish perspective. More important, in both "Isaac Babel" (1955) and "Wordsworth and the Rabbis" (1950), Trilling enlists Jewishness as a central metaphor—perhaps even an explanation—for his divided feelings about the modern, the very division that is the theme and engine of his criticism.

"Isaac Babel," which Trilling wrote as an introduction to an edition of Babel's stories, starts out by remarking on the "disturbing" effect that *Red Cavalry* had on him when he first read it in 1929. Part of the "shock," Trilling explains, came from the stories' literary "energy and boldness"—the wrenched, garish imagery and the immersion in violence that still make Babel so challenging today. Another part had to do with the particular ideological climate of the period, when "one still spoke of the 'Russian experiment.'" To liberal intellectuals like Trilling, Babel's revelation of the cruelty and savagery that built the Soviet state was unnerving.

But the most personal source of disturbance, and the element that Trilling makes the focus of his essay, was Babel's interpretation of Jewishness.

The sound of his name helped Trilling early in his career, when he was the first Jew to be hired in the Columbia English Department.

In the same year that Trilling lodged his complaint about the parochialism of American Jewish fiction, he found in Babel an infinitely more vital and relevant treatment of Jewish identity. *Red Cavalry* tells, in short, fragmentary episodes, the story of Babel's experiences in the Red Army during the Soviet-Polish War of 1920, when he served as a war correspondent attached to the front-line cavalry troops of Marshal Budyonny. Babel's position as a writer and intellectual among violent, often bestial soldiers was only made more uncomfortable by the fact that he was a Jew, while his comrades were Cossacks—traditionally the worst persecutors of the Jews of Russia.

As Trilling writes, "a Jew in a Cossack regiment was more than an anomaly, it was a joke, for between Cossack and Jew there existed not merely hatred but a polar opposition"—a difference not just of ethnicity, but of ideals and values. As Trilling summarizes it, "The Jew conceived his own ideal character to consist in his being intellectual, pacific, humane. The Cossack was physical, violent, without mind or manners." Of course, this summary of the Jewish character by no means accounts for the full variety of Jewish life in Eastern Europe, or even in Babel's own fiction. His "Odessa Stories" show that the same contrast between violence and intellect could just as well exist within the Jewish community. The heroes of those grotesque comic tales are Jewish gangsters, whose huge appetites and casual cruelty rival those of the Cossacks in *Red Cavalry*.

But this Jewish myth—unlike the malign Jewish myths he encountered in English literature—seemed to Trilling a valuable one, because it expressed something of his own temperament and aspirations. He writes poetically about Babel's face, as seen in a snapshot: "the face is very long and thin, charged with emotion and internality; bitter, intense, very sensitive, touched with humor, full of consciousness and contradiction. It is 'typically' an intellectual's face, a scholar's face, and it has great charm. I should not want to speak of it as a Jewish face, but it is a kind of face which many Jews used to aspire to have, or hoped their sons would have."

What does it mean for this lovingly described Jewish ideal, then, that Babel in his writing seems so often to ridicule and abase precisely those qualities in himself that Trilling admires? *Red Cavalry* is constantly observing the contrast between the tenderheartedness of Lyutov, Babel's narrator and alter ego, and the coarse savagery of the troops with whom he rides. The Cossacks in these stories are usually to be

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found feuding over horses, raping women, and casually massacring civilians—especially Jews. In the story "Zamosc," a fellow-soldier, not knowing that he is talking to a Jew, tells Lyutov: "The Jew is guilty before all men . . . There will be very few of them left when the war is over."

But even as he is depicting scenes that seem designed to make the reader fear and loathe the Cossacks, Babel himself seems to envy them, and to despise the very ethical scruples that prevent him from emulating them. His most famous story, "My First Goose," shows him winning the respect of the soldiers—who at first despise him because of his Jewish-intellectual glasses—by brutally killing an old peasant woman's goose. In "Argamak," he is given a spirited horse that has been confiscated from a Cossack officer, and shows himself unequal to riding it: "I wore out his back. It became covered in sores. Metallic flies fed on those sores. Hoops of coagulated black blood girdled the horse's belly." Argamak's wounds are the stigmata of the narrator's unmanliness. At the end of the story, this physical ineptitude is shown to have a moral dimension as well, when the narrator complains that it is unfair for Argamak's old owner to consider him a personal enemy. After all, he didn't ask for the Cossack's horse to be taken away. "How am I to blame?" he asks the squadron commander. This whine provokes a famous rebuke, which Trilling quotes: "I understand you completely . . . Your aim is to live without making enemies . . . Everything you do is aimed that way—so you won't have any enemies."

From the perspective Trilling describes as ideally Jewish, the desire to have no enemies is laudable, since it means wanting to live in peace and commit no offenses. From the Cossack perspective, it is contemptible: Everyone has enemies, and the only safe and honorable way to respond to them is to fight them. The imperative of self-help and martial readiness, in fact, has something in common with the Zionist message, which was spreading through Eastern Europe during the years of Babel's youth—especially in Odessa, the cosmopolitan Russian city where he was born in 1894. The Hebrew poet Chaim Nachman Bialik was living in Odessa when he wrote his great poem "In the City of Slaughter," which bitterly condemned Jewish men for failing to fight back against Russian pogroms.

Babel delivered a similar message in "First Love," an ostensibly autobiographical story in which the young narrator watches his father begging a Cossack officer for protection against an anti-Semitic riot. Trilling saw this episode as the key to Babel's desire to emulate, rather than submit to, Cossack violence: "We might put it that Babel rode with a Cossack regiment because, when he was nine years old, he had seen his father kneeling before a Cossack captain." But it is not simply physical force, Trilling insists, that Babel finds admirable in the Cossack ethos. It is, rather, the quality of "noble savagery" that Tolstoy had found in them, their "primitive energy, passion, and virtue." If the Jew was the man of the mind and the book, the Cossack was "the man of the body—and of the horse, the man who moved with speed and grace." At moments, as Trilling shows, Babel sounds enraptured with the sheer height and strength and good looks of the soldiers, especially as contrasted with the slight, hunched, timid Jews he is constantly encountering.

Yet if *Red Cavalry* simply endorsed the Cossack and condemned the Jew, it would hardly possess what Trilling called the "intensity, irony, and ambiguousness" that made it so disturbing. Babel may seem to want to emulate the Cossack, yet it is unmistakable that, in his campaign through Poland, he is constantly drawn to the Jews. In "The Rebbe," he has Sabbath dinner at the court of a Hasidic rabbi in Zhitomir; in "The Cemetery in Kozin," he records the epitaphs for dead sages: "Wolf, son of Elijah, prince abducted from the Torah in his nineteenth spring." These two moments converge in "The Rebbe's Son," where the writer encounters Ilya, the son of the Zhitomir Rebbe, who himself has been abducted from the Torah—in his case, because he has become a Communist and joined the Red Army. When Ilya dies, his trunk is made a symbol of the irreconcilability of Jew and Cossack, Communist and Hasid: "Portraits of Lenin and Maimonides lay side by side. Lenin's nodulous skull and the tarnished silk of the portraits of Maimonides . . . in the margins of communist leaflets swarmed crooked lines of Ancient Hebrew verse."

Trilling was too intellectually rigorous to believe that he could be nourished by the legacy of Judaism, when he knew almost nothing about it.

To Trilling, it is exactly Babel's refusal to grant victory to one of his warring ideals that makes him a great writer: "the opposition of these two images made his art." More specifically, it is what made him a great modernist writer. When he first read Babel, Trilling recalls, he was "afraid of the literature of modern Europe, because I was scared of its terrible intensities, and ironies, and ambiguities." To appreciate modernism, it is necessary to feel the attraction of violence as well as peace, of transgression as well as order. One of the major purposes of Trilling's criticism, in fact, is to keep the antinomian potential of modern literature alive in the reader's consciousness—to combat what he calls "the museum knowingness about art . . . our consumer's pride in buying only the very best spiritual commodities." To respond knowingly to the horror and confusion in *Red Cavalry* is to avoid genuinely encountering it, while the "moments when we lack the courage to confront, or the strength to endure, some particular work of art" may be those in which we encounter it most authentically.

In a culture that takes literary transgression for granted, the greatest shock may come from literature that refuses to transgress. That is Trilling's premise in "Wordsworth and the Rabbis," his other most explicitly Jewish essay. Written for the centenary of Wordsworth's death, the essay tries to identify the quality in the poet that makes him "unacceptable to the modern world," to find out "why . . . he is often thought to be rather absurd and even a little despicable." This technique, in which his contemporaries' failure to respond to a classic writer is made to serve as a diagnosis of the age, is one of Trilling's most fruitful. It is also one of the important uses of his famous "we": When Trilling asks why "we" no longer appreciate Wordsworth, he is both acknowledging his part in that antipathy, and inviting the reader to admit his or her own.

What is uncharacteristic in this essay is the way Trilling pivots, almost immediately, from Wordsworth's poetry to another text, which has no apparent relation to it: the Pirke Aboth (to use Trilling's transliteration; it is often spelled Pirkei Avot), usually rendered in English as the "Ethics of the Fathers." This is, as Trilling describes it, "a collection of maxims and *pensées*" from the rabbinic sages of the first centuries C.E. It is the only traditional Jewish text that Trilling writes about in the whole body of his work, and he is conscious enough of the anomaly to offer some explanation of how he became acquainted with it. As a boy, he recalls, "when I was supposed to be reading my prayers—very long, and in the Hebrew language, which I never mastered—I spent the required time and made it seem that I was doing my duty by reading the English translation of the Pirke Aboth . . . included in the prayerbook. It was more attractive to me than psalms, meditations, and supplications; it seemed more humane, and the Fathers had a curious substantiality."

Once again, Trilling is scrupulous in setting out the limits of his claim to Jewishness. He even manages to make his knowledge of the Pirke Aboth evidence of his overall failure to learn about Judaism. And the way Trilling approaches this work shows something important about his writerly method. If he were a literary or intellectual historian, he could not write about Pirke Aboth without describing the background to its composition—above all, the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E., which turned Judaism from a national and priestly religion into a diasporic and rabbinical one. This context, in which the rabbis tried to sustain Judaism in the face of defeat and exile, helps to explain the feature of the work that most intrigues Trilling—its unworldliness, its principled lack of interest in power.

Trilling only touches on this history in "Wordsworth and the Rabbis"; but then, if he were a more conventional literary historian, he would never have made this unlikely conjunction in the first place. He is, in fact, not entirely at ease with his justification for the decision to read Wordsworth through the lens of Pirke Aboth, which is that "the quality in Wordsworth that now makes him unacceptable is a Judaic quality." But this assertion, unintelligible as it might be in objective terms, becomes meaningful when it is read subjectively, as an expression of Trilling's own experience as a reader. Really, the essay is an attempt to identify a certain quality of sensibility that Trilling finds in both Wordsworth and the Rabbis, a sensibility whose common denominator is not Judaism but Trilling himself. As always in his criticism, the logic of the essay is that of the movements of Trilling's own mind, as it resists and embraces a text.

In this case, the quality that Trilling calls "Judaic" is closely related to the one that he called Jewish in the Babel essay, and once again he defines it by contrast. "We find in the tractate no implication of moral struggle. We find the energy of assiduity but not the energy of resistance." Above all, he writes, "there is no mention in the Aboth of courage or

heroism . . . There is not a word to suggest that the life of virtue and religious devotion requires the heroic quality." The incompatibility of the Jewish and the heroic—which also meant, to Trilling, the "direct, immediate, fierce"—was what Babel deplored. Trilling sympathizes with him, and in "Wordsworth and the Rabbis," too, he admits to finding the Rabbis' lack of interest in "moral struggle" discomfiting: "as much as anything in my boyhood experience of the Aboth it was this that fascinated me. It also repelled me."

The incompatibility of the Jewish and the heroic—which also meant, to Trilling, the "direct, immediate, fierce"—was what Babel deplored.

It is this mixed reaction that makes Trilling think of the Aboth in conjunction with Wordsworth, whose poetry also makes "us" uncomfortable. The reason, he suggests, is that both propose a life where piety—with all its implications of submission, tradition, quietness, and reverence—is the supreme virtue. To Wordsworth, Nature is beneficent and all-sufficient, and a being in communion with Nature has no need of heroic efforts: "the soul / Seeks for no trophies, struggles for no spoils / That may attest her prowess, blest in thoughts / That are their own perfection and reward, / Strong in herself and in beatitude," Trilling quotes from "The Prelude."

It may seem perverse for Trilling to insist on a resemblance between this quasi-pantheism and the faith of the Rabbis, which is aggressively uninterested in nature. In chapter three of Pirke Aboth, Rabbi Yaakov is quoted as saying: "One who walks along a road and studies, and interrupts his studying to say, 'How beautiful is this tree!' 'How beautiful is this ploughed field!'—the Torah considers it as if he had forfeited his life." How to reconcile this with the poet who wrote, "One impulse from a vernal wood / May teach you more of man, / Of moral evil and of good, / Than all the sages can"?

What they have in common, Trilling suggests, is the sensibility Wordsworth captured in the phrase "wise passiveness." Such passiveness is not resignation or apathy, but rather a faith that the world has been ordered to man's good, so that we do not have to conquer our place in it, but simply accept the place we have been given. As Trilling puts it, "different as the immediately present objects were in each case, Torah for the Rabbis, Nature for Wordsworth, there existed for the Rabbis and for Wordsworth a great object, which is from God and may be said to represent Him as a sort of surrogate."

What breathes in the Aboth is the Rabbis' absolute certainty that a life devoted to Torah is the best life. "Exile yourself to a place of Torah," advises one of them, "do not say that it will come after you." The rabbis are aware that the life of study has its own pitfalls, and they warn against intellectual vanity, quarrelsomeness, and the temptation to elevate theory over practice. But they have no doubt that no worldly activity can rival the study of the Law, and they warn against every kind of distraction: "one who speaks excessively brings on sin"; "one who excessively converses with a woman [a euphemism for sex] causes evil to himself, neglects the study of Torah, and in the end inherits purgatory"; "desire not the table of kings, for your table is greater than theirs, and your crown is greater than theirs." The whole ethos of Pirke Aboth is encapsulated in its very first line, which advises: "Be careful in judgment; raise up many disciples; and make a fence around the Torah."

It is this fencing off of so much of life that both repels and fascinates Trilling, since it seems to rule out the aggression and ambition from which modern literature is made. What would that literature be without its interest in sex, power, and self-expression? Don't the great modern novelists and poets celebrate the will, and use art to assert their own wills? "The predilection for the powerful, the fierce, the assertive, the personally militant is very strong in our culture," Trilling remarks, citing everyone from Yeats and Lawrence to Ayn Rand ("that curious underground work *The Fountainhead*").

Only by turning away from this literature, which informs modern assumptions so deeply, is it possible to see that an alternative exists. This is what he calls the "sentiment of Being," the feeling that the world does not have to be remade or struggled for, because it already is, and is good. Happiness is a matter not of becoming, but of being; not of creating, but of studying, whether we study "sermons in stones" or pages of the Talmud. Once again, it is clear, Trilling has made Jewishness the name of a way of being that is "pacific and humane," and that stands opposed to a seemingly more attractive way that is "fierce" and "militant." Only now it is not the Cossack who represents that seductive vitalism, but modern literature itself—the very modernism that counts Babel as one of its greatest artists, and Trilling as one of its greatest expositors. To be Jewish, for Trilling, is to stand both inside and outside the modern, to embrace its liberations and mourn its casualties. Or perhaps—since Trilling warned against finding in his work any specifically Jewish "faults or virtues"—to stand inside and outside the modern was Trilling's own destiny and project as a writer; and everything in his life, including his identity as a Jew, was made to serve it.

Adam Kirsch is a senior editor at The New Republic *and a columnist for* Tablet Magazine. *This essay is drawn from his forthcoming book,* Why Trilling Matters *(Yale University Press).*

Proverbs 8:22-31

A New Translation by Robert Alter

from

The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes: A Translation with Commentary (Norton)

The Lord created me at the outset of His way,
the very first of His works of old.
In remote eons I was shaped,
at the start of the first things of earth.
When there were no deeps I was spawned,
when there were no wellsprings, water sources.
Before mountains were anchored down,
before hills I was spawned.
He had yet not made earth and open land,
and the world's first clods of soil.
When He founded the heavens, I was there,
when He traced a circle on the face of the deep,
when He propped up the skies above,
when He powered the springs of the deep,
when He set to the sea its limit,
that the waters not flout His command,
when He strengthened the earth's foundations.
And I was by Him, an intimate,
I was His delight day after day,
playing before Him at all times,
playing in the world, His earth,
and my delight with humankind.

A Measure of Beauty

BY AZZAN YADIN-ISRAEL

6
by Hadag Nahash
Hatav Hashmini, 49 min., 69 NIS

Founded in Jerusalem in 1996, Hadag Nahash is one of the most influential and successful hip-hop bands in Israel. The band's name literally means fish-snake but is a spoonerism for *nahag hadash* ("new driver"), the wording of a sticker that cars in Israel sport, ostensibly to elicit more courtesy and patience from fellow drivers—though empirical observation suggests this is not always the result. Hadag Nahash is, in many ways, an utterly typical hip-hop band. It has self-aggrandizing lyrics ("Trumpeldor"); hymns in praise of its hometown ("Jerusalem"); critiques of political apathy and vapid commercialism ("Sod HaHatzlaha"); and boys-will-be-boys anthems ("California"). But Hadag Nahash is in fact one of the most interesting and literate pop bands in Israel, or anywhere else for that matter. In one sense this is well known. After all, its lead singer and lyricist Shaanan Streett recorded a stunning duet of a poem by the fourteenth-century philosopher-poet Immanuel of Rome with Chava Alberstein, and the band's biggest hit may be "Shirat ha-Sticker" (The Sticker Song), a witty pastiche of bumper-sticker slogans, written by the distinguished novelist David Grossman.

But Hadag Nahash is most remarkable for its vigorous and self-aware use of the Hebrew literary canon in its songs. These songs often highlight the tension inherent in a language whose recent secularization has left its more elevated and often religiously infused strata relatively close to the surface. So, for instance, one of the band's political songs is introduced by the words *ani ma'amin* ("I believe"), which traditionally introduces the religious credo "I believe with a perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah . . ." Unlike the traditional declaration of faith, Hadag Nahash's credo does not focus on a future time ("even though he may tarry, still I believe") or invoke a transcendent realm. Instead, it combines political reform ("I believe that companies that have lost fistfuls of public funds should not be allowed to purchase air time until they can show they've turned a profit") with prophetic proclamations ("I believe . . . that if we don't come to our senses . . . it's doubtful we'll be able to celebrate another sixty years"), though the band harbors no illusions about its efficacy, as the refrain angrily laments (I'm paraphrasing here): "But this won't get anyone to move their asses." The result is a startling juxtaposition of high and low.

Hadag Nahash is most remarkable for its vigorous and self-aware use of the Hebrew literary canon in its songs.

Often Hadag Nahash is subtler. In the Hebrew "LeHithalek Bair" (Share the City), from *Be'ezrat Ha-Jam* (another pun: "With the Help of the Jam" rather than Hashem, that is, God), the band offers a utopian vision of Jews and Arabs sharing Jerusalem. The song lovingly catalogs life in Israel's capital, exhorting its listeners to share in its bounty: "let's share the unique smell of the warm air, books, drawings, and artists searching for an ancient flavor" along with "the August heatwaves, the parking problems, the public housing, and the graveyards." Streett, who sings the song, then asks that we share "the nine portions (*kabin*) and the neighborhood fees." The archaic phrase "nine *kabin*" is taken from a famous saying in the Babylonian Talmud, "Ten portions (*kabin*) of beauty descended onto the world; Jerusalem took nine, and one was allotted to the rest of the world" (Kiddushin, 49b). A little later, Streett again juxtaposes two realms with a stunning image of the tran-

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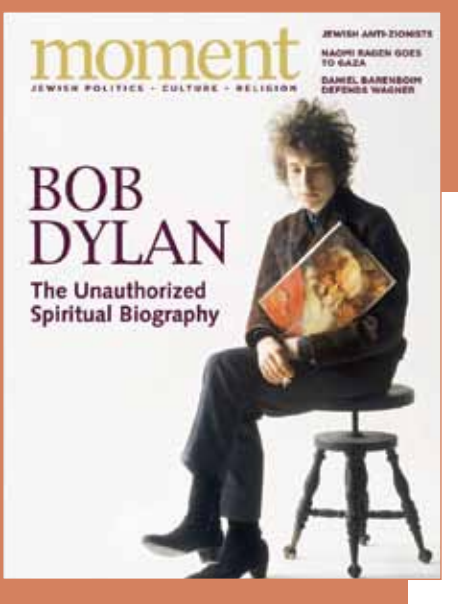

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scendent infusing the immanent world: "Let's share our yearly day of snowfall, the earthly manifestation of the wings of the *Shekhina*." Here, the traditional imagery of the (feminine) presence of God spreading her protective wings over Israel is reimagined as the snow that occasionally graces the city.

At other times, the elevated register inserted into a song is more ironic. In "Shir Nehama" from their latest album, *6*, the refrain employs two ancient verbs to lament *sovevuni bi-shkalim haleituni bi-kzavim* ("surround me with shekels, feed me lies"). The verb *sovevuni* "surround me" harks back to the poetic *sevavuni* in the Bible, which generally appears in negative contexts: "ropes of Sheol *encircled me*; snares of Death confronted me" (Psalm 18:6); "they *encircle me* with words of hate; they attack me without cause" (Psalm 109:3). The phrase, then, suggests that the author has been beset by shekels. But the modern verb differs from the biblical form in having a causative force that appears in the Hebrew slang *le-sovev mishehu*, "to 'spin' someone." This modern, Israeli sense yields a different but complementary reading: "they confused me with their shekels."

The second ancient verb in the lyric is *haleituni*, "feed me." The root is a *hapax legomenon*: It appears only once in the Bible, in the tale of Esau selling his birthright to Jacob. Esau, the man of the field, returns famished from the (apparently unsuccessful) hunt, and demands some of the stew that Jacob has prepared: "*Feed me* some of that red stuff *to gulp down*" (Genesis 25:30) he says. Though *hapax legomena* are hard to define, it is clear that Esau is making a bad deal with his brother. By using precisely this word to assert that they have been "fed lies," Hadag Nahash uses biblical Hebrew to suggest that they have been cheated by someone they should have been able to trust.

Hadag Nahash also enthusiastically and often humorously takes on the nascent Israeli canon. In "Gabby ve-Debby," Hadag Nahash meets two figures from a 1970s show (produced by the educational television authority) that taught Israeli schoolchildren intermediate English. In the series, Gabby and Debby were transported to different parts of the world using a magic stick and a map, and in the same spirit, they offer to take the song's narrator (Streett) anywhere in the world. After declining his first request (a Parisian bordello), the three take a wild, revisionist trip to Basel, where they meet Theodor Herzl, who is leaning on his hotel balcony, an iconic image from the First Zionist Congress of 1897. But rather than show deference to the father of Zionism, Streett bombards Herzl with a litany of complaints:

> "I told him about the traffic fatalities,
> And I told him about the handicapped striking,
> And I told him about a quarter-million
> unemployed,
> And I told him about the corrupt politicians . . ."

Alas, Herzl has no answer to the social and political ills that plague his ideological offspring. Instead, he places a tab of ecstasy on the singer's tongue and says: "If you take it (*im tikchu*), it is no legend," a parody of what is likely the most famous Zionist slogan, "If you will it (*im tirtzu*), it is no legend." The trip eventually ends with Streett asking to go "anywhere but" twenty-first-century Jerusalem, which is exactly where he ends up.

Though it is tempting to characterize this as an anti-Zionist song, it would be wrong to do so. The narrator wants to reform Israel, not break with it. After all, Streett returns home and the song ends with him there. As the infectious refrain declares over and over, *Hadag nahash osim hip hop tzioni* ("Hadag Nahash create Zionist hip hop"). Though this is, in part, a riposte to the right-wing Israeli rapper Subliminal, I tend to take the members of Hadag Nahash at their word, and understand them to be promoting a form of Zionism that recognizes the current shortcomings of Israeli society and is not afraid to criticize political leaders who pretend otherwise; one that admits the "grim Israeli reality" and the pull of life elsewhere, but returns home nonetheless.

Sometimes Hadag Nahash engages the tradition without irony or learned allusions. Its cover of "Shabehi Yerushalaim" on the last track of *Be'ezrat Ha-Jam* is a beautiful example of this. The lyrics consist of verses twelve and thirteen from Psalm 147: "O Jerusalem, glorify the Lord; praise your God, O Zion! For He made the bars of your gates strong and blessed your children within you." The melody was composed by Avihu Medina in the mid-'70s, but sat for a decade among his unfinished projects. It was rediscovered in 1985, and began to be played at weddings and other celebrations, until finally it became a huge hit, particularly in Orthodox and National Religious Party circles.

Hadag Nahash's cover of the song is straightforward—neither the melody nor the lyrics are altered, and precisely therein lies the cultural brilliance of the song. It marks the band as unapologetically *yerushalmit*, Jerusalemite, a bold statement given Tel Aviv's unquestioned pop-cultural hegemony. Of the nine *kabin* of beauty that descended on Jerusalem, Hadag Nahash, improbably, took at least one.



Hadag Nahash, from left: Shlomi Alon, Guy Margalit, Sha'anan Streett, Moshe Asraf, Yaya Cohen Aharonov, Dudush Klemense. (Photo by Amit Israeli.)

Azzan Yadin-Israel is an associate professor of Rabbinic Literature at Rutgers University. His primary scholarly focus is on early rabbinic legal interpretation. He is working on a book-length study of Rabbi Akiva.

Temporary Measures: Sukkah City

BY SHARI SAIMAN

The history of architecture has its origins in religious structures. Temples and places of worship were among the first great buildings. In contrast, modern architecture has tended to focus on minimal dwellings and innovations of form. Meanwhile, today's working architects are often occupied with the design of pre-fabricated dwellings. The sukkah, a sacred space that is nonetheless minimal, temporary, and often built from a kit, would seem a natural subject for serious architectural thought. But that has rarely been the case. So Joshua Foer and Roger Bennett's idea to create an architectural competition that challenged designers to create sukkot was a bold and brilliant move that makes the belated introduction between the two.

The project, which was underwritten by Project Reboot, an organization dedicated to exploring and reinvigorating Jewish ritual, is called "Sukkah City" and was announced this spring. The designs of twelve finalists were chosen in August, by an extraordinary panel of architects, graphic designers, and critics, including Thom Mayne of Morphosis Architects, and Maira Kalman and Paul Goldberger of *The New York Times*. The sukkot were displayed in Union Square before the holiday.

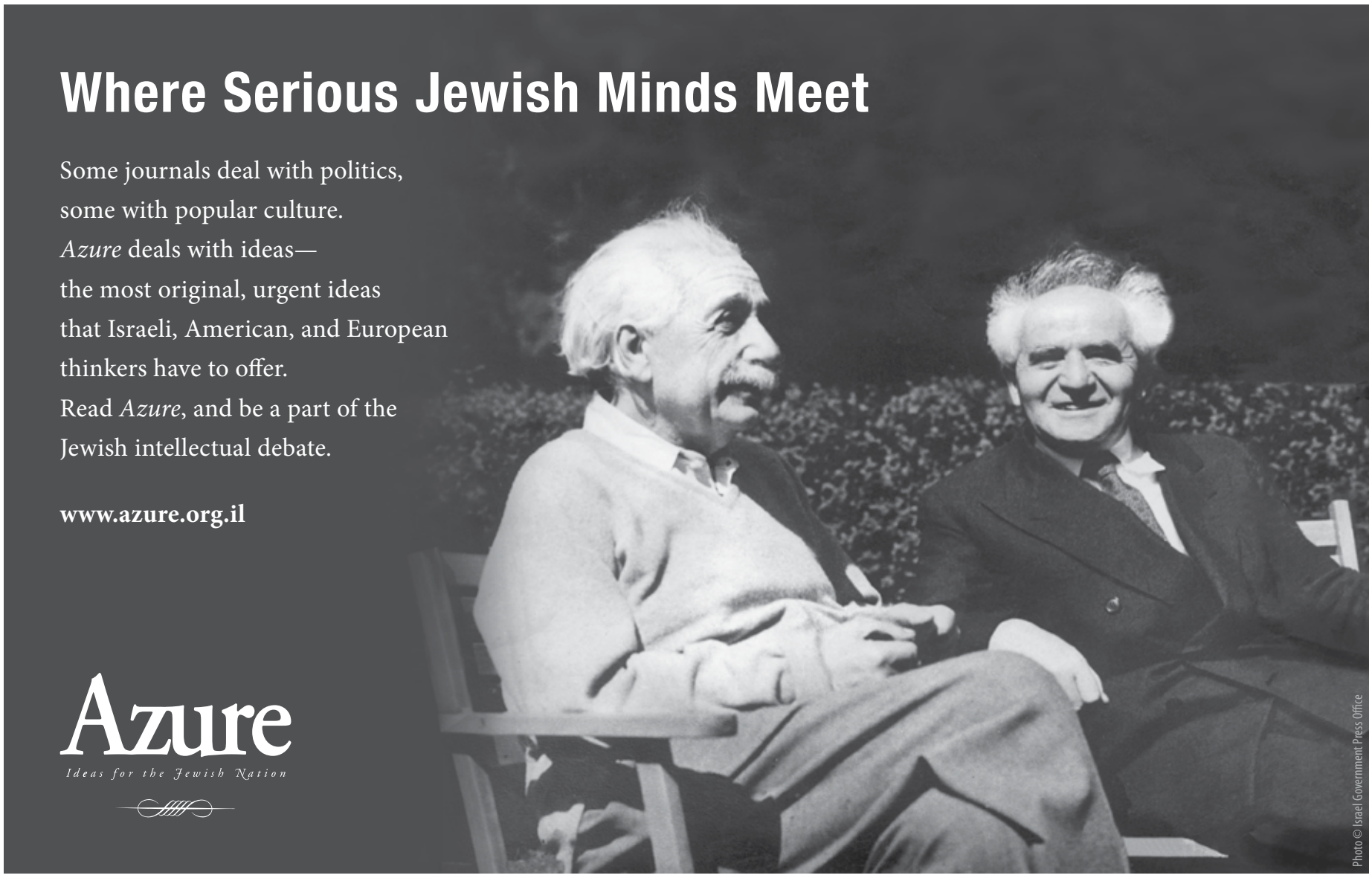
The competition poster—itself an elegant piece of design work—offered thirty-two traditional rabbinic rules, or halakhot, for building the sukkah, from its minimal dimensions requirements (in terms of *amot* or handbreadths) to materials and more intriguing possibilities for where a sukkah can be built (on the back of a camel, for example, or on a boat). The thirty-third rule was from the New York City building code, which stipulates that any building larger than 8' x 19' is not considered temporary, regardless of rabbinic tradition, which envisions sukkot of any size.

The poster gave a hint of the ritual logic and metaphysics of the holiday: "the sukkah must have a roof made of *skhakh*: the leaves and/or branches of a tree or plant; at night one must be able to see the stars from within the sukkah, through the roof," but did not elaborate much beyond such cryptic formulations. The architects were told that "the sukkah exists as an ancient archetype . . . recalling the homeless exodus through the desert and festival of harvest and homecoming: a place to eat, sleep, study, think, feel and be," and that "the sukkah exists as a parametric network of design constraints and possibilities: of musts and mays and maybes," and little else.

The field for such a competition is comprised of the kind of elite architects who might compete in the MoMA-P.S.1 Young Architects Program competition, where entrants are challenged to create an experimental and temporary structure for the museum's courtyard for the summer. Few of the sukkah-designers seem to have had a deep knowledge of the holiday or its vernacular architecture, beyond what was conveyed on the poster. Bennett and Foer seem to have intended this, challenging the Jewish community to think about what a sukkah might be as much as they were challenging the designers to think through the possibilities of these "radically temporary structures." That description is the real hook for the design culture, which is uncomfortable around the language and emotions of religion but charmed by the impermanent and ephemeral.

The first biblical description of the sukkah is brief:

> Live in sukkot for seven days, so your descendants will remember that I [the Lord] had



the Israelites live in wilderness shelters when I brought them out of Egypt
(Leviticus 23: 42-43).

The Rabbis of the Talmud debate whether Scripture's sukkah is a physical entity or a metaphor for God's protective Clouds of Glory, but the structure we know of today takes on its built form in Rabbinic literature. In its classic dialectical style, the Talmud debates the sukkah's minimum requirements in terms of both surface and measurement. But it also engages in thought-experiments: Must a sukkah be stationary? Can the wall of an existing building count as one of its three required walls? What about an animal, say an elephant? Can it have two stories? And so on. Foer describes this as "the oldest ongoing conversation about architecture in the world." From the first discussions in the Talmud to the fiberglass panels in a suburban backyard, the sukkah's form has evolved over time. But Foer is engaging in a bit of hyperbole here. Truly imaginative design discussion seems to have stopped with the Talmud. Most Jews observing this ritual today resort to the familiar metal pole frame and canvas walls, or prefabricated panels. This is often topped off with some kind of manufactured bamboo mat. Unlike our rabbinic forebears, we have ceased to explore the sukkah's potential form, which is precisely what makes Sukkah City such an intriguing project.



"Sukkah of the Signs" by Virgina San Fratello and Ronald Rael. (Photo by William Meyers.)





From left: "Star Cocoon" by Volkan Alkanoglu; "The Gathering" by Dale Suttle, So Sugita, and Ginna Nguyen. (Photos by William Meyers.)

Architects do not always take their clients' dictates as seriously as they do those of their own imagination, and at first glance some of the designs appear less than kosher. However, Foer and Bennett engaged Dani Passow, an advanced rabbinical student at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah as well as a Cooper Union-trained engineer, as a halakhic consultant. Passow serves as the expert on the sukkah's peculiar building codes, researching the rabbinic responsa literature while helping the architects to tweak their designs so that they conform to halakha. In recent weeks, his entire yeshiva has become engrossed in the process, provoked into a return to the kind of creative architectural thinking presented in the discussions of the Talmud.

Foer and Bennett's insistence that each design abide by halakha makes "Sukkah City" a uniquely Jewish project and not just an architectural competition with a yarmulke. The simultaneous demand for sophistication on the halakhic end and the design end is true *hiddur mitzvah*, "glorification of the mitzvah." The project brings not just cool and cachet but real depth and inquiry to the ancient practice of sukkah-building, in such a modern and public forum.

The best of Sukkah City's designs achieve the shock of the familiar: the halakha dressed in new clothes but still halakhic. The orb-like form of a "Star Cocoon" by Volkan Alkanoglu emphasizes the mandate that the sukkah's *skhakh* not obstruct a view of the stars. Its complex skin, composed of primary and secondary frames of bamboo with an exterior covering of rattan, makes a creative attempt at layering wall and roof elements. Its curvilinear shape also does not privilege any particular positioning; there are many ways to orient this sukkah and still be underneath its *skhakh*. The designer's entry rendering (not shown) demonstrates how it may offer shade from the sun during the day, while in the night it can be more open to a view of the stars.

One entry entitled "The Gathering" by Dale Suttle, So Sugita, and Ginna Nguyen has the energy and form of a windswept structure, offering inti-

mate enclosure in the middle of a busy urban space. Its design also recalls the themes of harvest and gathering associated with the holiday.

"Sukkah of the Signs" by Virginia San Fratello and Ronald Rael, a particularly poignant design that is more political statement than architecture, shows a dwelling made of the petitionary cardboard signs often held by homeless people seeking food or money. This design provokes the viewer by recalling the customary hospitality connected with the sukkah. It is the only design to address its context directly: Union Square may now be a neighborhood of upscale residences and retail venues, but it was home to the homeless and addicts in the late '70s and '80s. The design recalls the cardboard box, New York's classic temporary shelter, and is a sad reminder of the temporary dwellings and dwellers who are not a short-term installation in Union Square but a permanent fixture of the city. The winning design, a grassy spherical dwelling called "Fractured Bubble" by Henry Grosman and Babak Bryan, blurs the distinction between floor and roof (but still keeps them officially separate) and considers whether rectilinear geometry is necessary for a kosher sukkah.

The competition entries are visually impressive, and the most successful grasp and highlight some important aspect of the holiday. Others fail to understand that the sukkah, like all other aspects of Jewish observance, is not so much about the "laws" but about their lived interpretation. The halakhot were presented to the registrants as any other constraint in a construction project. But, to take just one instance, the Talmud's minimum requirement of "two walls and part of a third" is to be taken more than just literally. It is actually a consideration of what offers shelter, a visceral sense of comfort and protection, to the individual. Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the first Lubavitcher Rebbe, compares this to the Song of Songs description of a hug: "His left arm lay under my head and His right arm embraces me" (8:3).

Though clearly designed as temporary structures, some of the designs are almost too simplistic and spare. Others are so outlandish in their posturing forms that they read as extroverted gestures rather than introverted dwellings. The action of the sukkah is on the inside. Such designs lack Schneur Zalman's sense of embrace, as well as the humility encoded in the rabbinic concept of a temporary dwelling. A pile of spiked ringed structures may meet the legal requirements, but its imbalanced and aggressive form defeats the spirit of the sukkah.

For the architect, enamored of themes like deconstruction, rupture, and disjunction, the ideas of temporality and transience are alluring because they relate to our fragmented cultural moment. But the sukkah dweller, sitting beneath the *skhakh*, contemplates how, for only a few days, we are displaced from our homes and rooted in the ground, enclosed from around but open to the infinite expanse of the sky. This is not a fractured experience but an ennobling one. In the chill of early autumn, often huddled in our coats eating dinner beneath the night sky, a deep sense of peace and enclosure sets in that is almost impossible to articulate. Inhabiting the sukkah animates it more than any gesture of design can. Nonetheless, the best designs in Sukkah City return us to just this sense of fragility, intimacy, and awe.

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When Eve Ate the Etrog

A Passage from Tsena-Urena

BY MORRIS M. FAIERSTEIN

The commandment to recite the blessing over the lulav and the etrog on Sukkot can only be fulfilled with a fully intact fruit. If the etrog's stem is broken off or missing, it is unfit for ritual use. But as soon as the holiday is over, the etrog is superfluous. It was once the custom for a pregnant woman to bite off the tip of the etrog after services on Hoshanah Rabbah. This strange action is an outgrowth of an early modern Ashkenazic tradition about the pangs of childbirth. The earliest known source for both the tradition and the custom is in the popular Tsena-Urena, *the famous Yiddish biblical commentary by Jacob ben Isaac Ashkenazi of Janov, which was especially popular among women, and as some title pages had it, "men who are like women," in that they read Yiddish instead of Hebrew. The brief passage below includes the text of a Yiddish prayer, or tkhine, that the pregnant woman is instructed to recite based on Bahya ben Asher's commentary to Genesis 3:6. Strikingly, it also describes the forbidden fruit that Adam and Eve ate as an apple, a medieval Christian notion with no source in rabbinic interpretation.*

Rather than being a Yiddish translation of the Pentateuch, as is commonly assumed, Tsena-Urena *is a commentary on the Pentateuch, the Haftarot, and the Five Scrolls. First published at the beginning of the seventeenth century, it has appeared in more than two hundred and twenty-five editions and is still in print. Unfortunately, nineteenth-century publishers abbreviated and sometimes censored the text, and more recent publishers have followed in their footsteps. The following passage is among those that were deleted in the later editions.*

This excerpt is taken from what will be, when it is finished, the first complete and annotated English translation of the Tsena-Urena. *It is based on the earliest extant edition (Basel/Hanau, 1622).*



Beholding the etrog, from Ushpizin, *2005. (Ushpizin © New Line Productions, Inc. Licensed By Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. All rights reserved.)*

The tree was good for eating (Genesis 3:6). The tree was good to eat. Some sages say that it was a fig tree and therefore they ripped off leaves from a fig tree to cover their shame after they ate from the tree of knowledge. Their eyes were opened and they were ashamed to go naked. Others say that it was a grape vine and that she squeezed some grapes and gave him wine, red as blood, to drink. That is why the commandment of *niddah* was given to the women, from whom red blood flows (Genesis Rabbah 15:7). Others say that it was an etrog tree and that is why it is the custom for women to tear out the tip of the etrog on Hoshanah Rabbah. That is to say, they give money to charity because "*charity saves from death*" (Proverbs 10:2), and so that God should protect the child she is pregnant with. Since she did not eat from the apple, may the woman give birth to her child as easily as a hen lays an egg, without pain. The woman should say, "Lord of the universe, because Eve ate the apple, we women must suffer the terrible fate to die in childbirth. Had I been present there, I would not have derived any benefit from it, just as now I did not want to make the etrog ritually unfit." It was used for the fulfillment of a commandment for seven days, but now on Hoshanah Rabbah, the commandment is ended. I am not quick to eat it, and just as I have little benefit from the tip, so did I have little benefit from the apple that you forbade.

Morris M. Faierstein is an independent scholar and the author or editor of seven books and more than a hundred scholarly articles and reviews.

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Thank you for a wonderful mahzor for our High Holy Days—it spoke to those who have little background as well as for those who are much more fluent. I wanted to read ALL the commentary during the services. I am fortunate to have a copy now at home.
—Sandy Starkman, North Suburban Synagogue Beth El, Highland Park, IL

One can't overstate how great the mahzor was in our shul. People were . . . talking about how uplifting the mahzor was for their davening. A grandslam homerun!
—Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, dean, Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, Los Angeles, CA

When I opened the mahzor and saw the inclusion of women in the t'fillot, especially the Hineni prayer for a female service leader and the Mishe anah with women's voices in the Yom Kippur service, I cried.
—Rabbi Andrea Merow, Congregation Beth Sholom, Elkins Park, PA

A smash hit! Every tefilah was enhanced by the experience of encountering the commentary and readings, reading the clear fonts. A truly sacred experience was davening from Lev Shalem! Kol Hakavod to all of us for embracing en masse this new gem!
—Rabbi Menahem Creditor, Congregation Netivot Shalom, Berkeley, CA

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Prague Summer: The Altneuschul, Pan Am, and Herbert Marcuse

BY SHLOMO AVINERI

In the summer of 1966, I visited Prague to attend an international Hegel conference. I had been to the city before, and was looking forward to being reenchanted by its historical ambience and mystical atmosphere.

My visit coincided with the *yahrzeit* for my father, and I planned to go to services at the famous Altneuschul, the beautiful old synagogue in which Rabbi Yehudah Loew, known as the Maharal of Prague, was supposed to have created a golem in the sixteenth century to protect the local Jews. I brought a memorial candle with me as well as a siddur, which I intended to leave at the synagogue, knowing how hard Hebrew prayer books were to come by in Communist countries.

There were no direct flights from Israel to Prague in those years, so I had to fly via Athens where I changed to a Czechoslovak State Airlines flight coming from Cairo. I found myself sitting next to an East German engineer working on the Aswan Dam project, who had never met an Israeli before, so our conversations were interesting.

I arrived in Prague in the early morning hours of Friday, caught a few hours' sleep and registered for the Hegel conference at the Law Faculty of Charles University. As I did not plan to go back to the hotel before Friday night services at the synagogue, I took the memorial candle and the siddur with me. Upon registering for the conference, I was told that there was a message for me on the billboard, where I found a note asking me and two other conference participants to call Pan American Airways. One of the others was the Frankfurt School philosopher Herbert Marcuse, who would soon become one of the most influential social theorists of the 1960s. I was not scheduled to fly out of Prague on Pan Am—then the only US airline flying to Prague—but decided to call anyway, thinking that there might have been a change in flight schedules.

Still jet-lagged and groggy, I found a public phone in the conference reception area and dialed the number. A female voice asked me to wait a moment, and after some clicks and squeaks—Communist countries' telephones being what they were—another voice, this time a male one, came on the line. "Welcome to Prague, Dr. Avineri," it said in excellent Czech-accented English. "Thank you for calling back. Could you please come to the Friday night services at the Altneuschul?"

My reaction was a mixture of surprise, disbelief, and fear. I was going to the Altneuschul anyway, but how could anyone in Prague know this? Was someone spying on me? And in any case, what business did Pan Am have to ask me to go to a synagogue in a communist country? And, now that I was thinking along these lines, was I really speaking to Pan Am—or could this be the *Státní bezpečnost* (StB), the Czech equivalent of the KGB? My paranoia mounted, but I tried to sound businesslike: "Is this the Pan Am office?" "Yes," the polite voice answered. "And why does Pan Am want me to got to shul? "Well, please come," said the voice. I asked if there was any message regarding my itinerary—"No, but please do come to the synagogue."

I hung up, feeling like a character out of an Arthur Koestler novel. Was I being followed? Was I being set up? Would I rot in a Communist jail? Should I give up on the idea of going to the synagogue? I considered calling the Israeli embassy (this was before the Six-Day War, so Israel still had an embassy in Prague)—but what would I tell them? Should I tell the conference organizers? But what would I tell *them?*

I was going to the Altneuschul anyway, but how did anyone know? Was someone spying on me? And what business did Pan Am have to ask me to go to synagogue?

It took me some time to steady my nerves before attending the opening ceremony of the conference in the Carolinum, the magnificent medieval hall of the university. I hardly listened to what was said. I looked at the city map I had been given at the registration desk and was reassured to find that it clearly had a Magen David sign on the site of the synagogue. It was obviously a legitimate tourist site, so I decided to proceed according to plan.

This was August and sundown was late, so when I arrived at the Altneuschul night had not yet fallen. Unlike today, when the synagogue has been cleaned up and whitewashed, its walls were dark and sooty, and one couldn't see the upstairs vestibule, where the remains of the golem were supposed to be. The mysterious atmosphere reanimated my feelings of unease. I spotted the sexton, introduced myself as a guest from Jerusalem attending an international conference at the university, and told him that it was my father's *yahrzeit*. He welcomed me and asked whether I would join them in the community hall for a Sabbath meal after services. I was encouraged by his hospitality and his obvious comfort in speaking with an Israeli, so I told him about my strange phone conversation with the supposed representative of Pan Am.

The sexton smiled broadly and said: "Oh, my son, he's doing it again. He will be here for the meal, so he will explain it all to you." I was relieved, but not entirely. It didn't sound right. The sexton's son and Pan Am? It sounded like a parody of the Zionist-imperialist plot.

After services, a young man came up to me, introduced himself as the sexton's son and said, with a smile reminiscent of his father's, "My father told me you're a little nervous. It is all very simple." Apparently, Pan Am had been allowed by the Czech authorities to open an office in Prague as long as a Czech national headed its office. Who better suited than the son of the sexton of the Altneuschul? He obviously knew languages, must have some international connections, and might even know more than the average Czech citizen about airline routes and rates of exchange. So, he explained to me that every week he checked the list of passengers on incoming flights. If he saw someone with an itinerary that included Israel, or who had an obviously Jewish name, he tried to locate him through Čedok, the Government Tourist Bureau, and issue an invitation to the Altneuschul. "You see, we barely have a minyan, so this usually helps us to get enough people for Sabbath services. I am sorry I caused you some panic—I noticed it on the phone."

So the mystery was solved. Or was it? I was deeply moved by this example of Jewish ingenuity and solidarity—keeping a minyan on Friday night at the Altneuschul in the depth of Communist repression. But then, a Czech national working for Pan Am would obviously be under the surveillance of the StB; he might even be reporting to them in one way or another. He might actually be getting the list of presumably Jewish visitors to Prague from the StB, or collecting it for them.

So the looking-glass mystery was perhaps not solved to my total satisfaction, but over the kosher meal at the Jewish community's restaurant, more reminiscent of a soup kitchen than a proper restaurant (*tamkhui* would be the right Hebrew word for it), I was able to ponder another manifestation of the mysteries of Jewish existence.

Saturday morning, I saw Herbert Marcuse having his breakfast at the hotel. I joined him at his table and told him I saw there was a message for him to call Pan Am. "Yes," he said, "I did indeed call them, and some *meschiggener* told me to come to services at the synagogue." I replied that he obviously didn't go, since I hadn't seen him there. As expected, he replied that of course he wouldn't go to prayer services at a synagogue. "But," I decided to try this out, "you must have been to the Altneuschul before?" A little uncomfortably he admitted that no, he had not visited the Altneuschul. Some further questioning elicited the reluctant

answer that he had visited Prague frequently from the l920s until he was forced to flee Germany. In my Israeli chutzpah I said: "You must have visited St. Vitus Cathedral—it's such a gem of Gothic architecture. But perhaps you would have found some interest in early Jewish Gothic archiecture as well—after all, this is now the oldest surviving synagogue in Europe, after the Nazis burned down the Worms synagogue on Kristallnacht."

He got the point. "So why don't the two of us visit the synagogue together—not today, on the Holy Sabbath, but perhaps tomorrow? Be my guide," he added graciously.

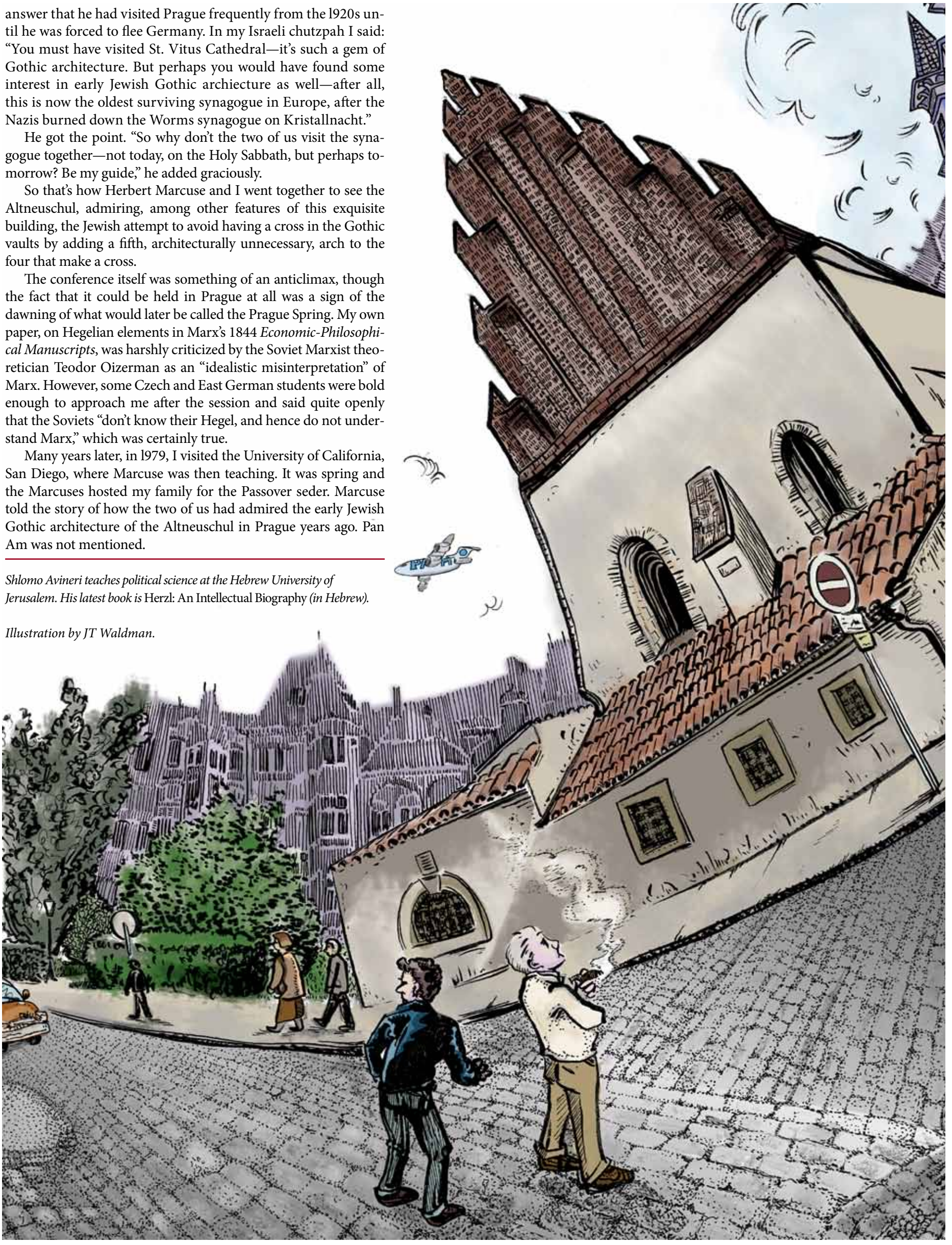
So that's how Herbert Marcuse and I went together to see the Altneuschul, admiring, among other features of this exquisite building, the Jewish attempt to avoid having a cross in the Gothic vaults by adding a fifth, architecturally unnecessary, arch to the four that make a cross.

The conference itself was something of an anticlimax, though the fact that it could be held in Prague at all was a sign of the dawning of what would later be called the Prague Spring. My own paper, on Hegelian elements in Marx's 1844 *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts*, was harshly criticized by the Soviet Marxist theoretician Teodor Oizerman as an "idealistic misinterpretation" of Marx. However, some Czech and East German students were bold enough to approach me after the session and said quite openly that the Soviets "don't know their Hegel, and hence do not understand Marx," which was certainly true.

Many years later, in l979, I visited the University of California, San Diego, where Marcuse was then teaching. It was spring and the Marcuses hosted my family for the Passover seder. Marcuse told the story of how the two of us had admired the early Jewish Gothic architecture of the Altneuschul in Prague years ago. Pan Am was not mentioned.

Shlomo Avineri teaches political science at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His latest book is Herzl: An Intellectual Biography *(in Hebrew).*

Illustration by JT Waldman.



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