

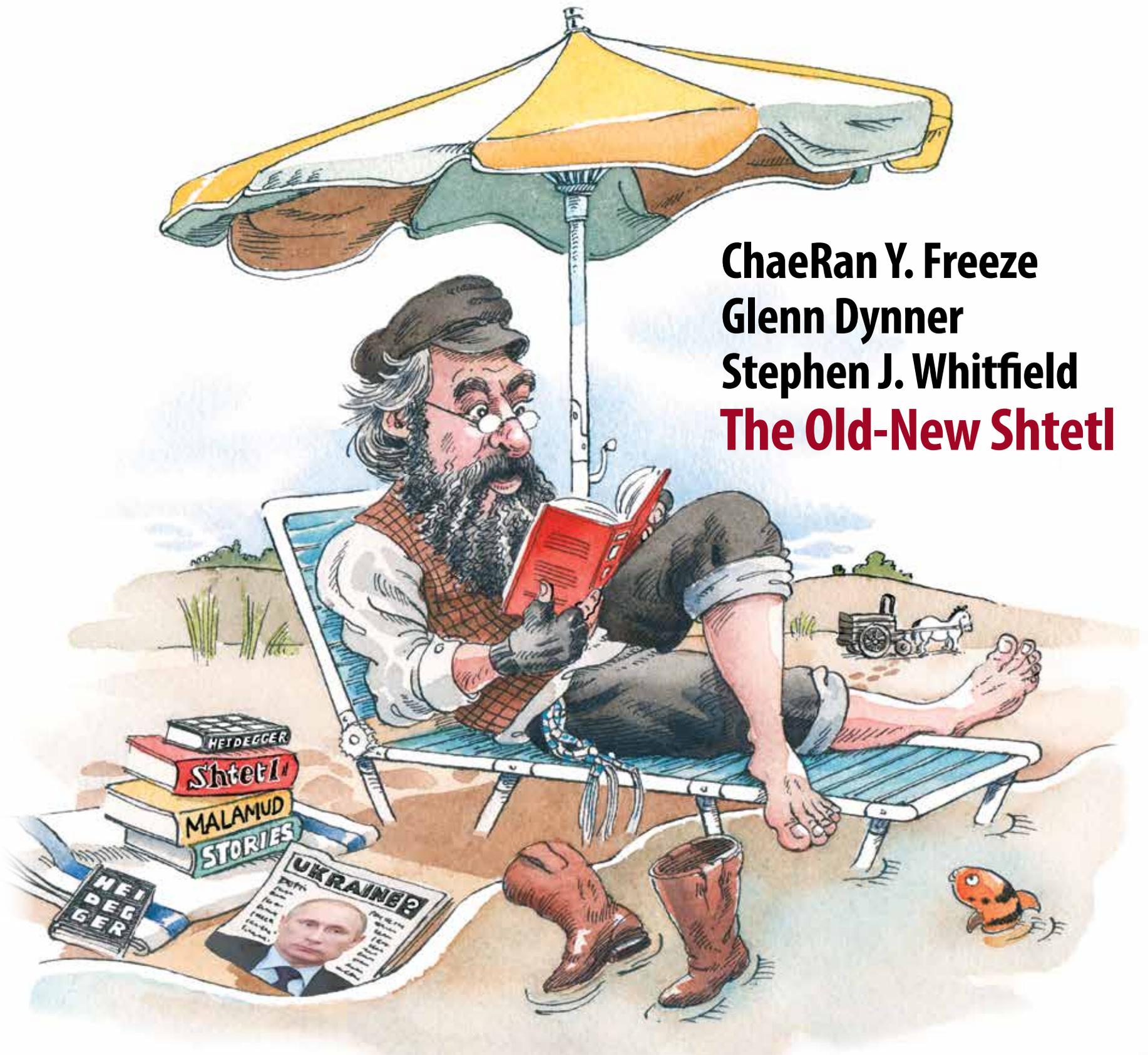
Jonathan Sacks **God and Our Post-Postmodern Moment**

# JEWISH REVIEW

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## Reform Revisionist

Although I enjoyed Stuart Schoffman's article ("A Stone for His Slingshot," April 2014), I would like to take issue with Schoffman's word choice in referring to my grandfather, Rabbi Dr. Louis I. Newman, as an "erstwhile antagonist" of Ben Hecht. I assume this refers to my grandfather's justifiable condemnation of Hecht's 1931 book, *A Jew in Love*. A reader might come away with the impression that Newman and Hecht bore a long-term antagonism toward each other that was only resolved toward the end of Hecht's life. Nothing could be further from the truth.

After 1939, Hecht and Newman shared a common passion. As Schoffman's article indicates, Hecht's views changed dramatically in 1939. Rabbi Newman was always an ardent and proud promoter of the Jewish religion, Jewish culture, the Jewish people, and Zionism. When much of the Reform Jewish leadership in the United States was anti-Zionist or barely Zionist, Rabbi Newman was a Revisionist. He used to meet with both Z'ev Jabotinsky and Menachem Begin when they were in New York. He raised money for Irgun missions to save Jews from Europe and transport them to Palestine until such missions became impossible. For a number of years, my grandfather's home on Central Park West was Jabotinsky's mailing address in New York City. Rabbi Newman was an ardent supporter of the Bergson Group, and he worked closely with Yitzhaq Ben-Ami, one of the leaders of the group. In fact, my grandfather was an attendee at the November 1948 banquet for Menachem Begin, where, as the article mentions, Ben Hecht gave a short speech. It was quite appropriate that Rabbi Newman officiated at Ben Hecht's funeral.

Saul Newman  
via email

## Rashi's Shul

Ivan Marcus' enlightening review of *Rashi* by Avraham Grossman ("Our Master, May He Live," Spring 2014) is illustrated by an old photograph of Rashi's synagogue in Worms. The caption reads "built in 1034, destroyed in 1938." That is not incorrect, but could well leave the impression that the synagogue no longer exists. On the foundation walls, using, as far as possible, original stones and the restored portal and apse, the synagogue was reconstructed in the late 1950s. If one were to google "Worms synagogue," among the first photographs that should appear are recent ones taken from a similar angle as the one in your photograph. Strictly speaking, the synagogue destroyed in 1938 and rebuilt after the war is not identical to the one built in 1034. That one was destroyed during the first and second crusades and rebuilt on the same site in 1174.

The greater tragedy, of course, was the annihilation of Worms' Jewish community. The reconstruction of the synagogue was not uncontroversial, as few if any Jews returned to Worms immediately after the war. Today, between 32 and 300 Jews live in Worms, depending on who is counting. Most are immigrants from the former Soviet Union and their young descendants.

Herman Reichenbach  
Hamburg, Germany

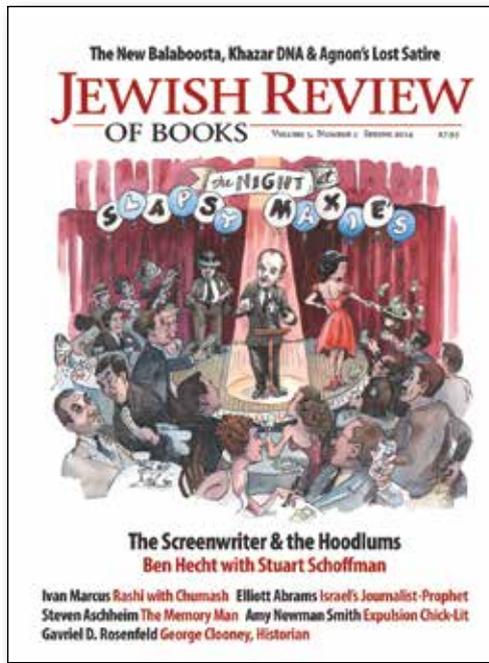
## Khazars Shmazars

I would like to comment on Stampfer's review ("Are We All Khazars Now?" Spring 2014). Elhaik, who

misuses me as a source in his article, makes a number of wrong assumptions (in italics) that call for further comment.

*The Khazar Empire already existed in the late Iron Age in the central-northern Caucasus:* The first time the Khazars appear in the literature, is in ca. 670 when they moved on their way south into the region of the Middle Volga, the region of the Samara river, about *one thousand kilometers north* of the Caucasus (Zuckerman 2007, 425). The aforementioned date is far past the late Iron Age, which means that the Khazars cannot have had an empire in the Caucasus in the late Iron Age.

*The Khazars converted to Judaism in the 8<sup>th</sup> century:* King Bulan of the Khazars converted to Juda-



ism in 861 (Zuckerman 1995). It is unknown how many Khazars joined in the conversion. Therefore, even apart from the wrong period, there is no evidence for Elhaik's assumption that *the* Khazars converted in any century.

*Caucasus Georgians and Armenians are considered as proto-Khazars:* Considering Georgians and Armenians as proto-Khazars is not based on genetic research, is not so formulated by the authors referred to, and is not in agreement with reliable information about Khazars.

*Prior to their exodus, the Judeo-Khazar population was estimated to be half a million in size:* As it is unknown how many Khazars converted to Judaism, and no reliable censuses exist in Eastern Europe before 1897, the estimate of half a million Jewish Khazars has no factual basis.

*Because, according to both [the Khazar and Rhineland] hypotheses, Eastern European Jews arrived in Eastern Europe roughly at the same time (13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries):* The 13<sup>th</sup> century appears to refer to the collapse of the Khazar Empire. Elhaik seems to be unaware of the Jewish presence in the region of the Black Sea already from the beginning of the Common Era (e.g., Harkavy 1867, 77-97; Dan'shin 1996). There are no sources that show that these Jews disappeared up to the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

The 15<sup>th</sup> century refers to the expulsions of Jews from the bigger cities, which according to Elhaik amounted to 50,000 Jews. During these expulsions, the Jews left the bigger cities and settled in villages (*Germania Judaica* III). Moreover, the number of

50,000 has no factual basis and would have left virtually no Jew in Germany, while the expulsions continued during the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

In addition to the above, Costa et al. (2013) concluded that "There is no evidence in the mtDNA pool to support the contention that lineages might have been recruited on a large scale from the North Caucasus [...] as would be predicted by the Khazar hypothesis." Therefore, the historical and demographic mistakes by Elhaik together with the conclusion by Costa et al. refute any important genetic link between (East) European Jews and Khazars.

As to the "demographic puzzle" mentioned by Stampfer: The number of 50,000 Jews in 1500 leading to more than eight million in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is no puzzle. The number of 50,000 (DellaPergola 2001, 22) is a modification of the numbers 30,000 and 10,000 originally proposed by Baron (1957, v.16, 4) and Weinryb (1972, 32), respectively. These numbers were not based on factual evidence, but on the assumption by the last two authors that these Jews had arrived in Eastern Europe following mass migrations from Germany during the Middle Ages. Because there weren't that many Jews in Germany in that period, the number had to be low. The validity of the mass migrations and the low numbers is considered as *Torah mi-Sinai*, despite the fact that there is no evidence for the mass migrations. In an earlier publication Stampfer (2012, 134) mentions a Jewish growth rate of *only* (my italics) 1.7 percent between 1500 and 1700 also starting out from 50,000 Jews in 1500. In the current article, Stampfer explains this number by comparing the high Jewish growth rates with the ones of the French who migrated to Canada (or of the Dutch who migrated to South Africa). This explanation does not hold for two reasons.

First, the author seems to be unaware of the fact that one cannot use the growth rate of population A in ecosystem X and assume that this same growth rate can also be applied to population B in ecosystem Y when the two ecosystems are completely different.

Second, annual growth rates of 1 percent or more did not occur in Europe before 1800. Nevertheless, historians and geneticists who deal with the origin of East European Jewry accept the high growth rates, and now we are stuck with the problem of how to defend a demographically impossible growth rate.

A number of arguments were proposed to explain these growth rates, such as low age at marriage, low infant mortality, higher rates of divorce, and better hygiene. However, no comparative research was ever carried out, because there are no (reliable) data in Eastern Europe during this period to carry out such research. Based on realistic growth rates, the number of Jews in Eastern Europe (say, the area of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth) in 1500 must have been about half a million or more (van Straten 2007).

Jits van Straten  
Bennekom, the Netherlands

## Shaul Stampfer Responds:

I thank Jits van Straten for his comments. The discussion continues in my review of his book, *The Origin of Ashkenazi Jewry: The Controversy Unraveled*, in the most recent issue of *East European Jewish Affairs*.

# Peace, Plan B

BY SHLOMO AVINERI

It is easy to blame the local players for Secretary of State John Kerry's failure to really get the Israelis and Palestinians to the negotiating table, let alone to a final status agreement. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's insistence on recognition of Israel as a Jewish nation-state did not make Kerry's task easier, nor did continued construction on the West Bank. PLO Chairman Mahmoud Abbas, also called Abu Mazen, added another hurdle by making the talks dependent on the release of more and more Palestinians prisoners (that is, terrorists), and he never even considered facing up to the challenge of accepting Israel as a Jewish state, and so on. But the crux of the problem lies deeper, as even those who disagree most strongly with Netanyahu's policies ought now to realize.

When Ehud Olmert, head of the centrist Kadima party, was prime minister, from 2006 to 2009, there were continuous negotiations with the Palestinian Authority for a final status agreement. Both sides came to the table with a commitment to a two-state solution, and the Labor Party, then headed by Minister of Defense Ehud Barak, was Olmert's main coalition partner. Had the talks succeeded, it is conceivable that Olmert would still be prime minister, and the corruption charges against him might have taken a back seat. By the same token, if Abu Mazen could have presented his people with a peace agreement that resulted in the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, he could probably have reasserted his authority over the separatist Gaza Strip, trumping his Islamist rivals in Hamas.

For almost two years, there were numerous meetings, at the highest level, between the two sides: In an unguarded moment during a live TV interview several months ago, Olmert blurted out that he had 36 (or 37, he didn't exactly remember) meetings with Abu Mazen without arriving at an agreement. To argue—as he subsequently did on that occasion—that what they needed was “just a little bit more time” is preposterous: If 36 (or was it 37?) meetings could not produce an agreement, then something more fundamental must have been involved.

With all of the goodwill and the not inconsiderable amount of trust between the two sides, and despite some initial readiness to make some significant concessions, when the negotiators addressed the core issues, the gap between even the most moderate Israeli government in years and the more moderate Palestinian faction (Abu Mazen's Fatah) remained deep and apparently unbridgeable. The most intractable problems were borders, settlements, Jerusalem, 1948 refugees, and, finally, security.

On borders and settlements, the Palestinians insist on Israel withdrawing to the 1967 armistice lines (the “Green Line”). They are willing to accept some limited territorial swaps, but anyone

looking at the map can see that this does not solve the question of the future of Israeli settlements in the West Bank. Now that there are a quarter of a million Jewish settlers in the area, some of whom have been there for 20 or 30 years, even the most

## The most intractable problems are borders, settlements, Jerusalem, 1948 refugees, and, finally, security.

long-time and adamant Israeli opponents of the entire settlement project realize that it would be extremely difficult for Israel to return to anything like square one. There is, moreover, no precedent for a democratic country evacuating between 5 percent and 7 percent of its own population from a contested area as part of a peace treaty. Hence whenever Olmert and Abu Mazen, or their deputies Tzipi Livni (then foreign minister) and Abu Ala (Ahmed Qurei, a leading Palestinian negotiator) approached this issue, it became clear that an agreement was beyond their reach.

The mantra of “Jerusalem as the capital of both

would one avoid a situation in which every automobile accident, every burglary, homicide, or neighborhood quarrel could spawn an international incident that could turn into a *casus belli*? Ideas of granting some sort of international status to the “Holy Basin” of the Old City appear equally out of touch with reality. Which international body would ultimately have authority? The UN (with a Russian and Chinese veto in the Security Council)? The EU? UNESCO? The last case of an internationalized entity of this sort was interwar Danzig—and it turned out to be part of the problem, not part of the solution.

Equally well-intentioned talk about an area “without sovereignty” or under “God's sovereignty” appears, when examined closely, to be either sophomoric or utterly nonsensical. Even ideas of leaving the holy places under the jurisdiction of the religions that lay claim to them is, to say the least, impractical. Who will represent the Christians: the Vatican, the Orthodox Church, or the Geneva-based Council of Churches? One has only to look at the centuries-old conflict among various Christian denominations at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher to realize how naive such pious notions are. No wonder that whenever the negotiators even tiptoed up to these issues, they quickly ended up running away from them as if from a wildfire.



U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu meet to discuss Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, Jerusalem, January 2014. (Courtesy of the Government Press Office, Israel.)

states” has a nice ring to it, but it is utterly chimerical. There is no city in the world that serves as the capital of two different states, much less of two states that have been embroiled in conflict for the better part of a century. With some 200,000 Israeli Jews now living in Jerusalem on the other side of the old Green Line, where exactly would one draw the border? How

The Palestinians view the right of the refugees from the 1948 war and their descendants (*al-houda*) to return as the cornerstone of their national narrative, something they can never abandon. Sometimes they also refer to it as an individual entitlement of each of the refugees, a matter that cannot be abrogated by any political agreement. To do

justice to the Palestinian position, one should add that they occasionally acknowledge that not all of the six million who claim to be 1948 refugees or their descendants will return to Israel. But every Israeli—Right and Left—understands that the Palestinian aim is to use demographics to put an end to

most Israeli doves, they understandably enough appear to the Palestinians to be a serious encroachment upon and emasculation of the sovereignty of their future state.

These are the intractable problems that prevented Olmert and Abu Mazen from reaching an

## What can be learned from all of these unsolved conflicts is that, in the absence of a final status agreement, partial solutions can be found.

Israel as a Jewish nation-state, and hence no Israeli government will ever accept it. It is certainly difficult for the Palestinian leadership, which has for more than 60 years taught all Palestinian children in refugee camps that they will someday return to their ancestors' homes and properties in Israel, to give up such a deeply ingrained and emotionally powerful claim. But it must be abandoned if one really wishes to achieve a historical reconciliation between the two national movements. As former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer once

agreement. None of these obstacles has disappeared since 2009—on the contrary, some have become more formidable. There are now more than 300,000 Jewish settlers on the West Bank, and Hamas is apparently well-entrenched in Gaza and remains explicitly opposed to negotiation and committed to Israel's destruction. The recent agreement between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas has yet to be implemented—and three such previous agreements suggest how unstable it is likely to be—but it certainly doesn't help. Nor does it seem that a Netan-

they are not religious conflicts, but all have religious aspects that exacerbate the conflicts and make reconciliation and compromise even more difficult.

In all of these conflicts, peace negotiations aimed at final status agreements have failed. In Cyprus, the Annan Plan has failed because one group, the Greek Cypriots, rejected it. In Bosnia, the Dayton Accords have stopped the killing, rape, and ethnic cleansing, but failed to achieve the multi-ethnic, multi-confessional, multi-layered confederative structure that their authors envisaged. In Kosovo, the Kosovo Albanians have achieved the independence they deserve, but Serbia has not acknowledged it, and so the conflict has not yet been solved. And—in all these cases—American involvement, diplomacy, and pressure have failed to overcome the fundamental disagreements that divide the contending parties. This is the moment to stop and consider if, after decades of trying, the international community has failed to solve the problems of divided cities such as Nicosia or Mitrovica, does it really have the wherewithal, or *chutzpah*, to imagine that it can solve those of Jerusalem, which are tenfold more complicated?

What can be learned from all of these unsolved conflicts is that, in the absence of a final status agreement, partial solutions can be found: limited agreements, unilateral steps, confidence-building measures. In international studies jargon this is sometimes called “proactive conflict management.” A Turkish decision to open the crossings in Nicosia did not *solve* the Cyprus conflict, but it did help lower the temperature on the divided island. European Union-brokered agreements in Kosovo concerning municipal arrangements in Serbian-dominated towns and villages have not *solved* the Kosovo problem, but have helped to alleviate tensions and nudge the situation a little bit closer to a possible future agreement.

Something similar can be tried in the Middle East as well. We could use some proactive conflict management, a series of partial steps on the part of the Israelis as well as the Palestinians. In short: a Plan B. Such measures should not be viewed as an alibi or alternative to a final status agreement, but as a series of stopgap measures for a very large gap. For the Israelis, this might entail a quiet, *de facto* commitment not to enlarge existing Jewish settlements; it might require the Palestinians to refrain from their symbolically powerful but politically pointless attempts to reach statehood via the UN. If they think creatively, both sides could come up with many more such steps. No doubt, the effort will be painful, but less painful than a total collapse of relations. And who knows? We might even get somewhere, even if progress proves very, very slow. Still, such progress would be real, unlike the totally utopian hopes raised and dashed over the last 20 years of attempts to reach a final status agreement through concessions that neither party is willing or able to make now.

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*Shlomo Avineri teaches political science at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem and is a member of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities. He is the former director-general of the Israeli Foreign Ministry. His latest book is Herzl: Theodor Herzl and the Foundation of the Jewish State (Weidenfeld & Nicolson).*



*Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert meet with Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas in Jerusalem, November 2007. (Photo by Moshe Milner, courtesy of the Government Press Office, Israel.)*

observed, if Germany had insisted that 12,000,000 ethnic German expellees (and their descendants) from Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary had a “right of return” to their former homes, there would never have been peace in Europe. Fischer himself, by the way, came from a family of ethnic Germans expelled from Hungary after World War II.

Deeply aware of Israel's security needs, even the center-left government of Olmert, Livni, and Barak insisted that the future Palestinian state be demilitarized and that Israel be allowed to retain a military presence in the Jordan Valley, with some overflight, entry, and exit rights in the West Bank. Netanyahu made similar demands in his Bar-Ilan speech when he, for the first time, accepted the idea of a two-state solution. While these considerations are shared by

yahu government, locked in a coalition with Naftali Bennett's ultra-nationalist/religious Jewish Home (Bayit Yehudi) party, will be able or willing to make the Palestinians a more generous offer than that made by Olmert and rejected by Abu Mazen.

**W**hat is to be done? Something can be learned from recent national conflicts in Cyprus, Bosnia, Kosovo, and even Kashmir. All of these are, like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, multifaceted. They all have a territorial dimension, but they are also conflicts between contending national movements and between conflicting historical narratives and memories. They all involve military occupation, resistance, terrorism, brutal reprisals, ethnic cleansing, settlement activities;

# The Ukrainian Question

BY KONSTANTY GEBERT

“If I had to choose between Hitler and Stalin,” says the veteran Polish dissident, activist, and essayist Adam Michnik, “I pick Marlene Dietrich.” Although Vladimir Putin is no Stalin and the new Ukrainian government includes no Hitlers, many Ukrainian Jews know the feeling. As the conflict deepens, however, this option will become increasingly less viable, especially given the surprisingly important role played by Jews—now reduced, in what was once the heartland of European Jewry, to a population variously assessed at from 70,000 up to 300,000 in a nation of 47 million—in the ongoing contest between Russia and Ukraine. The Ukrainian Jews’ part in the actual struggle for Ukraine’s independence (and

of Jews and Poles in World War II. The same OUN eventually turned its guns against the Germans when they failed to promote Ukrainian independence and then against the Soviets, who had chased the

the things they stood for. It should be noted that Ukraine’s problematic national heroes do not start with Bandera. Bogdan Khmelnytsky is remembered by Ukrainians as a father of the nation and by

**The nations of Central and Eastern Europe are left with the unpleasant history—and heroes—that they have, and they will not reject them.**

Germans away, but had no intention of supporting Ukrainian nationalism either. To Ukrainians in the west of the country, the OUN are national heroes; in the eyes of those in the east (including many of the descendants of the Soviet troops who fought them) and to Russians they are traitors.

Jewish or not, one should find the approval of such heroes deeply troubling, but Ukraine is hardly alone among Eastern and Central European countries in struggling with this problem. With the exception of Poland, the Czech Republic, and Serbia, all of the other countries in the region (or their predecessors) threw in with the Axis against the Allies in World War II. This is not surprising, given that in this part of the world the Allies meant Stalin, who had, among his many other crimes, deliberately starved some four and half million Ukrainians to death just a dozen years earlier.

The nations of Central and Eastern Europe are left with the unpleasant history—and heroes—that they have, and they will not reject them. One can hope, however, that they will reject some of

Jews as the perpetrator of the horrific massacres of 1648–1649. Both descriptions are correct. His was the worst name known to Ukrainian Jews until Hitler’s death squads and their local accomplices killed more than a million of them.

Nonetheless, support for the two Ukrainian extremist parties remains extremely low. Despite its members’ heroic involvement in the Maidan demonstrations, Svoboda received just 1.16 percent of the vote in the recent May presidential elections that brought billionaire candy maker Petro Poroshenko to power. Pravy Sektor polled 0.7 percent. Together, they received fewer votes than Vadim Rabinovich, president of the Ukrainian Jewish Parliament, who ran as an independent. This outcome hardly represents the neo-fascist threat of Putin’s propaganda. Of course, conflicts like this tend to stoke nationalism, so a resurgence of the extreme right cannot be ruled out. These groups owe their current support to their role in fighting Yanukovich’s brutal riot police, and a fight with Russian invaders would do wonders for their popularity.



Portrait of Vladimir Putin by George W. Bush, 2013. (Courtesy of the George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum.)

eventual membership in the European Union) is, to be sure, a marginal one, even if they were somewhat over-represented among the martyrs who died in the Maidan protests that eventually toppled Prime Minister Victor Yanukovich’s corrupt government. It is otherwise in the propaganda war.

Over the last few months, Putin and his Foreign Ministry have repeatedly justified Russia’s annexation of Crimea and encroachment on eastern Ukraine by arguing that it was necessary to counter “nationalist, reactionary, and anti-Semitic forces,” describing the new Ukrainian government as a “Nazi regime.” In fact, of course, it is Putin whose actions are somewhat reminiscent of Hitler’s Sudetenland and Austria land-grabs of the 1930s. Then again, Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk’s government does include the Svoboda (Freedom) and Pravy Sektor (Right Sector) parties, both of whom trace their lineage to wartime Ukrainian leader Stepan Bandera and his Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN). Bandera and the OUN collaborated with the Nazis in mass murder



Map of Ukraine and surrounding countries. (© RM Acquisition, LLC d/b/a Rand McNally. Reproduced with permission, License No. R.L. 14-S-013. All rights reserved.)

On April 28, 2014, Gennady Kernes, the somewhat pro-Putin Jewish mayor of the important eastern Ukrainian city of Kharkiv, was shot in the back by a sniper while jogging. The bullet just missed his heart, and after emergency surgery he was flown to Israel for further treatment. But Kernes is one of Ukraine's most politically controversial and personally flamboyant politicians ("Of all the mayors," he recently told a reporter, "my Instagram account is the best"), so it is anybody's guess as to who was behind the assassination attempt.

There have, however, been acts of explicitly anti-Semitic violence against Jews and Jewish insti-

**Of all the mayors, Kernes recently told a reporter, "my Instagram account is the best."**

tutions in Ukraine over the last few months. A rabbi was attacked in Kiev; a synagogue was firebombed in Nikolayev; and a Jewish memorial was defaced in Sevastopol, but responsibility for these acts has yet to be ascertained. Russia does engage in provocations: At first Putin disowned the "little green men" who took over Crimea, but then he recognized they were his own army. So it is not inconceivable that Putin's men might have been behind these attacks. On the other hand, the most publicized anti-Semitic act so far has been the distribution of leaflets demanding that Jews register with the separatists in Donetsk as potentially disloyal. These have



*Rabbi Pinchas Vyshetsky, at his synagogue, holds up a fraudulent notice demanding Jews register with pro-Russian authorities in Donetsk. (Courtesy of Derek Stoffel/CBC News.)*

now been debunked as forgeries meant to besmirch the pro-Russian separatists. However, Ukrainian Prime Minister Yatsenyuk promptly condemned the ploy.

Ukrainian Jews, meanwhile, have overwhelmingly thrown their support behind the anti-Yanukovich and now anti-Russian movement. It is perhaps telling

that no pro-Russian Jewish declarations emerged from Crimea after the takeover. In Russia itself, Jewish organizations have been largely silent: Only Chabad Chief Rabbi Berel Lazar, a long-time Putin supporter, has come out with an endorsement of Russia's actions. It remains to be seen how newly elected President Petro Poroshenko's rumored Jewish roots will impact the changing political landscape.

Interestingly, Israel was one of a dozen countries absent during the UN General Assembly vote reaffirming support for Ukraine's territorial integrity. This abstention was widely considered pro-Russian, and Israel—citing concerns over Russia's influence in Syria and Iran—refused to budge even in the face of American pressure. It must be remembered that Israel's foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman, an immigrant from then-Soviet Moldova, has been consistent in his sympathy for Putin's policies.

Are Jewish interests and values better served by the emergence of a democratic independent state, even if it is steeped in nationalist ideology? Or are they better served by the triumph of Russian regional imperialism, even if it is tempered by a demonstrated opposition to anti-Semitism?

One way to answer the question is to look for analogies. In 1980, when the Solidarity movement confronted the Poland's Communist regime and its Soviet patrons, Jewish observers were torn between sympathy for its democratic struggle (full disclosure: I was part of it) and concerns about its Catholic and nationalistic ideology, as well as a resurgence of anti-Semitism in some parts of the movement. Even as late as the mid-1990s, when a now-free Poland was lobbying for NATO membership, some critics considered it too stained by anti-Semitism to qualify. Most Polish Jews rejected this opinion (full disclosure: I did too), and the country eventually gained admittance.

Twenty-five years after the fall of Communism, Poland—a NATO and EU member, a U.S. ally in Iraq and Afghanistan with a surprisingly resilient market economy and a boringly predictable democracy—has a small but thriving Jewish community, of which most Poles are justifiably proud . . . and an anti-Semitic minority that will not go away. Had we failed in our freedom bid, Poland would probably look like Belarus today—a grotesque Stalinist parody of a state that jails people for standing in the street in mute protest.

The people of Ukraine are trying to do today what we in Poland did a generation ago. If they fail, Ukraine will probably look much more like Belarus than Poland. It is not the same as choosing between Hitler and Stalin, and for Jews it cannot be an entirely comfortable choice, but it is the right one.

*Konstanty Gebert is an international reporter and columnist at Gazeta Wyborcza, Poland's largest daily. In the 1970s and 1980s, he was a democratic opposition activist, underground journalist, and organizer of the Jewish Flying University. He is the founder of the Polish Jewish intellectual monthly Midrasz.*

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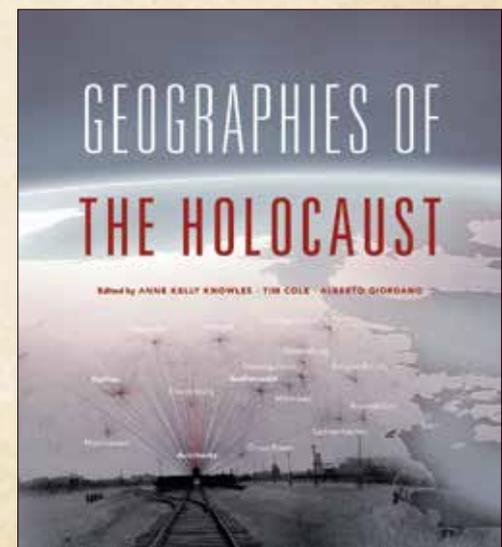
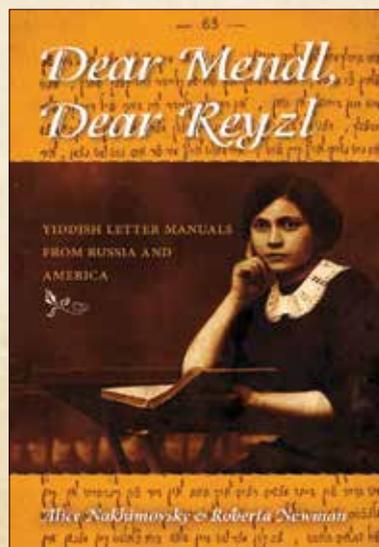
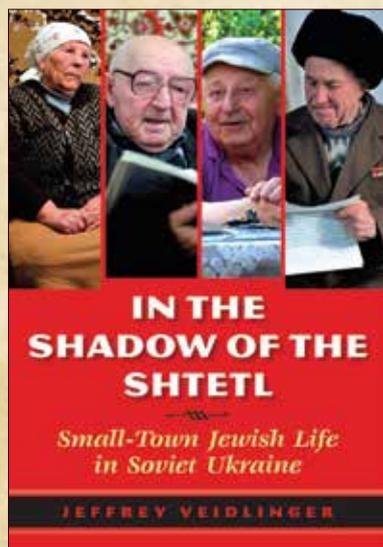
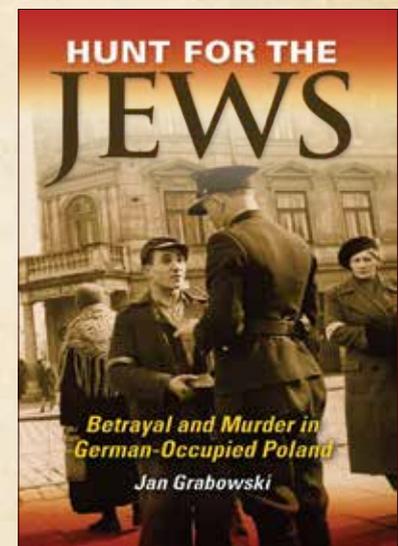
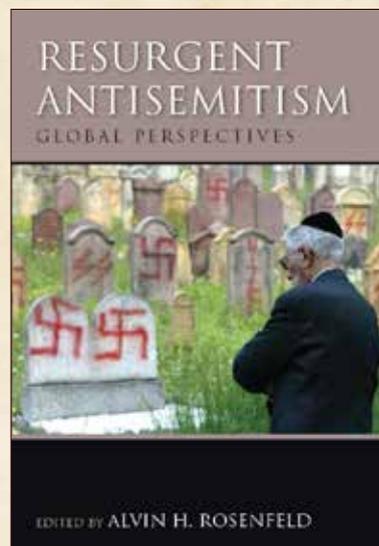
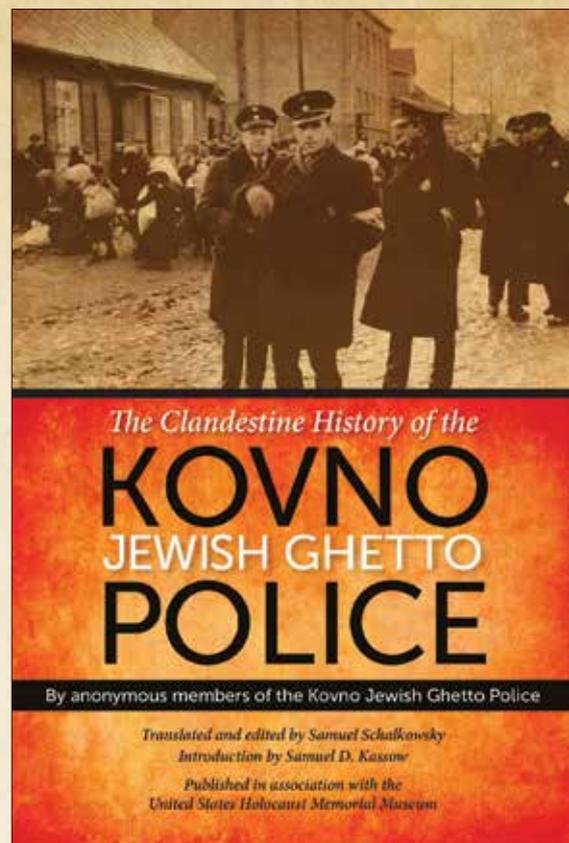
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# Nostalgia for the Numinous

BY JONATHAN SACKS

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## *Culture and the Death of God*

by Terry Eagleton

Yale University Press, 248 pp., \$26

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In the beginning were the angry atheists: Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and their heavenless hosts. Then came the response of the believers, of whom too there were many. After these books came more considered reflections, most from non-believers who nonetheless realized that religion spoke to something deep within the human condition. Among this third group were Jürgen Habermas' *An Awareness of What is Missing*, André Comte-Sponville's *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*, Alain de Botton's *Religion for Atheists*, and the late Ronald Dworkin's *Religion without God*. Perhaps most interesting was Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly's *All Things Shining*, an out-of-the-box argument by two distinguished philosophers for a return to polytheism. Terry Eagleton's new book *Culture and the Death of God* belongs to this category. His argument is simple: "Atheism is by no means as easy as it looks."

We are meaning-seeking animals. And if we can no longer believe in God we will find other things to worship. Eagleton's book is a brisk, intelligent, and provocative tour of Western intellectual history since the Enlightenment, understood as a series of chapters in the search for a God-substitute. The Enlightenment found it in reason, the Idealists in the human spirit, the Romantics in nature and culture, the Marxists in revolution, and Nietzsche in the *Übermensch*. Others chose the nation, the state, art, the sublime, humanity, society, science, the life force, and personal relationships. None of these had entirely happy outcomes, and none was self-sustaining.

The end result was postmodernism, a systematic subversion of meaning altogether. Postmodernism is Nietzsche without the anguish, tragedy, or will to power—all the things that made Nietzsche worth reading. Now, in place of the revaluation of values, we have their devaluation. We are surrounded by choices with no reason to choose this rather than that. Postmodern consciousness, in Perry Anderson's phrase, is "subjectivism without a subject." Eagleton calls it "depthless, anti-tragic, non-linear, anti-numinous, non-foundational and anti-universalist, suspicious of absolutes and averse to interiority."

The result is that we are witnesses to the advent of the first genuinely atheist culture in history. The apparent secularism of the 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was nothing of the kind. God—absent, hiding, yet underwriting the search for meaning—was in the background all along. In postmodernism, that sense of an absence, or what Eagleton calls "nostalgia for the numinous," is no longer there. Not only is there no redemption, there is nothing to be redeemed. We are left, Eagleton writes, with "Man the Eternal Consumer."

There the story of the search for transcendence might have ended. But then came 9/11 and the realization that religion had not gone away after all. It had just signaled its presence in the most brutal fashion. "No sooner had a thoroughly atheistic culture arrived on the scene . . . than the deity himself was suddenly back on the agenda with a vengeance."

The real trouble—and here Eagleton is surely right—is that the West no longer has a set of beliefs

## If we can no longer believe in God we will find other things to worship.

that would justify its commitments to freedom and democracy. All it has left is "a mixture of pragmatism, culturalism, hedonism, relativism and anti-foundationalism," inadequate defenses against an adversary that believes in "absolute truths, coherent identities and solid foundations." The West has, intellectually speaking, "unilaterally disarmed at just the point where it has proved most perilous for it to do so." Eagleton regards this as an irony, but it is not. It is precisely the West's loss of faith that made it seem vulnerable to its opponents. It is mostly the



Terry Eagleton, 2011. (Courtesy of Michael Morse.)

failure of postmodernism to speak to the most fundamental aspects of the human condition that has driven those in search of meaning and consolation into the hands of the anti-modernists for whom freedom and democracy are not values at all.

The substitutes for God turned out not to be substitutes after all. All the proposed alternatives to religion proved inadequate to achieve what the great faiths have done: "unite theory and practice, elite and populace, spirit and senses." Rationalism devalued the emotions. Romanticism failed to check

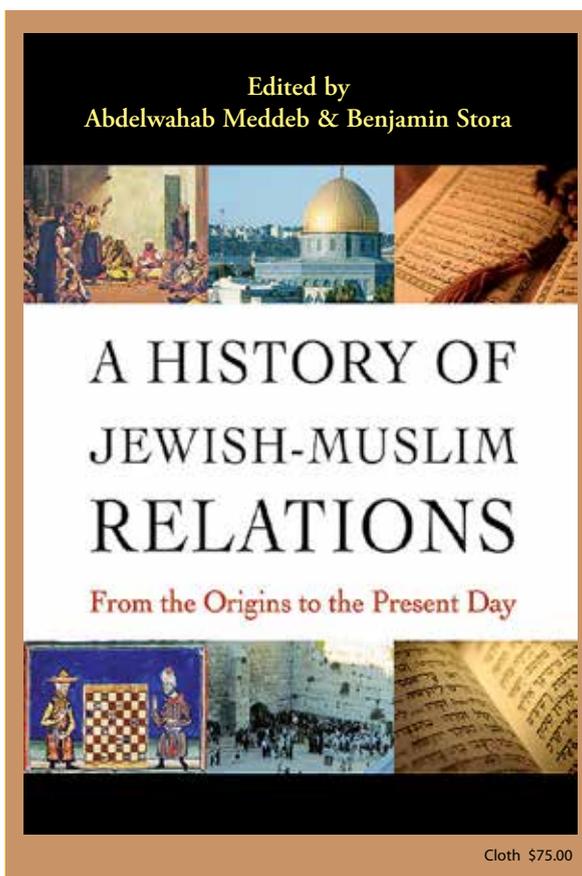
humanity's darker drives. And culture was unable to bridge the gap between the elite and the masses.

What then is left? Readers of Eagleton will not be surprised to discover that the answer is unforthcoming other than a vague gesture to his lost but still nostalgically remembered faiths as a Catholic, then a Marxist ("a crucified body," and "solidarity with the poor and powerless"). Nothing angers him more than a neo-conservative invoking religion for its character- and culture-strengthening properties: George Steiner, Roger Scruton, John Gray, and Alain de Botton all come in for Eagleton's scorn. Yet it is hard to see what he is doing if not gesturing at the same sort of argument from a left-wing position.

Jews and Christians believe, in their different ways, that the Supreme Power entered history to redeem the supremely powerless. But if one does not believe this, then invoking God for political reasons is precisely what Eagleton accuses Machiavelli, Voltaire, Matthew Arnold, Durkheim, and Leo Strauss of doing, a strategy that he calls "unpleasantly disingenuous." Eagleton is right to remind us that Judaism and Christianity have their revolutionary as well as their conservative moments. But we cannot feign faith if we lack it, and where in today's deeply de-religionized culture will we find it?

Reading his book as a Jew, one cannot but feel that Eagleton understates the real pathos of the situation. For the post-Enlightenment search for a God-substitute, whether in reason, the human spirit, culture, or art, went hand-in-hand with the evolution of a new strain of one of the world's most tenacious viruses, Judeophobia, or as it began to be called in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, anti-Semitism. The epicenters of this deadly disease were the intellectual capitals of Europe—Paris, Vienna, and the University of Jena. You can catch at least a trace of it in most of the great philosophers of mainland Europe, in Voltaire, Fichte, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Frege, and, most notoriously, Martin Heidegger.

This was the real refutation of *Bildung* and *Sittlichkeit*, "culture" and "sensibility," as a substitute for religion: that more than a half of the participants in the Wannsee Conference that decided on the "Final Solution" carried the title "doctor," that string quartets played in Auschwitz-Birkenau as a million and a quarter human beings—among them a quarter of a million children—were gassed, burned, and turned to ash. As George Steiner argued in *Language and Silence* almost half a century ago, civilization failed to civilize, and the humanities to humanize. And whereas the Catholic Church



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has tried to come to terms with its own history of Judeophobia, there has been almost no parallel self-reckoning on the part of secular philosophers as to how such a crime was possible, conceived, and enacted by the most self-consciously philosophical of Europe’s nations. (Jonathan Glover’s *Humanity* is an honorable exception.)

That tragedy has deepened in our time, as yet another new strain of anti-Semitism has emerged,

larism, every native population is in decline.

But the religiosity likely to prevail in the future will not be the mild, latitudinarian God-as-an-English-gentleman variety. It will be passionate, zealous, and unforgiving, with none of the self-restraints we have come to associate with liberal democratic societies. Liberal theologies are everywhere in retreat. So too are traditional orthodoxies, committed to creative dialogue with the wider



*Destruction of religious images in Zurich, 1524. (From the Panorama de la Renaissance.)*

substituting Israel for Jews and Zionism for Judaism. Jews find themselves for a third time denied the right to exist, first as a religion, then as a race, now as a sovereign nation. Once again not only has the academy by and large not protested, it has provided the new hatred with its most congenial home. In too many universities, campus life has become what Julien Benda called it in *La Trahison des Clercs* almost a century ago: a home for “the intellectual organisation of political hatreds.” Anti-Semitism is hardly the most pressing problem facing humanity, but over the centuries it has proved a reliable early warning of a civilization going wrong.

Can the West recover its faith? Livy said about 1<sup>st</sup>-century Rome that it had reached the stage where “we can endure neither our vices nor their cure.” Such is the degree of secularization among the West’s elites now that religious liberty itself is felt by many believers to be at risk. Having tried and failed to provide substitutes for religion, today’s public intellectuals have no new candidate to offer beyond the present mix of relativism, individualism, hedonism, and consumerism, which is neither elevating nor redemptive.

In global terms, the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be more religious than the 20<sup>th</sup>. In part this is because, after the failures of the God-substitutes, no other system remains as a source of meaning and consolation. In part it will happen simply because of demography. As Eric Kaufmann has documented in *Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth?* in most parts of the world religious practitioners have significantly more children than their secular counterparts. This really is the surpassing irony: Neo-Darwinian atheists risk extinction for the most Darwinian of reasons—their failure to hand on their genes to the next generation. In Europe, the epicenter of Western secu-

larism, every native population is in decline. As secular culture becomes increasingly hostile to religion, so religion becomes increasingly hostile to secular culture. And here lies the problem.

Enlightenment intellectuals and their successors did not, by and large, work within the world of faith itself even if they were themselves believers. They preferred to create neutral space—first science, then politics, then economics, then culture—systems that operated without religious presuppositions. There were liberal theologies aplenty, but none of them wrestled with the heart of darkness in many of the world’s great faiths.

The occupational hazard of monotheism is dualism: the division of humanity into the children of light and the children of darkness, the redeemed and the infidel. The result is that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we will face a world of increasing religiosity of the most unreconstructed, pre-modern kind, whose devotees believe themselves to be commanded to convert or conquer the world. Too little has been done within the faith traditions themselves to make space for the kind of diversity with which we will have to live if humankind is to have a future. As religious groups turn inward under the impact of aggressive secularism, all that will be left will be the extremes.

Terry Eagleton has written a witty and insightful book, but the real work—discovering within the word of God for all time, the word of God for this time—remains. Our grandchildren will pay a heavy price if we fail.

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*Lord Sacks is the emeritus chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth and the author of 25 books, including The Great Partnership: Science, Religion, and the Search for Meaning (Schocken). He can be followed on Twitter @rabbisacks.*

# Heschel Transcendent

BY ABRAHAM SOCHER

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## *Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence*

by Shai Held

Indiana University Press, 352 pp., \$45

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In the fall of 1942 Mordecai Kaplan was reading *The Review of Religion* when he ran across a philosophical account, from the inside as it were, of religious piety. Kaplan was so struck with it that, his biographer Mel Scult tells us, he wrote a kind of free verse prayer-précis called “The Pious Man” in his journal:

Let us observe the pious man and probe into his soul.

We shall discover in it that which transcends man,  
That which surmounts the visible and the available,  
Steadily preventing him from immersing himself  
in sensation or ambition,

From yielding to passion or slaving for a career.  
For him life takes place amid horizons beyond  
the span of years.

...

Faith engages a man’s mind;  
Piety, his entire life.

Kaplan was, perhaps, too much of a Deweyan pragmatist to be much of a poet, but he did have an eye for talent.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, the author of “An Analysis of Piety,” was a 35-year-old émigré scholar—Hasidic-born and University of Berlin-trained—who had been saved from the Nazis by a last-minute visa and job from the Hebrew Union College and its heroically enterprising president, Julian Morgenstern. Kaplan was perceptive, too, in seeing the centrality of the idea of transcendence—of religion as a striving for something beyond human experience and the natural world—to Heschel, particularly since it was the opposite of Kaplan’s own this-worldly Judaism. “Faith,” Heschel would later write in *God in Search of Man*, “is an act of man who transcending himself responds to Him who transcends the world.”

It is in fact just this ideal of transcendence around which Shai Held organizes his thoughtful, illuminating new study of Heschel’s thought. Held’s book is what philosophers and intellectual historians sometimes call a “rational reconstruction.” Held does not follow the trajectory of Heschel’s career or take up key texts individually, but rather presents a picture of his thinking as a whole. Heschel, he says, was not a “linear writer,” but he was a lucid, coherent thinker whose system can be explicated by collating and interpreting widely separated passages: “a stray thought here and a seemingly irrelevant line there may provide crucial insight not articulated or adequately expressed in its proper place.”

This method has its limits (to which I shall return), but it can also be invaluable, and it is especially so in Heschel’s case. Unlike his intellectual peers, a group that might be said to include Rabbi Joseph

“Piety,” Heschel had written in the 1942 *The Review of Religion* essay, “points to something beyond itself.” Eleven years later he told a story about his spiritual struggles as a young man

**“Faith,” Heschel would later write in *God in Search of Man*, “is an act of man who transcending himself responds to Him who transcends the world.”**

B. Soloveitchik, Reinhold Niebuhr, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, and Emmanuel Levinas, Heschel is often treated as something more like a religious poet than a theologian. I remember David Hartman visiting the UCLA Hillel in the 1980s and saying, with evident respect and affection, “Heschel wouldn’t know

at the annual conference of the Reform movement (Heschel himself had since moved to the Conservative movement’s Jewish Theological Seminary, but he was never much of a movement man):

I walked alone in the evenings through the magnificent streets of Berlin . . . Suddenly I noticed the sun had gone down, evening had arrived.

*From what time may one recite Shema in the evening?*

I had forgotten God—I had forgotten Sinai—I had forgotten that sunset is my business—that my task is “to restore the world to the kingship of the Lord.” So I began to utter the words of the evening prayer . . . And Goethe’s famous poem rang in my ear:

*Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh’*

*O’er all the hilltops is quiet now*

No, that was pagan thinking. To the pagan eye the mystery of life is *Ruh’*, death, oblivion. To us Jews, there is meaning beyond the mystery. We should say

*O’er all the hilltops is the word of God . . .*

How grateful I am to God that there is a duty to worship, a law to remind my distraught mind that it is time to think of God, time to disregard my ego for at least a moment!



*A young Abraham Joshua Heschel in an undated photo. (Courtesy of the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives.)*

an argument if it hit him in the head,” (some have felt the same about Hartman). To be fair, Heschel’s seemingly inexhaustible reservoir of eloquence did not always serve him well in this regard. Even *God in Search of Man*, the book to which Held devotes the most attention, reads as much like a series of thematically linked prose poems (or *derashot*) as it does systematic theology. Certainly, Heschel could become too enamored of turns of phrase (“After all, philosophy was made for man rather than man for philosophy,” he says early on in *Who Is Man?*—Well, one is tempted to respond, who could possibly claim otherwise or ever has?). But, as Held demonstrates, he was a deep and original thinker who remains relevant.

Although Held does not quote this particular passage, Heschel’s insight that the “yoke of the commandments,” and in particular the obligation to pray, entails a rejection of the ego is central to Held’s interpretation. “Self expression,” he writes in description of Heschel’s position, “is achieved, paradoxically, by paying less rather than more attention to myself, by shifting the center of my consciousness toward God and away from myself.” Indeed, as Held goes on to show, for Heschel the most important kind of prayer is one that is not really self-expression at all but rather “an act of empathy”:

The person does not approach the liturgy in a “prayerful mood,” but instead allows the words to direct him, to elicit a set of reactions from him. If, in the former case, human passions precede the act of prayer, in the latter case they follow upon them.

“The art of prayer” is, Heschel wrote in a passage Held scrutinizes closely, “in the absence of self-centered thoughts.” This is not to say that Heschel held out the possibility of a complete emptying of consciousness and mystical union, or *devekut*, between even the artful *davener* and God. Here and elsewhere—especially in his many discussions of prophecy—Heschel insists on the preservation of human individuality. The human soul does not dissolve without remainder into the divine ocean, as some mystics would have it.

Held is entirely right to emphasize that this is Heschel’s position and cogent, too, in his contextualization of it within Heschel’s broader theology. However, this is one of a few instances in the book where one wishes that it was not quite so pure an exercise in rational reconstruction. For Held goes on to compare Heschel’s position with that of the influential early-20<sup>th</sup>-century scholar of mysticism Evelyn Underhill and the famous mid-century American Trappist Monk Thomas Merton, both of whom coupled “self-transcendence with mystical union.” And yet, as Held well knows, Underhill and Merton’s positions might be useful analytic counterpoints to Heschel, but they weren’t *his* reference points. (It is true—though Held doesn’t mention it—that Heschel and Merton corresponded in the years leading up to Vatican II. Heschel even visited Merton at his Kentucky monastery, but as far as I know they never discussed these issues.)

The question of whether the human soul can achieve compete union with God has a complicated double history, and Heschel had a part in both halves of it. The dominant position within



Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, 1964.  
(Courtesy of the American Jewish University.)

pre-modern Jewish mysticism and philosophy was that although one can aspire to cleave to God, one cannot aspire to merge with Him. The great 20<sup>th</sup>-century historian of Kabbalah, Gershom Scholem, argued that this was really the *only* position, but, as Moshe Idel has definitively shown, he was wrong. Moreover, it was within the Hasidic movement, to which Heschel was heir, that the aspiration toward a complete mystical union reemerged in the modern period. Finally, Martin Buber, with whom Heschel

had a complicated personal and professional relationship (as, of course, did Scholem), denied precisely this in presenting Hasidism as embodying his I-Thou philosophy of dialogue, in which God is the “Eternal Thou,” with whom one can never unite.

It would take more than a few pages to unpack all of this (some of it is alluded to in Held’s footnotes), but doing so would show how Heschel stood at the intersection of these theological traditions and scholarly conversations. Held is an invariably sensitive and deeply serious reader, but there is a sense here that what is being described is a set of alternative positions on a theological game board, though for both Held and his subject the stakes are, and ought to be, much higher.

One of the joys of Held’s book is reading his long discursive endnotes, terse mini-essays in 10-point type that would have been even better, and certainly more rabbinic, as true footnotes at the bottom of the page (academic presses have their reasons—and their budgets). One example comes in a discussion of how Heschel’s insistence that a person’s prayer is ideally *not* about him or herself is in tension with the rabbinic emphasis on the *amida* prayer, “with its manifold petitions” for protection, forgiveness, health, and redemption. In the accompanying footnote he quotes Heschel’s contemporary Joseph Soloveitchik to the opposite effect: “Since prayer flows from a personality which finds itself in need . . . its main theme is not praise or adoration but rather request, demand, supplication.” As Held puts it, for Soloveitchik “the goal of prayer is not to forget the self entirely, but rather to surrender illusions of self-sufficiency, to become more deeply aware of [our] dependence upon God.” Held doesn’t attempt to resolve the issue between these two great 20<sup>th</sup>-century figures, nor does he succumb to the temptation to reduce it to a case of liberalism versus orthodoxy or *hasidut* versus *mitnagdut*. He simply highlights the issue and moves on.

*Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence* illuminates its subject’s thought on many other issues, including the human experience of wonder, the possibility of revelation, and the pathos of God. On all these issues and more, it will become a touchstone of future discussions. I have focused on its treatment of prayer because it is central to Heschel’s insight that the transcendent God of Judaism calls upon us to transcend ourselves.

After reading his “Analysis of Piety,” Mordecai Kaplan had hoped that Heschel would come to JTS. Heschel came in 1945, and Kaplan inserted his versification of the article in his radical new prayer book, but their approaches were too different for the two men to be intellectual allies. When Heschel later lamented that it was not “the Psalmist, Rabbi Jehudah Halevi, Rabbi Isaiah Horovitz, or Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav . . . who has become our guide in matters of Jewish prayer and God,” but Hegel, Dewey, and Freud, he was probably thinking of Kaplan. It is one of the many virtues of Shai Held’s book that it helps us to place Heschel alongside not only Kaplan but Halevi, Horovitz, and Rav Nahman—as well as the Psalmist.

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*Abraham Socher teaches at Oberlin College and is the editor of the Jewish Review of Books.*



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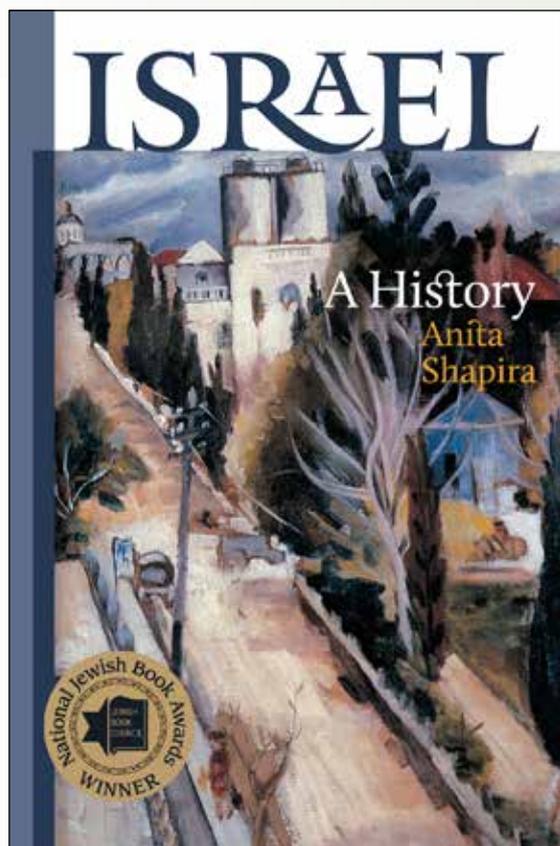
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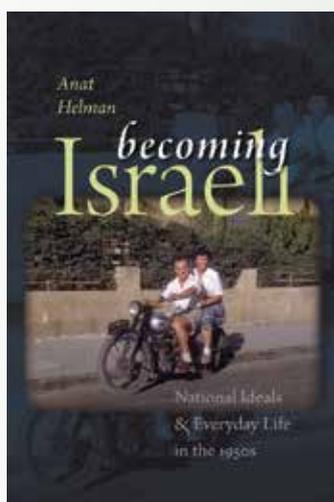
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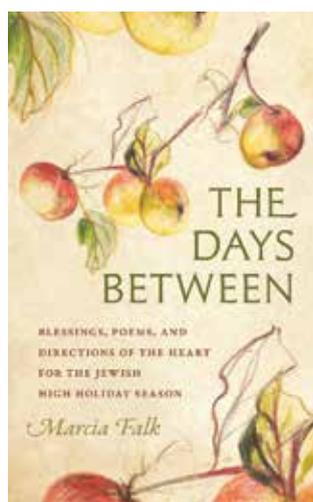
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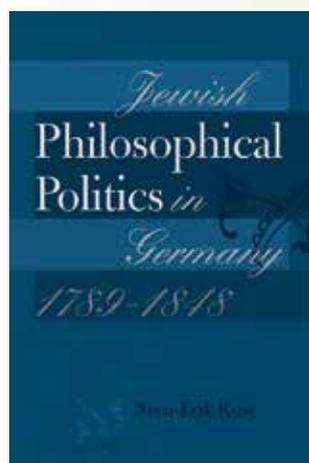


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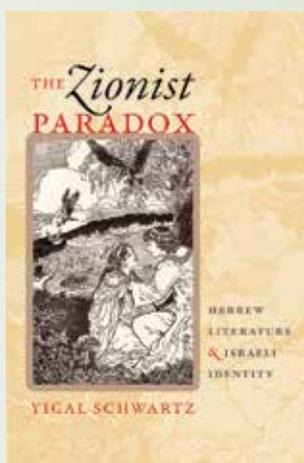


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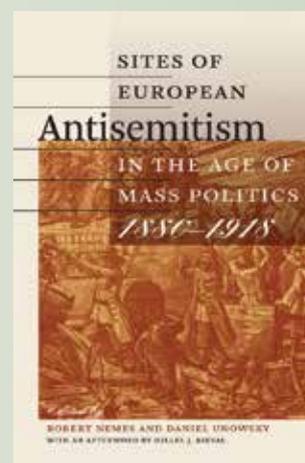
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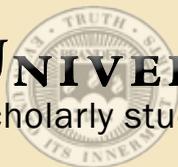
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# The Improbables

BY NADIA KALMAN

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## *The UnAmericans: Stories*

by Molly Antopol

W.W. Norton, 272 pp., \$24.95

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“Write what you know” is dangerous advice. The writer who takes it risks solipsism, dullness, a lack of perspective, or all three. It is refreshing, then, to see Molly Antopol steer away from the autobiographical shoals in *The UnAmericans*, a collection of short stories for which she received the National Book Foundation’s 5 Under 35 award. This young American author tells the stories of lovers past their prime, Czech dissidents, postwar American Communists, teenage partisans, and Israeli soldiers.

Witty descriptions and engaging characters are among Antopol’s strengths. In “A Difficult Phase,” a young Israeli journalist makes some sullenly funny observations:

“I have a job,” Talia said, and when both her parents said, “Journalism?” they laughed, as if she was five years old and had just announced that when she grew up she wanted to be a robot, or a dragon.

In the same story, Antopol perfectly depicts a 20-something worldview: “That was how people grew to be unhappy, she thought—by not making choices, by just letting what was warm and wonderful in one moment dictate the next, until one day they were living a life completely unsuited to their dreams.” Talia does not yet know how simplistic she is being, but Antopol does, and she shows us this with writerly wisdom, forgoing exaggeration or mockery.

Her book is careful with its language, and frequently its emotions, but only intermittently with its history. Suffice it to say that the large, ancient, sophisticated city of Kiev would not have boasted a *village* beauty and that torches were not necessary for navigating its streets in the 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. And yet, that is how the narrator of the collection’s first story, “The Old World,” describes Kiev in his grandfather’s day. The Jews of Kiev spoke Russian and sometimes Yiddish, but hardly ever, as Antopol seems to think, Ukrainian (a language banned by both czarist and Soviet regimes). And yet, the Israeli protagonist of “A Difficult Phase” learned Ukrainian from her Kievan grandparents, but Russian only at university.

Interrogations in Soviet-era Czechoslovakia were more likely to include beatings than beef dinners (rare enough for ordinary civilians), but that is what the dissident in “The Quietest Man” continues to be served, even as he refuses to talk. Contrary to the breezy generalizations in the final

story, “Retrospective,” Soviet dissident artists did not typically paint with mud, trash, and “anything they could scavenge off the streets,” but with paint, and burying subversive messages within official-

unfamiliar. The misplaced images of Kiev seem to emerge from some reservoir of shtetl lore, possibly from the writing of any number of other American Jewish authors about “the old world.”

## Her book is careful with its language, and frequently its emotions, but only intermittently with its history.

seeming artwork was not an act of rare bravery, as Antopol suggests, but common practice. In “My Grandmother Tells Me This Story,” Jewish partisans board a train, kill soldiers, and then loudly, repeatedly, purposefully announce their Jewishness to the passengers. This would have certainly led to terrible reprisals against other Jews; is it re-



Molly Antopol. (Courtesy of Debbi Cooper.)

ally likely that exuberance and pride would have overcome this awareness?

Although it is possible to look past or explain away some of these improbabilities, certain patterns begin to emerge. Eastern European countries and their residents appear more backward, oppression is less oppressive, and heroes are less heroic than history suggests. Several stories seem to have been built upon the same framework: We meet people generally considered to have been paragons and watch them topple from their pedestals. As they pile up, such narrative reversals lose the power to surprise.

Does any of this matter? As Virginia Woolf said, “Art is not a copy of the real world; one of the damn things is enough.” But there is a difference between fabricating deliberately, in service of a greater truth, and fabricating unconsciously, out of complacency.

The improbabilities, while dissonant with the times and places Antopol mentions, are not

It is difficult to lose oneself in a world that seems flimsy and second-hand. The reader transforms into an unwilling fact-checker, questioning everything; trust erodes. I know less about Israel and California than I do about the former Soviet Union, but still found myself pulled up short again and again—yanked out of the narrative and into Wikipedia. (Wouldn’t the use of the idiom “ahead of the curve” in the mid-century world of “The Unknown Soldier” be, well, ahead of the curve, as the earliest instances of that idiom seem to have occurred in the 1970s?) Perhaps more importantly, the relatively small untruths in this book interfere with its ability to tell larger truths about characters. The Kievan girlfriend in “The Old World” is melancholic, mysterious, calls the narrator her “big bear,” cries often; these resemblances to stereotypes about Eastern European women strip her of some of her individuality.

In “The Quietest Man,” Tómas—the object of the unusually gentle interrogation—conforms to type in a different, but equally problematic way. Who is Tómas? A man who does not betray his friends and is lionized for his loyalty. But also—and, to the story, more importantly—a lousy father, similar to the self-involved, unsupportive dads we find in Richard Ford and Jennifer Weiner. Very little about this man’s character finds root in his prior experiences, which, while unrealistically mild, still include the arrests of his friends, the loss of his language, the severance of his former life. Tómas’ ease in the world, his entitlement, his general lack of trouble with his past, suggest a youth spent in suburban New Jersey, not a police state.

As an American father, such a character would have been believable, if not strikingly original; as Antopol describes him, he is confusing, but not interesting. It feels as though someone grafted a somewhat exotic Eastern European biography onto a familiar prototype. Perhaps this odd choice marks an attempt to humanize a “heroic” character. But is this the right decision? When writing about someone seemingly larger than life, an author can either stretch her imagination to understand, or shrink a character into more comfortable, but less true, dimensions. Counterfactuals present their own issues, but a reader can’t help wondering how a story that took on more likely—and difficult—circumstances might have turned out. Had Tómas survived a typical interrogation, he may well have been an inadequate father, but of an utterly different (and more compelling) kind.

Vagueness about history and its horrors suffuses and ultimately undermines too many of these stories. Child partisans operate in “Europe”—not any particular country—and kill “soldiers.” Whether the soldiers were German nationals or collaborators would have determined the size of the reprisals, and thus would have been important to the partisans. The grandfather who emigrated from Kiev does not seem to have ever mentioned, in any of the endless stories he apparently told the narrator of “The Old World,” the period during which he emigrated. This “detail” would have figured in his story of escape and, indeed, would have been crucial to it. The fates of the dissident artists whose work a benefactress smuggled abroad in “Retrospective” are never mentioned—were any of them caught and punished for this “collaboration with the West”? In “The Quietest Man,” Tómas is similarly unconcerned with the fates of the dissidents he left behind.

How did the grandparents in the otherwise very good story “A Difficult Phase” manage to leave Kiev? Antopol refers to their “work[ing] so hard to leave”—but that would have been the least of it, if the emigration took place during the early or mid-Soviet era, as it seems to have (but again, the story leaves this essential detail vague). Those who are or were bound by history are unlikely to share Antopol’s somewhat casual attitude toward it. The information she omits or elides is not the irrelevant background she seems to think it is; it’s an essential portion of her characters’ lives, or at any rate, of the kind of real people her characters are meant to depict.

When writing what we don’t know, we can use anything that seems useful. Certainly, family stories (which the author cites as an influence) can spark imagination and help us empathize with characters unlike ourselves. However, empathy is not the same

**When writing about someone seemingly larger than life, an author can either stretch her imagination to understand, or shrink a character into more comfortable, but less true, dimensions.**

thing as understanding. At some point, it becomes important to ask whether a particular idea represents an intuition or a stereotype, to look critically at those wonderful but often less than reliable family stories, to examine a wide range of resources, and ultimately to carve out a solid understanding, while recognizing that it is necessarily incomplete. This is hard, but not impossible. Francis Spufford’s *Red Plenty*, for instance, is the best English-language novel about Khrushchev-era economic policy you’ll ever read. But then, Spufford was deeply interested in that time and place.

Nonetheless, there are parts of the collection I greatly enjoyed. Antopol offers sharp observa-

tions about relationships—especially when those relationships occur at some remove from dramatic historical events—and truthful insights into young adulthood. In “Retrospective,” after dispatching with her odd notions about dissident art, she gives a sensitive portrait of loneliness:

And the thing about being alone is knowing that if you want to enter the world again, you have to be a guest in it—people are doing you a favor by inviting you into their homes for family gatherings and national holidays, and the only way to act is cheerful and easy, even when you’re so depressed you can barely muster the energy to brush your teeth, and to arrive with wine and flowers and always offer to help with the dishes.

I am not sure why the artists, whom Antopol understands much less well than she does this unhappy young man, had to come into the story at all. In a recent essay in the *London Review of Books*, Elif Batuman blames MFA programs for contemporary authors’ tendency to unnecessarily pad the personal with the historical, and that seems to be what, all too often, has happened here. Antopol is undeniably talented, but I was left wondering whether that talent would have been better served had she written more of what she knew and cared about.

*Nadia Kalman lives in Brooklyn and is working on her second novel.*

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# The Shtetl Trap

BY CHAERAN Y. FREEZE

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## *Shtetl: A Vernacular Intellectual History*

by Jeffrey Shandler

Rutgers University Press, 192 pp., \$27.95

## *The Golden Age Shtetl: A New History of Jewish Life in East Europe*

by Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern

Princeton University Press, 448 pp., \$29.95

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As its somewhat forbidding title indicates, Jeffrey Shandler's new book focuses not so much on the Eastern European market town as on the changing ways in which Jews have employed it as "social space to think with," a ready-made idiom with which to address contemporary concerns. Following a brief section titled "Phenomenon," on the historical shtetl itself, Shandler traces its evolving image through several centuries and regions. Thus, collapsing time and space, Shandler introduces readers to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Hasidim, who adopted the names of their towns (i.e., the Belzer, Chortkover, Gerer, and so forth), thereby imbuing them with sanctity and eventually making them "sites of return journeys for [contemporary] hasidim seeking spiritual enhancement."

By contrast, he argues, *maskilim* from Yosef Perl to Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh (Mendele Mokher Seforim) transformed the shtetl into a literary abstraction of stultifying provincialism. In their satires, *shtetlakh* became archetypes with "comical, faux-indigenous names" like Glupsk (in fact, a provincial town, not a shtetl). This is correct as far as it goes, but it fails to note the growing complexity of maskilic attitudes toward the shtetl in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as disillusionment with selective emancipation set in—something one can see, for instance, in the fiction of S.Y. Abramovitsh.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Shandler shows, among other things, how the shtetl was perceived as a repository of authentic Jewish folk culture on the eve of World War I, as a fossil in Soviet Jewish culture, as a symbolic home for American immigrant members of the *landmanshaften* groups (a kind of combination of the Eastern European *kahal* and American fraternal orders), as an object of longing in interwar American Jewish popular culture (as, for instance, in the films of Molly Picon), and as a symbol of loss after the Holocaust. Its increasing remoteness from us now has endowed the shtetl with, Shandler writes, "greater significance as a metonym for a bygone way of life and for its values—intimacy, piety, provinciality, insularity, [and] rootedness."

Shandler also showcases the creative ways in which a generation with no direct memories of Eastern Europe has conjured up images of the shtetl as a form of bereavement. He correctly cautions, however, that these projects can be both liberating and limiting. Through their participation in Hasidic pilgrimages,

heritage tours, and museum visits, Jews have tried to experience the shtetl vicariously, to touch the things, breathe the air, and walk in the footsteps of their ancestors. Such journeys attempt to defy "the destructive will behind the Holocaust," but they also demonstrate the impossibility of return. Projects such as Yaffa Eliach's attempt to recreate a shtetl on 67 acres in Ris-

ple constructed an enduring paradigm of an exclusively Jewish world enveloped in sanctity. Historian Lucy Dawidowicz's anthology, *The Golden Tradition: Jewish Life and Thought in Eastern Europe*, was an important corrective, shifting the focus from the evocation of a timeless ethos back to figures who actually lived in history. Nonetheless, the idea of "the

**The tendency to use the shtetl as a paradigm is a trap that keeps us from seeing, even at a historical distance, actual *shtetlakh* and the people who lived in them.**

hon Lezion, Israel, only accentuate the chasm between the original and the reproduction. Such expressions of reflective nostalgia sometimes acknowledge their contradictions but, to quote, Svetlana Boym, always "cherish the shattered fragments of memory."

According to Shandler, 20<sup>th</sup>-century scholarship on the shtetl, which appeared much later than artistic representations, was always driven by activist agendas. Folklorists like S. An-sky (Shloyme Zanzvyl Rapoport) traveled to *shtetlakh* to gather the raw materials of Jewish folklore that would inform "projects of political action and cultural innovation." Similar motivations lay behind the creation of YIVO in 1925. The author demonstrates how post-Holocaust works such as Abraham Joshua Heschel's *The Earth Is the Lord's: The Inner World of the Jew in Eastern Europe* and Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog's extraordinarily influential *Life Is With Peo-*

*shtetl*," as "a social space to think with" (to return to Shandler's useful formulation)—that is, as a paradigm—has persisted.

Shandler writes that even today's researchers have found it difficult to leave behind "devotional or communally affirmative motives" for their work. One might add that even a sophisticated, erudite study such as Shandler's sometimes appears insufficiently removed from the cultural processes of memory and imagination that it documents. The tendency to use the shtetl as a paradigm is a trap that keeps us from seeing, even at a historical distance, actual *shtetlakh* and the people who lived in them.

In contrast to Shandler's discursive shtetl, Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern's town is exceedingly corporeal (if, in the shtetl, life was "with people," he focuses on a decidedly different class of company



Jewish Wedding by A. Trankowski, ca. 1875–1900. (Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Fritz Schmerl, in memory of Professor Hamilton Wolf, *The Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life*, University of California, Berkeley, 75.19.)

than previous chroniclers). On the basis of extensive work in the archives, Petrovsky-Shtern proposes to radically revise the history of the shtetl. He argues that Jews enjoyed a “golden age” in the shtetl from the 1790s to 1840s:

We begin the story of the shtetl’s golden age at the moment when Russia moved westward and inherited these formerly Polish territories with about one million Jews, one third of whom lived in central Ukraine. For the author, this story also began with a hunt for primary sources. That hunt brought me to the strongholds of previously classified archives, where a wealth of documents has lain dormant for more than two hundred years. To gain access to these documents, I sometimes disguised myself as a Ukrainian clerk, a Soviet speleologist, and a Polar explorer. This unorthodox approach yielded several thousand archival sources in seven languages, from six countries and dozens of depositories that reveal the shtetl in its years of glory.

This gives a good sense of the exuberance of Petrovsky-Shtern’s authorial voice. What of his historical thesis? This period is generally associated with the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815) followed by decades of reaction and repression, so it is certainly a bold one.

The center of the shtetl’s “years of glory,” Petrovsky-Shtern argues, “revolved around [the shtetl’s] economic axis . . . above all, on the market and money,” which was tied to the fortunes of the Polish landlords. Relying on the scholarship of Gershon Hundert, Moshe Rosman, and Adam Teller, Petrovsky-Shtern affirms that the economic alliance between Jews and Polish magnates in the early modern period propelled a burgeoning Jewish economy, especially in the sophisticated leaseholding (*arenda*) system. But he doesn’t agree (or even engage) with these scholars’ conclusion that signs of disintegration were already discernable in the Jewish economy by the last decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. According to Hundert, for instance, the erosion of the Jewish economy not only stemmed from opposition from the Sejm (the lower house of the Polish parliament) and the Catholic Church. There were also structural pressures: Jews found themselves at odds with Polish magnates who sought to “rationalize the administration of their [inefficient] estates”—a process accelerated by the Polish partitions.

Not so, contends Petrovsky-Shtern: The partitions suddenly removed all these pressures, leaving “Jews to their own devices,” no longer under Polish control yet not entirely governed by an inept and corrupt Russian provincial administration. Taking advantage of this “lawless freedom,” Jews and Slavs in the Ukrainian provinces profited from the black market economy, which flourished as a kind of Wild West frontier phenomenon. Petrovsky-Shtern’s golden age met its demise when the imperial state finally decided to crack down on these unruly border towns out of “xenophobia and nationalism.” As a result, he writes, the shtetl disintegrated into a “ramshackle town, perhaps even a village, stricken by poverty and pogroms.”

Despite Petrovsky-Shtern’s bold thesis about the non-interference of the Russian state in shtetl affairs until the 1840s, he begins his story with the meddling policies of Catherine II. In the 1790s, he argues, the Empress’ desire to suppress the subversive Poles led to the establishment of new customhouses, excise taxes, and bans on luxury goods. Such measures, quips the

author, posed few obstacles for Jewish borderland traders: They simply resorted to creative solutions including smuggling contraband, paying bribes to corrupt officials, and forming “gangs” with rough non-Jews, even Cossacks who, he notes, are “notoriously present in Jewish cultural memory as cold-blooded killers of Jews.” These contrabandists may have been “nightmares for Russian administrators,” but Petrovsky-Shtern proudly declares that they were “fighters for freedom for ordinary Jews and Slavs.” It was this “Judeo-Slavic brotherhood,” united against two common enemies—



Molly Picon in *Zipke*, at the Second Avenue Theater New York, 1924. (Photo by Rappoport Studios, New York, © American Jewish Historical Society.)

informers and capricious Russian bureaucrats—that formed the basis for the “golden age.”

The contraband cases are riveting; however, like many court cases, they involve criminals who were caught and prosecuted. Without a more rigorous comparison with law-abiding merchants, it is difficult to judge whether they represent the norm or, as Rabbi Isaac Mikhal of Radzivilov put it, the misdeeds of a few members “from the rabble who invent ways to bring contraband into Russia through their swindling.” Whatever the case, if economic restrictions (during a period of supposed “lawless freedom”) really turned respectable merchants into “a mafia of Jewish contrabandists,” how golden was this age? Moreover, the existence of black markets generally signals economic decline and stagnation, not growth.

According to Petrovsky-Shtern’s golden age model, the Jewish liquor trade and tavern culture were also central to shtetl life. Employing excise tax records, he documents the prominent role of Jews in this lucrative business. The tavern, he writes, provided a space in which to discuss business, engage in matchmaking, gossip with Russian officers and Polish gentry, and, of course, drink. It also allegedly played a mystical role in Hasidism: The rebbes “claimed that the tavern could bring them closer to God.” While alcohol no doubt played an integral part in Hasidic social life, this borders on the 19<sup>th</sup>-century parodies of the *maskilim*.

The social ills of drunkenness and alcoholism that plagued Jewish families who complained to rabbinic authorities such as Rabbi Eliyahu Guttmacher (1796–1874) also find no place in Petrovsky-Shtern’s valorizing account of the tavern. He maintains, in short, that drinking was not only a good thing in the golden age but entirely compatible with economic production. The good times would have continued had the Russian state not intervened to undermine the Polish town owners by removing “one of their main sources of income—the Jewish tavernkeeper.”

Lovers of the rowdy tavern and skillful contrabandists, Jewish residents of the golden age shtetl were, Petrovsky-Shtern writes, “quite the opposite of those meek, short, narrow-shouldered, nearsighted, hunched over, and physically inept images we find in memoirs and travelogues and prose narratives.” Rather, they were robust men who could “handle weaponry” and deliver “horrible obscenities . . . that could knock a police man off his feet.” Zionist historians were wrong; Jews mastered the language of violence “before they discovered Pushkin and Gogol,” which put them on “an equal footing with Christians long before any civil rights did.” For the objects of this violence, this age of criminality could not have been all that golden, but their experiences barely register here.

Not only could Jews fight for themselves; the author observes, based on police records, that they also resembled their Slavic neighbors in physical appearance: “fair-haired and shaven or bearded yet almost always without sidelocks or large, hooked noses.” Perhaps, he suggests, Jews owed their Slavic appearances in the reports to the limited vocabulary of the police clerks or the absence of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century anti-Semitic discourses imported from Western Europe. But part of what made it a golden age, the author suggests, is that even the police described Jews “as genuine Slavs,” a sign of Ukrainian interethnic harmony.

If Petrovsky-Shtern’s archival research offers us fresh materials on economic matters—albeit framed with dubious generalizations—his treatment of family and women moves us decidedly backwards. In fact, notwithstanding his anti-sentimentalist stance, his own subtitles strike a nostalgic note: “Beautifying a Housewife,” “Holy Sex” (with a nod to Shmuley Boteach, no less), “Protecting the Family,” and so forth. His treatment of these topics is shockingly crude and simplistic, reminiscent, again, of 19<sup>th</sup>-century maskilic satire. He writes that the matriarchs ruled the roost while their burly husbands only imagined that they had power. Many Jewish wives—“if not most . . . resembled Toibe Sosye from Mendele’s autobiographical novel—a corpulent woman with a shrieking voice.” Even if every woman in the shtetl actually weighed four hundred pounds and had a voice like a belfry, what would that prove about the family?

And what can one say of the following in an ostensibly serious work of history that invokes Clifford Geertz’s ideal of thick description and yet describes marital relations as follows?

To emphasize that family really matters, Yiddish proverbs reinforce the importance of figuring out the sexual urges of one’s wife and meeting them half way, especially those of a young wife, who in Yiddish is described as a devotee of *di groyse kishke*—which in this case does not refer to the traditional Sabbath meal.



*Feast of Trumpets by Aleksander Gierymski, ca. 1884, depicts Hasidic Jews performing tashlikh on Rosh Hashanah, on the banks of the Vistula River in Warsaw.*

It is hard to know what is worse here: the brazen generalization or the winking innuendo that accompanies it.

Petrovsky-Shtern also contends that silence was the “best variant of self-defense” against rape for women “chose to preserve family over justice.” They had to depend on the community to resort to “mob violence” or take the offender to a rabbinical court. Perhaps a more informed discussion of how 19<sup>th</sup>-century societies dealt with rape would have been instructive in explaining women’s silence and shame.

As a result of modernity, the author declares the number of “Jewish illegitimate children and vagabond orphans skyrocketed, and promiscuity became a cultural norm.” Regrettably, he fails to muster any sources to document this trajectory from “holy sex” to widespread promiscuity. More important, the very cases of wife beating, marital rape, divorces, and *agunot* that Petrovsky-Shtern utilizes to demonstrate the heroic efforts of the community to preserve the sanctity of the family actually suggest serious problems, not a golden age.

The golden age thesis also flounders in his discussion of print culture, which allegedly flourished under the radar of the Russian state until the 1830s. The author claims that independent Jewish printing

presses were not only ubiquitous but also published a disproportionate number of Hasidic and kabbalistic books (though most were, in fact, reprints). In 1836, the Russian state took a greater interest in the “harmful content” of Jewish books, closed most of the Jewish presses (except in Zhitomir and Vilna), and imposed stricter censorship. This is all well known, but according to Petrovsky-Shtern “reading a censored kabbalistic or Hasidic book persecuted by the regime became for Jews what touching the Turin Shroud or kissing a healing icon was for a devoted Christian.” Concrete documentation would have been helpful in appreciating such an intriguing comparison.

The demise of the golden age shtetl, contends Petrovsky-Shtern, was a byproduct of the czarist regime’s conquest of the western borderlands and suppression of Polish economic, political, social, and cultural institutions. Just as the state’s negligence had created the conditions for flourishing *shtetlakh*, “state-supported xenophobia” suffocated them by “debilitating their markets and weakening trade networks” and forcibly supporting administrative towns like Zhitomir. In fact, however, cities represented an expansion of the local economy, not its contraction. What really “brought down” the

*shtetlakh* was the railroad, not the establishment of Russian provincial centers. Moreover, the real threat of Polish nationalism was in the northwestern provinces of Lithuania, not in the *shtetlakh* of southern Ukraine, as demonstrated in the Polish Uprisings of 1863–1864.

Equally problematic is the author’s argument that as Jewish merchants migrated to new centers like Odessa, the vibrant shtetl became “an impoverished godforsaken village,” rife with “provincialism, timidity and stupidity, ghettoization, uncivilized manners, a coarse accent, pedestrian thoughts, and bad taste.” Such a theory gives far too much credit to the czarist regime, which could barely enforce its laws of registration among the Jews in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, let alone engineer this feat of cultural transformation. Petrovsky-Shtern also reads literary satires of the shtetl as if it were straightforward reportage. Rather than going “beyond colloquial stereotypes” of the sentimental shtetl, *The Golden Age Shtetl* more or less reverses them: brawny Jews, vibrant black markets, Slavic-Jewish interethnic harmony, the impious tavern as the center of social life, sexually starved corpulent women, and so forth.

The dizzying wealth of archival sources drawn upon in this book is impressive, but often enough they undermine the credibility of the historical portrait Petrovsky-Shtern wishes to paint. (In other instances, the details from these unpublished sources are simply incongruous—we are given little background, for instance, on an amazing and rare count of Rabbi Abraham Twersky’s “447 books,” incongruously noted in a policeman’s report about criminal schemes against the “Sovereign Emperor.”)

In analyzing the fascinating case of Gershko Kapeliushnik, the hat maker, Petrovsky-Shtern seems to me to take too much liberty with his sources. The Christian apprentices accused him of uttering words that were “tempting and blasphemous for Christians.” Petrovsky-Shtern claims that the apprentices’ reluctance to provide details “implies that Gershko enticed them with common Judaic invectives against Christian theology: Jesus was a poor bastard and the immaculate conception was obstetrical nonsense.” If “bastard discourse” were so common in this time and place, one would expect other similar cases to be adduced as well.

Despite Petrovsky-Shtern’s rich base of archival sources, he does not show that a golden age of the shtetl ever existed. He is also not the first to depict a rough-and-tumble shtetl. Consider Sholem Asch’s fictional shtetl “Koyl,” where Reb Israel Szochlin and his rugged sons, “who were no students,” resided, surrounded by their Jewish-Slav gang, their livestock, and many taverns. Though the inhabitants of the shtetl felt thoroughly ashamed of these coarse boors, butchers, and fishmongers, “if a shepherd set his dog on them, or a drunken Gentile started beating Jews—everyone, old and young ran screaming into the [Koyler] Street.” Even this new history, based on archival sources from the former Soviet Union, falls into the trap of painting yet another paradigmatic shtetl in broad strokes and garish colors.

ChaeRan Y. Freeze is an associate professor of Near Eastern and Judaic studies at Brandeis University. Her most recent book, co-written with Jay M. Harris, is *Everyday Jewish Life in Imperial Russia: Select Documents, 1772–1914*.



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# Tradition! Tradition!

BY STEPHEN J. WHITFIELD

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## *Wonder of Wonders: A Cultural History of Fiddler on the Roof*

by Alisa Solomon

Metropolitan Books, 448 pp., \$32

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Judged by the sublimity of its songs or the freshness of its form, *Fiddler on the Roof* hardly merits inclusion on the short list of the greatest Broadway musicals. Unlike the creators of *Show Boat*, *Oklahoma!*, or *West Side Story* composer Jerry Bock, lyricist Sheldon Harnick, and playwright Joseph Stein did not reimagine the possibilities of the genre. *A Chorus Line* enjoyed an even longer Broadway run, *My Fair Lady* is more enchanting, and several other musicals have more and bigger hit songs. But has any musical ever exceeded the expectations of its creators more spectacularly than did *Fiddler on the Roof*?

Opening in September 1964, *Fiddler* was supposed to do little more than satisfy Jewish nostalgia. Instead, it managed to become a wonder of wonders, insinuating itself into the hearts of millions of playgoers around

tion from a Yiddish storyteller came close—against all odds—to achieving universal appeal. *Fiddler* thus defied the suspicion that staging Eastern European Jewry would be too parochial to sell tickets to the multitudes that popular entertainment covets.

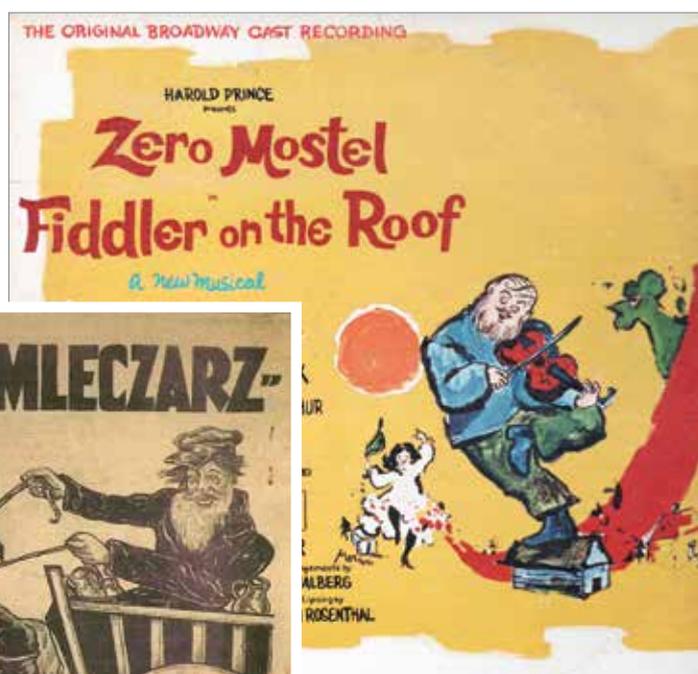
Based on research in four dozen archives, as well as extensive interviews and a copious published literature, *Wonder of Wonders* may be the best volume ever written about an American musical. Solomon writes in a sprightly prose that neither condescends nor gushes, and she has generally done her own translations from the Yiddish. Little needs to be added (or corrected) to the author's painstaking yet thrilling effort to trace how half a century of convulsive Jewish history was needed before the haunting power of roughly half a dozen tales of Sholem-Aleichem could make it to Broadway. There, *Fiddler* broke a box-office record (later eclipsed), before playing to packed houses from Tel Aviv to Tokyo,

variably weep while vaguely imagining that the tune actually comes from Anatevka rather than Tin Pan Alley.

How can such unanticipated success be accounted for? Triumphs in popular entertainment are often mysterious. Enterprises with no ambition larger than the desire to momentarily attract audiences sometimes persevere as an enduring source of delight. During tryouts in Detroit, the creators of *Fiddler* were gripped with the white-knuckle fear that no one would fill the seats once the Hadassah benefit parties evaporated. Yet *Fiddler* somehow managed to satisfy needs and to tap yearnings that those responsible for it did not realize were there. In the succeeding decades, tastes would shift, and Broadway would cease to be central to the nation's musical culture. And yet somehow this show has not faded from popular consciousness or collective memory, which is another way of saying that (miracle of miracles) *Fiddler on the Roof* has actually transcended a genre that now survives on the margins of American culture, often depending on the life support of revivals. Already four revivals of *Fiddler* have been mounted on Broadway, Solomon notes. The most recent (featuring Alfred Molina and then Harvey Fierstein as Tevye) lasted for nearly two years, and its 781 performances easily set yet another box-office record for revivals.

No small part of Solomon's explanation for such impact and durability is—no other word will do—genius. It was Jerome Robbins, the director and choreographer, who realized how decisively the show was about “tradition”—how to honor it and how to adapt it. It was he who represented most poignantly the ambivalence that Jews such as him felt toward the obligations of tradition. Though he shared his family name of Rabinowitz with the author who had adopted the cheerful pen name of Sholem-Aleichem, the ballet choreographer turned Broadway director had long deemed Jewishness more a burden than a blessing and had sought throughout much of his career to wriggle out from the claims of peoplehood and of Jewish destiny. *Wonder of Wonders* depicts the interior struggle that Robbins—tortured, indecisive, ferocious—waged in facing an artistic challenge that could not be isolated from the elusive meaning of ancestral loyalties. No one in the production, or indeed on Broadway, was more afflicted with psychic demons (or inflicted more *tzuris* upon his collaborators) than Jerome Robbins.

Part of the difficulty came from his insistence upon casting Zero Mostel, a 230-pound dynamo, as Tevye. In 1953 Robbins had named names before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, which subpoenaed Mostel two years later. Zero, who invoked the Fifth Amendment, was blacklisted. The actor therefore switched to painting before triumphing off-Broadway and then on it. The son of



Undated poster, left, advertising Sholem-Aleichem's Tevye der Milkhiker, (*Tevye the Dairyman*) performed by the Kraków Jewish Theater. Above, the original 1964 record cover of *Fiddler on the Roof*.



the globe. More than a theatrical production, *Fiddler* became a phenomenon, and when the Hollywood version appeared in 1971, interest in the fate of Anatevka seemed practically universal. Sometimes, apparently, it takes a village to make a global village.

How this process occurred, from inspiration to impact, is the subject of Alisa Solomon's terrific book. Though subtitled “a cultural history,” it is more than that. For it is also a work of social history, and it provides a riveting account of how an adapta-

tion from a Yiddish storyteller came close—against all odds—to achieving universal appeal. *Fiddler* thus defied the suspicion that staging Eastern European Jewry would be too parochial to sell tickets to the multitudes that popular entertainment covets.

Based on research in four dozen archives, as well as extensive interviews and a copious published literature, *Wonder of Wonders* may be the best volume ever written about an American musical. Solomon writes in a sprightly prose that neither condescends nor gushes, and she has generally done her own translations from the Yiddish. Little needs to be added (or corrected) to the author's painstaking yet thrilling effort to trace how half a century of convulsive Jewish history was needed before the haunting power of roughly half a dozen tales of Sholem-Aleichem could make it to Broadway. There, *Fiddler* broke a box-office record (later eclipsed), before playing to packed houses from Tel Aviv to Tokyo,

an Orthodox rabbi, Mostel never let Robbins forget which one of them was more deeply immersed in the rich Eastern European Jewish culture to which the play paid tribute. But Robbins was evidently a

as that of Ethel Merman in *Annie Get Your Gun* or Barbra Streisand in *Funny Girl*, but Solomon rightly notes that *Fiddler* clicked with audiences even after he had left the cast. Something was happening in early 1960s America, and neither the charm of the performers nor the claims of nostalgia can fully account for the excitement that *Fiddler* stirred when it opened. The multicultural moment had not yet arrived, but public space could suddenly be carved out for *Yiddishkeit* (or at least vestiges of it) to be expressed without anxiety.

The 1960s began with Jack Lemmon announcing near the end of *The Apartment* that “I’ve decided to become a *mentsch*,” but so unsure were co-scenarists Billy Wilder and Izzy Diamond of their audience’s Yiddish comprehension that Lemmon was obliged to define that noun (“a human being”). Mark Cohen’s recent biography of comedian Allan Sherman shows just how suddenly Jewish in-jokes and allusions went mainstream: In 1962 and 1963 all three of his LPs about “my son, the”

(fill in the blank) went gold. The decade ended in 1969 with the publication of *Portnoy’s Complaint*, a best-seller with more than a few Yiddish words besides *mentsch*. Such a shift in the tectonic plates of American culture could not have been predicted.

The astonishing success of *Fiddler on the Roof* can certainly be attributed to its distinctive dramatic and musical virtues, but the emergence of unabashed Jewish ethnicity in the early 1960s undoubtedly gave a musical about the Old Country a welcome boost.

In 1939 the *Forverts* found Maurice Schwartz’s film *Tevye der Milkhiker* to be a betrayal, and condemned the film because “merely a shadow of Sholem-Aleichem has remained.” Joseph Stein wanted the vocabulary of *Fiddler* to be 99 percent English, so it was hardly surprising that when the play opened, Irving Howe found it “disheartening” and “a tasteless jumble,” and famously ridiculed *Anatevka* as “the cutest shtetl we never had.” This was at least a little unfair. After all, Act I ends with a pogrom, and Act II ends with the eviction of the town’s Jews. For her part, Alisa Solomon is wryly appreciative of what *Fiddler* has wrought. It has become, she writes, “a global touchstone for an astonishing range of concerns: Jewish identity, American immigrant narratives, generational conflict, communal cohesion, ethnic authenticity.” Half a century ago the popularity of *Fiddler* seemed to prove that America had fully accepted Jewishness. Since then, *Fiddler* has become a cultural touchstone of Jewishness itself. Now that highbrow resistance to this exuberant and tender musical has faded, it has simply become irresistible.



Maurice Schwartz in *Tevye*, the restored 1939 Yiddish feature film. (Courtesy of The National Center for Jewish Film, [www.jewishfilm.org](http://www.jewishfilm.org).)

quick study. After the curtain came down on opening night, his father wept as he hugged him, and asked, “How did you know all that?”

Mostel did deliver one of the memorable, must-see performances in a postwar musical, as iconic

Stephen J. Whitfield is Max Richter Chair in American Civilization at Brandeis University and the author of *In Search of American Jewish Culture* (Brandeis University Press).

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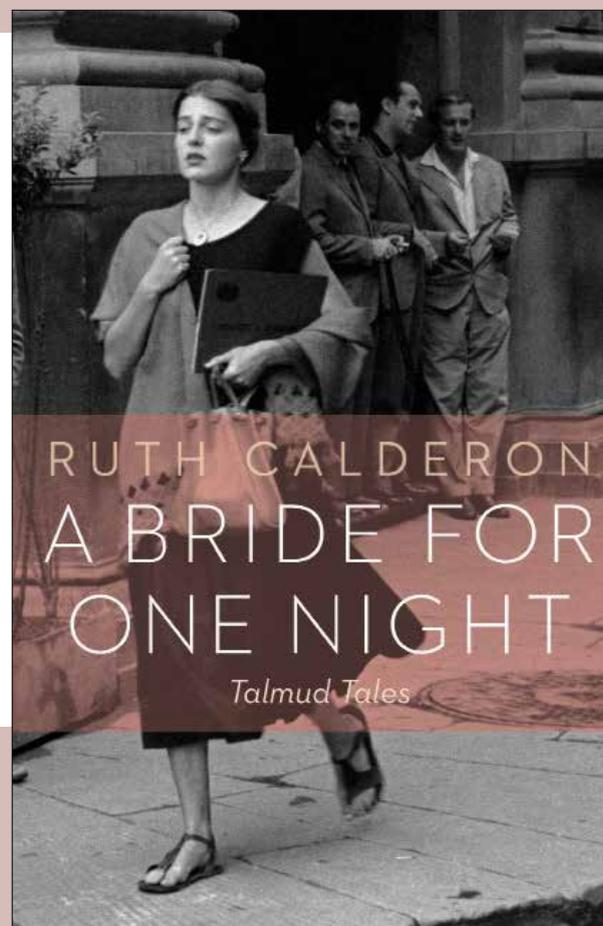
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Ruth Calderon was elected to the Israeli Knesset in January 2013. She became a national celebrity when she taught a page of Talmud in the Israeli parliament, arguing that the text was the heritage of the entire Jewish people. In her new book, she continues her quest to provide a modern take on classic Talmudic tales.



# I'm Still Here

BY SHOSHANA OLIDORT

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## *In the Illuminated Dark: Selected Poems of Tuvia Ruebner*

by Tuvia Ruebner, translated by Rachel Tzvia Back  
Hebrew Union College Press and University of Pittsburgh Press, 396 pp., \$39.95

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Sadness lurks on almost every page of *In the Illuminated Dark*, a large, generous collection of the distinguished Israeli poet Tuvia Ruebner's work. The book, which includes poems spanning Ruebner's entire long career (he is now 90), is dedicated to his sister Litz, who perished at the hands of the Nazis in 1942, when she was 13 years old. In an untitled poem immediately following the dedication, Ruebner writes:

Between one voice and the next  
suddenly she's

here, fleet-footed gazelle, quiet

as a shadow falling  
over my open eyes

There is tragic irony in the image of a fleet-footed gazelle that was unable to flee; in the original Hebrew, it harkens back to the blessing that Jacob gave to his son Naphtali. In her illuminating introduction poet-translator Rachel Tzvia Back quotes Ruebner as saying that the loss of his sister remains for him "the essence of grief and agony." The untitled dedicatory poem closes:

I'm still here and she's  
gone.

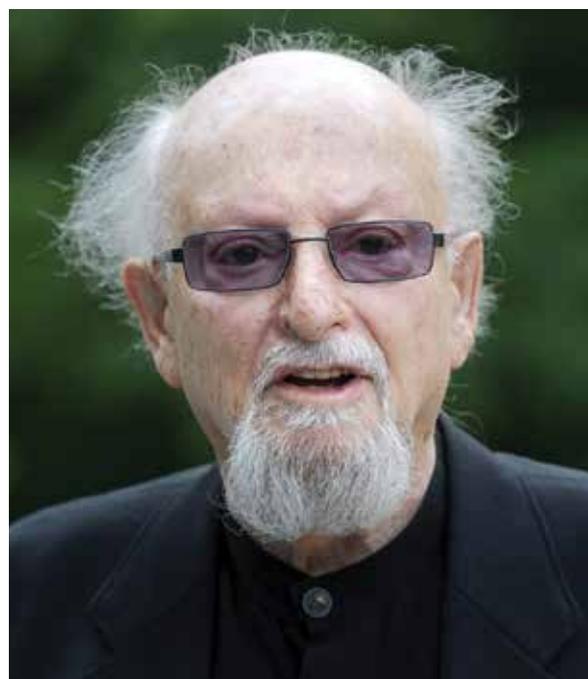
One has the impression that all of Ruebner's poetry is an attempt at making sense of that unthinkable reality. Nonetheless, Ruebner, who alone among his family was able to leave Slovakia in 1941, does not want to be labeled a Holocaust poet. "There is no connection between poetry and the Holocaust," he told me when we met in late fall in his home on Kibbutz Merchavia, in northern Israel.

Although he has been the recipient of many honors, including the Israel Prize, acclaim did not come to Ruebner until late in his career, and *In the Illuminated Dark* is his first book to appear in English. Back, who has also translated Lea Goldberg and Hamutal Bar Yosef, remarks in her introduction that "the translator's craft and art is a confluence of paradoxes," a craft that requires one to constantly negotiate the line between creativity and fidelity, and also between making the poem "at home" in translation and preserving the otherness of the original language. Pointing to Franz Rosenzweig, who sought, in his translation of the great

12<sup>th</sup>-century Hebrew poet Yehuda Halevi into German "not to Germanize what is foreign but to make foreign what is German," and to the Russian formalists' notion of defamiliarization in poetry and in poetic language, Back insists that any good translation of poetry must include an element of estrangement through which it evokes the original language.

## Ruebner, who alone among his family was able to leave Slovakia in 1941, does not want to be labeled a Holocaust poet.

In her translation of "Father," about the loss of Ruebner's son, who disappeared on a trip to South America in the 1980s after his Israeli army service, Back does just that:



Tuvia Ruebner, June 2012. (Photo by Candy Welz, DDP Images/Sipa USA.)

Like a lidless sleep  
like a soundless voice  
fingers with no hand  
the father of a lost son

slowly becomes mute.

This juxtaposition of paradoxes is meant to jolt the reader, but the poem's culmination amounts to a dissolution of this internal rhythm and ultimately of language itself. Back translates the Hebrew *bli afapayim*, literally: without eyelids, as "lidless," a word that jumps out at the reader because of its very foreignness. And yet, while it is not a literal translation, lidless captures the essence not only of the meaning, but of the word itself—the sounds and shapes of the original language; the word *afapayim* includes a repetition of sound *af-ap* that is replicated in Back's translation: lid-less.

Although Ruebner has suffered tremendous loss, he does not cut a tragic figure. Certainly, that was not my impression when I first caught sight of him on the kibbutz where he has lived since 1942. I was lost (the kibbutz has no street addresses) and he was driving toward me in a kind of go-cart dressed in a long, grey housecoat. Ruebner

exuded warmth and seemed amused by my inability to find my way around.

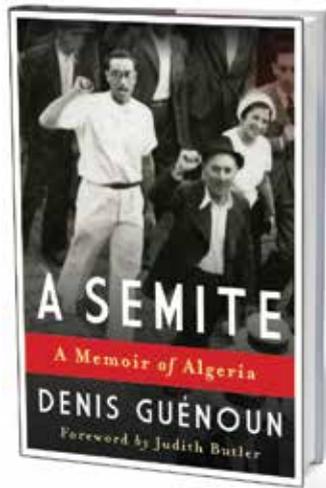
Even later, as he spoke of the harrowing loss of his son—who was literally lost without a trace while travelling in South America—a loss that came on the heels of so many others, the murder of his parents and sister by the Nazis, the violent death of his first wife in a bus accident, there wasn't the kind of heaviness one associates with those who have endured too much. Listening to Ruebner speak of his life with a directness and simplicity that is rare even among those with less calamitous histories, I couldn't help but wonder how someone who has suffered so much can continue not only to live, but to find the joy in living. Although loss has shaped Ruebner and his work, it does not define him. In "Wonder," from his 2011 collection *Contradictory Poems*, Ruebner writes:

If after everything that has happened  
you can still hear the blackbird,  
the tufted lark at dawn, the bulbul and the  
honey-bird—  
don't be surprised that happiness is watching  
the clouds being wind-carried away,  
is drinking morning coffee, being able to  
execute all the body's needs  
is walking along the paths without a cane  
and seeing the burning colors of sunset.

A human being can bear almost everything  
and no one knows when and where  
happiness will overcome him.

The poem's suggestion that happiness can be found in the most mundane aspects of our lives may seem trite, but what Ruebner offers here is the notion that happiness isn't so much something we seek out as it is inherent to life itself—as much in the ability to notice the "clouds being wind-carried away" as in the ability to "execute all the body's needs." For Ruebner, to live is to exist in a state of wonderment, and it is precisely in that state that happiness finally overcomes us.

In "Angelus Novus," Ruebner responds to Walter Benjamin's famous description of the Paul Klee painting by the same name:



## A Semite

*A Memoir of Algeria*

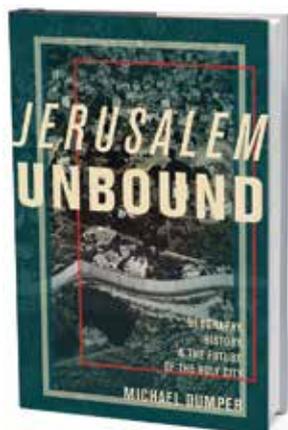
**DENIS GUÉNOUN**

*Foreword by Judith Butler*

*Translated by Ann Smock and William Smock*

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My face is on my back. I see  
heaps and heaps of ruins.  
Tiny hopes were tossed aloft, scorched  
they plummeted into the dark.  
I was spewn out.  
I rose up.  
I was reborn  
translucent as smoke.

Mute time  
blows from childhood’s pine groves,  
presses on my stubborn heart,  
spreads my wings.  
I am pushed back toward what is coming next.  
When will he come, the one to extinguish the  
fire in my eyes?

Where Benjamin’s Angel of History has his “face . . . turned toward the past,” Ruebner suggests an even more uncanny image, “My face is on my back.” The wreckage that Benjamin’s angel sees piling up is tragically real for Ruebner, who, looking back, sees “heaps and heaps of ruins,” a catastrophic piling up of personal tragedies that begins with him being “spewn out,” literally, from Slovakia, the country of his birth. Time is mute, inept; what we call “progress,” notes Benjamin’s angel, is, in fact, a terrible storm. This is what pushes Ruebner “back toward what is coming next.”

Some of Ruebner’s best poems are those that reflect on the act, or art, of writing itself. Take, for example, the opening lines of “Awakening”:

I don’t begin  
my poem begins  
me, again

When I asked him about his method in writing, the poet explained that he sets out with no intention except simply to “find the right words . . . words that don’t lie.” In “A Guide for the Young Poet” Ruebner offers a study in contradictions:

Be faithful to the forsaken  
Study the melody  
with sealed ears  
Listen with your hands  
Tap out the rhythm  
without moving a finger  
[. . .]  
Now you can begin  
by the sweat of your brow.

What he’s suggesting here, it seems to me, is that poetry is born out of the ability and willingness to engage with and live inside the conflicts that life presents. To quote the venerable American-Jewish poet Jerome Rothenberg, “the poetic process, seems . . . when it’s really working, most to allow room for contradiction and for conflict.” Thus, in “Farewell from a Friend,” a poem dedicated to his close friend and poet Dan Pagis, Ruebner writes: “We walked together each on his own path.”

Ruebner’s “Testimony” is a political poem that gives voice to the poet’s disavowal of Israeli nation-

alism but, perhaps more importantly, throws into question the very meaning of home:

I exist in order to say

this house is not a house  
place of confiscations, parched rock, fear

Ruebner has said of himself that he has no homeland, except, perhaps, in people and in the poetry that allows him to give expression to that which cannot otherwise be broached.

Each poem, Ruebner told me, is like a world unto itself with its own internal laws. To write poems is to take one’s experiences, thoughts, emotions, and “transfer them to the state, let us say, of the poem.” In this way, one can speak of the traumatic past, because it is “over there,” in the world of the poem. And yet, said Ruebner, poetry does not, ultimately, set him free of the past, of his memories. “I would have liked to forget,” Ruebner told me, “but I cannot.”

Although he rejects the label of Holocaust poet, Ruebner acknowledges that poems written after



*Angelus Novus* by Paul Klee, 1920. (The Israel Museum, Jerusalem.)

the war must bear witness somehow—even if only through a kind of stuttering. Commenting on Theodor Adorno’s famous pronouncement that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” Ruebner told me “it’s barbaric in the way that it’s barbaric that after a forest fire new trees grow.” Adorno was right, he said, “but poetry is so fundamental . . . it bursts forth.”

*Shoshana Olidort is a freelance writer and editor. Her work has appeared in The New Republic and The Times Literary Supplement.*

# Something Was Missing

BY DAVID C. JACOBSON

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## *A Bride for One Night: Talmud Tales*

by Ruth Calderon

translated by Ilana Kurshan

Jewish Publication Society, 184 pp., \$21.95

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**A**fter she was elected to Knesset last year, Ruth Calderon was invited to deliver her inaugural speech from the dais. The invitation was a matter of Israeli parliamentary custom, but the speech was something else. Calderon read a talmudic legend about a certain Rabbi Rehumi and his wife in the original Aramaic (“for the music,” she said), following it with a Hebrew translation and discussion.

Calderon’s Knesset Talmud lesson was a very public demonstration—it has over 250,000 hits on YouTube—of the significance of the secular Israeli “return to the Jewish bookcase” (*ha-hazara la-aron ha-sefarim ha-yehudi*), which began in the 1960s and picked up momentum over the last two decades. In her Knesset speech, Calderon told the story of how she and many of her contemporaries came to the study of rabbinic texts. As a pupil in the secular Jewish Israeli school system she had felt that “something was missing.” The schools she attended had aimed to liberate their students from diaspora values by de-emphasizing Jewish history and literature from the period of the destruction of the Second Temple until the rise of Zionism and the establishment of the State of Israel (“from the Tanakh to the Palmach”). She acknowledged that her teachers largely succeeded in inspiring their pupils to adopt this identity of “the new Hebrew . . . [who] realized their dream and became a courageous, practical, and suntanned soldier,” but it was not enough:

[F]or me, this contained—I contained—a void. I did not know how to fill that void, but when I first encountered the Talmud and became completely enamored with it, its language, its humor, its profound thinking, its modes of discussion, and the practicality, humanity, and maturity that emerge from its lines, I sensed that I had found the love of my life, what I had been lacking.

Following high school and her army service, Calderon began to immerse herself in Jewish studies at Ha-midrasha at Oranim, the pioneering kibbutz-sponsored institution for the return to the Jewish bookcase, and later received a master’s degree and a doctorate in Talmud at The Hebrew University. While in graduate school, she also studied at the Shalom Hartman Institute. She went on to found an influential pluralistic study house called Elul in Jerusalem in 1989 and another,

called Alma, in Tel Aviv in 1996, before eventually becoming a candidate for Knesset for Yair Lapid’s Yesh Atid party.

**“When I first encountered the Talmud,” Calderon said, “I found the love of my life.”**

Rabbinic legends have been of central interest to the returners to the Jewish bookcase, and collections of such legends that attempt to make them accessible to the general reader have been composed in Israel in recent years by such writers as Ari Elon, Admiel Kosman, and Ruhama Weiss (all of them following in the giant footsteps of Bialik and Ravnitzky’s *Sefer Ha-aggada*). Ruth Calderon’s contribution to this growing genre



Yesh Atid parliament member Ruth Calderon at a conference on Jewish and Arab women in Israel, December 18, 2013. (Photo by Miriam Alster/FLASH90.)

was titled in Hebrew *Hashuq. Habayit. Halev: Aggadot Talmudiyot* (The Market. The Home. The Heart: Talmudic Legends). It was published in 2001, and the Jewish Publication Society has now brought out an English edition of this important book under a different title, *A Bride for One Night: Talmud Tales* (well translated into English by Ilana Kurshan).

Calderon selected 18—one of which is not included in the English edition—brief rabbinic legends from talmudic and midrashic sources. In addition to her reflections on the contemporary significance of each story, Calderon presents what she refers to in the Introduction as “a midrash, or creative retelling that springs from my own imagination.”

It isn’t easy for the contemporary reader to ap-

preciate rabbinic stories. They emerge as part of the associative flow of talmudic discussions of law and legend, and only a person trained in the reading of rabbinic texts would even be able to locate them. (They are not, needless to say, titled.) Many of them are written in Aramaic, a language not comprehensible to most Israelis. Furthermore, they are written in a minimalist style, focusing on actions tersely described and brief dialogues, with little attention to the outward appearances or inner thoughts and feelings of the characters. Calderon overcomes the difficulties this all presents for her readers by extracting each legend from its original context, when necessary translating it into Hebrew (now rendered in English), giving it a title, and explaining cultural references. In her retellings, Calderon provides the details contemporary readers might expect, especially those that provide greater insights into the inner lives of the characters.

In an effort to appreciate these stories, readers must also come to terms with the enormous gap between the values, lifestyle, and world view of the authors of these legends and themselves. As Calderon puts it in the Introduction:

The [legendary] landscape at first seems very different from the world we know. It is wide and topsy-turvy, frightening and funny. It is a world in which the impossible happens: God asks to be blessed by a human being; the head of a talmudic academy marries a woman for one night in a strange city; a mortal steals the knife of the Angel of

Death; the wife of a Torah scholar dresses up as the most famous prostitute in Babylonia; and a kindergarten teacher causes rain to fall.

Not only do they strain credulity, these ancient tales can also be morally problematic. “Sometimes,” Calderon freely admits, “I come across talmudic stories that irritate or provoke me. The cultural milieu in which the rabbis lived and wrote relates to women, non-Jews, children, and slaves in a way that I consider immoral.” Calderon compensates by recasting these legends in ways that are more in keeping with contemporary values, but she also shows that sometimes a careful reading of the story reveals that the author is as disturbed by how characters relate to each other as the contemporary reader.

In the original version of the legend she calls “Yishmael, My Son, Bless Me” when the High Priest Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha enters the Holy of Holies in the Temple on Yom Kippur, God asks him to bless Him, and Rabbi Yishmael prays to God that He be able to relate to humanity with mercy. In her retelling of the story, Calderon draws the reader into an account of the inner feelings of Rabbi Yishmael, who is plagued with self-doubt as he undertakes his ritual responsibilities. In her reflections, she rereads the story as a divine sanction for the need to transcend ritual for a more spiritual approach to religion, a message that is likely to resonate with most contemporary readers. “A request [by God] for assistance from a human being,” she writes, “allows for a religious encounter that is anarchic in the sense that it requires no hierarchy of intermediaries. The language of the divine-human conversation is not one of ritual symbols. The fire pan of incense is rendered superfluous when true revelation takes place.”

The legend titled “Libertina” in the English translation is the story of a woman who disguises herself as a prostitute in order to seduce her rabbinic husband who for many years had withdrawn from marital relations with the apparent purpose of living up to an ascetic religious ideal. In her reading of the story Calderon sees the wife as a feminist heroine: “The story ... tears at the fabric of the unstated agreement between men who repress and women who are repressed. The story dares to ask whether such social control is necessary or even desirable.”

In the legend that gives Calderon’s book its

(English) title, it is told that when two important rabbinic sages would travel to a city far from where they lived with their wives, they would each marry a woman for one day and then divorce her, a practice that flies in the face of all that the contemporary reader would expect from an authoritative Jewish text. Indeed, even traditional interpreters have had to struggle to make moral sense of the story. Calderon transforms it into the first-person account of a widow who agrees to be “a bride for a night.” In Calderon’s telling, the woman makes her motivation clear: She is told that when the rabbi divorces her after their legally sanctioned one-night stand, she will receive the money that all married women are due from their husbands when they divorce, and she looks forward to this sexual encounter as a respite, albeit brief, from her loneliness. In Calderon’s version the respite turns out to be more than temporary when the rabbi invites the woman to come home with him and continue to be his wife.

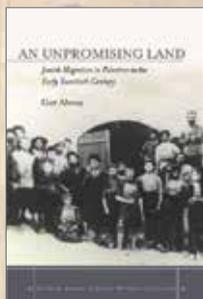
There is no question that Calderon’s interpretations creatively mediate between the cultural realities behind rabbinic legends and those of her contemporary Israeli readers. However, the danger in any retelling or reinterpretation is that reducing the strangeness of the text limits the perspective of readers. Calderon’s retelling of each legend in a more expansive style that conforms to the expectations of contemporary readers may prevent them from directly experiencing the ambiguity of the minimalistic rabbinic style. For example, the original text of “Libertina” gives no explanation for the rabbi’s abstinence or his wife’s seductive ruse.

Calderon provides explanations, but in so doing she deprives readers of the pleasure of seeking their own reasons.

To return to our three examples, I can see much justification and value in Calderon’s reading of “Yishmael, My Son, Bless Me” as a radical subversion of conventional theology and “Libertina” as a penetrating critique of rabbinic asceticism and, more generally, situations in which men dominate women. However, her retelling of “A Bride for One Night” strikes me as a forced attempt to transform what seems to be an ancient exploitative practice into a romantic story with a happy ending. Even when told from the perspective of the widow, her initial agreement to sleep with a man for monetary gain looks uncomfortably like a legally sanctioned form of prostitution, and her desire to escape from loneliness in a brief encounter comes across as emotionally misguided. Moreover, even in Calderon’s alternative ending, it would appear that the woman ends up living in a polygamous marriage with at least one other wife (a permissible practice at the time). Nonetheless, *A Bride for One Night* highlights Ruth Calderon’s remarkable skill in bridging the cultural gap between the rabbis and contemporary readers and the significant contribution she has made to demonstrating the relevance of rabbinic legends in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

David C. Jacobson is professor of Judaic studies at Brown University. He is currently writing a book on the resurgence of interest in rabbinic legends in contemporary Israeli culture.

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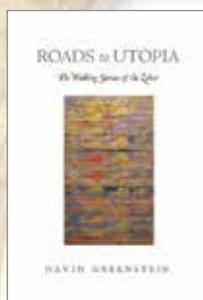
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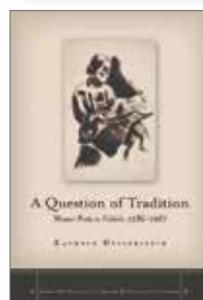
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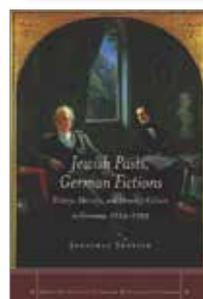
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# Rallying Round the Flags

BY ALLAN ARKUSH

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## *Jews and the Military: A History*

by Derek J. Penslar

Princeton University Press, 376 pp., \$29.95

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“Never before in history,” Derek Penslar observes, “had so many Jews been mobilized for battle” as in World War I. There were “over one million in the Allied forces and some 450,000 among the armies of the Central Powers.”

Inevitably, large numbers of Jews wearing the uniform of one country ended up killing large numbers of fellow Jews wearing the uniform of another. In his account of Jewish suffering in the battleground areas of the Pale of Settlement, the Jewish writer S. An-sky reports of a Jew “who had bayoneted a soldier, who, just before expiring, gasped the Sh'ma. His killer, so the story went, went mad.”

This oft-retold tale is much older than World War I, Penslar informs us. He traces its origins to a speech delivered in 1857 by Esdra Pontremoli, an Italian rabbi and educator:

Who does not remember the moving case of the French-Jewish soldier brought down to us from the stories of the Napoleonic wars? This man is lying on the ground soaked in his own blood; the shadow of death already covers his eyes; he cries out in vain. The bloodthirsty victor stands over him, lays on him a foot ready to deliver the fatal blow. Steel flashes, the vanquished man falls to his knees, a cry rings out: *Shema Yisroel!* And what do we see now? We see the steel fall from the hand of the victor: we see that same victor reach down to the fallen soldier, dress his wound, and help him to his feet. The final cry of the dying believer rose from the throat of the wounded man. These men recognized each other in that moment: they were brothers in faith.

Pontremoli's own attribution of this story to an earlier era is one that Penslar doesn't trust, since he can find no prior evidence for it. The tale only gained currency in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he conjectures, “precisely as Jewish emancipation took hold in western and central Europe, allowing Jews to assert more comfortably a transnational identity as well as national attachments.” Penslar shows very effectively that there was a lot of middle ground between Jews of the Mosaic persuasion who disavowed any special connection with their foreign coreligionists and ardent Zionists who denied that the Jews could ever really belong to a nation other than their own. This was territory occupied for a considerable period of time by Jewish soldiers as well as civilians who took genuine pride in their Jewish fellow citizens' service

to their countries while retaining a sense of solidarity with Jews elsewhere.

Things had not always been this way. As Penslar

**In 1789, Rabbi Yehezkel Landau spoke to Jewish conscripts into the Austrian army. As he cheered them on, he sobbed.**

reports, the induction of Jews into European armies was at the outset quite problematic, at least in the eyes of traditional Jews. Meeting in Prague in 1789 with some of the first Jewish conscripts into the Austrian army, Rabbi Yehezkel Landau exhorted them both to do their best to observe Jewish law and at the same time to “earn for yourselves and our entire nation

The love of country is in the heart of the Jews a sentiment so natural, so powerful, and so consonant to their religious opinions, that a French Jew considers himself in England, as among strangers, although he may be among Jews; and the case is the same with English Jews in France. To such a pitch is this sentiment carried among them, that during the last war, French Jews have been seen fighting desperately against other Jews, the subjects of countries then at war with France.

Many of the participating notables were no doubt bowing very deeply to what they perceived to be necessity and would have preferred to see the Jews remain altogether out of the fray. But there were others, too, who really meant it. And as the century wore on, there were more and more such Jews, not only in France, where Jews obtained completely equal rights, but also in countries such as Prussia, where they didn't.



Card depicting Jewish soldiers in the German army praying on Yom Kippur, just before France's surrender to Germany at Metz, ca. 1870. (Courtesy of the Museum of Jewish Heritage.)

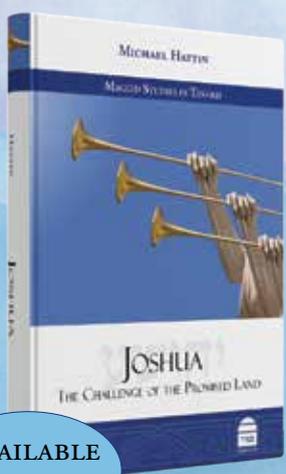
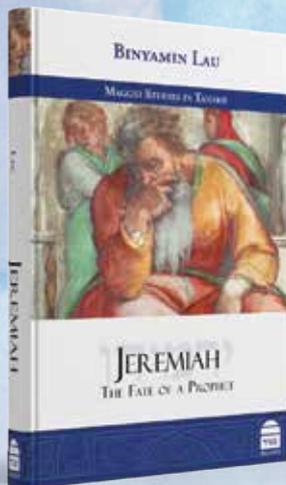
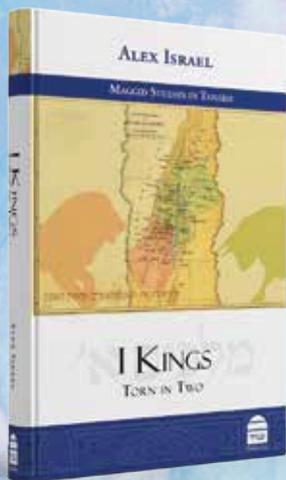
gratitude and honor so that one may see that our nation as well loves its ruler and state authority.” But even as he cheered them on he sobbed. A year after he made this speech, Penslar reports, Landau showed his true colors when he “was party to a petition to the new emperor, Leopold II, that pleaded for the maintenance of the Jews' historic privileges, one of which had been exemption from military service.”

Landau's fancy footwork was repeated two decades later by the French Jews in the 1806 Assembly of Notables convened by Napoleon who famously declared that:

Among them one should count Rabbi Abraham Geiger, one of the founders of Reform Judaism, who insisted in Breslau in 1842 that military service “is a religious duty, indeed the highest, to which all others must be subordinated.”

At roughly the same time, Geiger was capable of dismissing the blood libel in Damascus as a matter of purely local concern. “That which goes on among the Jews living in the uncivilized countries,” he argued, “is of trifling importance only, even if it were to be of general import in these particular lands.” In later generations, however, German and other European Jews

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who shared Geiger's yearning for integration into their own societies maintained a more active concern with what was going on outside of them. And they manifested the complexity of their identity, as Penslar shows, in more ways than by telling unhappy tales of Jewish soldiers killing one another.

Penslar writes that during the Franco-Prussian War, in 1870–1871, “German Jews simultaneously asserted not only German patriotism but also transnational Jewish solidarity and a particularistic religious identity.” Articles in the German-Jewish press “noted with satisfaction that Jewish soldiers served as guards for French-Jewish prisoners of war and that they attended religious services together.” In 1896, a German-Jewish defense organization published “a massive, folio-size tome” entitled *The Jew as Soldier* that listed “the numbers of Jews in uniform in every nation in Europe as well as the United States.” Here, Penslar writes, “The reader is struck by the placement of lists, side by side, of Jews who fought against each other, or at least whose countries were frequently enemies.” And, as he also notes, the English-language *Jewish Encyclopedia* of 1901–1906 contained a long entry titled “Army” that did much the same thing.

The fierce expressions of national antagonism that marked World War I tested but did not eliminate this Jewish “extranational solidarity.” At the 1935 world conference of Jewish veterans in Paris, “the assembled veterans proclaimed their love of each soldier’s native land; yet they did so as Jews,” blending “statements of love of home with a growing nationalist consciousness.” Unrepresented at this conference, however, were the German-Jewish war veterans, whose organization had been dissolved, for obvious reasons, by the Nazi government. Stung by this offense, the conference proposed to establish a village in Palestine for the orphan children of the 12,000 German-Jewish soldiers who had died fighting for Germany.

Needless to say, Jewish “extranational solidarity” in World War II, in which even more Jews fought than in World War I, bound together Jewish soldiers serving in only one of the contending alliances. “[T]here is not a single Jew fighting in the Axis armies,” proclaimed Abba Hillel Silver, in the 1941 yearbook of the United Palestine Appeal. “This was not precisely true,” Penslar carefully informs us, for there were, among others, thousands of men of concealed Jewish origin fighting for Nazi Germany and a couple of other small exceptions to the rule. He acknowledges, however, that “the prospect of Jews facing other Jews across the lines of battle, which . . . was a major theme in public conversations amongst Jews from the mid 1800s up through World War I, was no longer a visible dilemma.”

The transnational identity on which Penslar focuses in his final chapter is the one that bound the world’s Jews together in a joint struggle for Jewish independence. “During World War II,” he writes, “and during the years of Israel’s struggle for statehood, the line dividing a ‘diaspora’ from an ‘Israeli’ fighter was porous to the point of dissolution.” Un-

fortunately, both in the diaspora and in Israel, mythologists and historians of the matchless “sabra” have largely obscured the extent of the contribution made in Israel’s War of Independence by Jewish soldiers who weren’t homegrown. There is, of course, one great exception to this rule. The legend of Mickey Marcus, the West Point veteran who died in the war (depicted by Kirk Douglas in the 1966 film *Cast a Giant Shadow*) still flourishes. But this hero, whose story Penslar retells at some length, was not alone.

There were, to begin with, the numerous Haganah leaders “who had cut their fighting teeth in European armies during the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution.” Of these, Penslar singles out for special



Cover of the 1941 yearbook of the United Palestine Appeal by Arthur Szyk. (Courtesy of the Arthur Szyk Society.)

attention Sigmund Friedman, a former head of the Austrian World War I Jewish veterans’ association who had been arrested around the time of the Anschluss but was released “largely thanks to intensive lobbying efforts by Jewish veterans’ groups throughout the world.” After changing his name to the quintessentially sabra moniker, Eitan Avisar, he became the Haganah’s deputy chief of staff and “created a nationally organized militia and strategy out of what had been localized units and defensive schemes.”

In addition to such individuals there were the foreign recruits who came from Europe to Palestine in the framework of Gahal as immigrants, as well as 3,500 mostly Jewish volunteers who came mainly from the United States, Canada, and South Africa. Known as members of Machal, they “supplied the bulk of the pilots and crew for Israel’s embryonic air force, which played an essential role, not as a combat force so much as a transportation corps.” Perhaps even more vital to the struggle for Israel’s independence was the assistance provided by diaspora Jews in the surreptitious purchase and acquisition of weaponry: “86 percent of the cost of Israel’s arms purchased abroad in 1948,” Penslar tells us, “was borne by foreign sources.”



Left: U.S. Col. Mickey Marcus, 1948, the first modern Israeli general. (Courtesy of the Government Press Office, Israel.) Right: Poster advertising *Cast a Giant Shadow*, 1966, with Kirk Douglas depicting Marcus.

Ending on this note, Penslar's narrative might be mistaken for Zionist triumphalism, celebrating the ultimate coalescence of the disparate forces of the Jewish world in the service of a Jewish national project. But this is by no means the intention of this accomplished historian, who divides his time between the University of Toronto and Oxford and has made very significant contributions to both the history of Zionism and modern Jewish history in general. Penslar does want to demonstrate the crucial link between the experience of diaspora Jews in Gentile armies and the origins of Israel's military. But if there is any cause that he is seeking to uphold in *Jews and the Military* it is not that of Israel but of the Jewish soldiers of the diaspora, who have been "blotted . . . out of Jewish collective memory." Penslar complains both about "Jewish historical writing in North America," which has "steadfastly neglected Jewish soldiers," and Israeli scholars, who have "usually considered the diaspora Jewish soldier to be too inconsequential for serious attention."

Penslar hopes that his new book will help to rectify this situation, and perhaps it will, at least among Jewish historians, the primary audience of this learned tome. Many of them will no doubt be tantalized into pursuing the innumerable fascinating leads that Penslar provides. (Who knew, for instance, that Bernard Lazare, the famous Dreyfusard, had a brother, an officer in the French Army in Indochina, who was "disgusted to wear the same uniform as that of Dreyfus' tormentors"?) But it is hard to imagine a similar reaction among the general public. Its lack of interest in the history of Jewish military accomplishments in the diaspora is, as Penslar notes, glaringly evident.

In 1954, the Jewish War Veterans of the United States of America purchased a modest building off the Mall in Washington, D.C., and four years later received a congressional charter to establish a museum of American-Jewish military history. The museum attracts a few thousand visitors per year, mostly veterans or the families of veterans, or groups of Jewish day-school students from the Washington area. Nearby, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum receives some two million visitors per year. In Toronto, in recent years vast sums of money have flowed into a new Holocaust museum and educational center, while far more modest plans to

construct a monument honoring Canadian-Jewish soldiers of World War II were shelved owing to a lack of funds.

Penslar is not at a loss to explain this state of affairs. "Since World War II," he writes, "Jews in North America have lost the thrill induced by gazing at their menfolk in uniform." Freer than ever before from overt anti-Semitism, they feel little pressure "to produce apologetic literature, including documentation of the Jews' historical contribution to the military." Penslar does point to signs of an uptick in American Jewish involvement in the military. In re-

cent years, he notes, "1 to 2 percent of West Point's cadets and midshipmen at the U.S. Naval Academy were Jews." This is not very far from the total percentage of Americans who are Jewish. Then again, it pales in comparison with the reported 23 percent of students attending Ivy League colleges who are Jewish and doesn't really seem like a harbinger of any significant change. The preoccupying concerns and aspirations of American Jewry are decidedly irenic, so it is not surprising that its collective memory, such as it is, is directed elsewhere.

Israel is, of course, a more complicated story. The parade of elderly Russian-Jewish veterans of World War II down Israeli streets in recent decades surprised "Israelis whose education has made little room for heroism within the framework of a diaspora army" and has led to the erection of a memorial to the Red Army in World War II in Netanya. And in April of 2012 Tel Aviv's Diaspora Museum devoted an exhibition to "the foreign volunteers who manned the ships that brought illegal immigrants to Palestine and who fought in Israel's War of Independence." Penslar sees this latter commemoration as one of the signs that the "classic Zionist deprecation of the diaspora" is giving way, at least "among Israel's political and cultural elites," to a more positive attitude. But whether this will filter down to an Israeli public in which the opposite point of view is deeply rooted is something one must be permitted to doubt.

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

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**Commentary**

# The Jewbird

BY ADAM KIRSCH

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## **Malamud: Novels and Stories of the 1940s & 50s**

edited by Philip Davis

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## **Malamud: Novels and Stories of the 1960s**

edited by Philip Davis

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When Bernard Malamud died, in 1986, Saul Bellow composed a eulogy for the writer with whom he had been so often juxtaposed. The critical habit of viewing Bellow, Malamud, and the younger Philip Roth as a kind of literary consortium, a Jewish American all-star team, naturally irked all three of the men from time to time. It was Bellow himself who came up with the often-quoted quip that they were the Hart, Schaffner and Marx of American letters—a pointed joke, which suggests that Americans were more used to thinking of Jews as tailors than as contributors to American literature. For his part, Malamud was capable of envying Bellow's success, which was an order of magnitude larger even than his own. Malamud may have won the Pulitzer and the National Book Award, but it was Bellow who got the Nobel Prize, as Malamud wryly observed in his diary in 1976: "Bellow gets Nobel Prize, I win \$24.25 in poker."

Yet in Bellow's short eulogy, which can be found in his *Letters*, he welcomed the comparison with Malamud wholeheartedly:

We were cats of the same breed. The sons of Eastern European immigrant Jews, we had gone early into the streets of our respective cities, were Americanized by schools, newspapers, subways, streetcars, sandlots. Melting Pot children, we had assumed the American program to be the real thing: no barriers to the freest and fullest American choices.

It is easy to recognize in this description the Bellow who began *The Adventures of Augie March* with the triumphant words: "I am an American, Chicago born." Bellow's innate confidence—itsself an American, Emersonian virtue—made it simply impossible for him to imagine that America and literature, which he loved so dearly, could refuse his love. This same confidence, the unquestioning self-acceptance that carried all before it, made Bellow's feelings about Jewishness fairly uncomplicated, especially in the first part of his career. Jewishness was the condition of his existence, the environment in which he came to consciousness, intimately bound up with the helpless "potato love" that Bellow's protagonists always feel for their family and early friends. If Jewishness was a problem, it was a problem for other people: In Bellow's novel *The Victim*, it is the anti-Semite Allbee who is obsessed with

the Jewishness of Leventhal, not Leventhal himself.

For Malamud, however, neither Americanness nor Jewishness were so straightforward. Far from feeling that he faced "no barriers to the freest and fullest American choices," Malamud's life can be seen as a desperate effort to vault the barriers that hemmed him in on

**In the end, Malamud's was a success story—a life redeemed from obscurity and mediocrity by sheer talent and hard work.**

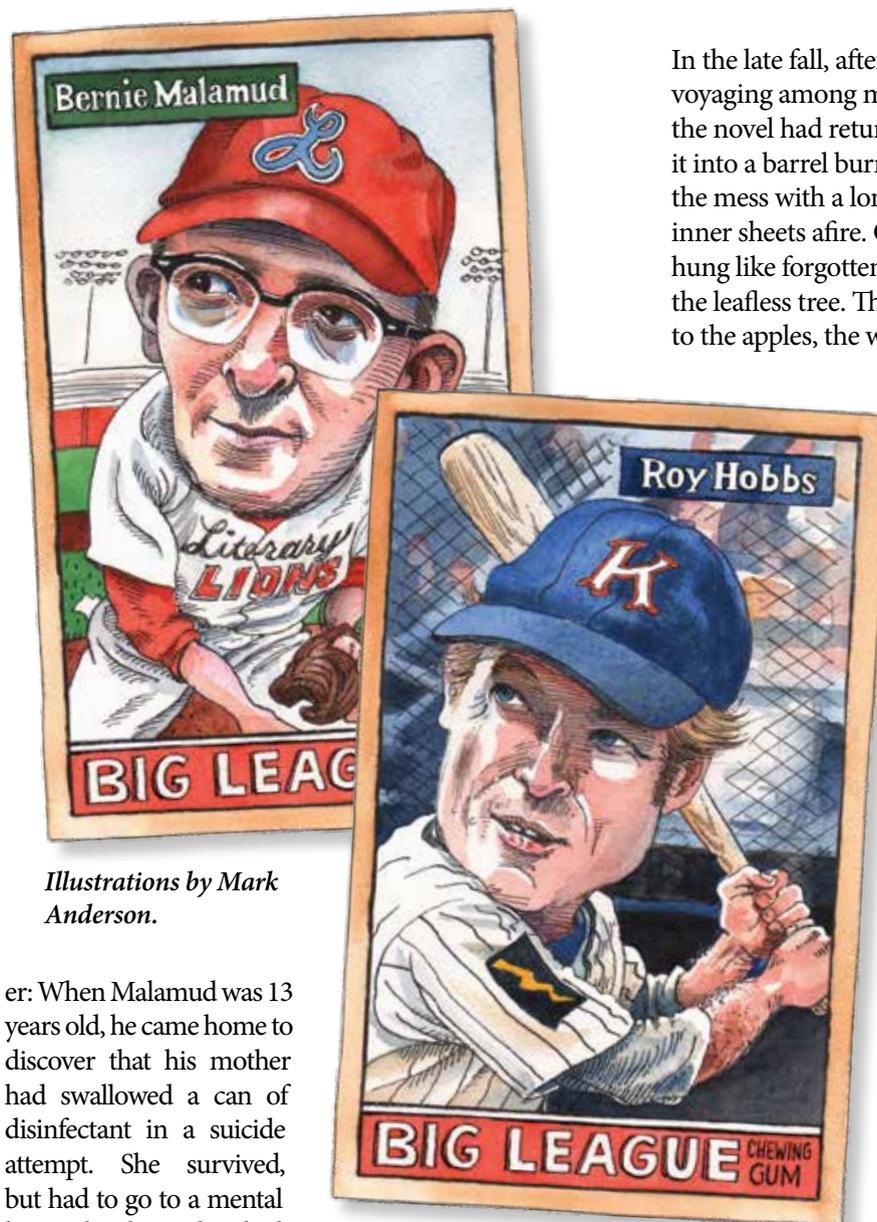
every side. His early years were defined by his father's business failures and by the mental illness of his moth-

*The Natural*, until 1952, when he was 38 years old. For a man who already knew as a teenager that he wanted to be a great writer, this meant that 20 years, the prime of his manhood, were spent in frustration and distraction. The effects can be seen throughout his work of the 1950s and 1960s, now collected in two Library of America volumes edited by Philip Davis. (A third volume, covering the last part of Malamud's career, is forthcoming.) During his twenties and thirties, Malamud taught high school at Erasmus Hall, worked for the Census Bureau, and took a few factory jobs. Time for writing was short, acceptances were few, and his first novel, *The Light Sleeper*, turned out to be a botch: After it was rejected by several publishers, he burned the manuscript. He drew on the experience in the 1953 story "The Girl of My Dreams," in which the would-be writer Mitka does the same thing to his book:

In the late fall, after a long year and a half of voyaging among more than twenty publishers, the novel had returned to stay and he had hurled it into a barrel burning autumn leaves, stirring the mess with a long length of pipe, to get the inner sheets afire. Overhead a few dead apples hung like forgotten Christmas ornaments upon the leafless tree. The sparks, as he stirred, flew to the apples, the withered fruit representing not only creation gone for nothing (three long years), but all his hopes, and the proud ideas he had given his book; and Mitka, although not a sentimentalist, felt as if he had burned (it took a thick two hours) an everlasting hollow in himself.

By the time *The Natural* was accepted, by the legendary editor Robert Giroux, Malamud was teaching composition at Oregon State University, in the small college town of Corvallis. It was not a good job, and his negative feelings about both the school and the place are eminently clear from his novel *A New Life*, where they are satirized as nests of mediocrity and conformism. Still, teaching college was a step up from the life he had known in

Brooklyn. On the cusp of 40, Malamud had escaped his family and finally established himself as a writer. From then on, his career would describe an upward arc. From Oregon he would move to Vermont, where he was a professor at Bennington College, and his stories and novels would earn steadily increasing



Illustrations by Mark Anderson.

er: When Malamud was 13 years old, he came home to discover that his mother had swallowed a can of disinfectant in a suicide attempt. She survived, but had to go to a mental hospital, where she died two years later. As Malamud's biographer Philip Davis and his daughter Janna Malamud Smith make clear in their books about him, these early miseries haunted the writer and his relationships for the rest of his life.

Perhaps the most significant thing in Malamud's biography, however, is an absence. Born in 1914, he did not publish his first book, the baseball novel

acclaim (and money). In the end, Malamud's was a success story—a life redeemed from obscurity and mediocrity by sheer talent and hard work.

The experience of prolonged struggle, the sense that the goal to which he dedicated his life might remain forever out of reach, shaped Malamud profoundly. Certainly it shaped the lives of his fictional characters, starting with Roy Hobbs, the baseball prodigy of *The Natural*. *The Natural* is in obvious ways an anomaly among Malamud's books—a tall tale or folk legend, where most of his novels would be homely and demotic; a programmatically American subject, with not a single Jewish character to be found. The story regularly lapses from narrative into dream or vision, and Malamud enforces a mythical framework that gives the whole book a self-consciously literary quality, a willed alienation from reality that it shares with Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, published the same year. (If you don't immediately grasp that the story of Roy Hobbs's redemption of a failing baseball team is a modern recasting of the medieval Fisher King legend, Malamud nudges you along by naming the team the Knights, and its manager Pop Fisher.)

*The Natural* is a Jewish immigrant writer's two-handed lunge for America, and while what Malamud came up with bears little relationship to the America he knew, the sheer effrontery involved energized his language in a way that he would never quite repeat. Here is Roy in his first professional at-bat, wielding his custom-made bat, his Excalibur, Wonderboy:

He couldn't tell the color of the pitch that came at him. All he could think of was that he was sick to death of waiting, and tongue-out thirsty to begin. The ball was now a dew drop staring him in the eye so he stepped back and swung from the toes.

Wonderboy flashed in the sun. It caught the sphere where it was biggest. A noise like a twenty-one gun salute cracked the sky. There was a straining, ripping sound and a few drops of rain spattered to the ground. The ball screamed toward the pitcher and seemed suddenly to dive down at his feet. He grabbed it to throw to first and realized to his horror that he held only the cover. The rest of it, unraveling cotton thread as it rode, was headed into the outfield.

What rings truest in this passage, what would prove to characterize Malamud more than the poeticism, is Roy's sense of being "sick to death of waiting." One of the disorienting things about *The Natural* is that it is structured around a false start. When the book opens, the teenage Roy is riding a train to Chicago, where he is supposed to have his major-league try-out. Then, in a weird, abrupt, and dream-like scene, he is shot in the stomach by a madwoman, a serial killer of athletes whose presence in the story has just barely been prepared for by a brief allusion early on. When the novel resumes, Roy is in his mid-thirties and has somehow made his way back to the majors. But nothing can make up for the time he has lost, and his age means that his first season as a baseball player might be his last. We hear about Roy's missing years only in hints, and the effect is as if he had been put to sleep, Rip Van Winkle-like, and then woken up almost two decades later. Malamud was

deeply drawn to the situation of a man taking his last shot at happiness—a man who feels he has wasted the best years of his life.

That same feeling is shared by the protagonists of all the novels included in these two Library of America volumes. All of them approach middle age as if they had never been young, as if large parts of their lives had simply been deleted. Frank Alpine, the thief turned grocery clerk in *The Assistant*, feels like Roy:



Bernard Malamud, 1961. (Photo © Seymour H. Linden, Bernard Malamud Papers, Oregon State University Libraries.)

"I've been close to some wonderful things—jobs, for instance, education, women, but close is as far as I go. . . . Don't ask me why, but sooner or later everything I think is worth having gets away from me in some way or other." The very title of *A New Life* suggests that Seymour Levin, by following his creator and moving to Oregon to teach in a college, is making his last grasp at resurrection. (Unlike Malamud, Levin's missing years are explained as the result of his alcoholism.) And in *The Fixer*, Yakov Bok gets himself into disastrous trouble when he, too, rebels against what he sees as a wasted life in the shtetl, symbolized by his inability to produce children with his wife, Raisl. "I've been cheated from the start," Yakov grumbles. "The shtetl is a prison . . . it moulders and the Jews moulder in it. . . . I want to make a living, I want to get acquainted with a bit of the world."

Yet none of these characters achieve the success that Malamud himself eventually did. Roy Hobbs makes it to the majors and becomes a sensation, only to lose everything when he agrees to throw a crucial game in exchange for a big bribe. Seymour Levin's story ends on a desperate note, as he agrees to take in his married lover, with her children, even though he no longer loves her; his bid for a new life has landed him in a new kind of prison. And Yakov Bok finds himself literally imprisoned. When he moves to Kiev and tries to seek his fortune under a Gentile name, his identity as a Jew is discovered and he is scapegoated for the murder of a local Russian boy. Perhaps only Frank Alpine can be said to achieve "a new life," though he does so by taking over the old life of the poor grocer Morris Bober, confining himself voluntarily to poverty and insignificance.

If Frank's confinement looks to Malamud like a victory, rather than a defeat, it is because it is undertaken voluntarily, like monastic orders. Yet the form that this monkhood takes is, paradoxically, conversion to Judaism. The novel ends with Frank undergoing circumcision as a kind of inverse baptism: "One day in April Frank went to the hospital and had himself circumcised. For a couple of days he dragged himself around with a pain between his legs. The pain enraged and inspired him. After Passover he became a Jew."

These are the book's last words, and though abrupt, they nevertheless feel exactly right—the destination to which the whole story has been heading. Outwardly, that story is fairly undramatic, after the initial hold-up that brings Frank into Morris Bober's store and life. The rest of the book chronicles Frank's attempt to make up for the robbery by becoming Bober's assistant and the consequent moral education that he undergoes. This is, in the novel's terms, an education in Judaism: Morris lectures Frank about the majesty of the Law, which he construes not in religious or ritual terms but strictly ethically. And Morris himself is an ethical paragon, refusing ever to cheat his customers or take advantage of people, even though he is at the bottom of society's pyramid. Becoming a good person, for Frank, means becoming Morris; and since Morris is a Jew, Frank must become a Jew as well.

Malamud's definition of what it means to be a Jew is teasingly dialectical. One of the first things we learn about Frank is that he was raised in a Catholic orphanage, where he was exposed to miracle tales about St. Francis of Assisi that he has never forgotten. Becoming a Jew, for him, may be merely the name he gives to becoming a good Christian. Indeed, one of the main themes of the novel is that, while Morris' Jewishness consists in fidelity to the Law—unswerving ethical behavior—Frank's Christianity is expressed as Love, a matter of inwardness, conscience, and good-heartedness. That is why Frank can continue to hold the reader's sympathy when he repeatedly backslides, committing crimes against the Bober family even as he claims to be helping them: stealing from Morris' cash register, even raping his daughter Helen. These are sins, but Frank, as a Christian, comes to teach the Bobers (and the reader) the importance of forgiveness and mercy—exactly the lesson that Portia tries and fails to teach Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*. At the same time, the Bobers are there to teach Frank the final earnestness of the Law—to help him to reach a state of moral perfection in which it is no longer necessary to be forgiven, because he no longer has the need to rebel.

In equating Christianity with Love and Judaism with Law, Malamud is of course reinstating an old and troublesome binary opposition—one that he learned not from Judaism, to which it is foreign (or at least as foreign as Paul), but from the Western culture and literature that shaped him. Yet at the same time, Malamud reverses the usual weighting of that equation, which makes Law benighted and Love superior. Both, he sug-

gests in *The Assistant*, are necessary, but the Law is finally supreme: It is Frank who must become a Jew, not the Bobers who must become Christian. Jewishness, for Malamud, is less important as a religious or ethnic identity than as the password to a moral existence.

Here again, the contrast with Bellow is illuminating. If the first line of *Augie March* is Bellow's credo, Malamud's might be the last line of "Angel Levine": "Believe me, there are Jews everywhere." For Bellow, Jewishness was a condition of the self, but for Malamud it had a tendency to metastasize into the condition of the world—a moral and metaphysical quality that pops up in the most unlikely places. In addition to the Catholic Frank Alpine, among the Jews we meet in Malamud's novels and stories of the 1950s and 1960s are the African-American angel of "Angel Levine," an Italian aristocrat in "The Lady of the Lake," and a bird in "The Jewbird." In "The Jewbird," indeed, the Jewish bird is persecuted unto death by the Jewish family with whom he seeks refuge. They are "anti-Semeets," to use the bird's Yiddishized pronunciation, not because they hate Jews—after all, they are Jews—but because they demonstrate the kind of cruelty and distrust of the Other that, to Malamud, is at the heart of anti-Semitism.

What Jewishness is not, for Malamud—what it cannot be, if it is to be a universal experience—is a concrete identity, or a specific religious tradition, or the history of a people. In a short memoir, "The Lost Bar-Mitzvah," Malamud recalled that when he was about to turn 13, he petitioned his father for a bar mitzvah, but the family's poverty and basic indifference to religion meant that it came to nothing. Instead, on his 13<sup>th</sup> birthday, his father put tefillin on him, had him recite some incomprehensible blessings, and it was all over: "Then he kissed me and said I was bar-mitzvahed, and he went downstairs into the store, to

wait on any customer who may have appeared."

As this anecdote shows, poverty, the grinding need to make a living, which Malamud writes about as well as any American ever has, was the bedrock reality of the family's life. And because the writer came to know Judaism in no other form than the family, he ended up equating being poor and hardworking and terribly earnest with being Jewish. Contrast the list of non-Jewish Jews in Malamud's fiction with the actual, ethnically and religiously, Jewish protagonists: Morris Bober, miserably poor but ethically sublime, and Yakov Bok, ditto. Notably, both these characters are directly based on real people: Morris on Max Malamud and Yakov on Mendel Beilis, the victim of a blood libel in 1913 Kiev. When Malamud searched the past for authentic Jews, what he found were tragic and serious men, usually victims.

At least, that is what he finds in his novels. But reading these Library of America volumes confirms the usual critical verdict that it is in his stories, rather than his full-length novels, that Malamud emerged as not just a talented writer, but a unique one. The best stories in *The Magic Barrel* (1958) and *Idiot's First* (1963) avoid the earnestness and moralizing of Malamud's novels. He achieves this by deflecting Jewishness away from actual Jews, who command his pity and respect, and toward "Jews"—angels, birds, mystic matchmakers—who are so flagrantly unlikely as to become comic. The collision of the surreally absurd with the tragically earnest is what defines Malamud's fiction at its best. The opposites ought to cancel each other out, but instead they crazily coexist, and the leap of faith this demands from the reader helps to explain why stories like "Angel Levine" and "The Magic Barrel" seem like religious parables.

If, like Kafka's parables or Hawthorne's, they remain impossible to fully interpret, that is because all three of these writers knew what it meant to live in the grips of a religious tradition they no longer understood. Indeed, Malamud is one of the great writers of Jewish modernity precisely because Judaism has been severed, for him, from any determinate content. For exactly this severance from the past is the defining trauma of Jewish emancipation: The emancipated Jew finds himself answerable to a name that no longer corresponds to any definition.

Malamud's mischievous contribution to this post-traditional tradition was to point out the contradiction involved in equating Jewishness with such universal identities. If Judaism is moralism, then why isn't Frank Alpine a Jew? If it is chosenness, why isn't Angel Levine a Jew? If it is victimhood, why isn't the Jewbird a Jew? The outrageous answer Malamud gives is that they are: Everyone, pushed to the most extreme version of themselves, becomes Jewish. That this answer could seem plausible and meaningful, not just to Malamud himself, but to the large audience that acclaimed him, speaks volumes about the unique position of Jews and Judaism in post-Holocaust America—the objects of tolerance and pity and shame and envy and admiration, all at once, a condition never before experienced in Jewish history. But such a historical moment could not last forever, and while Jewish American literature continues to live, we will probably never again see a writer who conjoins, or confuses, the Jewish and the human as daringly as Bernard Malamud.

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*Adam Kirsch is a senior editor at The New Republic and a columnist for Tablet. His most recent book is Why Trilling Matters (Yale).*

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# Brief Kvetches: Notes to a 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Miracle Worker

BY GLENN DYNNER

A young man falls into despair because running his tavern has left him less and less time for Torah studies. A husband is distraught because his wife, who is the family's sole provider, has become possessed by a demon that recently flung her down into the mud and forced her to stab herself. A miller who was cursed by a Gentile shepherd claims that he feels his legs weaken day by day. A widow's only son has been drafted into the tsarist army, where she fears he will be permanently lost to the Jewish people.

These colorful complaints by everyday Eastern European Jews appear in the vast collection of petitions (*kvitlekh*) sent to Rabbi Elijah Guttmacher, the Tzaddik of Grätz (Grodzisk Wielkopolski in present-day Poland), whose miracle-working practice flourished in the late 1860s and early 1870s, ending with his death in 1874. Housed in the YIVO Institute in New York, these approximately five thousand petitions open rare windows onto the lives of East European Jews, providing glimpses of their business and family affairs, sex lives, magical beliefs, pious hopes, and grim tenacity as they grappled with the new and unpredictable challenges of modernity. The collection is so rich as to beg comparison with the famous *Bintel Brief* advice column in the *Forverts* Yiddish newspaper a generation later, or even the famous Cairo *Geniza*.

Rabbi Guttmacher, a student of the distinguished *mitnaged* halakhic authority Rabbi Akiva Eiger and the official rabbi of Grätz, was an unlikely miracle worker. He was one of the first rabbinical leaders to advocate settling the Land of Israel, arguing that it was not sufficient for Jews to simply hope and pray that “suddenly the gates of mercy will open . . . and all will be called from their dwelling places.” Despite this apparent political realism, however, he was much more willing than other non-Hasidic rabbis to intercede with God on the behalf of his petitioners.

It all began when a father burst into the study house where Rabbi Guttmacher was teaching, begging him to expel the demons that had taken up residence inside his son. The boy's stomach was distended, and he was barking like a dog. Rabbi Guttmacher seized the boy's hand and recited Psalms with great intention (*kavanah*), eventually forcing the demons out. As word spread, Rabbi Guttmacher agreed to see other desperate pilgrims, whom he proceeded to heal with what he called “natural means”: fumigations (sometimes demons had to be smoked out), immersions, and, most commonly, through prayer. By 1873, Rabbi Guttmacher presided over a miracle-working enterprise in Prussian Poland that had eclipsed the dozens of Hasidic courts further to the east. When his petitioners tried to pay him the customary Hasidic fee (*pidyon*), he

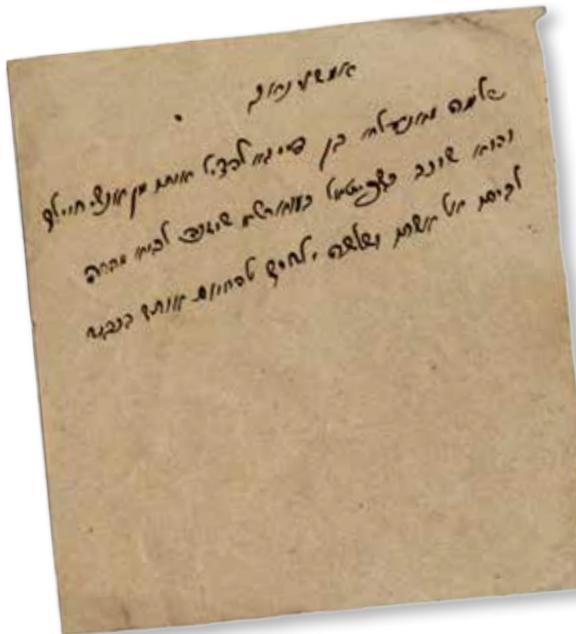
would simply gesture toward a box of donations earmarked for the founding of the settlement of Petach Tikvah.

brought most of their haul back to YIVO in Vilna, where it received little attention. What the Jewish scholars neglected, however, was perversely appreci-

**In 1932, in an attic in Grodzisk, researchers came across an enormous trove of *kvitlekh* that Rabbi Guttmacher had carefully filed away.**

“All these miracles were done out of necessity, and were imposed on me by force,” Rabbi Guttmacher would later claim defensively in his book *Tzofnat Paneach*, a commentary on the fantastic legends of the talmudic sage Rabbah bar bar Hannah. “What was I supposed to do when a mother and father and other relatives brought their children to me crying and shouting for mercy?” In a letter contained in the archives, he complains of feeling besieged by “the broken-hearted who sometimes come here asking [me] to arouse God, blessed be

ated by the Nazis. In 1942, Alfred Rosenberg's notorious task force, which was dedicated to expropriating cultural property from Jews and other “undesirables,” seized most of the collection, though members of the Jewish “paper brigade” were able to bury a small cache in the Vilna Ghetto. The task force transported the bulk of the Guttmacher archive to the Nazi Institute for Investigating the Jewish Question in Frankfurt, which had been founded to preserve the memory of the world's soon-to-be-deceased Jewish population. It was, of course, the Institute itself that ceased to exist. In 1945, after the collapse of the Nazi regime, the U.S. army recovered the Guttmacher petitions and returned them to YIVO, which had relocated to New York. The hidden portion was later unearthed in the Vilna Ghetto and restored to YIVO as well. From that point on, these petitions have sat in New York City (although some have made their way to Jerusalem), virtually unread.



*Kvitlekh from the Guttmacher collection, ca. 1860–1874. (Courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.)*

He, to heal them . . . and give them advice.” In 1874, the year of his death, he went so far as to place an appeal in the Hebrew periodical *Ha-Magid* begging Jews to stop coming to him. Still, Rabbi Guttmacher could not conceal his pride: “Often I have thought, ‘Now who will tolerate the new heretics who say that nothing exists beyond nature?’”

Fifty years later, a network of amateur ethnographic collectors known as *zamlers* began to fan out across Poland collecting artifacts and jotting down folk idioms. In 1932, in an attic in Grodzisk, some of them came across an enormous trove of *kvitlekh* that Rabbi Guttmacher had carefully filed away. They

The neglect of Guttmacher's petitioners may be due to the fact that they do not conform to professional historians' picture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as one of rapid modernization. Jewish historians tend to paint a picture of industrialization, secularization, and emigration splashed across a dull backdrop of poverty and stagnant religiosity. They highlight *maskilim*, budding Zionists, Bundists, assimilationists, and other urban, secularizing elites, at most tolerating a few exemplars of high rabbinic culture. Jewish fiction writers depict older-generation Teyves looking on helplessly as their daughters shun tradition and court modernity. Jewish artists appear more enchanted by everyday Jews of the Old World. Yet even they cannot seem to refrain from flinging fiddlers, cows, and newlyweds across the shtetl sky.

Hints of modernization do glimmer among the Guttmacher petitions. But petitioners are most commonly preoccupied with finding a match, earning a living, recovering their health, and avoiding the “military fate” of conscription into the Russian Army. Their world is at once enchanted and disenchanting. Shopkeepers calculate profits, hurl curses, and offer up prayers. The ill, beset by both scientifically named diseases and irrepressible demons, consult professional *doktorim* before finally turning to

Rabbi Guttmacher, often apologizing for their momentary lapses of faith.

The petitions remind us that the promises of scientific modernity produced their own forms of disillusionment. Israel Jacob ben Feiga concluded that “all doctors are frauds and liars” after they failed to cure his son, resolving to “seize faith in the strength of God, for He is the best of the doctors. And after that, faith in the efforts of the prayers of the righteous (*tzaddikim*).” Joshua ben Basha, who had read books in non-Jewish languages and acquired “strange knowledge,” fell into a state of chronic depression. He was sure that the foreign books were to blame.

Instead of welcoming secular modernity, most of Rabbi Guttmacher’s petitioners lived within the rhythms of Jewish law and ritual and continued to be awed by Hasidic rebbes and talmudic geniuses (Guttmacher being a bit of both). Their letters also display increasing irritation and outrage with the “new heretics” denounced by Guttmacher. Many of his petitioners appear to be shifting from a passive, unreflective attachment to tradition to a more conscious and defiant “traditionalism”—a project that sought to shore up piety and ethnic boundaries at the very moment when religion was becoming voluntary and privatized.

Jewish traditionalism in Eastern Europe emerged in a context of severe government pressure on Jews to conform to the rest of the population by shedding their distinctive dress, language, occupations, and education. The heaviest form of coercion was military conscription, which induced a

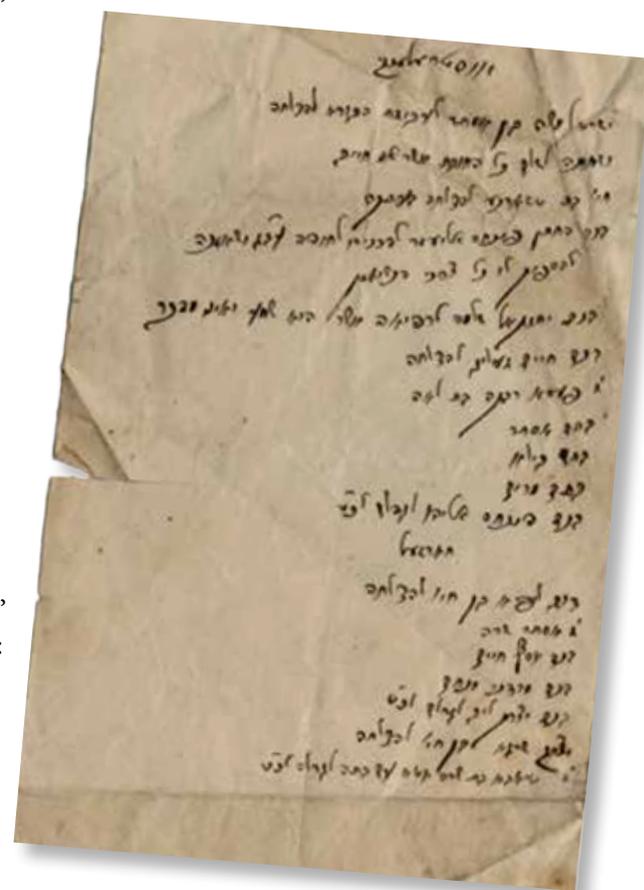
flood of panicky requests to Rabbi Guttmacher to rescue the petitioners or their sons from “falling into the hands of the men of war,” or more generally, “the hands of the Gentiles.” Feigel bat Hadas,

**The collection contains fascinating cases of women who, rabbinic law notwithstanding, effectively divorced their husbands when they failed to contribute economically or “walk the proper path.”**

whose husband had been “taken by the soldiers,” describes his transformation after years of service:

My husband has been living with me in my house not according to the proper way, but in great strife walks the improper path and constantly plays cards and does other profane things that are not pious. And I cannot suffer this. And because of this he beat me. And now, since he has mingled with the Gentiles, he has learned their ways and does not want to live with me when he returns from his work. May the *Admor Shelita* [“our Master, Our Teacher

and Rabbi, long may he live”] pray to our fathers in Heaven to turn his heart to good, or to arrange a proper divorce (*get*).



Kvitl from the Guttmacher collection, ca. 1860–1874. (Courtesy of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.)

Traditional economic relations were also being unsettled. For centuries, Eastern European Jews and Gentiles had coexisted within fixed economic roles. But the recent emancipation of the serfs, while a positive development on the whole, brought peasants and declining landowners into fierce competition with Jews over contracts and customers. Many petitioners saw the new competition as a threat to the entire Jewish people and asked Rabbi Guttmacher to curse their new rivals. Menachem Moses ben Feiga memorably petitioned:

For success in the tavern, and to repel the local Gentile who arose against the Jews and took their livelihood, so that the customers will not go to [the Gentile] and that the scent of his drinks will stink so that they can no longer bear his drinks. And to cause his downfall, for all the Jews and the widows and the orphans need it, for he took their livelihood.

Rabbi Guttmacher seems to have done little to discourage such chauvinist and protectionist sentiments—he even advised a smuggler to hire a Gentile to bring his contraband over the border so that “if God forbid, there was any seizure then [the Gentile] would have to pay.”

Some Jews readily cooperated with the new class of Christian entrepreneurs. But most considered such collusion to be sheer betrayal. Shmuel ben Gitl had once earned an “honorable livelihood that allowed him a free hour to devote to Torah and divine service,” and he had spared no expense guiding his son onto “the path of Torah and knowledge and good deeds.” Now his timber factory was failing because “a Gentile, may his name be blotted out,

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arose and established a factory next to our town" and hired a Jewish agent "who pursues me" with stiff competition. Shmuel's predicament was particularly mortifying because "the festivals are approaching, and I am accustomed to donating a lot of money." Moreover, his children were growing up and "the marriage rites are hanging around my neck; I need to give a suitable dowry to make respectable matches according to my familial status with Torah scholars (*talmide hakhamim*), especially Torah scholars with distinguished lineage (*yichus*)." Rabbi Guttmacher would, he hoped, curse his Jewish competitor on the grounds that he had deprived him of the honor and wealth that his piety and generosity had earned him. The frequency of such requests, both explicit and implicit, suggest that Rabbi Guttmacher might sometimes have been willing to comply.



Rabbi Guttmacher surrounded by his students, ca. 1874.

Petitions by traditionalist women can be jarring to modern ears (a woman named Hayya bat Hanka, for instance, complains that she "has not merited a son" and has no dowry for her recently divorced daughter). But they also remind us of a frequently forgotten feature of traditional Jewish society: Most of Rabbi Guttmacher's female petitioners worked, either alongside their husbands running taverns, or in separate enterprises such as market stalls. Ironically, it was the modern embrace of non-Jewish bourgeois norms that drew Jewish women out of the workforce and relegated them to the domestic sphere.

Crucially, traditionalist Jewish women who worked could escape unhappy marriages without consigning themselves to destitution. The Guttmacher collection contains fascinating cases of women who, rabbinic law notwithstanding, effectively divorced their husbands when they failed to contribute economically or "walk the proper path." Sarah bat Feiga had married a widower who turned out to be a gambler and "a drinking man," who contributed nothing to the family's finances. "So I divorced him through the *bet din*," Sarah reports, merely grumbling that, until she came up with her part of the financial settlement she would have to keep feeding him while he wandered around drinking and gambling. A surprising number of women asked Rabbi Guttmacher to help them obtain a *get*, presumably by means of legalistic finesse and communal pressure.

The traditionalism reflected in many of the *kvitlekh* addressed to Rabbi Guttmacher expresses an anxiety over what Jacob Katz once described as the Jewish "awareness of other Jews' rejection of tradition." Petitioners were scandalized when they learned, for instance, that a fellow Jew "profaned the Sabbath while on business in Prussia," all the more so if the detractor was an economic rival. Even a smuggler expressed outrage

that certain border guards were apostates who had converted from Judaism to Christianity.

But traditionalism was more than reaction. Ordinary Jews continued to value the wisdom of Torah sages over modern rationalism. Most tended to repudiate Western civilization, which they regarded as morally and culturally inferior to their own. Many just wished to be left in peace to study Torah:

Akiva ben Kasa, for Torah and worship and health and livelihood and success. His

livelihood is as a tavern and innkeeper, and the business was always meager but he was content with his portion because he had time to study Torah. But now, many arise against his craft, and it is not enough that his livelihood diminished, but they have also caused his Torah study to diminish because of his diminished livelihood. Also, he has several debts to pay off, which are as cruel as snakes and ravens.

Traditionalism was indeed forced to make room for Zionism, Jewish socialism, diaspora nationalism, and acculturation by the turn of the century, but it remained a stubborn counterpoint to secular modernity. Throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Hasidim and other traditionalists were steadily rebuilding, regrouping, and replenishing their ranks by means of political parties, publishing enterprises, yeshivas, and networks of prayer and study houses. In doing so, they created a viable, institutionalized Orthodox alternative to the new political and cultural movements on the Jewish scene. Their counter-modern mentality is given poignant voice in the thousands of scribbled requests to Rabbi Elijah Guttmacher.

Glenn Dynner is professor of religion at Sarah Lawrence College, the National Endowment for Humanities' senior scholar at the Center for Jewish History, and author of *Yankel's Tavern: Jews, Liquor, & Life in the Kingdom of Poland* (Oxford University Press).

## Crafting the 613 Commandments: Maimonides on the Enumeration, Classification, and Formulation of the Scriptural Commandments

By **Albert D. Friedberg**

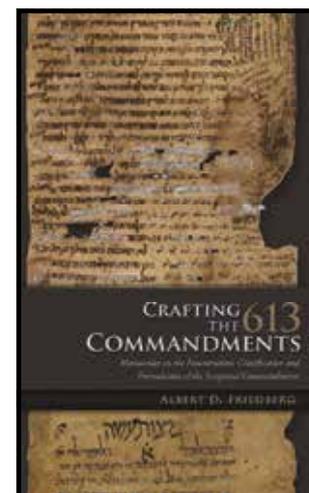
9781618111678 (cloth) / 9781618113870 (paper), \$85.00 / \$34.00, 400 pp., February 2014

Rabbinic tradition has it that 613 commandments were given to Moses on Mount Sinai, but it does not specify those included in the enumeration. Maimonides methodically and artfully crafts a list of 613 commandments in a work that serves as a prolegomenon to the Mishneh Torah, his monumental code of law. This book explores the surprising way Maimonides put this tradition to use and his possible rationale for using such a tradition. It also explores many of the philosophical and ethical ideas animating the composition of such a list. In the book's second half, Friedberg examines the manner by which Maimonides formulated positive commandments in the Mishneh Torah, leading him to suggest new dimensions in Maimonides' legal theory.

"Friedberg's thesis is original and groundbreaking. . . . Students of Maimonides will find the book very worthwhile."

—H. Norman Strickman, Touro College

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# Haim Gouri at 90

BY ALAN MINTZ

Last October I attended a gala celebration of the poet Haim Gouri's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday thrown by the city of Tel Aviv. Although Gouri has lived his adult life in Jerusalem, Ron Huldai, the mayor of Tel Aviv, was intent on appropriating this milestone for his city, as Gouri was born in Tel Aviv and, the mayor argued, hadn't Gouri written innumerable poems about the White City? The large auditorium in the new wing of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art was filled to capacity, and, as a group of actors and musicians alternately declaimed Gouri's poems and played musical settings of them, the audience sat in rapt attention, at home with dozens of texts for which only the titles were given in the program. Finally, the poet himself was helped to the stage. Although Gouri was a little unsteady on his feet, his voice was confident as he honored his hosts, evoking the heady days of Tel Aviv's literary cafes and reciting stanzas of its great poets from memory.

The Israeli literary supplements last fall were full of long interviews with Gouri conducted by such well-known writers as Meir Shalev, Ariel Hirschfeld, and Nir Baram. Over the holidays last fall, the great critic-scholar Dan Miron published a seven-part series on the inner development of Gouri's poetry in *Ha'aretz*. The Bialik Institute together with Kibbutz Ha-me'uchad put out two large volumes of Gouri's prose.

It's hard to exaggerate the importance of poetry in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Israeli culture. The willful disengagement from Orthodox beliefs and practices that accompanied the Zionist revolution left the spiritual needs of secular Israelis unattended to, and the writing and reading of poetry have often become a kind of sacrament filling that void. Beginning in Eastern Europe and continuing in Palestine, Hebrew readers looked to poets not only to illuminate their private experience but also to serve as secular prophets.

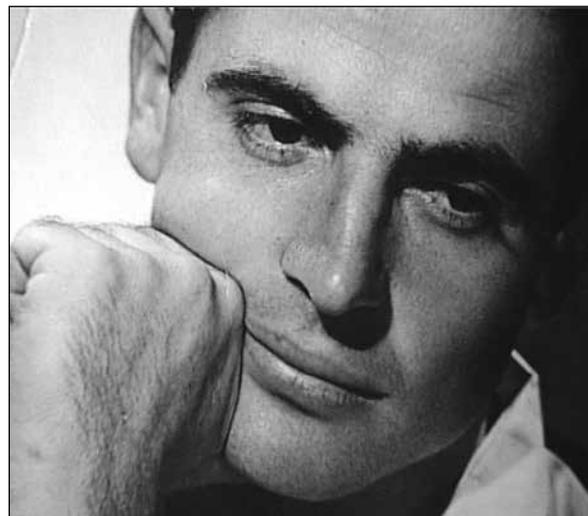
Each generation of the Hebrew literary public has further sought to invest some figure with the real if unofficial status of "national poet." It began with Bialik and was passed on to Natan Alterman. For some, the awesome Revisionist poet Uri Zvi Greenberg bore the mantle. Later in the century, that distinction belonged to Yehuda Amichai. But Amichai, who is very different from his contemporary Gouri as a poet and a public figure, died in 2000. Since then, Gouri has taken the position, and there are many who would say that it has been his all along. The only other living contender is Natan Zach, age 83, whose brilliant, stripped-down existentialist verse revolutionized Hebrew poetry in the 1960s. But Zach doesn't fill the bill for two reasons. To be a national poet, it hardly bears saying, one has to evince sympathy for the nation, and Zach has long distanced himself from the Zionist enterprise. Moreover Zach never followed his stylistic breakthroughs of 50 years ago with accomplishments that connected with the poetry-reading public.

Here is where Gouri has shone. Rather than

marching in place or remaining content to recycle his favorite themes, at the age of 86 in 2009 Gouri published a book-length cycle of poems called *Eyval*—more on the meaning of the title and the significance of the work later on—that was regarded by readers and critics alike as perhaps the best thing he had ever written. Gouri thus spared the public

## The iconic status of his early songs had a paradoxical effect on his career.

the embarrassment of having to celebrate him at 90 as a literary relic—the kind of grand old man of letters whose only recent achievement is his longevity. Instead, the new late-in-life book stimulated public discussion about the shape of Gouri's career and how it moved from its initiation in the War of Independence through several discernable stations to arrive at this late consummation.



Haim Gouri while a student at The Hebrew University, 1950s. (Courtesy of Haim Gouri.)

That Haim Gouri is not well known to us in America is regrettable but hardly surprising. Here the contrast with Amichai is instructive. Amichai served in the British army in World War II, admired and was influenced by Auden, and made his living by teaching American Jews studying in Jerusalem. He was a popular visitor on American campuses and, because he knew English well, was able to supervise closely the translations of his poems, most of which appeared on these shores. Gouri, on the other hand, was oriented toward Europe, to the degree to which he looked beyond Palestine/Israel at all. He spent a year at the Sorbonne after his studies at The Hebrew University and remains more comfortable with French culture than with English or American. The only book-length sampling of his poetry in English is a bilingual selection translated by the late Stanley

F. Chyet, *Words in My Lovesick Blood: Poems by Haim Gouri*.

Interestingly, there is one hidden point of connection between Gouri's poetry and American Jewish culture. Anyone who attended Jewish summer camps or participated in Zionist youth movements in their heyday probably remembers singing the haunting Hebrew song "Bab El Wad" around the campfire. The lyrics are by Gouri and the melody by Shmuel Farshko. The title (literally, the gate to the wadi; Sha'ar Hagai in Hebrew) refers to a narrow corridor 23 kilometers from Jerusalem on the road from Tel Aviv. In 1948, during the siege of Jerusalem, the only way to get supplies to the city was to push makeshift armored vehicles through the blockade. Many Jewish soldiers lost their lives in the effort, and the burnt-out shells of these vehicles, which have been maintained as a memorial, can still be seen on the drive between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. (Many versions of "Bab El Wad" can be found on YouTube; I recommend one by Shlomo Gronich because of the contemporary photographs that accompany the words.) This is one of a number of song lyrics that Gouri wrote in the eye of the storm in '48 that became instant classics by brilliantly realizing the mood and spirit of the Yishuv in the midst of the struggle and its immediate aftermath. Here is the chorus and one of the stanzas from "Bab El Wad."

Bab El Wad, forever remember our names!  
Convoys broke through on the way to the city.  
By the side of the road lay our dead.  
The iron skeleton is silent like my comrade.

And I walk, passing here in utter silence.  
I remember them, each and every one.  
Here we fought on cliffs and boulders,  
Here we were one family.

The atmosphere of sacrifice lies heavy upon these lines. The dead are freshly dead, laid out awaiting transport for burial. The comparison of their silence to the burnt-out shells of the armored vehicles expresses outrage and grief. Yet the horror is mitigated by the supremely meaningful nature of the deaths and by the fact that they were not, and will not be, alone. Not only did they fall defending their brethren in a desperate war of survival, but their efforts succeeded. The blockade was breached and Jerusalem resupplied. The soldier who survives, the "I" who walks in silence, justifies his own survival by a vow to remember the name of every fallen comrade because they were not merely comrades-in-arms but members of one family.

Split from their music, such lyrics can seem stilted and over-laden with emotion, but they make sense when they are sung, and in the decades that followed they were sung very often indeed, performing the function of a communal rite of remembrance on the part of the surviving, belated members of the national "family." Gouri himself

regarded them as lyrics rather than poetry and did not include them in his collected verse. But the iconic status of these early songs had a paradoxical effect on his career. It gave him recognition far beyond the circles of readers of serious poetry, but at the same time it associated him indissolubly with the moment of 1948 and the high pathos of struggle and sacrifice attached to it.

Gouri's first published book of verse, *Pirchei Geish* (Fire Flowers, 1949), did not do much to shift the perception of Gouri as a war poet. To be sure, these were highly accomplished poems in their own right, not song lyrics. Yet, within this higher literary register, they performed a similar elegiac function and projected the feelings of tragic renunciation felt by a generation called by destiny to give up the normal prerogatives of youth—first love, studies, travel—and afterward felt unworthy when measured against those who had made the ultimate sacrifice. Although the voice in these poems was Gouri's own, the style of the poetry owed a great deal to Natan Alterman, the great eminence in Hebrew literary circles in the 1940s and 1950s. The lush figurative language and the neo-symbolic pathos Gouri borrowed from the master were oddly fitted to the experiences of violence and sudden loss on the battlefield. Within a few years, when Amichai and Zach began to turn the poetics of Hebrew verse upside down, Gouri's debut came to seem more like an homage than a new departure.

To understand Gouri's literary growth it's useful to know something of his origins. He was born in Tel Aviv in 1923 to parents who had emigrated from Russia. Committed Zionists, they came to Palestine already speaking perfect Hebrew and spoke no other language in the home, not even when they wanted to keep secrets from their children. The atmosphere of the home was utterly secular: no Shabbos candles, holidays, or bar mitzvah. Gouri recalls his mother saying that for the

human heart there are no fixed observances.

His schooling reinforced Zionist socialist values. General subjects were studied, along with Bible and Hebrew literature, but there was little about the millennia of Jewish life in Europe. The past in general, except for periods of ancient biblical glory, was deemed irrelevant. It was all about the promise of tomorrow. The walls of the clubhouse of the Makhanot Ha'olim youth movement, to which Gouri belonged, were festooned with placards carrying such slogans as: "You are the rock upon which the sanctuary of the future will be built." The violence surrounding the Arab revolt of 1936–1939 was a formative experience during his adolescent years. After two years on a kibbutz, Gouri attended the elite Kadourie Agricultural School in the Lower Galilee, where Yitzhak Rabin and Yigal Allon were classmates, before joining the Palmach. He participated in paramilitary actions aimed at hastening the British withdrawal from Palestine. In 1947 he was sent to Hungary and Czechoslovakia to organize the illegal aliyah of the remnants of Zionist youth movements. In the War of Independence he served as a deputy company commander on the southern front. After the war, he studied at The Hebrew University and the Sorbonne before undertaking a career as a journalist for labor and left-wing newspapers.

Gouri was a member of the first truly native generation, born in Palestine, raised wholly in Hebrew, and formed in the crucible of the struggle for statehood. This is, to be sure, the heroic stuff of modern Jewish history, but it is also a formation that entailed significant blind spots. Blacked out is the life of the Jewish people in the diaspora, not just the shtetls of Eastern Europe, but the vast, adaptive civilization of the Jews from the Babylonia of the Talmud to the golden age of Andalusia and Maimonides and then to the rabbinic and mercantile elites of Ashkenaz and Poland. Early on, Gouri began to come to terms with these limitations. The year he spent in Central Europe after the Holocaust was an education, exposing him not only to the enormity of

what had taken place but also to the human faces behind it. His studies in Jerusalem helped him fill in the not-inconsiderable cultural space between the Bible and Bialik. As it happens, it was through Bialik and Rawnitzki's great anthology of rabbinic legends *Sefer ha-agada* that Gouri encountered the spiritual world of the Talmud. He also read the great medieval Hebrew poets and delved into the High Holiday *machzor*. Gouri is the kind of poet who makes room for new influences rather than divesting himself of old commitments. The discovery of diaspora Jews and their culture surely affected his sabra attitudes, but rather than renouncing that core identity he simply became a *larger* poet.

The attention given the Holocaust in Gouri's work makes him unique among the native writers of his generation. As harsh as it is to say, Zionist ideology had made the destruction of European Jewry into the chronicle of a death foretold. No one had foreseen the specific mechanisms of its execution or its national source—that it came from the enlightened West rather than from the Slavic East was a surprise—but the disappearance of Europe's Jews through pogrom or assimilation had been considered inevitable. This certainty derived from a scathing critique of the physical passivity and moral corruption of diaspora Jews. When the predictions became fact, the catastrophe engendered a deep sense of shame and confusion in those who had been raised in the youth movements of the Yishuv. What stance could be taken by young people who were preparing for the defense of their land and people toward their brethren who, as it was commonly thought at the time, had passively submitted themselves to death?

This may be familiar territory, but it's worth recalling in order to gauge the singularity of Gouri's response. The year Gouri spent in Europe after the war working with survivors when he was 24 was the beginning of a long process that reached its climax when he covered the Eichmann trial in 1961 for *Lamerchav*, the newspaper of the Labor-left Achdut Ha-avoda party. His dispatches are fascinating documents because of the tension they record between the trial testimony, which he dutifully describes, and his subjective responses as a native Israeli. Early in the trial, for example, a witness named Morris Fleischman related how, as an act of public humiliation, he and the chief rabbi of Vienna were ordered to go down on their hands and knees and scrub the sidewalks, and how the rabbi, dressed in his tallit, endured this as an act of God. Gouri's immediate response is disgust: "I had no desire to listen to this broken, decrepit man go on and on about his afflictions. . . . I would prefer attending the Nachal (the army pioneer corps) ceremonies taking place today at the stadium and seeing strong young people." And yet, he writes, "Morris Fleischman's testimony grabs me by the throat with incredible force and says to me: 'Sit down and listen to every word!'" Gouri's honesty is bracing, and it allows those of us who are often caught up in our own righteous hindsight to understand just how difficult this moral readjustment must have been for Israelis.

Gouri persevered in his engagement with the Holocaust. Stepping out of his *métier* as a poet, he published in 1965 a stunning short novel called *The Chocolate Deal*, which stages an encounter between Ruby and Mordy, two survivors in an unnamed



Ambulance with Star of David insignias on the Jerusalem-Tel Aviv highway near Bab El Wad, May 1, 1948. (Photo by Frank Scherschel//Time Life Pictures/Getty Images.)

German city several months after the war's end. Ruby is all activity and mobility unburdened by shame and self-reflexive memory; he is busy with schemes for cornering the market on surplus Allied chocolate. Mordy is flooded by memories of suffering, not only his own but those of others who sought to hide him. Gouri stretched himself in another direction when he was asked in 1974 by the members of Lochamei Ha-getaot (The Ghetto Fighters) to prepare a documentary film for the kibbutz's Holocaust museum. Despite having no experience in filmmaking, Gouri worked over the next 13 years to produce a trilogy of well-regarded films: *The 81st Blow*, *The Last Sea*, and *Flames in the Ashes*.

This is how Gouri ends a poem ("Inheritance," translated by Stanley Chyet) written in the 1950s about the Akeidah, Abraham's almost-sacrifice of his son:

Isaac, we're told, was not offered up in sacrifice.  
He lived long,  
enjoyed his life, until the light of his eyes grew dim.

But he bequeathed that hour to his progeny.  
They are born  
with a knife in their heart.

Although the Holocaust is not explicitly mentioned, it doesn't need to be. Already at the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, survivors of the crusader massacres called attention to the somber fact that, compared to Abraham's uncompleted act, the sacrifice of their martyrs had been fully consummated. So too in Gouri's retelling of the Akeida. Even though the angel intervenes and the knife drops from Abraham's hand and Isaac goes on to live a long and happy life, the intended wound takes on a life of its own. Like a Jewish version of original sin, each new generation is born with a sense of dread. For a member of the heroic cadres that fought for the establishment of Israel, this is no small admission. It is one of the things that makes Gouri a great poet.

The poetic "I" that speaks in most of his poems, though firmly planted in its home ground, is open to contemplating antagonistic arguments and points of view. But this is hardly a simple liberality of spirit or a Whitmanesque embrace of a world of contradictions, as indicated by the title of another poem from the 1950s, "Civil War," translated here by Stanley Chyet:

I'm a civil war  
and half of me fires to the last  
at the walls of the vanquished.

I'm a court martial  
working in shifts,  
its light never dimmed.

And those in the right fire on the others in the right.  
And then it's quiet  
a calm composed of fatigue and darkness and empty shells.

I'm nighttime in a city open  
to everyone who's hungry.

In the temporary calm that comes from exhaustion rather than resolution, the speaker compares him-

self to an open city using allusions that pull in two directions. The last two lines allude to Roberto Rossellini's 1945 film *Open City*, about war-torn Rome as a defenseless space open to looting. Yet Gouri closes the poem in a surprising note of generosity with the familiar Aramaic phrase from the Passover

**Gouri is no post-Zionist.  
Israel's enemies and their  
evil intentions are real.  
There are no fantasies of  
undoing history, and no rosy  
visions of resolution.**

haggadah that offers the "bread of affliction" to all who are hungry.

This poetic conceit became very real at an important juncture in Gouri's career. After the Six-Day War, Gouri signed a manifesto supporting the Movement for a Greater Israel, a circle of secular writers and intellectuals—these were not the messianists of Gush Emunim—who advocated incorporating Judah and Samaria into the state of Israel. Gouri's participation was solicited by Natan Alterman, who overcame the

tia, deep in the Shomron. Until that point, the IDF had been removing settlers as soon as they established themselves, but this demonstration was bigger, and it took place against the background of Arafat's defiant, gun-in-holster appearance at the United Nations and the resolution condemning Zionism as racism. Gouri had been reporting on this tense confrontation between the settlers and the army when he was prevailed upon by the settlers to serve as a go-between between them and the Rabin government. He brokered a deal that allowed 30 persons—later interpreted as 30 *families*—to remain at Sebastia legally, the first in a series of concessions made by the Labor government that allowed settlements to spring up.

In time Gouri came to regret this as one of the greatest mistakes in his life. He had crossed the line between objective journalist and active participant. More disturbing were the violent excesses of the settler movement in the years to come. Nor did Gouri foresee the heavy moral price paid by Israel, especially by young soldiers as they policed Arab population centers, in ruling another people.

Yet rather than blaming the extremists, Gouri turns the light of moral scrutiny upon himself and his generation. It is this kind of grand self-reckoning, a *heshbon ha-nefesh*, that is the burden of *Eyval*, a cycle of 86 poems that has been widely celebrated as the late fruit of Gouri's career. The title comes



Sacrifice of Isaac by Caravaggio, ca. 1603.

younger poet's hesitations by laying out a vision of a single state with a Jewish majority—achieved by mass aliyah from the West—in which the Arabs would form a respected minority with full religious and national rights. Gouri was not a man of the right, but he had been formed by a Zionist youth culture that imbued him with a deep connection to the Land of Israel in its totality (all parts of which were accessible when he was growing up) and esteemed the value of *hulutsiyut*, pioneering and self-realization through settlement on the land.

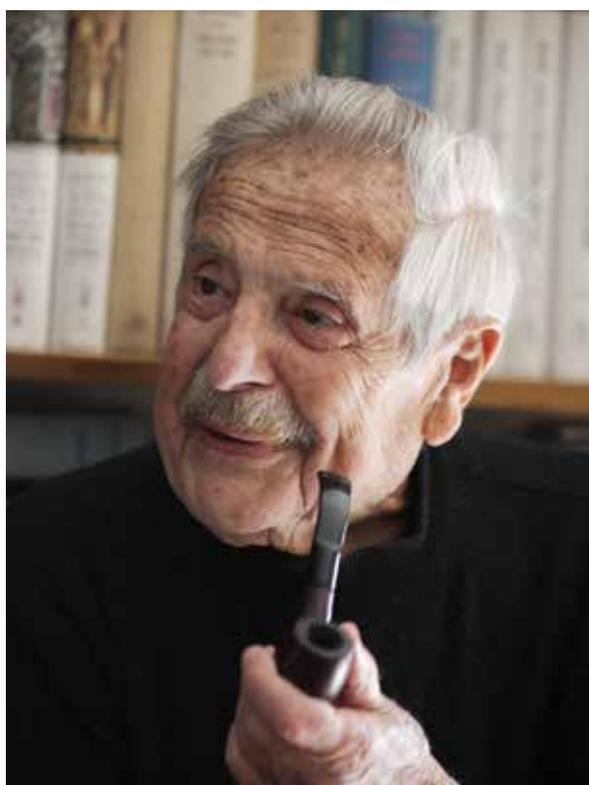
In 1975, thousands of supporters of Gush Emunim occupied the old Turkish train station at Sebas-

from the covenant ceremony in Deuteronomy 27, in which Moses delivers the blessings concerning Israel's future on Mount Grizim and the curses on Mount Eyval. The place name conveys the somber mood of the composition. Gouri looks back and finds his generation—his comrades from the Palmach and the youth movements who forged the institutions of the new state—responsible for a fundamental error. In the heat of their bravery and in their heartfelt identification with the Land of Israel, they were blind to the trauma and disenfranchisement Palestinian Arabs had undergone and to the consequences their ordeal would eventually bear.

Gouri sees no guile or malevolence here; the error was an unintended—but not necessarily unforeseeable—result of the legitimate goal of creating a Jewish homeland.

Gouri is no post-Zionist. Israel's enemies and their evil intentions are real. There are no fantasies of undoing history, and no rosy visions of resolution. All we can do, says the speaker of *Eyval*, is to open our eyes, renounce self-congratulation, become aware of the chances we missed, inhabit our regret with courage, and await judgment. What saves this reckoning from prophetic righteousness is Gouri's refusal to stand apart from his peers. The "we" that prevails in the poems is not moral camouflage but a generational collective for which Gouri takes full responsibility. In *Pirchei eish* (Fire Flowers), his debut collection in 1949, he had spoken in the first-person plural and afterward spent decades on his own poetic subjectivity, apart from the collective. In *Eyval*, 60 years later, Gouri returns to "we," but on terms that are noticeably different.

Any summary of the political argument of *Eyval* is destined to sound crude, not because it simplifies the nuances of analysis but because it is beside the point. What is most real is the experience of regret, not its source. The poems explore what it's like to abide the uncertainty that is created when the principles that have guided one's life have been severely questioned. After admitting that "Almost all the holy cows have been slaughtered," the poet confesses:



Haim Gouri at home, Jerusalem, February 2013. (Photo by Yossi Zamir/Flash90.)

It's difficult for me personally without those cows.  
For years and years I pastured them.  
I am coming to resemble Methuselah,  
Another holy cow that has been slaughtered.

A great and much celebrated poet, a national institution, Gouri could have cruised into the last, late phase of his career. There is something breathtaking in his choice to knock his halo askew and forfeit the pose of the vindicated prophet.

*Eyval* demonstrates how great, luminous poetry can be made out of remorse. Gouri's persona in the poems manages the neat trick of accepting responsibility for his past actions and at the same time not taking himself too seriously. A gift for self-irony and wit leavens the gloom. There are antic shifts between wildly disparate registers of Hebrew; a rare biblical term will share a line with a conversational catch phrase or a piece of army lingo. For a poet so schooled in secularity, there is also an unexpected reaching out to the language of Jewish prayer. The experience of awaiting judgment is the fundamental mood of *Eyval*. The desire to know who will withstand this scrutiny is expressed by the question "Kama ya'avrun?" (How many will pass?); the echo of the U'netaneh Tokef prayer of Yom Kippur is unmistakable. References abound to the Ne'ilah service that brings the holiest of days to its conclusion. Here, at the end of Gouri's long career, he ranges over the entire Hebrew and Jewish tradition to create a poetry of wisdom.

Alan Mintz teaches Hebrew literature at The Jewish Theological Seminary and is the author of *Sanctuary in the Wilderness: A Critical Introduction to American Hebrew Poetry* (Stanford University Press).



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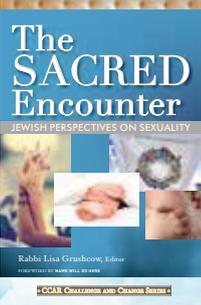
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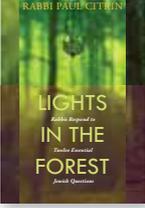
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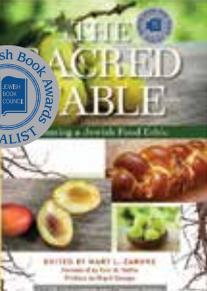
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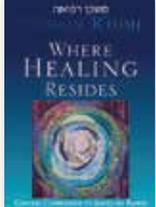
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# National Socialism, World Jewry, and the History of Being: Heidegger's Black Notebooks

BY RICHARD WOLIN

**M**artin Heidegger's *Schwarze Hefte* (Black Notebooks), the first three of which have recently been published in Germany to great controversy, will eventually comprise the last eight volumes of his mammoth *Gesamtausgabe* (Collected Works). When complete, the edition will run to a staggering 102 volumes—more than the collected works of Kant, Hegel, or Nietzsche. At the end of his life, Heidegger, who regarded himself as the greatest thinker in the Western tradition since Heraclitus, meticulously mapped out the (non-chronological) sequence in which his Collected Works would be published and chose the Black Notebooks as the edition's culminating contribution.

For decades, the guardians of Heidegger's literary estate, his son Hermann and the Freiburg philosopher Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, kept the existence of these works, which take their name from the notebooks, bound in black wax and leather, in which he wrote them, a carefully guarded secret. It is not hard to see why, for they reveal the extent to which during the 1930s and 1940s Heidegger was wholly obsessed with Bolshevism, National Socialism, and the ignoble actions of "World Jewry" (*Weltjudentum*), as represented by Western powers such as England and the United States.

Of course, the scandal of Heidegger's politics is not new. It goes back, at the very least, to his inaugural address as the Nazi-installed rector of University of Freiburg in 1933, in which Heidegger sought to sacrifice the autonomy of the university to the historical destiny of the German people (*Volk*). The subsequent controversies over the extent of Heidegger's Nazism (he resigned as rector after a year but retained his membership in the National Socialist Party until 1945) might be said to have begun with the denazification proceedings at Freiburg after the war. In the report, his old friend and colleague Karl Jaspers described Heidegger as a nihilist and an uncritical mystic who nonetheless was "occasionally able in a clandestine and remarkable way, to strike the core of philosophical thought." However, Jaspers also wrote that:

It is absolutely necessary that those who helped place National Socialism in the saddle be called to account. Heidegger is among the few professors to have done that . . . Heidegger's manner of thinking, which to me seems in its essence unfree, dictatorial, and incapable of communication, would today be disastrous in its pedagogical effects . . . Heidegger certainly did not see through all the real powers and goals of the National Socialist leaders . . . But his manner of speaking and his actions

have a certain affinity with National Socialist characteristics, which makes his error comprehensible.

Heidegger was subsequently dismissed from the university and barred from teaching, though he was reintegrated and allowed to teach again in 1951.

The more recent controversies over the extent

Thus, contrary to what has been reported, the Black Notebooks are not merely a compendium of occasional or unpolished thoughts. Instead, in the main they consist of sustained reflections on the essential problems of the contemporary era as viewed from the rarified Heideggerian standpoint of the "history of Being." From this point hence, it will no longer suffice to trivialize the extent of Heidegger's

**The response of the Heideggerian faithful has been to detach the philosopher's thought from his embarrassing political entanglements.**

and significance of Heidegger's Nazi sympathies have been provoked by the damning research of Hugo Ott, Victor Fariás, Emmanuel Faye, and others. However, each time the response of the Heideggerian faithful has been to detach the philosopher's thought from his embarrassing political entanglements. This strategy has never been entirely plausible, as Jaspers had already recognized. What the

racism, as Jonathan Rée recently has, by claiming that the Freiburg sage was merely "the sort of cultural anti-Semite (DH Lawrence, TS Eliot, Ezra Pound) often found in the 1920s and 30s." As the German journalist Thomas Assheuer has astutely noted:

The hermeneutic trick of acknowledging Heidegger's anti-Semitism only in order to permanently cordon it off from his philosophy proper is no longer convincing. The anti-Jewish enmity of the *Black Notebooks* is no afterthought; instead, it forms the basis of [Heidegger's] philosophical diagnostics.

With the publication of the Black Notebooks, what has now become indubitably clear is that racial prejudice against non-Germanic peoples—the English, the Russians, the French, the Americans, and, especially, the Jews—lies at the very center of Heidegger's philosophical project, since it is inseparable from the *Volk*-concept that he had embraced already in *Being and Time* (1927) and that he continued to exalt throughout his lectures and seminars of the 1930s. Heidegger's belief in the ontological superiority of the German *Volk* underwrites his political view that inferior peoples may be justly persecuted in the name of "the history of Being," a point that has also been forcefully made by the Black Notebooks' editor, Peter Trawny, in his short book *Heidegger und der Mythos der jüdischen Weltverschwörung* (Heidegger and the Myth of the Jewish World Conspiracy).

**W**hen pressed to define the pivotal notion of "Being" in one of the key texts of his later period, the 1947 "Letter on Humanism," Heidegger wrote:

Man does not decide whether and how beings appear, whether and how God and the gods or history and nature come forward into the



Martin Heidegger ca. 1920. (Photo by Apic/Getty Images.)

Black Notebooks now provide, in contrast to the lectures and theoretical treatises that have already been published, is access to Heidegger's *innermost philosophical thoughts*: the elaboration of an extensive "hidden doctrine" that the philosopher developed in the solitude of his Black Forest ski hut.

lighting of Being, come to presence and depart. The advent of beings lies in the destiny of Being.

It is impossible to know how one might verify or even evaluate such a statement, which seems to suggest that humanity is ineluctably dependent on nameless and mysterious higher powers. In the passage just cited, Heidegger neglects to tell us who “the gods” are and how they have come into being, not to mention how they influence human affairs. Many of Heidegger’s key assertions concerning “humanity,”

is objectionable. His attempt to ground philosophy in unintelligible concepts and idioms renders his thought, in nearly all of its incarnations, deeply problematic.

It was precisely this style of unfounded, mystical assertion to which Jaspers was pointing when he described Heidegger’s thinking as “unfree, dictatorial, and incapable of communication.” In fact, Jaspers’ criticism may have been even more far-sighted than he realized. Not only was such “thinking” pedagogically disastrous for German students immediate-

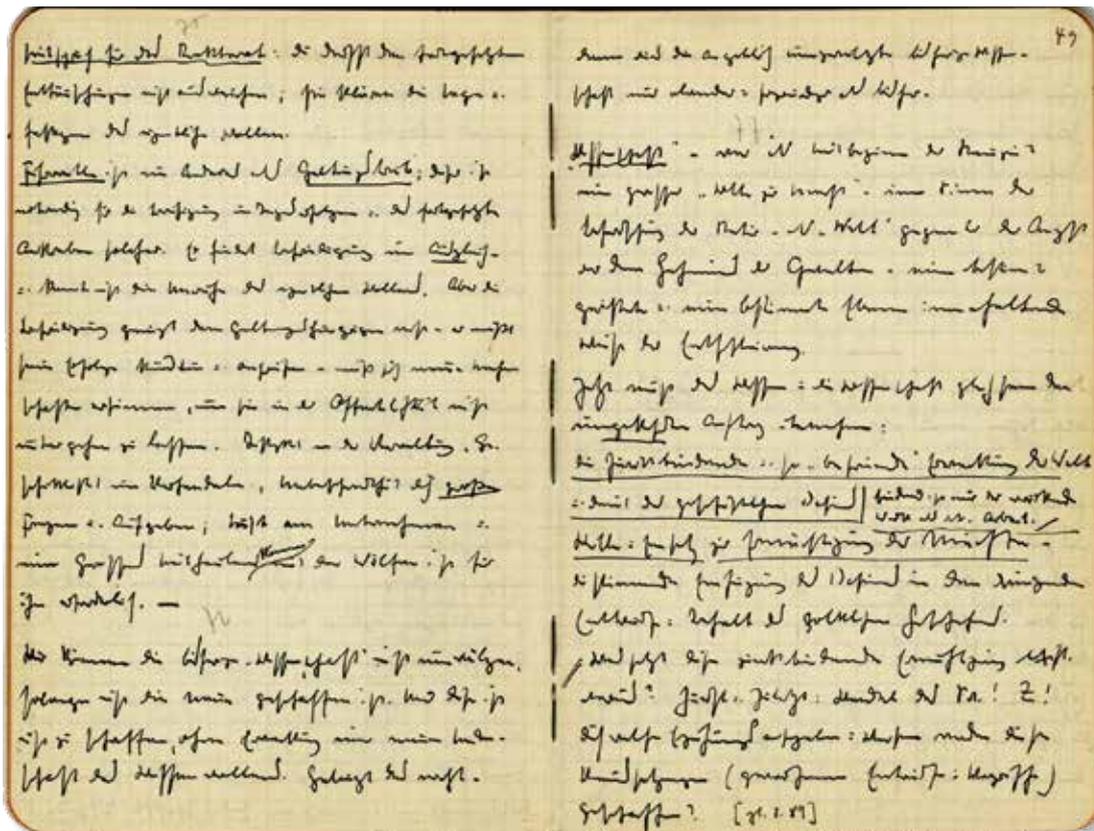
derived from its claim to being rooted in life or Being. Significantly, the *völkisch* ideology on which Nazism was predicated was based on the virtues of *Bodenständigkeit*, or “rootedness in soil,” and, in Heidegger’s view, this was the source of the deep-seated affinity between National Socialism and his own “fundamental ontology.” In his inaugural address Heidegger celebrated National Socialism for having reawakened the primordial “forces of earth and blood” (*erd- und bluthäftige Kräfte*).

The same preoccupation with the values of ontological rootedness that attracted Heidegger to the Nazis explains his philosophical aversion to Jews. As “cosmopolitans,” Jews constitutionally lacked what Heidegger valued most: *Bodenständigkeit*, a capacity for *völkisch* belonging predicated on rootedness in Being. In a 1934 seminar, Heidegger condemned “Semitic peoples,” who, because they were “rootless,” were unable to appreciate the existential qualities of German “space” (*Raum*). In the Black Notebooks, he confidently claims that rootedness-in-soil provides us with structures that link us existentially to our “mother’s blood” as well as our “ancestors.”

As the progenitors of biblical monotheism, the Jews had also invented religious universalism, a standpoint that was anathema to Heidegger. The positing of a single Lord of all creation precluded the concrete structures of existential belonging: *Dasein*, mood, and everydayness, as well as those of *Volk*, race, and rootedness-in-soil. In Heidegger’s view, universalism of any sort was a vestige of “idealism” or the “philosophy of subject” that Heidegger sought to “annihilate”—he was fond of violent and martial metaphors—by virtue of his turn toward the question of Being.

Heidegger’s antipathy to Jews, of course, has a context as well as a history. In German anti-Semitic circles, it was a widely shared truism that Jews were the chief carriers of the corrosive spirit of modernity, which was associated with excesses of abstract thought. It followed that Jews must be held directly responsible for modernity’s manifold degenerative tendencies: above all, the dislocations associated with the momentous transition from organic communities (*Gemeinschaft*) to modern mass society (*Gesellschaft*). Although such anti-Jewish prejudices had long been common currency, they rose to fever pitch following the defeat of the Central Powers in World War I. It was at this point that the “stab-in-the-back” legend originated, alleging that Jewish shirkers had been responsible for the German defeat.

One of the best-sellers of the Weimar era, when Heidegger’s mature world view was formed, was Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*. Spengler’s frenzied account of European decrepitude harmonized perfectly with Germany’s postwar mood of cultural despondency. His impassioned jeremiad identified a litany of by now familiar culprits: racial mixing, the deracinating character of modern urban life, the concomitant loss of community and belief, and, finally, the triumph of arid intellectualism at the expense of healthy and robust human instinctual life. Heidegger was a connoisseur of Spengler’s work. In the Black Notebooks, he writes: “I have seen nothing that would prove that Spengler was incorrect.” Man is free to experience the truth of Being (*Sein*), Heidegger claims, channeling Spengler, only in “downfall” or “perishing” (*Untergang*). “Downfall is not something that should be feared,” Heidegger continues, “insofar as the essential precondition for historical downfall is Greatness.”



Pages from one of Martin Heidegger’s Black Notebooks from 1931 to 1941, recently published in Germany for the first time. (Courtesy of Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach.)

“fate,” and the “history of Being” shun demonstrative argument in favor of airy conjecture about the nature of obscure deities and supra-mundane potencies to whom we must passively submit. In this respect Heidegger’s later thought represents, in no uncertain terms, a renunciation of human autonomy.

Since Heidegger regarded the history of philosophy since Plato as a “history of decline,” he was not bound by the central concepts and standards of that tradition. Consequently, he characterizes the nature of Being, on which so much depends, in terms that, to all intents and purposes, fall beneath the threshold of sense: “Yet Being—what is Being? It is It itself. The thinking that is to come must learn to experience that and to say it.” But if Being can only be defined as self-identical—“It is It itself”—how might we humans make sense of its various manifestations? Heidegger claims to possess superior insight concerning Being’s modalities. But these insights remain undemonstrable: They transcend—often, in ways that seem entirely arbitrary—the basic capacities of the human understanding, which Heidegger frequently mocked.

In the anti-philosophical arguments of the Black Notebooks, Heidegger views reason, individualism, and democracy through the prism of modern humanity’s utter and wholesale “abandonment by Being.” His obscure point of departure leads to equally obscurantist forms of criticism. It is not merely Heidegger’s racist reliance on the *Volk*-ideal that

ly after the war, in many respects it remains so today. Heidegger’s philosophical posture is peculiarly conducive to discipleship and adulation. It breeds passive acceptance and fierce loyalty rather than the virtues of individual autonomy and active citizenship.

The Black Notebooks reflect Heidegger’s enthusiasm for Germany’s so-called “National Revolution” of 1933, from which he expected, as he once put it, “a total transformation of our German *Dasein*,” *Dasein* being the Heideggerian term of art describing human “being-in-the-world.” Early on, Heidegger openly acknowledged the affinities between his own philosophy of existence and the Nazi world view: “The metaphysics of *Dasein* must deepen itself in a manner consistent with its inner structures and extend to the *Metapolitics* ‘of’ the historical *Volk*.” Even at the zenith of World War II, as European cities lay in ruins and the Slavic peoples had been turned into slaves of the German Reich, Heidegger continued to insist that salvation, should it arrive at all, would come from the Germans, whom he believed, along with the Greeks, were the only truly historical people.

In his inaugural address as rector of the University of Freiburg, Heidegger had justified his support for the regime in the existentialist idiom that he had developed in his 1927 classic *Being and Time* and related works. Heidegger held that the superiority of his *Existenzphilosophie* (existential philosophy)

In interwar Germany, the Spenglerian critique of civilization, known as *Zivilisationskritik*, went hand in hand with the radical critique of reason (*Vernunftkritik*), and the pejorative conception of “World Jewry” in which they were both enmeshed. “Thinking,” Heidegger once wrote, “begins only when we have come to know that reason, glorified for centuries, is the most stiff-necked adversary of thought.” In the Black Notebooks, Heidegger’s anti-Judaism becomes obsessional, as his repeated exco-riations of the Jewish mentality of “calculation” and “reckoning” demonstrate. In *The Decline of the West*, Spengler, for his part, had asserted that, “What has mattered in the West more than any other distinction is the difference between the *race-ideal of the Gothic springtime* . . . and that of the Sephardic Jew.”

One of Heidegger’s chief philosophical targets was neo-Kantianism, which had become the semi-official philosophy of the Second Empire (1871–1918). Its leading representative was Hermann Cohen, whose final book, *Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism*, appeared in 1919. Cohen’s treatise, as its title implied, was a justification of Jewish monotheism as the fountainhead of Western rationalism. To Heidegger’s way of thinking, however, neo-Kantianism was the consummate incarnation of philosophy divorced from life: a barren and sterile intellectualism. On these grounds, Heidegger emphatically sided with the rising tide of *Lebensphilosophie* (philosophy of life) against the outmoded and anti-vital “religion of reason.”

Heidegger’s critique of theories of knowledge that abstract from the actual conditions of human existence in *Being and Time* and other early works

is deeply original and remains important. As Emmanuel Levinas perspicaciously recognized early on, by taking “Being-in-the-world,” rather than Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum*, as its point of departure, Heidegger’s philosophy of existence was able to revolutionize the enterprise of transcendental philosophy. But it is also not hard to see how, in the philosopher’s own mind, many of the aforementioned, overlapping philosophical and cultural themes became confusedly intertwined. Thus if modernity was a “fall” from the grace of origins and if the main culprit was the implacable triumph of Western rationalism, it seemed to follow that the Jews were behind it. Hence from the very beginning, Heidegger’s fundamental ontology was profoundly and irredeemably ideological.

Heidegger’s champions have long claimed that his anti-Semitism is a later and somewhat equivocal development, a regrettable lapse that the Master himself quickly corrected, with no intrinsic or essential connection to the majesty of his thought. Now that these anti-Semitic transgressions have been acknowledged, we are repeatedly told, we can safely go back to imbibing his portentous pronouncements concerning the ill effects of technology and the forlorn condition of modern man. But the critical point to keep in mind is that Heidegger’s radical critique of reason, of subjectivity, of modern technology, and of Western civilization’s downfall are all part of a world view—whose individual components are historically and thematically inseparable—that rejected reason, democracy, and individualism. As Heidegger avows in the Black Notebooks, in a passage that is replete with anti-Semitic stereotypes:

Contemporary Jewry’s . . . increase in power finds its basis in the fact that Western metaphysics—above all, in its modern incarnation—offers fertile ground for the dissemination of an empty rationality and calculability, which in this way gains a foothold in “spirit,” without ever being able to grasp from within the hidden realms of decision.

Heidegger concludes this litany of invective by declaring that, “The more original and primordial that future decisions and questioning become, the more they will remain inaccessible to this ‘race’”—that is, the Jews. He wrote these words circa 1939.

In his time as *Rektor-Führer* of the University of Freiburg, Heidegger had proposed a series of political changes that would bring German higher education in line with the values of “existential rootedness” (*Bodenständigkeit*). He emphasized and celebrated the idea of “service”: military service, labor service, and service in knowledge. Labor, in particular, would help cure German students of excessive intellectualism and re-channel their energies toward the values of the “national community” (*Volksgemeinschaft*). In all of these respects, Heidegger saw crucial existential affinities between his philosophy and the Nazi ideology of *Volk, Gemeinschaft, Führertum* (leadership), hierarchy, destiny, and *Kampf*, or struggle. As he would later declare in the Black Notebooks, “The higher compulsion [*Zwang*] of the earth” is only realized “in the world-shaping power [*Macht*] of a Volk.” It is worth noting that many of these Nazi or proto-Nazi



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ideals had previously surfaced in *Being and Time* in connection with Heidegger's discussion of "historicity." Thus already during the late 1920s, among Heidegger's criteria for authentic historical existence were fidelity to the *Volk*, allegiance to one's "generation," loyalty to a historical "community" (*Gemeinschaft*), the capacity to "choose one's hero," and an ability to heed the summons of destiny.

In this regard, one of the main obstacles to accepting Heidegger's philosophy of existence is that, historicity, as Heidegger defines it, is inextricably tied to his idea of the *Volk*, and to the entire array of racist and anti-democratic prejudices that accompany it. Only *Völker* (peoples) can be "historical," in Heidegger's sense, since they alone are rooted in soil and place and possess a common bloodline. As Heidegger observes at one point: "The voice of blood derives from the fundamental mood of man, and the shaping of our *Dasein* through labor is integrally related to this process." Moral and legal conceptions that are opposed to the *Volk*-idea, including democracy and human rights, are mere disembodied abstractions. In the Black Notebooks, these concerns become obsessional.

The attempt by Heidegger's defenders to separate his philosophy from his political views (or even to delineate between his early and late philosophy) necessarily comes to grief. It founders owing to the nature of Heidegger's philosophy itself, which takes its bearings and inspiration from the historical situatedness of *Dasein*. Even before he joined the Nazi Party, Heidegger's thought was saturated with *völkisch* ideological themes. Parts of *Being and Time* express the same anti-liberal, proto-fascist perspective as Oswald Spengler and other contemporary German thinkers, including Carl Schmitt and Ernst Jünger. The major difference is that Heidegger's anti-democratic sentiments are masked in the discourse of fundamental ontology.

In the Black Notebooks the question of Being becomes a springboard for Heidegger's intemperate judgments concerning the politics of the 1930s. No matter where Heidegger trains his gaze, he perceives the same manifestations of historico-ontological degeneracy, the same fateful hypostatization and disqualification of Being. His preferred term to describe this condition of cultural decline is *Machenschaft*, which can be approximately rendered as "machination," while also suggesting both "fabrication" and "manufacture." Heidegger's lamentation against such machination pervaded his work in the 1930s.

Russia and America are the same, with the same dreary technological frenzy and the same unrestricted organization of the average man. The lives of men . . . slide into a world which lacked the depth from out of which the essential always comes . . . The prevailing dimension became that of extension and number. Intelligence no longer meant a wealth of talent, lavishly spent, but only what could be learned by everyone . . . This is the onslaught of what we call *the demonic* (in the sense of destructive evil).

Here, as in many other instances, Heidegger's history of Being threatens to lapse into inverted theology, with an apocalyptic punchline. He really has nothing to tell us about Russia under Stalin or America at the time of the New Deal (though he may tell us more than he realizes about Germany under Hitler). It seems that ev-

erything "essential" has been determined in advance by the inchoate and mysterious "sendings of Being." Here it is worth recalling Heidegger's declaration in the "Letter on Humanism" that, from the standpoint of fundamental ontology, human will counts for naught. As Jürgen Habermas has written:

The propositionally contentless speech about Being [demands] resignation to fate. Its practical-political side consists in . . . a diffuse readiness to obey . . . an auratic but indeterminate authority. The rhetoric of the later Heidegger compensates for the propositional content that the text itself refuses: It attunes and trains its addressees in their dealings with pseudo-sacral powers.

In the Black Notebooks Heidegger's misplaced reverence for Being qua "destiny" occasionally reaches absurd proportions. For instance he attributes numinous power to names that begin with the letter H: Heraclitus, Hölderlin, and Hegel. But Hitler would also seem to belong to the list, as would, of course, Heidegger. Heidegger also indulges in baseless numerological prophesying, conjecturing that a final "decision" (*Entscheidung*) on the planetary reign of "American-

ism" will come to pass in 2300. He also predicts that in the year 2327 his own name will re-emerge from the oblivion of forgetting, that is, on the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *Being and Time*.

Heidegger believed that the Soviet Union, America, and England, as embodiments of *Machenschaft*, were expressions of the spirit of "World Jewry"—"a human type whose world historical goal is the uprooting of all beings from Being." According to Heidegger, the problem with *Machenschaft* "is that it leads to total deracination, resulting in the self-alienation of peoples." He continues: Whereas "World Jewry which is everywhere ungraspable, does not need to resort to arms"—since, presumably, it has stealthily infiltrated all global centers of power—"conversely, we Germans sacrifice the most racially gifted representatives of our *Volk*." In other words, according to Heidegger, "World Jewry" had everything to gain from World War II without having wagered a thing.

In Heidegger's view, another hypocritical aspect of World Jewry is that, whereas "since time immemorial, the Jews, *relying on their express talents for calculation*, have 'lived' according to the principle of race, they now seek to defend themselves against that same principle's unrestricted application"—a reference to

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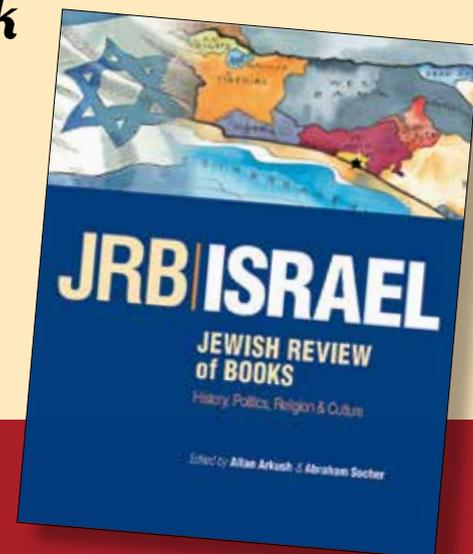
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the Nazis' draconian and persecutory racial legislation. Time and again, Heidegger asserts that an international Jewish conspiracy is responsible for secretly orchestrating a world-historical process of deracination—the alienation of the world's peoples from their rootedness in soil. For this reason, Heidegger believed that National Socialism's racial persecution of the Jews was essentially a case of self-defense. In his treatise on the "history of Being" he contends that, "It would be important to enquire about the basis of [World] Jewry's unique predisposition toward planetary criminality [*planetarisches Verbrechen*]."

The *Black Notebooks* confirm the extent to which, during the 1930s, Heidegger's philosophical language had imbibed the National Socialist rhetoric of "struggle" and "annihilation" (*Kampf*

*und Vernichtung*). "Everything," he writes, "must be [exposed to] total devastation, preceded by the annihilation . . . of 'Culture.'" On another occasion, he says that, "Truth is not for everyone, but only for the strong." By way of illustration, Heidegger praises the "violent ones [*die Gewalttätige*] . . . who use force to become preeminent in historical Being." In the *Black Notebooks* he endorses the practice of a kind of philosophical "breeding" (*Züchtung*), claiming, "The breeding of higher and of the highest modalities of thought is of primary importance—more so than the mere communication of knowledge (*Kenntnismitteilung*)." Expressing contempt for the German university, Heidegger declares that, "Two years of military service is better preparation for the sciences than four semesters of 'study.'"

The *Black Notebooks* are meant to stake out, he writes, "stealthy advance and rearguard positions" (*unscheinbare Vorposten—und Nachhutstellungen*) in the struggle to achieve a mode of "original questioning" (*anfängliche Fragen*). "Every [authentic] philosophy is in-human," Heidegger proclaims—"a consuming fire."

During the late 1930s, as Nazi aggression precipitated a series of crises pushing Europe toward the precipice of war, the ideological fervor of Heidegger's political judgments escalated accordingly. By propagating the debased, technical-instrumental values of "welfare," "reason," and "culture," the "Western Revolutions" gave rise to the impersonal "despotism of No One—the unadulterated . . . empowerment of limitless planning and calculation" that holds sway in the contemporary world. Implausibly, Heidegger describes Bolshevism as the culmination of the English Revolution: "The character of modernity is the total and unrelenting fabrication (*Machenschaft*) of all Being." Once one abstracts from their "political, social, and religious forms," the English state and the "state of the united Soviet republics" are, Heidegger affirms, "the same," insofar as both subscribe to the same ruthless logic of technological world mastery. "The bourgeois-Christian form of English Bolshevism," Heidegger asserts, must be "annihilated." In such confused delusional ramblings, Heidegger's utter incapacity for real political judgment stands fully exposed.

Whereas Heidegger excelled at finding fault with non-Germanic cultures, he was strangely impervious to Nazi Germany's predatory and genocidal practices, despite living in the midst of them. In the early 1940s, he observes that reports of Soviet atrocities have been especially gruesome, but concerning the depredations of the Wehrmacht and the *Einsatzgruppen* in the East, he is entirely silent. He justifies Germany's inhumane treatment of Czechoslovakia and Poland by claiming that were France and England to triumph they would do the same to Germany. Yet, from the standpoint of the history of Being, a French and English victory would be *much worse*: France would undoubtedly inflict its "ahistoricity" on Germany. England would presumably do the same, turning all that it touched into a "giant business concern." Thus, a German triumph is the only way to ensure what he goes on to describe as a "transition toward reflection" as the initial step toward an "other Beginning."

Heidegger's fears about the planetary spread of "Americanism," coming from a land that he characterizes simply as the "site of catastrophe" (*das Katastrophenhaft*), are never far from view in this

period. "With Americanism" he says, "nihilism attains its zenith." The Americans embrace "the condition of nothingness [*Nichtigkeit*]" as "their future, since with the appearance of 'happiness' for everyone, they destroy everything." Of course, Heidegger never made the slightest effort to investigate America—its politics, its culture, and its intellectual dispositions—since the standpoint of "history of Being" already tells him all that he needs to know.

## Given the importance of existential rootedness for Heidegger, there was no room for a "worldless" people like the Jews.

In these writings, Heidegger's notion of our "abandonment by Being"—in essence, a restatement of Spengler's notion of "decline" retrofitted with the language of fundamental ontology—congeals into an obsession that implacably subsumes everything with which it comes into contact. Although Heidegger was fond of referring to his later philosophy as "thinking" (*Denken*), in truth, there is little evidence of real thought. Instead, time and again, we merely encounter the incantatory and ethically obtuse restatement of idiosyncratic dogma and ideological prejudice.

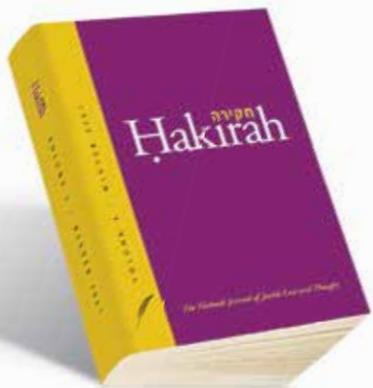
In light of the unrelenting cultural disparagement of non-Germanic peoples that accompanies Heidegger's embrace of the *Volk*-idea, the visceral anti-Semitism that suffuses the *Black Notebooks* should come as little surprise. The derogatory characterizations of "World Jewry" are not incidental; they are of a piece with the feverish critique of *Machenschaft*, calculation, "Americanism," and technological frenzy that, in Heidegger's view, have come to define the modern condition.

In his *Philosophische Autobiographie* (Philosophical Autobiography) Karl Jaspers recounts a conversation with Heidegger in which the topic of the "Jewish Question" arose. When Jaspers belittled *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* as anti-Semitic drivel, Heidegger replied that, "There really is a dangerous international alliance of Jews." Given Heidegger's delirious, prejudice-laden critique of modernity, who else could be primarily responsible for these multifarious and omnipresent manifestations of decline if not the Jews?

It is curious that Heidegger's supporters could doubt the depth of his commitment to anti-Semitism in view of the fact that, as the *Black Notebooks* reaffirm unequivocally, he was such an enthusiastic supporter of a regime whose alpha and omega was, in the words of historian Saul Friedländer, "redemptive anti-Semitism." Moreover, during the 12 years of Nazi rule, Heidegger was hardly an innocent bystander. Nor did he opt for the solitude of inner emigration. Instead, he was a Nazi Party member who paid his dues in full until the very end. During his tenure as rector, Heidegger felt little compunction about serving as one of the regime's most zealous intellectual spokespersons, in one speech going so far as to praise Hitler as "the present and future German reality and its law." In the *Black Notebooks*, he rarely wavers in his support

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for Hitler, insisting that it is a “stroke of good fortune” that “the Führer has awakened a new reality that has rechanneled our [German] thinking along the right path and infused it with new energy.” Heidegger also apparently set great store by the fact that both he and Hitler were born in the same year, 1889—a fact that he interpreted as indicating that their “destinies” were entwined—which turned out to be true, though not as he had imagined.

Equally disturbing is the fact that, on numerous occasions, Heidegger expressed his solidarity with the regime’s unmatched ethos of cruelty and brutality. As he opines in the Black Notebooks:

National Socialism is a *barbaric principle*. Therein lie its essence and its capacity for greatness. The danger is not [Nazism] itself, but instead that it will be rendered innocuous via homilies about the True, the Good, and the Beautiful.

This echoes Nietzsche’s prophetic summons in *The Will to Power* of the advent of the “barbarians of the twentieth century”: “A dominating race can grow up only out of terrible and violent beginnings. *Where are the barbarians of the twentieth century?*” Just as the Vandals and the Visigoths of 5<sup>th</sup>-century Europe delivered the *caput mortem* to Roman decadence, Heidegger hopes that the Nazis will not be derailed by talk of “the True, the Good, and the Beautiful” in fulfilling their destiny.

In his capacity as rector, Heidegger had few reservations about proscribing Jewish faculty members or denouncing scholars he viewed as politically unreliable. From the very outset, he was an eyewitness to the regime’s abhorrent anti-Semitic measures and policies: from the anti-Jewish boycott of April 1933 to the draconian professional proscriptions later that fall, to the Nuremberg racial laws of 1935, which codified German Jewry’s de-emancipation as citizens, to the persecutions and brigandage of *Kristallnacht*, to the Jewish deportations of 1940–1941, which succeeded, at long last, in making Germany free of Jews, or *Judenrein*. Neither in his lectures, nor in his treatises, nor in his correspondence did Heidegger express any objections to these policies.

Even after the war, despite many entreaties on the part of his students, Heidegger refused to renounce the Nazi regime. Writing to Herbert Marcuse, Heidegger claimed that the atrocities perpetrated by the Allies had been just as terrible; moreover the Nazi atrocities had been concealed from the German people. Heidegger’s claim is, needless to say, specious. As terrible as the firebombings of Dresden and Tokyo were, they pale in comparison with Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Babi Yar. And although the Final Solution may not have been public knowledge, the immense scale of the Nazi persecutions and deportations was apparent to everyone. After all: Where did Heidegger think that Germany’s 500,000 Jews had gone?

To think that one could serve in an official capacity in the highly toxic ideological atmosphere of Nazi Germany, as Heidegger did even after he stepped down as rector, without largely sharing the regime’s persecutory, anti-Semitic world view is, when all is said and done, simply delusional. The Black Notebooks are of paramount importance because they furnish us with Heidegger’s own justification of Nazism—a justification that, far from being occasional or circumstantial, emerges seamlessly from his doctrine of the “history of Being.” As Heidegger affirms:

One of the stealthiest forms of Gigantism and perhaps the most ancient [is] the fastpaced historicity of calculation, pushiness, and intermixing whereby Jewry’s worldlessness is established.

Given the importance of existential rootedness for Heidegger, there was no room for a “worldless” people like the Jews. “Worldlessness,” was, in fact, a word that Heidegger had used on other occasions to characterize “world-poor” (*weltarm*) beings like animals and inanimate objects.

The hierarchies and exclusions that pervade Heidegger’s philosophy of existence license merciless domination and persecution. This is not merely an occasional political judgment on Heidegger’s part; it follows from his distinctive *Seinspolitik*, his “politics of Being.” Even after the war, Heidegger continued to insist on what he characterized as National Socialism’s “inner truth and greatness”; that he believed that this greatness was not ultimately achieved because his teachings were ignored hardly exculpates him.

Heidegger’s philosophical partisanship for National Socialism was not a series of contingent errors or odd misjudgments. It was a betrayal of philosophy, of reasoning and thinking, in the most profound sense. As Herbert Marcuse wrote to Heidegger in the late 1940s:

A philosopher can be deceived regarding political matters . . . But he cannot be deceived about a regime that has killed millions of Jews, merely because they were Jews—that made terror into an everyday phenomenon, and that

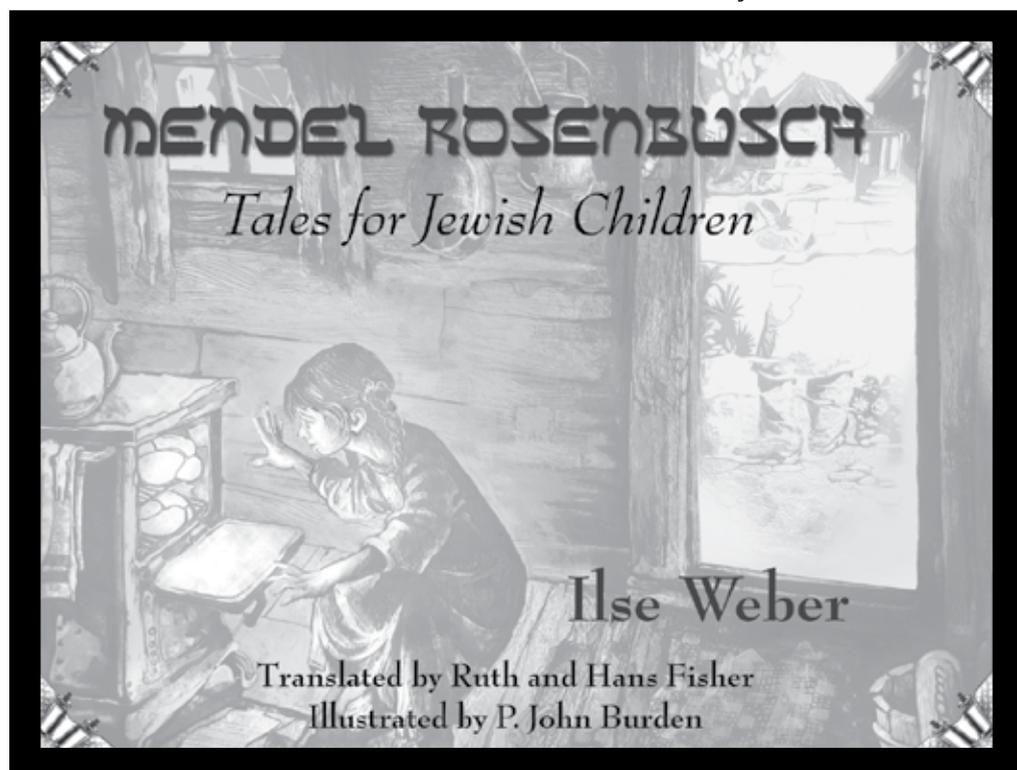
turned everything that pertains to the ideas of spirit, freedom, and truth, into its bloody opposite.

What astonished and disturbed Marcuse was that, even after the war, Heidegger seemed constitutionally incapable of arriving at such conclusions. Instead, in stark denial of all available evidence, including the macabre revelations concerning the Nazi death camps, he continued to insist that National Socialism had been the right course for Germany—the political path that most closely approximated the contours of his own philosophy of existence. The publication of the Black Notebooks in Heidegger’s Collected Works edition are proof of this perverse insistence. Heidegger faulted the Nazi movement merely for having failed to realize the sublimity of its appointed historical destiny, as delineated by his own philosophy of Being. After the war, in other words, Heidegger arrogantly maintained that it was not he who had abandoned Hitler, but Hitler who had failed him! Given the disturbing revelations contained in the Black Notebooks, any discussion of Heidegger’s legacy that downplays or diminishes the extent of his political folly stands guilty, by extension, of perpetuating the philosophical betrayal initiated by the Master himself.

Richard Wolin is Distinguished Professor of History and Political Science at the CUNY Graduate Center. His books, which have been translated into 10 languages, include *The Politics of Being: The Political Thought of Martin Heidegger* (Columbia University Press) and *Heidegger’s Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse* (Princeton University Press).

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# Killer Backdrop

BY AMY NEWMAN SMITH

**G**lossy-covered, deckle-edged, carrying enthusiastic blurbs on their backs, new works of Holocaust fiction arrive regularly at the *JRB* offices. So many, in fact, that they have spilled off the shelves allotted to the Holocaust, forcing us to move them to the tops of several bookcases. This is more than just an issue of space; these books simply don't belong on the same shelves as works by scholars and survivors. Perhaps this effusion of novels is to be expected. If Auschwitz can have a gift shop, why can't the Warsaw Ghetto have a love story?

Time has disproved Adorno's famous axiom about poetry after Auschwitz, but our familiarity with the history of the Shoah brings new urgency to critic Reinhard Baumgart's observation that Holocaust fiction, "by removing some of the horror, commits a grave injustice against the victims." And now we have Holocaust genre fiction, a glut of books aimed at people who apparently find romance more moving when it comes with a frisson of historical horror.

Take, for example, *The Train to Warsaw* by Gwen Edelman, blurbbed as follows: "In this lyrical exploration of memory, there is more urgent sensuality and haunting desire than anything I've read in a long time." Edelman renders the Holocaust just frightening enough to provide the dramatic tension necessary for a novel that spends as much time in the bedroom as on the streets of the Warsaw Ghetto, where Jascha and Lilka met and fell in love. Forty years later they return for the now-famous Jascha to give a reading from one of his books. Much of the novel consists of dialogue between the two:

The radiator clanked and the heat began to rise with a hiss. Lilka brought out a small chocolate cake. Is it the one I like? he asked. She nodded. With marzipan? His eyes grew shiny. Oh darling, he said. Come and sit on my lap. Let me hug you and kiss you. I'll take you to Paris. We'll go to Fouquet's. I'll buy you stockings with a black seam up the back. Like before the war. I don't want to go to Paris, she said. Take me to Warsaw.

The radiator isn't the only thing clanking. Here are Jascha and Lilka reminiscing:

Women were mad for me. Were they? she asked. Sometimes I brought them something we had smuggled in. A pot of jam, a hair ribbon, a few cigarettes. What a hero I was. I still had dark curls. And I could run like the wind. He smiled. What adventures we had. He smoked and flicked the ashes onto the floor. In those days, in the ghetto, long long ago, he said, I was young.

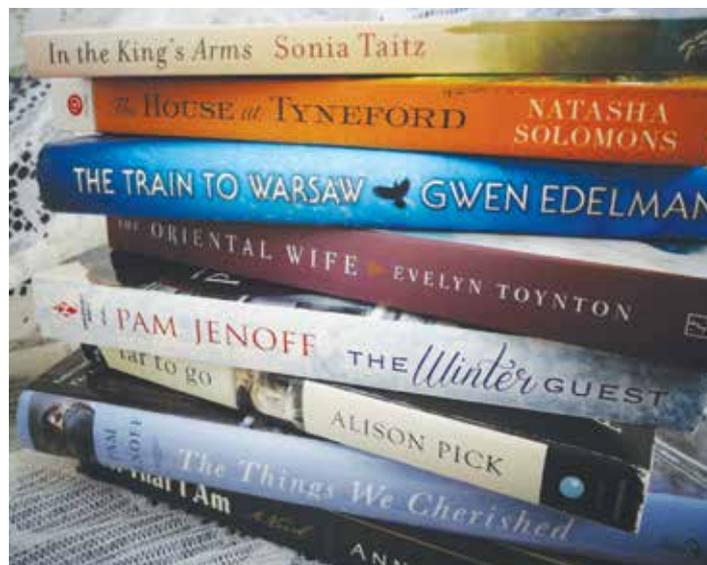
Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi wrote of the Holocaust that, "I have no doubt whatever that its image is being shaped, not at the historian's anvil, but in the

novelist's crucible." If the novelist is Gwen Edelman, God help us all.

But it is unfair to single out Edelman. After all, even Harlequin has gotten into the Holocaust novel business. Regardless of the publisher, sex always looms large in these novels, often appearing sooner and more often than the Nazis. It is telling

## Despite the literary and moral dangers, using the Holocaust is enticingly convenient.

that almost all of the relationships in such books are illicit in one way or another. Take *Far to Go*, by Alison Pick. It tells the story of the romantic relationship between the Bauer family's loyal Gentile nanny and Pavel Bauer's duplicitous—and married—



Photograph courtesy of Raizy Gil Smith.

employee, a Sudeten German named Ernst who wants to "Aryanize" the Bauers' financial assets before the Nazis get the chance. We are also witness to Pavel and his wife Anneliese's fraying marriage and the affairs that develop between Anneliese and a German officer and between Pavel and the nanny. (Sexual relationships between Jews and Germans are common in these books; in *The Train to Warsaw*, Lilka's mother is killed because of her affair—conducted inside the Warsaw Ghetto—with a Nazi officer.)

**H**ow are we to assess such fiction? The reviews of many of the higher-end novels are often glowing; *Far to Go* was long listed for the prestigious Man Booker Prize. In *A Thousand Darknests: Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction*, Ruth Franklin says that, "What matters . . . is the work's own internal dynamic: its creative ambition, its motivations." This metric has the advantage of marrying aesthetic judgment to common sense: Why are you writing a novel set in the Holocaust? Of course there was romance in the ghettos (and the forests and even

the camps), but is the author aiming at careful reconstruction or crass exploitation?

Anna Funder, author of *All That I Am*, may have inadvertently explained how it is possible to turn out a book about the Holocaust in which a character says (as Jascha does in Gwen Edelman's *The Train to Warsaw*), "Lovemaking was never as good as when you might die in the next moment." Funder writes (in the voice of Ruth Becker Wesemann):

[A]t a distance of seventy years, it is safe to imagine, because no one can be called on to act. No one held to account. The costume party will not be interrupted.

Historical fiction often has the feel of a costume party, and perhaps it is too much to hope that writers of Holocaust novels would be aware of the literary and moral dangers in dressing up their banal characters and plots in the clothes of Nazis and their victims.

In Funder's case, her novel struggles to find the proper balance between historical accuracy and dramatic tension. It starts in the years when her main characters—the real-life leftist playwright and political activist Ernst Toller and Socialist writer Dora Fabian—are still living in Germany. But the reader comes away with no real understanding of the importance of either figure. Even the performance of one of the plays that put Toller on the Nazi's enemies list is used primarily to drive forward the tortured romantic relationship between Toller and Fabian.

Hagiography does not serve history, but *All That I Am* veers in the opposite direction, spending page after page on the characters reveling in nightclubs that

offer cocaine along with cocktails and the "entertainment" of nude models pretending to be statues. Open marriages, bisexuality, drug use, and abortion cannot be ignored in an honest history of Weimar, but here they take prurient center stage. One almost feels as if these anti-Nazi characters are being depicted through Nazi eyes.

Despite the literary and moral dangers, using the Holocaust is enticingly convenient. As Alison Pick explains in an interview printed in the back of *Far to Go*:

[B]y setting the book against a dramatic backdrop such as the lead-up to the Second World War, part of my work was already done. I had a series of actual events and preexisting political tensions. All I had to do was drop my characters into the scene and see how they'd react.

Pick, it should be noted, is the granddaughter of Czech Jews who fled the Nazis and settled in Canada, raising their two sons as Christians. As much as one wants to give her the benefit of the doubt,

one cannot help but cringe when she says, in the same interview, that “from a marketing and publicity perspective . . . it would have been nice if the book had been out” in time to coincide with the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Czechoslovakian Kindertransport, trains that took Jewish children to the relative safety of England in 1938 and 1939. How very unfortunate for her marketing and publicity personnel that the writer couldn’t have rushed her prose or the Germans couldn’t have held off invading their neighbors for just a little bit longer.

Tone-deafness is, I think, the key to understanding how this genre came into being and how it continues to flourish. How else could an editor allow Anna Funder’s imagining of a dialogue between Ernst Toller and W.H. Auden in which Toller says, “This is a conversation we’ve had before—about the temptation of art, like fire, to use people as fuel,” to escape the red pen?

The recent booksellers’ catalog from Knopf/Vintage outlines the selling points for *The Aftermath* by Rhidian Brook. Due out in September 2014, the book has already been optioned for the movies by Ridley Scott—director of *Blade Runner*, *Alien*, and *American Gangster*. The press materials reveal that one character is based on Brook’s grandfather, “giving the novel great immediacy and emotional resonance, and very strong hooks for publicity.” A grandfather in a story in which “enmity and grief give way to passion and betrayal” against the background of Nazi genocide? Money in the bank.

Many years ago, I wrote a small textbook, aimed at seventh- to ninth-graders, on the Nuremberg laws. It isn’t a great book, but it does attempt to tell the truth, and I only stopped having nightmares a year after I finished it. One fact has stuck with me for the almost two decades since it appeared, although I have not spoken or written of it in all that time. At Treblinka, the Nazis’ victims disembarked from the train, were stripped of all their clothes and belongings, and moved directly into a fenced-in path, covered with tree branches to prevent views from inside or out, called “the tube.” This “tube” led to the gas chamber entrance, allowing a small group of Nazi guards to murder approximately 850,000 Jews and Romani between July 1942 and October 1943. No matter how efficient the camp, there were, at times, backups in the tube, when people, rather than being rushed to their death, had to wait, naked in the bitter cold, before they were murdered. The feet of the children, whose skin was softer than that of their parents, would sometimes freeze to the hard ground, and they would have to be ripped up to be moved to the gas chambers, their skin and blood sticking to the frozen earth.

If you write a novel set in the Holocaust, if you promote it, blurb it, or shill for it, and you do not know how children spent their last moments in Treblinka, or other equally terrible facts, then you should stop now. If you do know and nonetheless continue with your work, then there is probably little any of us can say.

If not today, then tomorrow or the next day, another piece of Holocaust genre fiction will arrive here in the mail. The costume party will not be interrupted.

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Amy Newman Smith is associate editor of the Jewish Review of Books.

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/mō zā’ ik/

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