Shmuel Trigano  French Anti-Semitism  Chaim Saiman  When Do We Eat?

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LAST WORD

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On the cover: Celebration! by Mark Anderson.
The Fixer
commentary on Bernard Malamud and his novel
new edition of Mendel Beilis' memoir, unfavorable
Life and Literature
first charge: that in writing his novel
The Fixer
book, titled "Pulitzer Plagiarism," in which we level
the memoir a "still-riveting tale."

The first sentence of the review is ambiguous per -
sacs, after Cain's rejected one (and that was not
start when his first sentence refers to the offering
of a one-year-old lamb together with wine and a
vegetable on the altar, "but that was not something I said.

These may seem like inconsistent criticisms, but
in fact they are not. Indisputably, Malamud's nov-
ties that would predictably be imputed to Beilis and
his wife, unfavorable traits that would predictably
be imputed to Beilis and his wife. "They would be
hard-pressed to cite any literary critic, anywhere, of
any standing that would defend such silliness.

Steven J. Zipperstein Responds:
Family loyalty is nobler than literary acumen. On
these grounds, Beilis' heirs are to be commended
for their dogged defense of their famous, tragic
ancestor. But hounded by them Bernard Malamud
certainly is: The appendix to Blood Libel: The Life
and Memory of Mendel Beilis is nearly 70 pages of
legalese-inflected bombardment. Just one example
from page 278: "Having plagiarized so extensively,
we contend, Malamud forfeited any artistic license
to give his Beilis-based character, and that charac-
ter's wife, unfavorable traits that would predictably
be imputed to Beilis and his wife." They would be
hard-pressed to cite any literary critic, anywhere, of
any standing that would defend such silliness.

Malamud borrowed promiscuously from near-
ly everything around him. This is hardly less true
of Dubin's Lives or A New Life than of his Beilis-
inspired novel, The Fixer. It's what he made out of
all this, including the stray sentences he lifted
from Beilis' memoir, that make him still worth reading
today. The Beilis family should take solace in the
simple fact that non-fiction accounts of Beilis' tra-
vails, including those I discussed, continue to be
produced. Such works stand or fall on their ability
to relate with accuracy historical truth. The truth
that animates literary work is of a different nature,
and few have reminded us of this more bracingly
than Malamud himself. Recall that scene in The As-
sistant, where his protagonist exclaims when first
learning of Dostoevsky that "I'd rather read the
truth" only to be told "It is the truth."

David and Goliath
I am gratified that the Jewish Review of Books gave
space in its pages to a review of my book, Making
David into Goliath: How the World Turned Against
Israel and that your reviewer, Allan Arkush, present-
ed a cogent summary of it (‘And How Do You Like
continued on page 54
A Journey Through French Anti-Semitism

BY SHMUEL TRIGANO

I
f after the horrors of January 2015 there is any consolation for the Jews of France, it would seem to lie in the words of Prime Minister Manuel Valls. “How can we accept that people are killed because they are Jewish?” he cried out at a special session of the French parliament a week after the massacres at the Charlie Hebdo editorial offices and at the Hypercacher kosher supermarket. “History has taught us that the awakening of anti-Semitism is the symptom of a crisis for democracy and for a crisis for the Republic. That is why we must respond with force.” We are at war, he said, “with terrorism, jihadism, and Islamist radicals” (he has spoken more recently of “Islamofascism”), but not, he added, “Islam and Muslims.” And yet, as someone who has lived through and documented the last two decades and more of anti-Semitism in France, I note that there is a problem with the inevitable reflexive warnings after every vicious attack not to slip into Islamophobia by conflating Islam and terrorism. It is a kind of automatic discourse in which the existence of a threat to Muslims erases the recognition of the hatred to which Islamic texts and doctrines have given rise, as expressed by the terrorists themselves. For there is a long history of Islamic anti-Judaism, and it is the reason for the attacks against the Jews.

After the great mass rally of solidarity in Paris, there was a call for national unity against the “barbarians.” But if this is a threat which the whole nation faces, how can one explain the fact that it is the Jewish centers and institutions, almost exclusively, that are under the protection of soldiers and that every synagogue has a minyan of armed guards standing outside of it day and night?

Our recollection of the prime minister’s fine—if somewhat belated—words cannot erase our memory of what France’s foreign minister, Laurent Fabius, said on the very morning of the rally. He affirmed that it is the conflict in the Middle East—read: Israel—that is the cause of anti-Semitism in France. There was no mention of the traditional Muslim disparagement of non-Muslims clearly invoked by the terrorists and reflected in the silence of the “moderate” Muslims, who have, with rare exceptions, refused to combat anti-Semitism. Nor was there a mention of the many failures of the French state to deal with these problems. It is to hide all of this that the authorities, at critical moments, again and again point the finger at Israel. The automatic exculpation of Islam from any responsibility necessarily shifts all of the blame to Israel and its policy toward the Palestinians. If Islam is not guilty, Israel is.

Why are things this way in France, in Belgium, in Great Britain, and, indeed, in Western Europe in general? To understand the situation in France, first of all, we have to go back several decades, to the 1980s, which witnessed large-scale Muslim immigration into the country from North Africa as well as Sub-Saharan Africa. This influx of millions of people quickly became a political and social issue that acquired a whole new dimension when then-President François Mitterrand opted for a dangerous new political strategy. In order to break the republican right, Mitterrand invented an “anti-fascist front.” It focused on presenting the National Front, then an insignificant party, as a major “fascist” danger against which all citizens, of whatever party, would have to unify—under the banner of the Socialist Party, of course. It was really Mitterrand who, in effect, created Jean-Marie Le Pen and made his National Front party the pivot around which the French political system turns to this day.

In this new political game, Mitterrand used the Jews to prove the authenticity of the fascist threat. The Jewish community, which had been deemed, with the help of SOS-Racism, an “immigrant com-

In the year prior to September 2001, 450 anti-Semitic attacks took place in France, but the French government and media kept absolutely silent.

With the assistance of Mitterrand and the Socialist Party, an association called SOS-Racism grew out of the French Jewish Students’ Union (UEJF) and adopted as its most significant slogan: “Jews=Immigrants.” The fight against the neo-Nazism of Le Pen thus converged with the fight against anti-Semitism as well as against anti-Arab racism. This facilitated Mitterrand’s cooptation of the newly arrived immigrants, who had begun to become politically active during these years. These developments had unforeseen but dire consequences. The Jewish community now found itself identified for the first time since World War II as a “community of immigration.” Before 1989, the immigrant population was regarded as a victim of racism and of the extreme right. At the same time, the heated controversy over the public wearing of the Islamic veil arose. In 1989, at the bicentennial of the French Revolution, Jews began to face popular criticism for their communautarisme (that is, their tribalism, their disloyalty to the ideals of French republicanism and the common good).

A coterie of intellectuals set the tone by attacking Islamic communautarisme as a menace to the Republic. The Jewish community, which had been deemed, with the help of SOS-Racism, an “immigrant community” was subjected to the same nationalist suspicions. This political balancing act facilitated the criticism of the Muslim population. This was a turning point and, as I see it now, the beginning of the descent into hell. It marked, in fact, the renewal of intolerant French nationalism cloaked in the attire of the Republic, of civic morality, in the name of something universal. Jews, who had been citizens of the Republic since 1791—or, in the case of Algeria, 1870—were
suddenly suspect, as the result of questions raised not by issues within their own communities but by those of Muslim communities. Little by little, the Jewish community lost its national legitimacy within France. After the Persian Gulf War of 1990–1991, Mitterrand congratulated "the two communities" (without identifying them), as if it were evident that there were two communities in France, both alien to French society) for remaining calm. A rapid process of symbolic "denationalization" of the Jews had begun.

In their diverse efforts, the succeeding governments never dared to call for religious reforms within Islam that would prepare it to exist within the context of the Republic. Instead, the Republic chose the path of "pacification" through "inter-religious dialogue," further marginalizing the Jews as strangers in their own country. While the government, at its best, has been able to conceive of a political solution on a national scale.

... had been minister of the interior during the Intifada, later admitted that the Jospin government had, in an act of true censorship, imposed this silence in 2001 to "not throw oil on the fire." In other words, the government knowingly disregarded the rights of French Jews, as citizens, to receive protection from their country, in order to ensure "public peace." We felt abandoned. Speaking personally, my memories of the end of French Algeria in 1962 came tumbling back to me: the frenzied escape to avoid the death promised by our Arab neighbors, the cramped ships and planes carrying an exodus of one million people—myself included—the two-day wait at a military airport to go wherever, as long as we could get out. The State had abandoned us; death loomed.

At the time of the Iraq War in 2003, President Jacques Chirac pursued an anti-American and pro-Arab policy. There were huge demonstrations in the streets against the United States and Israel. Because he attributed decisive influence over the Pentagon to Jewish Americans, Chirac feared, "American Judaism" would pressure Washington to turn against France if the extent of anti-Semitism in France became public. On one of his visits to Washington he brought with him a delegation of Jewish leaders tasked with declaring that there was no anti-Semitism in France in order to "calm" American Jews. The Chirac years were the darkest for French Jews in this period and put a negative stamp on the future fight against anti-Semitism. In Chirac's times, the invocation of anti-Semitism in France became proof of "anti-French" activity.

... the eruption of violence, it was similarly claimed, did not emanate from French society, but was rather an "imported conflict" from the Middle East. This dishonest phrase reprehensively impugs the nationality of French Jews by grouping them together with recent immigrant communities, many of whose members are often dual citizens of North African countries. Neither could the violence be called anti-Semitic, it was further claimed, because only the Nazi, extreme right could be so termed. How could the Arabs, themselves "Semitic" and "victims of colonization," be anti-Semites? How could Islam, the "religion of peace," inspire hostility? It was simply "anti-Zionist," a "legitimate" opinion, given what the Israelis do to the Palestinians. Anti-Semitism was thus upgraded to a manifestation of "inter-communal tensions," leaving the Jews as responsible as anyone else for what they suffered. In the face of all this, the official institutions of French Jewry kept silent for an entire year. Finding themselves left to their own devices, each Jew, or at least the most conscientious amongst them, underwent a process of growing isolation from French society. Many of us began avoiding non-Jewish friends—no more dinner parties in the city in order to avoid the anger of friends who no longer wanted to hear us out. In every milieu, social as well as professional, Jews were reproached, summoned to apologize for or distance themselves from Israel, from Ariel Sharon. Those with dignity and honor refused this deal—one that would have offered them access to society and recognition; they preferred to leave behind the public sphere, with its enmity toward Israel and Jew-hashing.

Some nonetheless tried to clarify, debunk, ex-
plain, and, above all, alert political and journalistic public opinion. Despite the profound malaise, we believed then that the problem might have boiled down to a lack of information, or rather, disinformation—a malentendu. In 2001, I founded a journal called l’Observatoire du monde juif whose primary task was to publish a list of attacks that the official organs of the Jewish community knew about but did not make public. From 2001 through 2005, we published 12 bulletins and edited numerous small books without institutional support of any kind. These were sent to the entire political class, to members of both chambers of parliament, to leading intellectuals, and to journalists. When it became clear that the crisis of anti-Jewish violence was not episodic but permanent, I ceased publication of l’Observatoire du monde juif. We could no longer continue the fight, at every corner, against this or that article, newspaper, or opinion.

I then created the journal Controverses to provide an intellectual haven for writers to say what was impossible to say elsewhere. In 2011, after publishing 18 issues, I gave this up, too. It was not simply the lack of financial means or the aliyah of many of the editors that led me to this decision. I had the feeling that everything had already been said. I drew from this a terrible conclusion: When words no longer carry weight, one can expect violence.

Over the years, we saw a legion of intellectuals, who had always been far removed from Jewish life and Jewish thought, rise to denounce Israel and the Jewish community in the name of Jewish morality, or, rather, “another Judaism,” or else “the memory of the Holocaust.” This invocation often depicted Israel as a Nazi state, radically misinterpreting both the one and the other. Not even the spectacle of Muslim Brotherhood–led protests in all French cities in 2014—complete with cries of “Death to the Jews”—has brought these people to their senses. Behind the pretext of Palestine, the religious motivations of the anti-Jewish violence remain misunderstood. It would cost French elites too much doctrinal and psychological effort to accept this fact, after such a long period of denial, for it overturns their erroneous prism of interpretation. The thesis that France faces an “imported conflict” still reigns today—and it remains as false now as it was 14 years ago at the time of the Second Intifada. We are in the same place. There has been no improvement.

The political impasse for the Jews in France today is still almost total. President Hollande and, especially, Prime Minister Valls both now speak far more frankly and openly of anti-Semitism.

A remembrance ceremony, Jerusalem, January 11, 2015, which paid tribute to the 17 victims of the Paris massacres. (Photo by Yonatan Sindel/Flash90.)

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam
Collaboration and Conflict in the Age of Diaspora
EDITED BY SANDER L. GILMAN
This volume examines Abrahamic cultures as minority groups in societies which may be majority Muslim, Christian or Jewish, or self-consciously secular. The focus is on the relationships between these religious identities in global Diaspora, where all of them are confronted with claims about national and individual difference. An important theme is how the complex patterns of interaction among these religions embrace collaboration as well as conflict—even in the modern Middle East.

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Grassroots Fascism
The War Experience of the Japanese People
YOSHIMI YOSHIKI
Translated by Ethan Mark
“Although this classic work concentrates on how ordinary people were enlisted into Japan’s fascist project, it also shows in rich detail the role they were willing to play as agents at the level of everyday life. Yoshimi’s book joins a post–Cold War historiographical tradition that once more recognizes the necessity to take fascism seriously as a global conjunctural event.”—Harry Harootunian, Columbia University
Drawing Conclusions: Joann Sfar and the Jews of France

BY MICHAEL WEINGRAD

On March 19, 2012, a French jihadi on a shooting spree targeted a Jewish school in Toulouse, murdering three children and a rabbi. A few days later, a Jewish cemetery in Nice was defaced. Both events were on the mind of comic book creator Joann Sfar as he resumed work on the final book of Klezmer, a five-volume fantasy on Jewish life in turn of the century Eastern Europe. Published last year by Gallimard, the last installment imagines a group of musicians on their way to Kishinev in the immediate aftermath of the infamous pogroms that took place there in 1903. Versions of Vladimir Ze’ev Jabotinsky and Chaim Nachman Bialik make their appearance in the book. In the Afterword Sfar explains that his Kishinev is a symbol for the fundamental dilemma of Jews in Europe not only in 1903 but throughout the 20th century and today in the 21st: namely, how to respond to the anti-Semitism that threatens both the physical existence of Jews and their dream of participation in a cosmopolitan European society.

Sfar is neither the first nor the only significant Jewish contributor to French comics. Jews who have left their mark on what the French call “bandes dessinées” and regard as a serious art form include, for instance, René Goscinny, the co-creator of the iconic French comic book Asterix, and Marcel Gotlib, whose satirical creations helped propel French comics into adult territory in the 1960s and 1970s. That satirical territory was most famously occupied by the comic periodical Charlie Hebdo to which Sfar, along with other Jewish writers and artists (including Elsa Cayat and Georges Wolinski, who were murdered in the recent Islamist attack on the magazine’s editorial offices) also contributed. Yet, as the historian of bandes dessinées Thierry Groensteen observes in Entretiens avec Joann Sfar, an informative book-length interview with Sfar published in 2013, Sfar is the first French comic book artist whose reputation rests on works that explore Jewish themes and characters directly. Sfar is best known for The Rabbi’s Cat (English translation in two volumes, 2005 and 2008) about a talking cat and its Jewish owners in North Africa between the world wars. First published a little over a decade ago, the series became a best-seller in France and has since been translated into several languages, including English, and adapted as an animated feature film. Sfar has also treated Jewish themes at length in other graphic novels including the three-volume Les Oliviers noirs (2001–2003, story by Sfar, art by Emmanuel Guibert), the two-volume Chagall en Russie (2010–2011), and Klezmer (2005–2014, Volume One translated in 2006), Jewish characters and references feature prominently in other of his works as well, such as his series Pacsin about the French painter Jules Pascin (who was Jewish and has since been translated into several languages), whose Jewish protagonist Michael befriends the undead. In 2010, moreover, Sfar directed an acclaimed film based on the life of the superstar French musician Serge Gainsbourg, who was also Jewish.

Sfar, who is now working at the height of his considerable powers, was born in 1971 and grew up in Nice. His Algerian-born father was a bon vivant and lawyer, who later became well-known for prosecuting neo-Nazis; his mother, a promising young singer in the breadth style of Brigitte Bardot. When his mother died suddenly at the age of 26, his family decided to tell the three-year-old Sfar that she had left on a trip and would return when he was older if he behaved himself, a pretense they kept up for a year. The young Sfar found refuge in constant drawing despite his family’s concern that it had become alarmingly obsessive. He has also been quoted as saying that by the age of six he had realized that “it was useless to behave and maybe also to believe.”

He went on to study art and drawing at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, while continuing a longstanding interest in philosophy. (He has published illustrated versions of Plato’s Symposium and Voltaire’s Candide, and an early ambition of his was to render the classics of Western thought in comic form.) His comics began to appear in the 1990s, and he was involved early on with L’Association, the publishing collective that brought out such works as Marjane Satrapi’s celebrated Persepolis and Sfar’s own series about the Jewish modernist painter Julius Mordecai Pascin, known as Pacsin. His first major success was Donjon, an ongoing series of dozens of whimsical, interconnected fantasy adventures, which Sfar created with Lewis Trondheim. More successes followed, as well as collaborations with a number of different artists and writers.

Apart from his recognizable almond-eyed women, Sfar is not known for a distinct drawing style, borrowing instead from a wide range of influences including Jules Feiffer, Quentin Blake, illustrator of many of Roald Dahl’s books, and Marvel Comics’ artist Jack Kirby. His main talent in any case is not as an illustrator but as a storyteller. Sfar is a font of narrative creativity, a Scheherazade with pen and brush. And he is at his best when chronicling the vagaries of

Joann Sfar at work, 2004. (© Arnault Joubin/Corbis.)
love and jealousy, as in his sad yet delightful Vampire Loves, in which the romantically inept vampire Fer dinand tries to find happiness after the collapse of his relationship with the fetching plant-girl Liana.

Yet it is Jews and Judaism which most exercise Sfar and with which he struggles in his best-known works. And struggles is the word, since Sfar is nothing if not ambivalent about these subjects. Certainly, he makes no secret of his aversion to rabbinic orthodoxy. Jewish law is, as he puts it in the Groensteen interview, “absurd” and “Jesuitical,” and Judaism is often a “teaching of hyperbolic guilt.” The point is made repeatedly in his books, in which strictly observant Jews are portrayed as sanctimonious and foolish, while characters who free themselves from Jewish tradition tend to be sympathetic. In the first volume of Klezmer, the Talmud prodigy Yaacov is expelled from his yeshiva, freeing him to declare his disbelief in God, express his indifference to Jewish law and prayer, and take up with a band of lively musicians. Les Olives noires, set in Jerusalem during the Second Temple period, features the cowardly fanatic Josue, a Jewish nationalist who cares more about the strictures of kashrut (dietary laws are a bête noire of Sfar’s) and the exclusion of Gentiles than about protecting a child. Throughout Sfar’s books, ethics and compassion lie for the most part outside the structures of traditional Judaism.

Artistic creativity certainly does: His artists and musicians and writers stand outside of, and often against, their traditional communities. Sfar prefers instead to draw his Jewish characters in fellowship with non-Jews. The rabbi in The Rabbi’s Cat, for instance, is best friends with a Sufi Muslim. (This makes it all the more ironic that no publisher has dared to publish the Arabic translation of the book.) In Klezmer, the quartet of musicians includes a philo-Semitic Roma guitarist based on Django Reinhardt, and they are assisted by a rather improbable Cossack killer with a heart of gold. Of course, the Jewish worlds of Sfar are always fantasies, set in the past but only loosely connected with history. They are at times informed by scholarly works—he has drawn upon the work of Jeffrey Veidlinger and Michel Gurfinkel, among others—but are more often inspired by tales from his Polish and Algerian grandparents, whom he tends to romanticize. (For instance, he uncritically reports his irreligious grandfather’s claim to have “memorized the Talmud.”) It may reflect nothing more than his own preference for fantasy over reportage, but it does seem significant that none of Sfar’s narrative works about Jews is set during his own lifetime, either in France or in Israel.

Some years ago, when he was asked, as “a good Jew,” to sign an anti-Israel petition, Sfar refused, saying that he had never been a good Jew and didn’t see signing anti-Israel petitions as the way to start. Sfar has, however, taken pains to keep himself at arm’s length from the Israel-bashing so common in the worlds of French leftist politics and bandes dessinées alike. Some years ago, when he was asked, as “a good Jew,” to sign an anti-Israel petition, he refused, saying that he had never been a good Jew and didn’t see signing anti-Israel petitions as the way to start.
Winning the 2014 National Jewish Book Award in History

The Golden Age Shtetl
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Yehanan Petrovsky-Shtern

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Conversion and Radical Assimilation in Modern Jewish History
Todd M. Endelman

“An astonishingly comprehensive, lucid, and beautifully crafted work. With sure command of the full range of early modern and modern Jewish history, Endelman casts his net wide in a study that explores every significant manifestation of radical assimilation in Jewish life over the last several centuries. His superb book is a reminder of the great clarity a first-rate historian can bring to opening up the past as well as present.”
—Steven J. Zipperstein, Stanford University
Cloth $39.50

Analytical Psychology in Exile
The Correspondence of C. G. Jung and Erich Neumann
C. G. Jung & Erich Neumann
Edited and introduced by Martin Liebcher
Translated by Heather McCartney

“This work is a significant contribution to the field of Jung studies. It offers Neumann’s unique perspectives as a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany who lived first in Zurich and then settled in Palestine. Of particular interest is Neumann’s dialogue with Jung concerning the archetypes of Jewish culture and Jung’s involvement with psychotherapists who remained in Germany after Hitler came to power.”
—Geoffrey Campbell Cocks, author of The State of Health: Illness in Nazi Germany
Cloth $35.00

So where does this leave Sfar as violence continues to escalate against the Jews of Europe? How does he draw the Jews of France after the massacre of his colleagues at Charlie Hebdo and, most recently, his fellow French Jews at a kosher grocery?

Here we must return to the final volume of Klezmer, which dramatizes Sfar’s suspension between an anti-Semitism that makes life for Jews impossible in France and the forms of Jewish solidarity (Orthodoxy and Israel; religion and state) that he rejects. He writes in the Afterword that the Kishinev pogroms are a metaphor for the moment in which Jews must choose whether to stay in Europe or leave for Israel. To stay in Europe is to embrace a Judaism that is diasporic, European, cosmopolitan, progressive, and cultural rather than religious—all traits that he apparently believes cannot be found in Israel. Yet he recognizes that in choosing Europe one possibly chooses destruction. “In 1903, the Jews that left Europe were wrong—yet their families survived,” he writes, while those who remained “had the truth on their side . . . with rare exceptions died.”

Yet the resolution of this dilemma is one that Sfar freely admits, he cannot depict: [My] characters go neither to Auschwitz nor to Jerusalem. They are not exterminated, because I cannot draw the massacre. They are not in Israel, because that is not my story . . . My country is France. The territory where I feel legitimate is Europe. And klezmer. And all my books testify to this alone: the Jews who had the courage to remain in Europe made a noble and worthy choice. I write to justify the Jews of Europe. They were right. And many died for it.

And so, at the end of the final volume of Klezmer, Sfar leaves off just before his characters reach Kishinev, before the moment in which they must choose. Their train approaches the city, but it never arrives.

Michael Weingrad is professor of Jewish studies at Portland State University. His latest book is Letters to America: Selected Poems of Reuven Bein-Vosef (Syracuse University Press), and he writes at investigationsandfantasies.com.
The Civil War is, even now, the most important event in American history, but it is one to which fewer and fewer Americans can claim a direct familial connection. If your ancestors came to this country after 1865—if your background is Italian or Greek, Puerto Rican, or Korean—then you probably have no relative who took part in the struggle over America’s destiny. But does this mean that you are less susceptible to the “mystic chords of memory” of which Abraham Lincoln famously spoke in his first inaugural address? Only a mind immune to the power of historical imagination could answer yes. The Civil War continues to make a double claim on the memory of every American, regardless of when his or her family became American. The first is that the issues about which the war was fought—slavery and sectional division—continue to define American society and politics to this day. It’s impossible to make sense of quite a few daily headlines or election results without knowing about the Civil War’s causes and consequences. Second, and even more important, is that at a distance of 150 years, no American can claim any living memory of the conflict, at ranks from private to general; they served in government in the North (two Pennsylvania congressmen were Jews) and in the South (Judah P. Benjamin, a former U.S. senator from Louisiana, was the Confederate secretary of state).

This means that Lincoln and the Jews is largely a catalogue of the American Jews whose paths happened to intersect with his, from his early career in Springfield, Illinois to his years as president and commander-in-chief. Throughout, he seems to have treated them with the benevolence and absence of prejudice one would expect from the Great Emancipator. As Sarna summarizes on the book’s last page: He “interacted with Jews, represented Jews, befriended Jews, admired Jews, commisioned Jews, trusted Jews, defended Jews, pardoned Jews, took advice from Jews, gave jobs to Jews, extended rights to Jews . . . .” His connections to Jews went further and deeper than those of any previous American president.

Lincoln’s philo-Semitism is especially notable in contrast to his fellow politicians and his own generals. Lincoln and the Jews reproduces a number of letters in which such figures refer to Jews, almost always with a sneer—as when George McClellan, Lincoln’s battle-shy general and later rival in the 1864 presidential election, finds himself on board a ship unfortunately full of “the sons of Jacob.” Exactly why Lincoln was immune from this conventional prejudice is a cause for speculation. Perhaps it is because he grew up in rural Kentucky and Indiana, areas with no Jewish population, and so gained his earliest impressions of Jews from the heroic accounts of the Bible, with which he was deeply familiar. (Sarna notes that the Protestant denomination in which Lincoln was raised believed in predestination and was thus indifferent to efforts to proselytize Jews.)

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Lincoln and the Jews
BY ADAM KIRSCH

Lincoln and the Jews: A History
by Jonathan D. Sarna and Benjamin Shapell
Thomas Dunne Books, 288 pp., $40

For American Jews, the question of our relationship to the Civil War is complex. On the one hand, the vast majority of American Jews are descended from Eastern European immigrants who arrived here after 1880, and so they have no ancestral connection to the war. At the same time, as Jonathan D. Sarna and Benjamin Shapell amply demonstrate in Lincoln and the Jews, there was a sizable number of Jews in America in the mid-19th century—some 150,000 by the time Lincoln was elected president in 1860, many of them recent immigrants who fled Germany in the aftermath of the failed revolution of 1848. This was a small fraction of the nation’s population, then 31 million, but it means that if we look for Jewish connections to the Civil War, we will find plenty of them. Jews fought and died on both sides of the conflict, at ranks from private to general; they served in government in the North (two Pennsylvania congressmen were Jews) and in the South (Judah P. Benjamin, a former U.S. senator from Louisiana, was the Confederate secretary of state).

This means that Lincoln and the Jews is largely a catalogue of the American Jews whose paths happened to intersect with his, from his early career in Springfield, Illinois to his years as president and commander-in-chief. Throughout, he seems to have treated them with the benevolence and absence of prejudice one would expect from the Great Emancipator. As Sarna summarizes on the book’s last page: He “interacted with Jews, represented Jews, befriended Jews, admired Jews, commissioned Jews, trusted Jews, defended Jews, pardoned Jews, took advice from Jews, gave jobs to Jews, extended rights to Jews . . . His connections to Jews went further and deeper than those of any previous American president.”

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Lincoln met his first real-life Jews in the mid-1830s, when he moved to the Illinois capital of Springfield to serve in the state legislature. They tended to be small businessmen, clothing retailers, or department store owners, whom he encountered as neighbors, constituents, and legal clients. While nothing in particular is known about his relations with men such as Louis Saltzenstein, a postmaster whose store the young Lincoln patronized, or Julius Hammerslough, from whom Lincoln bought some suits, such acquaintances show that Lincoln was accustomed to dealing with Jews on familiar terms.

In one instance, Sarna shows, there was something more like real friendship. Abraham Jonas was, like Lincoln, a lawyer and politician who became an activist in the newly founded Republican Party. Jonas, it seems, was not especially religious—“on at least one occasion in 1854 he dined openly with Abraham Lincoln and others at an oyster saloon”—but he was well known as a Jew in his small town of Quincy, Illinois. The two Abrahams probably met in 1843, at a Washington’s Birthday event in the state capital, and soon Jonas became Lincoln’s political

A letter from Abraham Lincoln to Abraham Jonas acknowledging him as “one of my most valued friends.” (Courtesy of Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library & Museum.) Right: Abraham Jonas. (Courtesy of the Wells Family.)
ally, Jonas hosted Lincoln during his statewide tour in 1858 for the Lincoln-Douglas debates and later boosted his candidacy for president. After Lincoln was elected, Jonas reaped his reward in patronage, getting a job as postmaster in his hometown of Quincy. While the two men do not seem to have been especially close—surely Lincoln had many political friends like Jonas—the relationship did help to contribute to Lincoln’s view of Jews as equal citizens and ordinary Americans.

Interestingly, Sarna notes that Jonas urged Republican leaders to earn favor with Jewish voters by blasting the inaction of the Buchanan administration over the Mortara Affair. This was the notorious case in which a young Italian-Jewish boy who had been baptized without his parents’ knowledge was subsequently abducted from his home and held by Catholic authorities who refused to return him to his family. “In the free states,” Jonas wrote to Illinois’ Senator Lyman Trumbull, “there are 50,000 Jewish votes, two thirds of whom vote the democratic ticket,” but a strong stand on the Mortara Affair might win them over to the Republican side. This may have been the first time in American politics that a strategist talked about courting the “Jewish vote,” which, small as it was, could have been significant in a closely contested election.

Lincoln’s personal friendships with Jews did not lead the majority of Jewish voters to support him in 1860. Some German-Jewish immigrants, who had fled their home country on account of their liberal politics, continued to fight on the side of progress and anti-slavery, becoming Republican stalwarts. But the majority of Jews lived in eastern cities that were Democratic strongholds, and the involvement of many Jews in the clothing trade led them to fear the disruption of cotton imports should the South secede. (There was also, perhaps, though Sarna doesn’t speculate on it, a certain inherited fear of social disruption: Historically, civil wars and ideological strife had boded ill for Jews in Europe.)

Nor, as Sarna points out, were American Jews necessarily opposed to slavery. Though the experience of slavery and emancipation stands at the heart of Jewish history, rabbis could be found who justified the institution—and not just in the South. Sarna introduces the reader to Rabbi Morris Raphall of New York’s B’nai Jeshurun, who devoted his sermon on January 4, 1861—which had been declared a national day of fasting by President Buchanan—to a biblical defense of slaveholding. Isaac Mayer Wise was unimpressed by Lincoln and appalled by the crowds that gathered in Cincinnati to greet the president-elect on his way to Wash-
who betrayed their Savior; & have also betrayed us,” Lincoln proclaimed to a visitor, “I myself have a regard for the Jews.” He even extended this regard to a character like Issachar Zacharie, the most colorful figure to appear in *Lincoln and the Jews*. Zacharie, a chiropodist and con man, managed to use his foot-doctoring skills to win the president’s confidence, whereupon he was entrusted with secret diplomatic missions to the South. Alas, Zacharie’s dream of establishing an Army podiatric corps came to nothing, even though Lincoln took time out of his frenzied schedule to give him not one but three handwritten testimonials.

There was only one occasion during the Civil War when the treatment of Jews actually posed a serious policy and political issue for Lincoln. This was in December 1862, when Ulysses Grant issued his notorious General Order No. 11, expelling “Jews as a class” from the territory under his command, from Mississippi to Illinois. It remains the most famous act of official anti-Jewish discrimination in American history. Sarna, who has previously devoted a book to the affair, points out that Grant’s pique had a personal source. His own father had entered into partnership with some Jewish merchants who hoped to take advantage of the family connection to get a permit to purchase cotton in Grant’s territory. When Grant banned Jews from his department, it was less out of religious bigotry than from the widespread belief that the merchants who traveled to war zones for the purpose of commercial speculation were mostly Jews—as indeed many were, just as many Jewish businessmen served the Union Army as sutlers and quartermasters.

It is a sign of Lincoln’s good nature and sense of justice that, as soon as he heard about Grant’s impetuous order, he ordered it revoked. Legend has it that when one of the Jewish expellees, Cesar Kaskel, came to the White House to seek Lincoln’s help, he used biblical language: “we have come unto Father Abraham’s bosom, asking protection.” Whether or not such a conversation actually took place, Sarna writes, General Order No. 11 was immediately countermanded. Soon after, a delegation of Jews came to Washington to thank the president, who told them that he would permit “no distinction between Jew and Gentile.”

Such acts of benevolence helped Lincoln to win the support of many Northern Jews who had initially opposed his election. And when the president was assassinated, the outpouring of grief from Jewish Americans was intense. As Sarna notes, the day Lincoln was shot—April 14, 1865—was a Friday, which meant that the next day was Shabbat. As the news of his death early Saturday morning spread across the country, rabbis were the first clergymen to eulogize the president. As one Jewish observer noted, “it was the Israelites’ privilege here . . . to be the first to offer in their places of worship, prayers for the repose of Mr. Lincoln.” Some congregations spontaneously offered a Kaddish prayer for Lincoln, an unprecedented gesture for mourning a Gentile.

If, in fact, he was a Gentile: Isaac Mayer Wise, who had disdained Lincoln in 1860, declared in 1865 that “he supposed himself to be a descendant of Hebrew parentage,” “bone from our bone and flesh from our flesh.” Call it the madness of grief, but this desire of Jews to claim Lincoln for their own was a way of demonstrating that being American and being Jewish could be complementary parts of the same identity. To this day, American Jewish life rests on that same promise.
Coming with a Lampoon

BY RUTH R. WISSE

Howard Jacobson’s latest novel really got to me. I have been reading Jacobson with pleasure since his 1983 debut novel Coming from Behind and was happily surprised when he was awarded the 2010 Man Booker Prize for The Finkler Question, although in my opinion he ought also to have won it earlier for his darker novel Kalooki Nights. Jacobson is a world master of the art of disturbing comedy and each new work of his advances the genre—this one by a giant step.

J, or more precisely ḩ, begins with a challenge, first to typesetters and then to readers, to crack the code of the double lines that cross the eponymous letter. Kevern “Coco” Cohen’s father would always “put two fingers across his mouth, like a tramp sucking on a cigarette butt . . . to stifle the letter ḩ before it left his lips.” Kevern follows his father’s custom, which might have been taken over from his father. But if this is a family sport, it is not much fun for the son who would have liked to understand this habit of erasure. As a reader who sees the potential jew in every jewel, I was certain I grasped what Kevern doesn’t, but my anxiety then focused on the whys and wherefores of striking or muzzling that portentous consonant.

This novel is situated in the aftermath of “WHAT HAPPENED,” a fictional time at about the same chronological remove as we are now from the Shoah, whose horrors have been written about, commemorated, and mourned by a people schooled in such matters since Jerusalem’s destruction at the hands of the Babylonians. However, unlike the events of the Shoah, WHAT HAPPENED has been deliberately and systematically repressed.

In stark contrast to Jews who transmitted their heritage from generation to generation, always focused on their eventual recovery of Zion, the residents of Jacobson’s allegorical territory inherit a frightful history they refuse to confront. Determined to create a “harmonious society,” they try to erase the murderous past for perpetrators, bystanders, and victims alike through strategies of silencing and pacification. They look for a final solution to the J question by trying to expunge all memory of the evil that was done as a means of stamping out both the evil and those destined to become its victims. One is not permitted to speak of what happened except by adding “if it happened.”

One is not permitted to speak of what happened except by adding “if it happened.” Jewish patronyms ensuring a permanently irritating reminder of what is being denied.

In “breaking” the J code and making explicit what the novel never does, I do not in the least lighten its nocturnal atmosphere which is telegraphed in the opening sentence:

H mornings weren’t good for either of them.

They are Ailinn Solomons and Kevern Cohen, whose love story reveals the condition of their world. We learn that they are damaged in opposite ways, Ailinn by the absence of any known family, having been picked out “like an orange” from an orphanage, while Kevern is haunted by a father and mother who beleaguer him from beyond the grave. He continues to hear his dead mother’s voice as a cry for help, pronouncing his name “Key-vern,” which minus the last consonant is the Hebrew-Yiddish word keyver, for grave. The complementarity of this man and woman would appear to make them a perfect fit; others recognize their affinity before they feel it on their own. Both are homespun artists, he a wood turner and she a designer of paper flowers, and they express their love through art without words. He makes her a lovespoon “in which the two of them could be recognized, entwined, inseparable, carved from a single piece of wood,” in return for which she makes him “a pair of exquisitely comical purple pansies, a paper likeness of his face in one, hers in another,” and arranges them so that “they stared at each other unremittingly.” Alas, mere words are the medium through which society—and the novel—must function.

When they meet, Ailinn is painfully literal, unable to recognize let alone grasp the implication of Kevern’s wit. He instructs her in humor. (So as not to alarm her by overuse of that freighted J, he avoids the word joking.) She tells him that she feels constantly—eternally—in flight from some pursuer, like Herman Melville’s white whale from Captain Ahab. Around such intimate revelations they develop a lively repartee:

“I was going to ask . . . [he says] whether Ahab is a generalized idea for you or you actually picture him coming at you with his lampoon.”

“Lampoon?”

“Slip of the tongue. You’ve been making me nervous. Harpoon.”

She stared at him. “You call that a slip?”

“Why, what would you call it?”

“A searchlight into your soul.”

She has figured out how his mind works. “You set it a problem and when it could come up with no answer, it came up with a joke.”

She also realizes that his obsessions about being invaded are those of a paranoid who has real enemies. In fact, they are both the objects of pursuit, though
by pursuers with opposite intentions—Kevern aims to complete the deeds of the unmentionable past, while Ailinn aims to undo them.

The forces shadowing Kevern in the seaside village of Port Reuben have been likened by other reviewers to East Germany's STASI or the Big Brother network of George Orwell's 1984, but they appear to be spying less for a state than for a state of mind. Edward Everett Phineas Zermansky is a teacher of "Benign Visual Arts" who starts out rather liking Kevern, but later rages with mistrust of him and holds him responsible when his wife walks out on their marriage. Equally unhinged and overzealous is Detective Inspector Gutkind, himself the eventual victim of a murder he doesn't see coming. It seems that everyone in this small village is reporting on the residents known as "aphids"—those marked as alien not by their genealogical records (which are taboo as is everything relating to cords (which are taboo as is everything relating to those marked as alien not by their genealogical records) but by their distinctive behavior. Neither Kevern's gentler nature that earns him his clownish nickname nor his being a native of Port Reuben make him any less suspect in the eyes of his goyish beholders.

Ailinn falls under the no less intense scrutiny of Esme Nussbaum, a researcher employed by Ofnow, "the non-statutory monitor of the Public Mood." In the course of studying the effects of the social experiment, Esme discovers "the continuance of low- and medium-level violence in those very areas of the country where its reduction, if not its cessation, was most to have been expected, given the money and energy expended on uprooting it." The summary of Esme's report as delivered to her superior enunciates its dystopian premise: "The past exists in order that we forget it." Ofnow requires that the citizenry lampoon. This society's homogenizing attempts at self-improvement cannot eliminate its malice. Smaller forms of corruption seep back with a vengeance: Kissing, for which Jacobson uses the current British slang verb "snogging," is brutal and ugly; marriages are vengeful and ugly; murders are coarse and almost random. If I were English, I would shudder as Jacobson approached with his lâmpoon.

And what of the Jews? When Ailinn begins to read about her forebears, the dog-eared books tell her:

Just as the biblical Tamar waylays Judah, the female duo of Esme and Ailinn conspire to seduce Kevern for the sake of a tribe he has no wish to perpetuate.

When I came to the final page of this book, I was reminded of something I had heard 30 years ago while on a visit to Paris. We were staying with a Frenchwoman who had met her Jewish husband-to-be when they were both in the anti-fascist resistance. The Jew and his mother were the only ones of their family to survive the war, and so our Christian hostess insisted on raising their children as Jews as an extension of their "resistance." Their boys were circumcised and when their eldest son decided to circumcise his newborn son, she called her mother-in-law to share the good news. But the Jewish great-grandmother insisted they call it off, saying: "Ça suffit! It's enough!"

So what's this about Jacobson's "disturbing comedy?" My ham-fisted (forgive me) exposition has conveyed too little of the book's wit. "This place needs cheering up!" Ailinn says when she and Kevern visit a cathedral, and indeed, she picks up the habit of joking as though she were genetically predisposed to it. So she is. Yet it must be said that all the cheer that she and her author bring into their world is not enough to brighten it. The book is a satire of all the unfunny people that surround the novel's C-crossed lovers, anti-Semites ranging from Wagner and his enthusiasts to local blokes who can't help baiting Jews because that is what they are predisposed to do. This society's homogenizing attempts at self-improvement cannot eliminate its malice. Smaller forms of corruption seep back with a vengeance: Kissing, for which Jacobson uses the current British slang verb "snogging," is brutal and ugly; marriages are vengeful and ugly; murders are coarse and almost random. If I were English, I would shudder as Jacobson approached with his lâmpoon.

And what of the Jews? When Ailinn begins to read about her forebears, the dog-eared books tell her:
They demanded too much. They set too high a standard. A second writer understood their defining characteristic as a near irresponsible love of the material world, and it was this that had landed them in hot water. Offered the spirit, they chose matter. Offered emotion, they chose reason. This one said they were deeply pious; that one found them profoundly sacrilegious. They were devoted to charity, yet they amassed wealth regardless of how they came by it. When they weren't consumed by self-regard they suffered a bruising sense of worthlessness. They saw the universe as a reflection of the God that loved them above all people, but moved through it like strangers.

J feels less like a book by a writer who went looking for a subject than the outcry of a subject that was in need of its writer. They chose reason. This one said they were deeply pious; that one found them profoundly sacrilegious. They were devoted to charity, yet they amassed wealth regardless of how they came by it. When they weren't consumed by self-regard they suffered a bruising sense of worthlessness. They saw the universe as a reflection of the God that loved them above all people, but moved through it like strangers.

She recognizes herself in none of this except, slightly, the alienation. Given the depth of her deracination, her only function in the future world of the novel is as fodder for her antagonists. 

J feels less like a book by a writer who went looking for a subject than the outcry of a subject that was in need of its writer. Europeans composed no Book of Lamentations to record the destruction (self-destruction) of their civilization, leaving it mostly to Jews to document their losses as though theirs was the reckoning that mattered. But nothing had HAPPENED that was not made to happen and Jews were not the agents of that happening, although the temptation to blame them retroactively remains as great as it ever was. The tens of thousands of real and fictionalized survivor testimonies contribute little to our understanding of the forces that generated the destruction of European Jewry. This novel does so by shining a searchlight into the soul of Europe; it functions as the fictional equivalent of Esme’s report to Ofnow. The record of now’s adaptation to then through forcibly harmonizing people and indiscriminate apologetics without arduous self-scrutiny shows how the conditions of violence are reconstituted.

Of course, the British are a special case. Their habits of obfuscation are different from continental malice, and the atmosphere of this book is that of an island nation, a people that wants to be decent if only it could figure out how. As a genre, the dystopian novel aims at warning against the worst that can happen. I pray that Jacobson’s may have some effect, though, as another J once noted, prophets are usually without honor or impact in their own country.

Ruth R. Wisse recently retired from the Martin Peretz Professorship of Yiddish Literature at Harvard University and is currently a distinguished senior fellow at the Tikvah Fund. Her book No Joke: Making Jewish Humor (Princeton University Press) has just been released in paperback.
Jewish Geography

BY JENNA WEISSMAN JOSELIT

Roads Taken: The Great Jewish Migrations to the New World and the Peddlers Who Forged the Way
by Hasia R. Diner
Yale University Press, 280 pp., $35

The Rag Race: How Jews Sewed Their Way to Success in America and the British Empire
by Adam D. Mendelsohn
New York University Press, 320 pp., $35

Walt Whitman may have sung the praises of the open road, but for his contemporary, the Jewish peddler shouldering a 160-pound pack as he made his way over dusty trails in the Australian Outback or down country lanes in Wales, that life left a lot to be desired. Peddling, as Hasia Diner’s latest book, Roads Taken: The Great Jewish Migrations to the New World and the Peddlers Who Forged the Way, makes clear, was not an occupation for a nice Jewish boy. Wherever he and his coreligionists went—just about everywhere, it turns out—the “Jew peddler” faced challenges that were at once cultural, economic, and meteorological. Staring down the hostile expressions of those who bristled at his rootlessness, let alone his Jewishness; competing with local storeowners who took offense at his lack of fixed expenses; traipsing through snowdrifts in winter and hiding from the blazing sun in the summer—the Jewish peddler, the “slave of the bas-relief,” was a man who wore many faces: merchant, salesperson, traveler, itinerant, as numerous as the items in his peddler’s pack while also hinting slyly at the occasional incongruity between the man and his wares.

There are Jewish peddlers everywhere traveling with boxes of haberdashery on their backs, cuckoo clocks, sealing wax, quilts, weather glasses, green spectacles, clumsy figures in plaster of Paris, which you see over the chimney of an alehouse parlor in the country, or miserable prints of the King and Queen, the Four Seasons, the Cardinal Virtues, the last Naval Victory, the Prodigal Son, and such like subjects; even the Nativity and the Crucifixion. Deeply and richly researched, festooned with colorful detail, her account follows their peregrinations and dramatic boycotts like the one that roiled the Jewish community of Chicago in the mid-19th century. A catalyst of migration, an agent of modernization, the harbinger of news, founding father of hundreds of Jewish settlements throughout the world, a de-fanger of stereotypes who not only “exposed people to Jews as real people,” but also dealt with newly emancipated slaves when no one else would, the Jewish peddler was as influential as he was ubiquitous. “The world the peddlers and their customers forged together constituted a new chapter in Jewish history, one that made the new world different than the old,” Diner writes.

Wholesalers of dry goods would propel peddlers off into the wild “like Noah sending the dove from the Ark.”

Saddled with stuff, the Jewish hawkers, or smous as he was called in South Africa, did more than just peddle. Though the working life of a peddler typically lasted no more than a decade—hardly anyone considered it a proper career—its implications for modern Jewish life, Diner argues persuasively, were as numerous as the items in his pekl, and as consequential, too. A catalyst of migration, an agent of modernization, the harbinger of news, founding father of hundreds of Jewish settlements throughout the world, a de-fanger of stereotypes who not only “exposed people to Jews as real people,” but also dealt with newly emancipated slaves when no one else would, the Jewish peddler was as influential as he was ubiquitous. “The world the peddlers and their customers forged together constituted a new chapter in Jewish history, one that made the new world different than the old,” Diner writes.

For all his many virtues, the “Jewman” was not always welcomed with open arms. Customers (and latter-day historians) might delight in his presence, but legislators, storekeepers, and clerics did not. The many disturbing examples of anti-peddler animus that Diner uncovered will be new to most of her readers. We learn of successful efforts to restrict peddling licenses to the native-born, of the posting of signs whose bold letters screamed “No Peddlers Allowed,” and of public demonstrations and dramatic boycotts like the one that roiled Limerick in early 20th-century Ireland.

That the established Jewish community was not always well-disposed toward its peddling brethren either is another one of Diner’s many revelations. Peddling was thoroughly enmeshed in the broader Jewish ethnic economy where, Hatzolah, a Russian-Jewish periodical, noted evocatively in 1891, wholesalers of dry goods would propel peddlers off into the wild “like Noah sending the dove from the Ark.” What’s more, many of the modern Jewish community’s leading lights had once been peddlers themselves. All the same, thinking ill of coreligionists on the move was not uncommon, while attempts to “exterminate peddling,” as the Jewish Alliance of America infelicitously declared in 1890, by encouraging farming and other more sedentary pursuits, were thick on the ground.

By highlighting the centrality of peddling to the modern Jewish experience, Diner’s account prompts us to take the measure of its global reach. An exercise in transnational history, her book also reflects the recent economic turn in Jewish studies, whose sophisticated understanding of the marketplace has, of late, invigorated the field. Still, I could not help wonder whether our understanding of the far-flung phenomenon of peddling might have been enhanced had the people who move in and out of the volume’s pages been more fully fleshed out and realized. All too often, they don’t.
inhabit the narrative as much as illustrate a point. Writing, for instance, about Julius Meyer, whose dealings with the Pawnee earned him the sobriquet of “Box-Ka-Re-Sha-Hash-Ta-Ka,” Diner simply tells us that he “helped stimulate a market for Indian arts and crafts around the world.” Surely more could be made of the “curly-headed white chief who speaks with one tongue.”

The same goes for the material culture that is at the heart of the story Diner tells. Thanks to her eye for detail, we come away with a clear sense of the peddler’s inventory. Less fully developed or sustained is its larger meaning. How Jewish peddlers obtained their wares and distributed them is fascinating, to be sure; of equal moment, I should think, is what the growing availability of eyeglasses and mirrors, photographs, and trinkets betokened. This is, after all, a study in the circulation of goods. Now and again, it seemed if Diner was just about to go down that road, writing effectively, for example, of the ways in which the sale of spectacles promoted the peddler’s inventory. Less fully developed or sustained is it, however, in narrative ways as well and would have benefited from a much tighter structure. That it, too, is an exhilarating display of research and synthesis. While each volume stands tall on its own, they are even more profitably read together. They remind us that he “helped stimulate a market for Indian arts and crafts around the world.” Surely more could be made of the “curly-headed white chief who speaks with one tongue.”

To make his case, he marshals a stunning array of sources, whose ranks include the writings of Dickens and a dictionary of British slang, petitions to the lord mayor of London, 19th-century travel literature and advertisements galore, among them this amusing piece of doggerel, courtesy of the house of E. Moses & Son:

A dress coat, if it fit too tight/Will make the wearer look a fright./And if the garment fit too loose,/It scarcely is of any use.

Exhaustively and imaginatively researched, Mendelsohn’s book is replete with detail—so much so that at times the reader gets lost. The text sprawls in narrative ways as well and would have benefited greatly from a much tighter structure. That it, too, like Diner’s account, ultimately treats clothing more

As wide-ranging in scope as the ambitions of Elias Moses and Joseph Seligman, whose transmogrification from itinerant peddlers into respectable bankers underscores the book’s main theme—the “alchemy” of success—this study situates the nascent apparel trade within such varied contexts as the California gold rush, the development of the British Empire, and Civil War procurement practices. Were it not for the presence of Jewish peddlers or “Jehudem,” who, like Levi Strauss, plied their trade in the mining camps outside of San Francisco; the Jewish tailors who sold “emigrant outfits” to those who sought their fortunes in Australia; or the participation of Jewish wholesalers from Cincinnati in outfitting Union troops with hats and boots, jackets and pants, the modern garment industry as we know it would not have come into being. “…To begin a discussion of Jews and the clothing trade in America with the sweatshop is like presenting a stage play without its opening acts,” Mendelsohn chides, adding “the role of earlier immigrants in opening the arena and designing the props essential for the success of the later drama has not been fully recognized.”

The Rag Race: How Jews Sewed Their Way to Success in America and the British Empire, Adam Mendelsohn’s first book, reckons directly with the discarded rags, second-hand clothes and spit-and-polish uniforms that fill its pages. An inquiry into the wellspring of modern Jewish economic success, it attends to the origins of the garment industry, poking around in the dusty and often little-known, corners of a global exchange based on kinship and the Jewish collective. Focusing on the "old clo' man and other unsung heroes of Jewish history, Mendelsohn’s objective is to revamp, or, as the lingo of the market in second-hand goods would have it, "renovate," our understanding of the past. "This attention to 'old clo' dealers is one of the ways this volume cuts, crimps and reworks several pieces of the standard narrative of the economic history of the Jews in England and the United States," he writes, drawing heavily and characteristically on verbs that trumpet his subject’s roots in the making of things to wear.

Shuttling between Petticoat Lane in London and Chatham Street in New York, between that self-styled “El Dorado on the shores of the Pacific,” a rosy-eyed reference to California, and an auction mart in Melbourne, which, wrote one disgruntled eyewitness, “might have been mistaken for a Jewish synagogue,” Mendelsohn vividly documents the process by which clothing made the rounds. Well before globalization became the darling of the contemporary academic curriculum, the Jews made it a common practice. As wide-ranging in scope as the ambitions of Elias Moses and Joseph Seligman, whose transmogrification from itinerant peddlers into respectable bankers underscores the book’s main theme—the “alchemy” of success—this study situates the nascent apparel trade within such varied contexts as the California gold rush, the development of the British Empire, and Civil War procurement practices. Were it not for the presence of Jewish peddlers or “Jehudem,” who, like Levi Strauss, plied their trade in the mining camps outside of San Francisco; the Jewish tailors who sold “emigrant outfits” to those who sought their fortunes in Australia; or the participation of Jewish wholesalers from Cincinnati in outfitting Union troops with hats and boots, jackets and pants, the modern garment industry as we know it would not have come into being. “…To begin a discussion of Jews and the clothing trade in America with the sweatshop is like presenting a stage play without its

J. Minsky, tailor’s trimmings, Aldgate, East End, ca. 1905. (Courtesy of Jewish East End Celebration Society.)

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W hen a recent move required me to pack and unpack all my books, I seized the opportunity to reassess my literary real estate. I situated the books I love in prime real estate. In the Jewish part of town, a selection of Yiddish writers gave way to the great American Jews. Israelis reside one shelf away, and to assuage my discomfort at shelving Jews only with Jews, these clusters are interrupted by a row of favorite novels. I read Prayers for the Living the same weekend this arranging took place, wondering: Where does this book fit in the landscape of American and American Jewish fiction?

Prayers for the Living could live happily next to Philip Roth's American Pastoral for its intensity and scope, with its rendering of immigrant experience, it ought to dwell with Jonathan Franzen's The Corrections. Prayers for the Living is a novel with the weight of legend, the feel of myth. In this story of the rise and fall of Manny Bloch, a rabbi turned business mogul, Alan Cheuse explores the shedding of tradition and the return to it; the immigrant's travails and the complexities of success, which brings its own burdens. The novel asks a dazzling array of questions about living a life of the spirit or of the world, about order and randomness, about the long shadow of the Holocaust, about silence in the face of injustice, and about families connected and estranged.

At the book's heart is Minnie Bloch, mother of Manny, grandmoth-er of Sarah. She speaks in a Yiddish-inflected, Jewish mother's voice that is funny and endearing; it feels familiar without veering into stereotype; it moves seamlessly from the quip to the deepest emotional registers. As Minnie says, she has arrived at an age when “we can eat and weep at the same time.”

Some of what Minnie tells is based on recollected conversation. Some information is based on letters her son Manny sent while away at school, and other material is gathered on the sly, for which Minnie expresses no apologies. Reading the private writings of her daughter-in-law, for example, she says, indignantly, “What do you mean you don't want to snoop? This is not snooping, snooping is something else. This is learning.”

This is a novel of immigration. Newly arrived in America, Minnie's husband Jacob, a “dreamer and hard-working peddler all in one,” decides, as did so many immigrants, to work on the Sabbath, setting into motion one of the central questions of the novel: Is Jewish law to be lived in a vacuum, away from the world? Does the rabbi reside on high, upon a dais such as the one on which Manny stands as the book opens on Yom Kippur? In Pastoral, the biblical rendering of Yom Kippur, the high priest wears a red thread that turns white, sin expunged, holi-ness affirmed; in this Yom Kippur, the rabbi stands on the podium, experiences a vision delivered by a bird, and he falls and he falls. But even as this dichotomy is framed, the book argues with the division between the world of the spirit and the world of the everyday. And yet, even as Minnie is willing to argue with God, some of her prayers are as raw and wrenching as any imaginable. Most forcefully, she speaks as a mother. “I make this si- lent request of you, God, whoever You are, wherever You are—a burning bush, a naked back, a cry in the night, a great big white, flapping, winged bird. Whoever. Whatever. Dear God. Please keep my children from harm.” This last sentiment—please keep my children from harm—is uttered in varied ways throughout the book, even as it proves ultimately to be a futile plea. No one can be kept from harm here, because to live is to be inevitably harmed.

Indeed, Minnie belongs to a long and storied cast of Jewish mothers. But while she shares many of the presumably worst qualities attributed to this group—she too can be called intrusive, overbearing, self-centered—Cheuse wrests open these words to find the empathic center. If Portnoy's mother was skewered for an intrusion born of consuming anxiety, Minnie's intrusiveness seems forged primarily of love. If Minnie comes off as controlling, it is only out of a desire to steady her family's careen- ing lives.

If the redeeming power in this novel is motherly love, the corrupting powers are business and money and greed. Manny rises higher than his father could have imagined. What a distinctly American story, and an American Jewish story—the fruit peddler's son who rises to own an entire banana-producing country. But as always, there are no simple stories of arrival or success.

All the characters are damaged—and if there is redemption here, it is in the act of telling a story that is ruth-llessly honest and unsparing. This is a novel, in the end, about the ways our lives inevitably crash into one anoth-er. Prayers for the Living offers a vision of harsh beauty and for its wrenching honesty, for its simultaneous inti-macy and wide scope, for the power of its soaring language, it deserves to live among the great novels of Jewish American experience.

-- Alan Cheuse has been reviewing books on National Public Radio's All Things Considered since the 1980s. He is the author of five novels, half a dozen collections of short stories and novellas, and the memoir Fall Out of Heaven.

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A Great Novel of the American Jewish Experience: Prayers for the Living

Adapted from Tova Mirvis’ Foreword to Prayers for the Living by Alan Cheuse (Fig Tree Books, 2015)

Tova Mirvis is the author of three novels: Visible City, The Outside World, and The Ladies Auxiliary, which was a national bestseller.

Prayers for the Living

Is it possible to be both “rich and blessed”? If you work on the Sabbath, a rabbi tells Jacob, you will wander, and your son will wander. “I’m going to wander up to Union Square, that’s where I’ll wander, so I can sell enough bananas to buy this boy a winter coat,” Jacob tells the rabbi in one example of the book’s irreverent humor. And then, the sinner’s worst nightmare: the God whom you defy is indeed watching over you and punishes you for your transgression. In Jacob’s case, punishment comes in the form of a toppled milk cart, which crushes him to death while his son Manny looks on. “The way a life breaks. The way life goes. The pieces. The pattern. What happens next,” Minnie agonizes, re-calling her husband’s demise.

Young Manny begins studies with the rabbi, who tells him, “Your father died like a goy and you’re helping to make him a Jew.” The father’s dilemma is visited on the son: “Did he want to live a life dedicated to study? Or did he want to live a life in which he could use the talents he inherited from his father? . . . He heard a voice in his head telling him, both! Choose both!”

Whether he can choose both is one of the novel’s central questions. Is Jewish law to be lived in a vacuum, away from the world? Does the rabbi reside on high, upon a dais such as the one on which Manny stands as the book opens on Yom Kippur? In Pastoral, the biblical rendering of Yom Kippur, the high priest wears a red thread that turns white, sin expunged, holiness affirmed; in this Yom Kippur, the rabbi stands on the podium, experiences a vision delivered by a bird, and he falls and he falls. But even as this dichotomy is framed, the book argues with the division between the world of the spirit and the world of the everyday. And yet, even as Minnie is willing to argue with God, some of her prayers are as raw and wrenching as any imaginable. Most forcefully, she speaks as a mother. “I make this silent request of you, God, whoever You are, wherever You are—a burning bush, a naked back, a cry in the night, a great big white, flapping, winged bird. Whoever. Whatever. Dear God. Please keep my children from harm.” This last sentiment—please keep my children from harm—is uttered in varied ways throughout the book, even as it proves ultimately to be a futile plea. No one can be kept from harm here, because to live is to be inevitably harmed.

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The Abrams Case and Justice Holmes' Philo-Semitism

BY GARY STEIN

The Great Dissent: How Oliver Wendell Holmes Changed His Mind—and Changed the History of Free Speech in America
by Thomas Healy
Picador, 352 pp., $20

In 1919 Oliver Wendell Holmes changed his mind in and so doing transformed the law of free speech. Before his famous dissenting opinion in Abrams v. United States, the Supreme Court justice had shown little interest in a speech-protective approach to the First Amendment. That same year Holmes had authored a trilogy of unanimous decisions for the Court upholding the criminal convictions of Philadelphia socialist Charles Schenck, Missouri newspaper publisher Jacob Frohwerk, and perennial Socialist Party presidential candidate Eugene Debs for protesting America’s involvement in World War I. This was in line with the abiding tenet of Holmes’ overall constitutional philosophy: a fatalistic (some say nihilistic) deference to the prerogatives of the democratic majority; no matter how wrong-headed the majority might be.

When Abrams came before the Court in the fall of 1919, it would have been reasonable to expect Holmes to view the case through the same lens. The defendants were five Russian-born Jewish anarchists prosecuted for distributing leaflets in New York City (both in English and in Yiddish) urging workers’ strikes at munitions factories. Targeted at the Wilson administration’s opposition to the new Bolshevik government in Russia, the leaflets nonetheless were distributed while the United States was at war with Germany and were deemed a potential interference with the war effort. In Red Scare, post-armistice America, the Abrams defendants could expect little sympathy in the courts. A 7-2 majority of the Supreme Court showed them none, affirming their convictions and rejecting their First Amendment arguments on the strength of Holmes’ reasoning in the Schenck, Frohwerk, and Debs cases.

Yet Holmes himself—joined by Justice Louis Brandeis—disagreed. “Persecution for the expression of opinions seems to me perfectly logical,” the seminal passage of Holmes’ dissent began. “But,” it continued, “when men have realized that time has upset many fighting faiths”—in other words, that the persecutors are often proven wrong—“they may come to believe even more than they believe the very foundations of their own conduct that the ultimate good desired is better reached by free trade in ideas—that the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market.” Ultimately (as if to prove the validity of its own major premise), Holmes’ dissenting opinion won acceptance in the marketplace of legal ideas and came to represent the majority view of the Supreme Court.

Why Holmes changed his mind has long been a source of fascination and puzzlement for legal scholars. In The Great Dissent: How Oliver Wendell Holmes Changed His Mind—and Changed the History of Free Speech in America, Thomas Healy, a professor at Seton Hall University School of Law and former journalist, has given us a highly readable and thought-provoking account of this important moment in American constitutional history. Like scholars before him, Healy draws heavily on Holmes’ contemporaneous correspondence with several progressive intellectuals who, as prosecutions of wartime protestors mounted, sought to move Holmes toward a more liberal position on free speech. Prominent among these was the British-Jewish political scientist Harold Laski, then only in his mid-20s and teaching at Harvard. (Laski would go on to briefly chair the Labour Party after World War II and clash with Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin over the latter’s anti-Zionist Palestine policy.)

It was at Laski’s suggestion that Holmes read a new biography of Adam Smith and re-read John Stuart Mill’s On Liberty. These works, according to Healy, inspired the intellectual rationale of the Abrams dissent and in particular the now-familiar metaphor of a marketplace of ideas where free speech facilitates the discovery of truth, much like free trade facilitates growth in economic markets.

Yet in Professor Healy’s retelling, Holmes’ transformation was as much a change of heart as a change of mind, and for that Laski bears even greater responsibility. The decisive factor in that transformation, Healy suggests, was a campaign to banish Laski from Harvard for his left-wing views. In the fall of 1919, Laski created an uproar by vocally supporting an unpopular strike by the Boston police force. Denunciations from the press, the Boston establishment, and wealthy Harvard alumni followed, along with calls that Laski be fired. A few days before Abrams was decided, Laski asked Holmes if he would write an article on toleration for The Atlantic Monthly, which would aid Laski’s defense. That request was made at the suggestion of future Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, another Jewish Holmes acolyte then teaching at Harvard.

While Holmes did not share Laski’s political views, he had grown extremely fond of him personally. The two summered near one another on the North Shore of Boston, and Holmes took “the greatest pleasure” in Laski’s conversation. As well he might: Immensely learned and extraordinarily agreeable, Laski displayed, as Edmund Wilson once observed, a “genuine emotion of piety” towards Holmes, some 52 years his senior. For both the childless Holmes and the non-observant Laski, estranged from his own Orthodox father, their association took on the psychological dynamics of a father-son relationship. Healy hypothesizes that empathy for Laski, “the son [Holmes] never had,” is what finally pushed Holmes into the pro-free speech camp:

For what had been merely an abstract question for Holmes over the past year was, suddenly, concrete and personal. The face of free speech was no longer Eugene Debs, the dangerous socialist agitator. It was his good friend Harold Laski, and Holmes’s views shifted accordingly—and dramatically.

Holmes never wrote the article for The Atlantic Monthly. But Healy contends that he wrote his Abrams dissent as a kind of substitute. Contemporaneous evidence from Holmes supports that contention. In a November 1, 1919 letter to Frankfurter, Holmes explained that although he was “too busy” to write the proposed article, “Just now I am full of a tentative statement that may see light later on kindred themes to your subject.” In fact, he had just completed his Abrams dissent and sent it off to the printer.

Healy’s insight gives rise to an intriguing question that Healy touches upon but does not
Socialist handing out pamphlets in Union Square, New York, ca. 1908. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.)

A page from the January 1920 issue of The Harvard Lampoon throughout which Harold Laski is mocked and vilified. (From the collection of the Harvard University Archives.)

directly explore. As Healy notes, anti-Semitism was “prevalent” at Harvard at the time, and it was perceived as a motivating force behind the anti-Laski campaign, as well as a similar campaign in the spring of 1919 to banish Frankfurter for his supposedly radical views, as well as an attempt that year to oust yet a third Jewish professor, philosopher Harry Sather. (There were only five Jews on the entire Harvard faculty at the time.) When Laski was nominated for membership in the Harvard Club in early 1919, the membership committee deemed it necessary to conduct further due diligence on him because, as the club secretary explained in a letter, “Mr. Laski is a Jew.”

During the police strike firestorm, one alumnus, told Harvard President A. Lawrence Lovell (himself known to harbor anti-Jewish sentiments) that if a “Russian Jew” and “out-and-out Bolshevik” like Laski remained on the faculty, he would refuse to contribute to the university’s endowment campaign. And in January 1920, The Harvard Lampoon devoted an entire issue to vilifying Laski in 16 pages of anti-Semitic “poems, plays, cartoons, songs, and articles” mocking him as “Professor Moses Smartelekoff!” A few months later Laski resigned from Harvard and returned to England, confiding in Bertrand Russell that he was “heartily sick of America” and eager to be in a land “where an ox does not tread upon the tongue.”

Could Holmes’ reaction to anti-Semitism have played some role in his historic shift in Abrams? If, as Healy posits, Laski became the “face of free speech” for Holmes when writing his dissent, it follows that the face of repression hovering in Holmes’ subconscious may have been the anti-Semitism that sought to silence Laski (as well as Frankfurter). And if so, this might help explain why Holmes viewed Laski’s plight, and that of the Abrams defendants, differently than the seemingly similarly situated dissenters in Schenck, Frohwerk, and Debs. Certainly Holmes was aware of the anti-Jewish prejudice directed at his two young Harvard friends. In an April 5, 1919 letter, Holmes asked English legal scholar Frederick Pollock if he knew Laski, adding: “People in Boston seem to have got the idea that he is a dangerous man (they used to think me one) . . . There is also a prejudice against Frankfurter; I think partly because he (as well as Laski) is a Jew.” As for himself, Holmes told Pollock: “It never occurs to me until after the event that a man I like is a Jew, nor do I care, when I realize it.” That same month Holmes asked Laski why he and Frankfurter were encountering such opposition, and Laski replied by relaying a colleague’s view that, at least in Frankfurter’s case, “it is antisemitism.”

Historians have often noted that Holmes did not share the anti-Semitism common in his day. To the contrary, he formed friendships with many Jewish intellectuals for whom, according to Edmund Wilson, he “felt a special affinity”: not only Laski and Jewish were a race lying under a curse for their obstinacy in refusing the gospel” and “shar[ing] more or less the prevailing prejudices against the persecuted race.” (Later in life, Holmes’ father experienced an epiphany while seated between two Jews at the theater and became a proponent of religious toleration.) Even Holmes’ wife of more than five decades, Fanny, disagreed with him on the subject of Jews: “She calls them Keiks and how can I bother with them,” a friend once recalled Holmes saying. “But I never notice their noses, it’s their conversation I like!!!”

Holmes, whose views of human nature were shaped by the brutality of his Civil War experiences, was also deeply influenced by Social Darwinism. “The real Holmes,” as he was unkindly judged by the late Yale law professor Grant Gilmore, “was savage, harsh, and cruel, a bitter and lifelong pessimist who saw in the course of human life nothing but a continuing struggle in which the rich and powerful impose their will on the poor and weak.” Black causes did not fare particularly well before Holmes, who voted repeatedly to uphold segregationist legislation. Yet Holmes, himself agnostic in matters of religion, seemed to treat Jews as equals and react adversely to discrimination against them.

Four years before Abrams, Holmes had stood up for Leo Frank, the unfortunate Jewish Atlanta factory manager falsely accused of murdering a 13-year-old girl and convicted at a trial conducted in the shadow of an angry anti-Semitic mob. A majority of the Supreme Court refused to entertain Frank’s application for habeas corpus relief. Dissenting (this time joined only by Justice Charles Evans Hughes—Brandeis was not yet on the court), Holmes derided Frank’s conviction as the product of “the passions of the mob” and “lynch law.” (Shortly thereafter Frank was, in fact, lynched after Georgia’s governor commuted his death sentence.) In correspondence, Holmes described his opinion as “a dissent as to which I feel a good deal” and characterized Holmes’ philo-Semitism is something of a curiosity. As a Boston Brahmin, Holmes might have been expected to share the anti-Jewish prejudices of his social class. Holmes’ grandfather advocated converting Jews to Christianity. Holmes’ father, himself a famous physician and popular writer, admitted growing up “inheriting the traditional idea that [the
Frank as “a Jew convicted of murder in Georgia after a trial that we thought a farce.”

The Abrams defendants were also Jewish (although, like Laski, non-observant), and anti-Semitism infected their case as well. Although their trial took place in federal court in Manhattan, the presiding judge was a pinch-hitter from down South, Henry DeLamar Clayton, Jr., brought in to help out with a case backlog. An “Alabama bigot” and “apologist for slavery” as described by

Healy, Clayton could not conceal his contempt for the cadre of Jewish revolutionaries before him, who had arrived from Russia only a few years earlier. When Jacob Abrams, testifying in his distinct Yiddish accent, referred to “our forefathers of the American Revolution,” Clayton, a fifth-generation American, immediately cut him off. “Your what?” he asked incredulously. “Do you mean to refer to the fathers of this nation as your forefathers?” Annoyed at defense lawyer Harry Weinberger’s persistence in a line of questioning, Clayton ordered him to sit down, complaining “the Lord knows I can not out-talk a Jew.” At sentencing, Clayton contrasted the defendants with “our good, free American Jewish citizens” who understood the virtues of capitalism, offering the irrelevant aside that previously

For all its philosophical abstraction, the Abrams dissent radiates an undercurrent of empathy.

“The Irish had all of the offices and the Jews had the money,” but now Jews “actually have taken some of the offices away from the Irish.” Clayton sentenced Abrams and two of his co-defendants to the maximum prison term of 20 years.

In his Abrams dissent, Holmes went out of his way to criticize Clayton’s sentences, which, as Healy notes, were not even at issue before the Court. Even if properly convicted, Holmes wrote, “these poor and puny anonymities” were deserving of only “the most nominal punishment.” The harsh sentences effectively made the defendants “suffer not for what the indictment alleges but for the creed they avow”—a creed that “no one has a right even to consider in dealing with the charges before the Court.” Holmes’ insistence that the defendants’ creed—what they thought and believed—was strictly off limits (“no one has a right even to consider it”) is a powerful expression of the principle of toleration. Although Holmes was apparently referring to the defendants’ political “creed,” there is an obvious parallel to be drawn with Holmes’ religion-blind approach in dealing with Jews, which likewise gave no consideration to their religious “creed.”

Legal scholars have long struggled to make sense of Holmes’ Abrams dissent, both because of its seeming inconsistency with Holmes’ prior free speech opinions and because of its doctrinal incoherence. The opinion advances a quintessential liberal humanist goal—toleration for the opinions of others—while seeming to lack a liberal humanist soul. Rather than proclaim any individual right to self-expression, Holmes instead emphasized the societal interest in promoting the search for truth in a marketplace of ideas. Given Holmes’ abhorrence of natural law doctrines centered on individual rights, that is not surprising. But it is hard to square with Holmes’ lifetime pragmatic epistemological stance, which held that “truth” comprises nothing more than what the dominant majority believes.

For all its philosophical abstraction, the Abrams dissent radiates an undercurrent of empathy. Holmes himself probably would have denied that. But he too sensed that his stated reasoning was incomplete, acknowledging in the last sentence of the dissent: “I regret that I cannot put into more impressive words my belief that in their conviction upon this indictment the defendants were deprived of their rights under the Constitution of the United States.” What was it that Holmes intuited but was unable to articulate? The answer may well be that Holmes felt a very human impulse to protect victims of those prejudices—like anti-Semitism—that to him were incomprehensible.

Gary Stein is a lawyer in private practice in New York City.
Lands of the Free

BY ALLAN ARKUSH

Jews & Diaspora Nationalism: Writings on Jewish Peoplehood in Europe & the United States
edited by Simon Rabinovitch
Brandeis University Press, 296 pp., $26

Diaspora Nationalism and Jewish Identity in Habsburg Galicia
by Joshua Shanes
Cambridge University Press, 336 pp., $29.99

Jewish Rights, National Rites: Nationalism and Autonomy in Late Imperial and Revolutionary Russia
by Simon Rabinovitch
Stanford University Press, 392 pp., $65

The Tragedy of a Generation: The Rise and Fall of Jewish Nationalism in Eastern Europe
by Simon Rabinovitch
Stanford University Press, 392 pp., $65

In the Shadow of Zion: Promised Lands Before Israel
by Adam L. Rovner
New York University Press, 352 pp., $35

Known that the Jews have recovered their homeland, however contested it remains, makes it almost as entertaining as it is painful to look back on the unsuccessful search for an alternative in the first half of the 20th century, when Palestine seemed unattainable or insufficient. It is still sad to watch the territorialists engage in their wild goose chases all over the globe at a time when multitudes of Jews were in need of a place, any place, to go. But it is also entrancing to read about the idealists and adventurers who prowled through chanceries and jungles in their efforts to outdo Theodor Herzl and his successors and find the Jews a refuge in a land that was “uninhabited or scarcely populated so as to avoid competition with the native population.”

Take, for instance, Dr. Isaac Nachman Steinberg, the man Adam Rovner describes in In the Shadow of Zion: Promised Lands Before Israel as “one of the most important Jewish figures of the twentieth century you’ve probably never heard of.” Steinberg was an anti-tsarist activist who did time in a Russian prison but who, when he was eventually exiled, earned a doctorate in Heidelberg for his study of criminal law in the Talmud. A leader of the non-Marxist Social Revolutionary Party during World War I, he became Lenin’s first commissar of justice after the Bolshevik Revolution:

He remained religiously observant during this period and would pray in the middle of cabinet meetings called by Lenin. “He had very discreet ways of doing it,” his son remembered. “He would get up as if to stretch his legs, lean, and cover his head with hand. But you knew he was silently running through the prayers, which he knew by heart. He never missed it.”

But he didn’t stick around long either. By March 1918 he was out of the government, and soon thereafter he fled the Soviet Union (taking with him the above-quoted son, who would grow up to become the legendary art historian Leo Steinberg). Resettled in Germany, Steinberg devoted himself to scholarship and literature (he played an important role in setting up YIVO) until Hitler took over. Fortunately, he was lecturing in London in early 1933, out of reach of the goons who were tasked with hunting down intellectuals like him. Resettled once again in the British capital, Steinberg became active in the Freeland League for Jewish Territorial Colonization, the successor to the writer-activist Israel Zangwill’s better known but by then defunct Jewish Territorial Organization (ITO), which had folded up its tent not long after the establishment of the British Mandate for Palestine.

Rovner follows in the footsteps (quite literally, with a lot of zest and a friend who took plenty of pictures) of Steinberg and the other Freelanders as they roamed large parts of Africa, Latin America, and Australia in search of a territory that would serve their purposes in the years prior to World War II, during the war, and even after the war. They achieved their greatest success in April 1947, when the Dutch governor of Suriname agreed to permit large-scale Jewish colonization “with rights of autonomy in local government” in part of the colony. In April 1947, the Dutch governor of Suriname agreed to permit large-scale Jewish colonization “with rights of autonomy in local government” in part of the colony.

But the Freelanders had once been desperately eager to rescue. And it was also a time when the Zionist movement, in command of world Jewry and on the brink of achieving its goals, looked askance at any plans that might divert survivors of the Holocaust from Palestine.

The prominent American Zionist leader Stephen S. Wise had played a part in helping Steinberg enter the United States in 1941 (not an easy matter for a former Soviet official). But by 1948 he regarded him as an enemy. “I personally believe,” he cabled to a friend, “that Steinberg should be lynched or hanged in quarters, if that would make his lamented demise more certain. He represents a combination of a Messiah complex and anti-Zionism, that appeals, understandably, to many Jews.” As Rovner astutely comments, “For Wise, one of the founders of the NAACP, ‘lynching’ was not an empty image.” Needless to say, nobody was strung up, but the Dutch government, apparently under Zionist pressure, seemed to have compelled the local authorities in Suriname to suspend negotiations with the Freeland League at the end of 1948.

If the Zionists in fact played a part in sabotaging the Freelanders at this time, they were only fulfilling their own founder’s prophecy. He had taken notice of Freeland when it was still just a book, a utopian novel (entitled Freeland) composed by a man Rovner describes as “an educated, assimilated Jew from Budapest” and a writer for the Viennese newspaper Neue Freie Presse with “penetrating eyes and an impressive beard.” After naming the book’s author as “Theodor Hertzka,” Rovner hastens to inform us: “That is not a typo. Improbably, Dr. Theodor Herlzl was a colleague of Dr. Theodor Herzl’s and shared with him a parallel background and professional trajectory.”
In *The Jewish State*, Herzl was quite eager, for obvious reasons, to distinguish his own proposals from what he considered to be the unrealistic dreams of *Freiland*. “Even supposing ‘Freiland societies’ were to come into existence,” he wrote, “I should look on the whole thing as a joke.” The Freeland organization that Herzl mockingly foresaw wasn’t established until the early 1930s, and although it bore its name from Hertzka’s novel, it did not hearken back to his specific ideas. Still, one can’t help but feel that its final defeat provided Herzl with the posthumous last laugh.

The territorialists were by no means the only Jews for whom Zion didn’t seem like an entirely adequate answer to “the Jewish Problem.” There were also the diaspora nationalists. And, as Joshua Shanes argues in his *Diaspora Nationalism and Jewish Identity in Habsburg Galicia*, there were Zionists who were, de facto, also diaspora nationalists. At the end of the 19th and in the early 20th centuries, the Zionism of Austrian-ruled Galicia was, he informs us:

largely a Diaspora-oriented movement, directed primarily toward national cultural work in the Diaspora (i.e., building Jewish national consciousness) and the acquisition of national minority rights, long before Zionism in either Russia or the West had begun to engage in such activity.

Galician-Jewish intellectuals came to Jewish nationalism either in the aftermath of failed attempts at integration into local, Gentile society or as part of an effort to “integrate into the modern world without abandoning their sense of authentic Jewishness.” But whatever their motives, they were not people whose lives had been shaped by the kind of pogroms or civic repression that afflicted their Russian counterparts. Living in the Austro-Hungarian Empire under a rather liberal constitution, they “felt more confident that they might achieve national rights without having to emigrate.”

The lead article published in 1895 by the young Zionist yeshiva student Mordechai Ehrenpreis (who was later to become the chief rabbi of Stockholm) in the Galician Zionists’ Yiddish-language annual is representative of the pre-Herzl period. After lamenting the extent to which Jewish children were being alienated from their own national ideals, he declared that:

We want to do what is in our power to decrease our misery, to raise our income, to multiply and increase our political rights, to improve the education of our children, to further the education and vocational training [Ausbildung] of our people [Volksmassen].

The expression of such everyday aspirations did not come at the price of building a national home in Palestine, Shanes tells us, but it definitely “tended to mean paying lip service to the settlement of the land of Israel as a long-term dream while actually focusing primarily on cultural and political work in the Diaspora.”

Just a year after Ehrenpreis published his piece—and after Theodor Herzl published his bombshell—Ehrenpreis’ colleague Adolf Korkis wrote a piece for the same journal that made “absolutely no reference to any Diaspora agenda” and declared “that the only solution to the Jewish problem in Europe was Palestine.” The *Jewish State* was a game-changer.

Deliverance wasn’t quickly forthcoming, however, and the older tendencies reasserted themselves, especially in the aftermath of Herzl’s diplomatic failures. Galician Zionists eventually returned to

Skeptical of the practicality of Zionism from the outset and irreversibly convinced that it could never provide a solution to the problems faced by the preponderant majority of Jews, Dubnov also had deeper reservations concerning the restoration of a Jewish state. He argued, as the historian Jonathan Frankel observed “that the Jewish nation, lacking a territory of its own, represented the highest form in the evolution of nationalities, dependent as it was on the expression of such everyday aspirations did not come at the price of building a national home in Palestine, Shanes tells us, but it definitely “tended to mean paying lip service to the settlement of the land of Israel as a long-term dream while actually focusing primarily on cultural and political work in the Diaspora.”

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While Dubnov and his Folkspartey helped to shift Jewish politics, as Rabinovitch maintains, in the direction of increasing "Jewish collective rights," neither they nor the other supporters of autonomism, including Russian Zionists, could achieve anything concrete in the context of a deeply anti-Semitic regime. But following the overthrow of the tsar, in February 1917, "Jews focused their political energies on creating the mechanisms of Jewish national autonomy that had been discussed in theory in the Jewish press since Simon Dubnov’s articulation of autonomism between 1897 and 1907." The nationalist intellectuals finally had "the opportunity to turn what had been theory into action."

In the spring of 1917 (when Isaac Nachman Steinberg still had his eyes focused on bigger things) the Jewish nationalists prepared the ground for an "all-Russian Jewish congress as the ultimate expression of Jewish autonomy in Russia," but when elections for this congress were held in November, the Zionists won them handily. This did not necessarily represent a defeat for the Folkspartey, for, according to Rabinovitch, it is not really clear how many of its members "actually wanted power within the community rather than simply the adoption of their and Dubnov’s ideas about Jewish autonomy."

In fact, what Russian Jews did on the national level with "no possibility of striving for political victories, territorial annexations or the subjugation of other peoples.” This attempt to develop a benign nationalism is what, perhaps, makes Dubnov and his colleagues attractive to cosmopolitan idealists even today.

In addition to seminal texts of Smolenskin and Dubnov, Rabinovitch includes in his anthology excerpts from the theoretical writings of other diaspora nationalists, such as Chaim Zhitlowsky and Jacob Lestchinsky, as well as the writings of American Jewish thinkers whose work reflects Dubnov’s ideas. In his more recently published *Jewish Rights, National Rites: Nationalism and Autonomy in Late Imperial and Revolutionary Russia*, Rabinovitch focuses not so much on explicating theories as on attempting "to define Dubnov’s sociopolitical footprint" up to and beyond the Russian Revolution. He relates, among other things, how in 1907 Dubnov and his allies created, in a far more tumultuous environment and a much less stable state than Habsburg-ruled Galicia, the "Folkspartey," a party that aimed to achieve three goals:

1. a democratic Russian government with "complete equality of rights for all peoples of the empire";
2. the legal recognition of Jewish nationality “as a single whole with rights to national self-government in all realms of internal life"; and
3. the convocation of an all-Russian Jewish national assembly, “for the purpose of establishing the principles of national organization.”

In *The Tragedy of a Generation: The Rise and Fall of Jewish Nationalism in Eastern Europe*, Joshua Karlip concentrates on the way in which several Russian-born supporters of autonomism, who were also secular-minded Yiddishists, came to terms with the post-war collapse of their dreams. Less than illustrious but still important intellectuals Elias Tcherikower, Isroel Efron, and Zelig Kalmanovitch changed from believers that the “hour of national redemption had come,” with the Russian Revolution, into people who had “largely despaired,” by the late 1930s, “of the ideologies to which they had dedicated most of their careers.” Their experiences with hostile or unsympathetic regimes, in the West as well as in the East, together with the steady “disintegration of the Jewish national collective,” led them to question not only autonomism but the benefits of the entire age of emancipation that had given rise to the idea. Breaking painfully with Dubnov, Tcherikower, for

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**The Old Master Haggadah**

**MARK FISCH**

"... A perfect yom tov addition." — The Jewish Week

A beautiful addition to both the Seder table and the coffee table, *The Old Master Haggadah*, edited by Mark Fisch, is a unique and detailed Haggadah that features 17th century paintings by famed artists, such as Caravaggio, Velasquez, and Rembrandt. The Haggadah’s text is written clearly in Hebrew and in English, making it a great version for those participating who may desire a direct translation. Throughout the text the works of art are presented in timely, Old Testament canon; as the *introduction* reads, “It is critical to understand this entire historical sweep to grasp the meaning of Passover and the purpose of the Seder.” The works and their artists are briefly described in order to connect each story to its historical relevance. The gold page edges and vibrant color images highlight the unique and truly special aspects of this Haggadah.

The Old Master Haggadah is a perfect gift for friends and family—and especially for your own home!

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his part, issued a call in 1939 for “a return to the
ghetto,” albeit a very ambivalent one.

We know that the call backward is in vain. The
old sources of religious faith are very dried up,
even among the common people themselves.
Our generation is too far gone in skepticism,
difference, and criticism to be able to once
again bind itself with tfiln straps. We long ago
lost the past simplicity of religious faith, and
no one has the strength to once again pour old
wine into new vessels. But we also do not have
the strength to free ourselves from the need
for yonette; and from envy of the harmonious
religious world of previous generations. We are
tired of gray, rationalistic commonplaces. This
is a tragedy of the generation that
do not have the ability to struggle with itself, a struggle between
modernism and its own inheritance.

This perception of a tragic dilemma did not lead
Tcherikower into passivity. “Although not overtly Zi-
onist,” he envisioned a Jewish exodus from Europe that
“echoed Herzl’s vision in Der Judenstaat.” He escaped
from occupied France in September 1940 and settled
in New York, where he continued—until his death
in Paris an admirer and supporter of the Labor Zi-
onist leadership of the Yishuv” who saw Palestine
as the site of a future Jewish national home. When
he made his escape from France, however, in
1942, it was to Montevideo, Uruguay. In his writ-
ings from Uruguay, Efroikin developed a some-
what peculiar Zionist vision that “incorporated[d]
the best elements of folkism” while repudiating
the folkist argument “that understood the Jews’
status as a Stateless nation as advantageous and
advantageous.”

Although he started out as something of a Zion-
ist, Karlip’s third major figure, the philologist, trans-
lator, and editor Zelig Kalmanovitch, was for many
decades a dedicated proponent of autonomism. In
1917 he dismissed the Balfour Declaration as a cyni-
cal, self-aggrandizing move on the part of British
imperialists, one that would do nothing for the Jews
other than embroil them in conflict with the Arabs.

Kalmanovitch went to his death addressing the following
words to his German oppressors: “I laugh at you; I am not
afraid of you! I have a son in the Land of Israel!”

Even as he became a wealthy businessman,
Efroikin remained actively committed to diaspora
nationalism. But his limited success as head of the
Federation of Jewish Societies and the worsening
overall situation destroyed his hopes for change.

“In 1938, Efroikin visited Palestine and returned
to Paris an admirer and supporter of the Labor Zi-
onist leadership of the Yishuv” who saw Palestine
as the site of a future Jewish national home. When
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what peculiar Zionist vision that “incorporated[d]
the best elements of folkism” while repudiating
the folkist argument “that understood the Jews’
had predicted the possibility of such a catastrophe as early as two generations ago.” But for Kalmanovitch, it was now too late to escape to Palestine, where before the war he had been offered what he called “a spectacular position” with the National Library. His work now, under increasingly trying and eventually desperate circumstances, was to do what he could to preserve the Jewish cultural heritage. As the diary he wrote in the Vilna ghetto reveals, he found himself returning to “some aspects of biblical and rabbinic faith and theology.” He survived his deportation from the ghetto to forced labor camps in Estonia for only a few months. “According to survivors, Kalmanovitch went to his death addressing the following words to his German oppressors: ‘I laugh at you; I am not afraid of you! I have a son in the Land of Israel!’”

The moral of this story might seem clear enough. As Karlip observes in his conclusion: “The State of Israel has proven Kalmanovitch, Efrozin, and Tchikerower correct in assuming that if secular Jewish national politics ever would be realized on a mass scale it would be in a future state in Palestine.” Rabinovitch, for his part, is somewhat more tentative. “Autonomism’s greatest success,” he says, “was in the most unlikely of places: Palestine.” All the other “successes” he has in mind, in Russia and Ukraine, for instance, were admittedly very short-lived. But this, in his judgment, does not retroactively demonstrate that this is the way things had to be:

Whether autonomism and genuine national rights for Jews as a nonterritorial minority might have taken hold in Eastern Europe largely depends on how one views the historical prospects of the Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires. The collapse of those empires, and the manner in which they collapsed, was by no means historically inevitable:

Had the Russian Revolution ended some other way, some of the abortive experiments might have proved long-lasting. To deny this, Rabinovitch argues, is “to accept the inevitability of Jewish autonomism’s failure in the remnants of the Russian Empire is to a certain extent to accept the Bolshevik historical narrative of the inevitable triumph of proletarian socialism.”

It is indeed possible, as Rabinovitch insists, to imagine a different history than the one we have had. And even for those who see little value in such counterfactual speculation, it remains interesting to discover the intricate and often surprising connections between Zionism, autonomism, and territorialism. What matters most, in the end, however, is what Rowne tells us in the very last sentences of his book: “The mythopoiesis of Israel ultimately proved more potent a nationalist force than any other territory. Of all the many promised lands, only one today is real.”

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Love in the Shadow of Death

BY WALTER LAQUEUR

Paper Love: Searching for the Girl My Grandfather Left Behind
by Sarah Wildman
Riverhead Books, 400 pp., $27.95

This is a sad story, one that might be better (or at any rate differently) discussed by someone further removed from the events it reconstructs and the time in which it took place, someone who never met any of the people who had the misfortune to be affected by these events. It begins with Sarah Wildman’s discovery among the papers of her grandfather, a physician in Massachusetts, of a file of letters dating back to 1939–1942. The file had obviously been misplaced, for it was in the middle of his patients’ records. The letter writer was not a patient but a young doctor named Valy (Scheftel) from his native Vienna. They had been lovers. He had the good fortune to escape just in time; she was caught in the deadly trap.

Wildman, a highly accomplished journalist, wanted to find out everything she could about Valy. How did she take the separation? Could anything have been done to bring her to America? Why did Karl answer Valy’s letters so infrequently? Even the vocabulary raised questions. What exactly was a “certificate”? What did “Chamada” mean and who was Paltreu? Why did the possession of $150 make the difference between life and death in a case like Valy’s? (It was the price of a visa for Chile.) Answers to the other questions can be found in the very last Jewish book published in Germany a week before Kristallnacht: the Philo Handbook for Jews Emigrating. A primer in misery, it explained that no one wanted immigrants, especially Jewish immgirts from Central Europe. The book was reprinted in 1998, as a curiosity, no doubt.

I was a witness not exactly to what Sarah Wildman relates, but to some of the events that preceded her story, and I am one of the very few still alive who knew some of those who figure in it. I may be forgiven therefore for beginning with my own recollections, which go back a long time. They do not concern Karl or Valy but a boy of my acquaintance named Hans Falbsch. I remember visiting his hometown of Breslau (at that time a German city, now Wrocław in Poland). We were exactly the same age but I was a year ahead in school, having skipped a grade. It was mainly good luck: I did not like school at that age and for this reason worked hard to get it behind me. In the end, this saved my life, for I graduated a year before the outbreak of the war and was compelled to make an immediate decision about my future. And this meant leaving Germany as quickly as possible.

Hans and I belonged to the same Jewish youth organization, whose local branch was divided into two groups. He belonged to one, I to another, and there was a friendly rivalry between us. Everyone had a nickname. Being short of stature, his was Zwerg (dwarf). But there was nothing derivative in this. He was not that tiny and was in fact rather popular, a very lively, nice boy, pleasant to talk to and to work with. The movement to which we belonged was more German than Jewish, but this was true for much of German Jewry at the time. This organization was not political; we were far more interested in camping and hiking than in intellectual, let alone spiritual, preoccupations. With Hitler’s rise to power, things began to change. Some of us became Zionists; others discovered their religious identity. One member of Hans’ family, a few years older, joined the Communists and went with several others to the Soviet Union. He seemed to have been aware that a “purge” was in progress in Moscow. After a short time he was arrested and returned to Nazi Germany, in fact handed over to the Gestapo. (One of Martin Buber’s daughters-in-law, Margarete Buber-Neumann belonged to this group.)

The head of Hans’ group was a medical student nicknamed “Stork,” who in later life became a surgeon in New York. Stork’s father, also a physician, was one of the very few Breslav Jewish survivors. He was head of the local Jewish hospital, and it had been Gestapo policy to liquidate Jewish hospitals last. Had this very German Jew lived a few more decades he would have been surprised to learn that one of his granddaughters was to become the biographer of Isaac Bashevis Singer while another would marry a young man from Yemen.

In winter Hans’ group and mine went skiing just on the other side of the border with Czechoslovakia. We rented the hayloft belonging to a local peasant; to this day I wonder how we survived the icy nights. Recently, I received a call from members of the U.S. skiing association. It had come to their knowledge that we had been helping people who were in political trouble in Nazi Germany to escape the Reich by evading border controls. Was it true? It was true, up to a point. As groups we were not involved; we were too young to engage in political militancy. But
individuals among us did assist in such escapes, and I remember one girl who paid with her life for this. I do not recall when I last saw Hans Fabisch. In the years that followed, during the war and after, I met many members of his group in various parts of the world, often unexpectedly. But there was no word from or about him. I met his older sister, Ilse Meyer, who lived not far from our apartment in North London. She was married to “Yogi” (yet another nickname, yet another man with a variety of achievements to his credit) who had been the overall head of the youth movement mentioned earlier on. (It was banned by the Gestapo as early as 1934.) But she knew little about her brother’s last year beyond the fact that he had not survived. She knew that before the war he had trained as an agriculturist together with a group of young people on a farm near Breslau but had switched over to a school where he could study chemistry. After that, there had been occasional letters from Berlin, which had to be carefully worded because they were sent by way of neutral countries and subject to careful censorship in more than one country. She had no information at all about his last months or the date, place, and circumstances of his death.

Eventually, however, the mystery was cleared up. Following the publication of my book Generation Exodus in 2001, which told the story of young people from the German-speaking communities of Central Europe who fled from the Nazis, many survivors of this generation contacted me. One of them was Ernstein Fonthen, a senior researcher in space science at the University of Michigan. He related to me in considerable detail events as he witnessed them in wartime Berlin. I put him in touch with Ilse, who found out from him what had happened to her brother. It was from a letter that he wrote to her that Sarah Wildman learned the details concerning Hans’ marriage to Valy.

From the letters she found in her grandfather’s files, Wildman knew that Valy had returned, after the German annexation of Austria in March 1938, to her home in Troppau, Czechoslovakia, both to escape the Nazis and to take care of her mother. But Hitler’s seizure of the “Sudetenland” at the end of 1938 made life impossible for the Jews there. To break loose from the “stifling, virulent, small-town racism” that surrounded them, Valy and her mother headed for—of all places—Berlin, where there was at least the prospect of employment. They settled in Babelsberg, a suburb of Berlin (and the center of the German film industry) where Valy got a job in a Jewish children’s home and hospital. Since Jews were almost completely barred from the practice of medicine, she worked as a nurse except when one of the non-Jewish doctors went on holiday or fell ill.

The letters Valy wrote to Karl make painful reading. She was very much in love and hoped that the separation would be of short duration. She had expected that he would do everything possible to help her to join him in the United States. It was this love that kept her going. There were periods of depression, and they became more frequent as time went by. But she tried to keep up a brave front. She was “dreadfully lonesome,” she wrote in one of her letters, and reported the purchase of a flute. She practiced as frequently as she could, so that she would be a more accomplished player when the two of them were again reunited.

Her letters were more than just affectionate; it was “my beloved only one” and “I consider myself as belonging to you wholly and entirely and I am bound to you.” She lived in the past and the future, because the present was horrible. She wrote about how they had enjoyed the forests and the lakes in Austria, the Friday evenings at his mother’s, about trips to Dalmatia and Italy, the Viennese medical students ball: “And thus I constantly dream of how things will be when I am with you again my darling and how incredibly happy I shall be.” In such moments I let our entire life together pass in front of my inner eyes and live through all the different phases of our life together.” And in January 1941: “Dearest, how much I had wished to be with you finally on this birthday of yours. Darling, I want so badly to say to you how I wish you all the best from the bottom of my heart. I yearn to tell you finally everything that is written only on paper, so dead, so empty and so boring. How I wish I could see you, behold your dear face.” And so she went on week after week.

But for long periods there was no reply from Karl. What had happened? Had he deserted or forgotten her? October 1941:

Beloved, I knew that I could believe in you. Once, many years ago we were walking through the Prater, it was in October and you recited the Oktoberlied [a poem by Theodor Storm] for me, about the overcast day which we wanted to make golden. We were happy then or at least I was. With you I never was quite sure how things were. This morning when I saw the overcast ugly utterly depressing day I thought in my despair that I should gild it. And just a few hours later your letter arrived and made this day golden as ever a day turned golden.

But the end of Valy’s last golden days was approaching. There is the draft of a letter by Karl dated October 1941 in which he tries to explain why he did not answer her “sacred” letters. The only explanation he could provide for his silence was that he belonged to a generation that had been destroyed by war even if it had escaped its cannons. “I am dead because I have died mentally and morally. I cannot remember hav- ing laughed even once during the past three years.”

It would be wrong to dismiss these words as a clever but cheap way to explain his inexcusable behavior. But it was at best only part of the truth. His mental and moral death did not prevent him becoming, by
The last letter from Valy was dated November 17, 1941. To learn her subsequent fate Wildman went to the archives in Arlösen, Germany, of the International Tracing Service, originally assembled for the sole purpose of helping governments and survivors trace the path of the Nazis’ victims but now, finally, open to outside researchers. What these files revealed was sketchy, but she now knew, at least, that Valy had survived in Berlin until she was deported to Auschwitz on January 29, 1943. And she also found out that at that time she had a husband, a man 10 years her junior and born in Breslau—my friend Hans Fabisch.

In the files there was also something that gave Wildman a shock. Someone else had asked about Valy, more than 50 years earlier, and it hadn’t been her grandfather Karl. In 1956, Ilse, Hans Fabisch’s sister, had made an inquiry about her brother and his wife. But rather than trying to locate this woman, whose last known address was in London and who, if she were still alive, would have been in her nineties, Wildman first retraced Valy’s footsteps in Vienna, Berlin, and Czechoslovakia. Eventually she placed an ad in a British publication, the Journal of the Association of Jewish Refugees, announcing that she was “looking for descendants of Ilse Charlotte Mayer.” Within two months, one of them showed up: her youngest daughter, Carol Levene. She supplied Wildman with a seven-page letter that Ernest Fonthim had written to her deceased mother after talking to me, the document that became her “key to understanding everything that happened after my letters end.”

Ernest (as I shall call him, since we became friends over the years) described Hans as his best friend during the 21 months they had known each other in wartime Berlin. He could not report how Hans and Valy first met, though it was probably at the institution in Babelsberg where Valy worked and where Hans had also found employment. Hans at that time, he says, remained a great optimist. The war would end one day and he would become a medical doctor, not of course in Germany. He was studying medical textbooks and Valy offered to coach him. The two became a couple and moved into a little apartment in one of the “Jew houses,” the new ghettoes.

At the end of 1942, however, the Babelsberg children’s institute was on the verge of closing, which meant that Valy would be deported. Hans, for his part, was safe, at least for the time being, since he had in the meantime moved to Siemens, where he was doing work that was of some importance for the war effort. Hans offered to marry Valy so as to exempt her from deportation. Valy seems to have been a little reluctant at the beginning. She was, after all, 10 years older than Hans. But she had also at long last given up any hope as far as Karl was concerned. They married on January 5, 1943.

Was it a marriage that practical reasons were of course involved, but that they were also deeply in love.

What did deportation mean? Hard labor under bad conditions in Eastern Europe—or something much worse? By mid-1942 matters became much clearer. It was a trip from which no one ever returned, nor were there any letters or other signs of life. In brief, it meant death even if it was not yet clear by what means. Ernest, Fabisch, Valy, and their circle of friends among Siemens workers did what they could to hang on, but they also discussed means of escaping a fate that seemed more inevitable by the week. They managed to buy or fabricate false identity papers. But more than forged identity papers were needed. One had to obtain money and above all contacts with local people willing to help, and this was not easy for those like Valy and Hans who were not native Berliners.

In the end, psychology was the decisive factor, and, of course, accident also played a central role. As one contemporary put it: Pessimists stood a better chance of survival than optimists for they expected the worst and were inclined to go into hiding immediately. Hans was an optimist almost to the end. He and Valy waited too long.

On January 18, 1943, when he learned that deportation vans were on Hans and Valy’s block, Ernest did his best to warn them, but he wasn’t successful. The details of his attempts and failure would be better related in a film noir than in cold prose. Hans Fabisch died, probably by suicide, two weeks after his arrival in Auschwitz; the date of Valy’s death is not known. Their married life together had lasted less than two weeks.

Ernest himself survived the next 30 months in a garden allotment in a distant Berlin suburb. He was almost caught at the very end, but good luck for one did not desert him. This is yet another amazing story which should be told one day. After the war he went to the United States where he finally received the higher education he craved and enjoyed his successful career.

The dreadful events described in this book will not come as a shock or total surprise to the few surviving members of my generation. I have witnessed similar situations in my own life and that of my contemporaries: fear, the panic of being trapped, relief at being saved owing to accident, love in the shadow of death, sacrifice and betrayal, and guilt for not having done all that one could have done to save a person close to him.

For someone like Sarah Wildman, who enjoyed what is now termed die Grune der spaten Geburt (the good fortune of being born too late), the telling of the story of Karl, Valy, and Hans Fabisch involved more than an enormous amount of research in several countries and various languages, interviewing both experts and contemporaries of Karl and Valy, persuading them to open up. It also required a measure of empathy seldom displayed by writers dealing with a period so different from their own. I thought it could not be done and half-tried to persuade her (as she relates) not to undertake the effort.

I am glad she ignored my advice. For by telling the story of three individuals from among the millions who were exiled or slaughtered she has made a major contribution towards the understanding of this whole tragic period in recent history.
Unsettling Days

BY ROBERT ALTER

Assaf Gavron's *The Hilltop*, first published in Hebrew in 2013, is a refreshing reminder that traditional realism is still an effective vehicle of insight into contemporary society and politics. There is nothing modernist or postmodern in the way Gavron tells his story—no experimentation with narrative form, no dense interior monologues, no stylistic fireworks. What Gavron repeatedly evinces is a very keen eye for characteristic gesture and speech, for the reflexes of social milieu, and for the ways in which ideology suffuses attitudes and actions. The sum effect in this novel is a probing representation of the settler movement and the ambiguous relation to it of the Israeli government and of the consumerist world of secular Israel.

The book is alternately satiric (it includes scenes of sheer farce) and somber, ending on a mock-idyllic note that points to a future fraught with ominous potential. Though it seems safe to infer that Gavron strenuously objects to the settler movement, part of his achievement is that he is able to imagine it sympathetically from within. What Gavron repeatedly evinces is a very keen eye for characteristic gesture and speech, for the reflexes of social milieu, and for the ways in which ideology suffuses attitudes and actions. The sum effect in this novel is a probing representation of the settler movement and the ambiguous relation to it of the Israeli government and of the consumerist world of secular Israel.

The book begins with ironic echoes of the Garden story in Genesis (“In the beginning were the fields . . . And so it came to pass that Othniel deferred to the vintner . . .”). ironically intimating that the settlers may imagine they are living in a new Eden. The English version of the novel is well served by Steven Cohen’s lively translation, which takes minor liberties with the Hebrew to vivifying effect and can be faulted only for the now predictable repeated use of “like” where “as” is required and for sometimes making the dialogue sound too American (“dude” for the Hebrew gever; “man” and “bro” for the Hebrew ahi, “brother”).

The hilltop of the title is a small illegal settlement in the West Bank, Ma’aleh Hermesh C, which adjoins two older, authorized settlements, Ma’aleh Hermesh A and B, and sits above an Arab village surrounded by old olive groves. A large cast of characters populate Ma’aleh Hermesh C, ranging from an ideologically fervid beautician—the choice of her profession is itself amusing—to a young and prejudiced American immigrant floundering with his rudimentary Hebrew, and several couples, some happy and some dysfunctional, who mainly want to enjoy family life in a quiet prospering place, an aspiration probably shared by a large part of the population of very different settlements. They could scarcely all be like Ma’aleh Hermesh C, but novelists are obliged to use one instance to stand for the societal whole (surely not every orphanage in 1830’s England was quite like Oliver Twist’s).

Ma’aleh Hermesh C is a rigorously Orthodox community: Worship takes place in its little make-shift synagogue morning and evening; the Sabbath is strictly observed; the men, with beards and pe’ot, wear large knitted skullcaps and regard the small kippot of the modern Orthodox as a shameful concession to the secularists. Some, though not all, of these settlers are genuinely devout, dedicated to a serious quest for spiritual fulfillment. The novel embodies a sympathetic understanding of the Sabbath tranquility experienced by these Jews and the sense of security and harmony realized through the familiar cycle of daily rituals and annual festivals. But since Gavron is a realist, he also knows that people, however religious, will inevitably be people, and so a piquant subplot involves a passionate affair between the teenage daughter of one of the large, pious families and a young Ethiopian soldier who serves in the IDF contingent assigned to protect the settlement.

Gavron juggles these ramifying relationships and personalities quite deftly, but he places two brothers at the center of the novel, Roni Kupfer, who suddenly arrives at the settlement after having lived for an extended period in New York, and Gabi Nehushtan (he has Hebraized the family name), who has joined the settlement as a ba’al te’huva (in Cohen’s slightly odd translation choice, “a reborn” Jew). In order to flesh out their identities, Gavron presents their backstories through lengthy flashbacks, which constitutes something of a structural problem: Just when things at Ma’aleh Hermesh C have come to a boil, we are taken back to Roni and Gabi’s childhood, their time in the army, and afterward.

Roni is an unreconstructed secular Israeli and something of a sensualist. When, for example, a group of leftists arrives at the settlement to conduct a protest against it, his eye is caught by the alluring figure of one female protestor:

And that’s what Roni could see, freely bouncing up and down under a shirt bearing the slogan *The Occupation Weakens Us*—large and juicy, poking against the fabric, erect, fleshy nipples of volume and experience; the nipples of someone who knows they are there and how to leverage them.

Roni is also an indefatigable entrepreneur. After the army, he ends up becoming the proprietor of a trendy bar in Tel Aviv. Eventually, tired of the business, he makes his way to New York, acquires an MBA, and secures a place as a Wall Street trader. He wheels and deals, picking up insider information from Israeli contacts in the financial sector, then forges his boss’s signature to make unauthorized trades. On the eve of the 2008 crash, he bets against a new Apple product called the iPhone, having been assured by his informants that it doesn’t work very well. He thus loses immense sums that were not his to lose. He flees first to San Francisco, and then, with investigators hot on his trail, he hops on a plane for Tel Aviv:

The gambles, the successes, the mistakes, that, within the space of a few months during the American economy’s most dramatic fall, had pushed his brief and meteoric career into a fatal tailspin . . . and eventually [had] driven him that wintry day in February from San Francisco straight to the West Bank, dressed in an elegant Hugo Boss suit and worn-out socks, and in possession of scarcely anything else.

The combination of the Hugo Boss suit and the worn-out socks, from affluence to exposed inscrutability, is a particularly apt realist stroke. Roni,
The brothers have grown up on a kibbutz after being orphaned in early childhood when both their parents were killed in a car accident. Gabi has a long history of sporadic outbursts of violent acts, from boyhood to the period of his army service to a time when he is married, living in Tel Aviv, and the father of a small son. It is as a consequence of one of these violent episodes—its precise nature is not spelled out until relatively late in the novel—that he finds himself in jail and susceptible to the persuasion of an ultra-Orthodox proselytizer. Thus, when he comes to the settlement, he prays three times daily, pores over the writings of the Hasidic master Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, longs to go on a pilgrimage to the Bratslaver’s native Uman in Ukraine, and contemplates more or less endlessly reading and memorizing things said by some Ukrainian rabbi, who told you to be silent, or to sing, or to rejoice, or God knows what?

“Explain to me, then. What do you get out of endlessly reading and memorizing things said two hundred years ago by some Ukrainian rabbi, who told you to be silent, or to sing, or to rejoice, or God knows what?” “Peace of mind,” Gabi replied. “It brings me tranquility, love, happiness. For some reason, it’s hard for you to accept that. Maybe you’re trying too hard not to see it.”

“And maybe you’re trying too hard to see it.”

It should be evident that this is one of those arguments in which both sides are right, or perhaps, more to the political point of the novel, in which both sides are wrong. Gabi’s disapproval of his brother has a clear warrant in the rudderless and morally shabby nature of Roni’s life. It is not much of a life—the most one can say of it is that he has made no pretense of being someone he is not.

While Gabi concentrates on his spiritual self-realization, the penniless Roni cooks up a questionable scheme to market the olive oil produced in the neighboring Arab village to Tel Aviv boutique shops.

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the settlers, overseen by the army and carried out with bulldozers, seems on the verge of enactment more than once, it never happens. "Fortunately for us, the right hand has no clue as to what the left one is doing," a settler aptly remarks. The Ma'aleh Hermesh C activists pull strings in Jerusalem and obtain a temporary stay of the edict. (Israeli government circles here look rather like the Circumlocution Office in Dickens.) Then a Washington Post correspondent publishes an article on the unauthorized occupation of this site. "The hodgepodge of laws and conflicting authorities," he writes, "like something out of Joseph Heller's Catch-22, has allowed Jewish settlers to create a kind of Wild West, where they behave like outlaw sheriffs." This condemnation triggers outrage in the White House, and American pressure is brought to bear on Israel to remove the settlement.

An Israeli cabinet minister shows up at Ma'aleh Hermesh C with full entourage, writhing under the blazing sun in his suit and tie, his physical discomfort a comical correlative to the political discomfort of his hopeless effort to placate both the Americans and the settlers. This long farcical scene vividly illustrates the government's impotence in the face of the fierce determination of the settlers. The minister makes a little mealy-mouthed speech about "certain adjustments" that will have to be made at Ma'aleh Hermesh C. The fanatic beautician responds with a blistering, self-righteous denunciation:

"Tell the American president that he doesn't stand a chance against us, because the king of the world is on our side! . . . What do Americans understand about the Israeli people's struggle against Arab brutality? Who asked you to come here? Have you come to weaken the Jewish people, who've returned to the Land of Israel after two thousand years of exile and persecution and wars and pogroms and the Holocaust? Are you forcing us out of here—here, God's sanctuary, the land of our forefathers? You're throwing us out of here? And you dare to call that peace? Chutzpah!"

What emerges from Gavron's representation of the settler movement as it is manifested in Ma'aleh Hermesh C is that it has been enabled not by a grand governmental plan of territorial expansion but, from the Labor government in 1967 to the succession of right-wing coalitions that continue to the present, by a checkered history of religious idealism, political acquisitiveness,氰尿, diplomatic gridlock, confusion, and sheer incompetence—the right hand not knowing what the left is doing. There is considerable justice in what one visitor from the other side of the "Green Line" says to Roni: "Tell me, are they not lunatics, burning with messianic ideological fervor, outlaws and bullies who harass the Arabs and steal land and all that?" The lunacy and even the ideological fervor are not shared by the representatives of the Israeli government we see in the novel, but they are not resolute enough to confront them in any effective or sustained way.

The intersecting stories of the two brothers in the end become an emblem for the underlying national context of the potent trouble spot that is the settler movement. The two boys, we should recall, are products of the kibbutz, which has often been thought of as the finest flowering of Zionist idealism. One of the settlers is in fact writing a dissertation on the failure of the kibbutz movement, involving "the appropriation of land, the decisions vis-à-vis sources of livelihood and the receipt of state credit and benefits, including, too, the reliance on slogans and ideology, and through also to the condescension and arrogance of a closed society, alienated and on a pedestal, functioning according to its own set of rules." All of which makes the kibbutz sound like a precursor to the settlement movement.

The brothers grow up in the waning phase of the kibbutz experiment, and neither considered himself a product of the world of messianic ideological fervor, outlaws and political heroes. Their rebellion begins, an embodiment of the Israeli hustler, the paradigmatic figure of an acquisitive and hedonistic society. Gabi is driven by the collapse of his personal demons.

The divergent paths they then take in the wake of their private failures trace what amounts to a national trajectory. Roni remains where he began, an embodiment of the Israeli hustler, the paradigmatic figure of an acquisitive and hedonistic society. Gabi is driven by the collapse of his personal life to the reassurances of faith. But at a historical moment when believers have become political activists, his turn to religion entails the expropriation of land, acts of hostility toward the neighboring Arabs who are scarcely neighbors, estrangement from much of the Jewish population within Israel proper, and a withdrawal from what is bracing and challenging along with what is debased in the modern world. The fate of the brothers suggests that the settler movement with its aggressively confident values has flourished because it fills a vacuum in a country that senses or at least fears the withering of national values.

The last extended scene of the novel is an attempt by the army to remove the settlement in the midst of a Purim celebration. Everyone at Ma'aleh Hermesh C is in costume. This carnivalesque moment perfectly exemplifies the country's topsy-turvy political realm as well as the confusion of identities with which it is beset. The bulldozers are poised among the masked revelers. Then a quixotic and idiotic act on the part of three of the settlers triggers a chain of events that brings the evacuation to a halt.

A West Bank Jewish settlement, May 19, 2013. (Photo by Mendy Hechtman/Flash90.)

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A Spy's Life

BY AMY NEWMAN SMITH

Sylvia Rafael: The Life and Death of a Mossad Spy
by Ram Oren and Moti Kfir
University Press of Kentucky, 288 pp., $29.95

Sylvia Rafael: The Life and Death of a Mossad Spy opens not with an intrepid secret agent about to pull off a bold maneuver, as books with such titles usually do, but with nine men gathered around a table in 1977, studying a picture of an Israeli agent. "This woman must die," orders the group's leader, Black September terrorist Ali Hassan Salameh. Salameh had support at the highest level for this action against her, with financing personally provided by Yasser Arafat. The team had assembled in Oslo, retrieved weapons from a stash in the Libyan embassy, and prepared to launch the attack on Rafael from a public park as she left her home the following morning. The night before, the hit squad "avoided using the telephone, hid out in their rooms, made do with sandwiches, and retired early."

After this ominous beginning, the book flashes back to the South African backwater in 1946, when a bedraggled Holocaust survivor found his way to the prosperous home of Ferdinando Rafael, Sylvia's father, and collapsed on the doorstep as his family was enjoying tea time. In his pocket was a Soviet passport in the name of Alex Rafael and in his hand a letter, written years ago from Ferdinand in Graaff-Reinet to Alex in Kiev on the occasion of his bar mitzvah. From this newfound uncle Alex, after he was revived, young Sylvia (whose Boer mother had never converted but fasted on Yom Kippur) received the beginnings of her Jewish education. He told her both Bible stories and the tale of his own miraculous escape from the deadly pit at Babi Yar where his entire family (including his own daughter, Sylvia's age) had been murdered. She put things in her own words in a school essay:

Our entire family in Europe was killed before we had a chance to meet them. My father told me that they were very nice people... They were taken from their houses and killed, just because they were Jews. The Ukrainians and the Germans had rifles and cannons, but my family didn't even have a revolver to protect them... I asked my father why God didn't protect his Jews, why didn't He save our family, and Father only said: If the Jews don't defend themselves, nobody else will do it for them.

History had made its mark on her. As they tell Sylvia Rafael's story, co-authors Moti Kfir and Ram Oren (a writer of best-selling Hebrew thrillers) also trace the life story of her eventual nemesis, Ali Hassan Salameh, cutting back and forth between the two. In 1948, as Sylvia was delving deeper into her Jewish heritage, Ali, who was three years younger, was with his father, Hassan Salameh, on the road to Jerusalem, watching a Jewish convoy approach and grind to a stop as it met the roadblock his father's men had prepared: fallen rocks and a booby-trapped dead dog. Ali watched as Hassan ordered the attack, preventing the convoy from reaching the besieged city of Jerusalem. He stayed at the roadblock, watching more ambushes, more death on both sides, for two days. It was all part of Ali's training to follow in his father's footsteps: "For the Jews of pre-state Palestine, Hassan Salameh's name was synonymous with destruction and annihilation," Kfir and Oren write. Earlier in the decade, Salameh had been the senior aide of the exiled Hajj Ammin al-Husseini, the grand mufti of Jerusalem, in Nazi Germany.

When Israel declared its independence, Sylvia hoisted the flag of the new state in front of her family's home. Wounded in the June 1948 battle at Ras al Ayn, the dying Hassan Salameh made his wife and young son promise Ali would carry on the struggle against the Jewish presence in Palestine.

When she was 22, Sylvia Rafael moved to Israel, leaving behind a family that, with the exception of her mother, neither understood nor supported her decision to abandon a promising young lawyer who wanted to marry her and a comfortable life in South Africa. For a while, she wandered, working first as a volunteer on a kibbutz and then as an English teacher in Holon, unsatisfied with the work but unable to find anything that quite suited her. Then, as is the norm in elite Israeli units, where "a friend brings a friend," the Israeli secret service, specifically the ultra-clandestine Unit 188 that performed covert operations outside of Israel, found her:

Sylvia's roommate, Hannah, had a friend named Zvika, who was an instructor at the unit's School for Special Operations. During one of his visits to the flat, Zvika was introduced to Sylvia and had a long conversation with her. He was impressed by her intelligence, her native English, and her burning desire to serve the State of Israel. "I think she could be right for us," he told his colleague, the commander of the School for Special Operations.

Rafael soon had a cloak-and-dagger meeting with "Gadi," an interview for a job he could only describe as "a hugely challenging job involving quite a lot of travel abroad" with an organization he couldn't name. Gadi was in fact co-author Moti Kfir, the school commander to whom Zvika had spoken. It was an unusual dance, feeling out someone for a job you couldn't tell her about until you were fairly sure she could do it. Kfir thought that she could and recommended she go through the unit's initial battery of tests and psychological evaluations. She passed them all with flying colors.

Rafael continued to excel throughout her training, which covered everything from explosives to how to avoid looking like an Israeli when she peeked an orange. She mastered the business of being a spy as she began to inhabit the new persona created for her by "Yitzchak," her mentor as she transitioned from training to operations. While at times Kfir and Oren veer close to propaganda (or hagiography) in describing Rafael's life, their account of her mentor Yitzchak's key role in the execution in Uruguay of Herbert Zuckers, aka Herbert Cakurs, the "Hangman from Riga."

On the other hand, they spare no superlatives as they tell how Sylvia "became" the Canadian photographer Patricia Roxenburg, charming the neighbors and making friends who could vouch for her if the need arose; how her photographic skills developed to the point where she was hired by a French photo agency and had an exhibition of her photographs from war-torn Djibouti in Paris; how she calmly withstood detention and the threat of execution in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon, where she had gone, undercover, to take photographs. Although she doesn't appear in Steven Spelberg's Munich, readers will realize that the dramatic as-
sensation by telephone bomb it depicts was made possible by Sylvia’s ability to get the target, Dr. Mahmoud Hamshari, out of his Paris apartment on the pretext of a newspaper interview long enough for Mossad agents to plant the bomb.

**Rafael’s training covered everything from explosives to how to avoid looking like an Israeli when she peeled an orange.**

Despite his playboy ways and love of fast cars, the adult Ali Hassan Salameh made himself indispensable to Yasser Arafat and the PLO. While sources within the CIA and Black September apparently play down his importance, the Mossad was sure he had earned the moniker “the Red Prince” for his line and for the blood of the innocents that was on his hands. Their analysts placed him at the center of the planning not just of the massacre at the Munich Olympics in 1972, but of operations the previous year, including the hijacking of a Brussels-to-Ben Gurion Sabena airliner and coordination with the Japanese Red Army terrorist group in its deadly attack in the Ben Gurion Airport.

Sometimes Kfir and Oren strain too hard to connect Rafael and Salameh—over-emphasizing their fundamental differences as well as their similarities. It’s entirely believable that Sylvia’s Mossad file contains a note from a psychologist concerning a comment she made in one of her initial interviews: “The word ‘impossible’ doesn’t exist in my lexicon.” But do Kfir and Oren really know that, at a meeting called to plan the explosion of an El Al plane in mid-air, Ali told his incredulous co-conspirators: “The term ‘impossible’ doesn’t appear in our lexicon”? If the Mossad had either the listening capabilities to overhear such a conversation or a mole deep enough inside Fatah and Black September, that “great game.” Since 1969, he had maintained, with Arafat’s knowledge, an ongoing dialogue with CIA officer Robert Ames, forming the first back-channel link between the PLO and the U.S. government. Although Salameh had never formally agreed to become a paid CIA asset, he was certainly an asset to the CIA, and the Mossad knew it.

The Mossad continued to look after Rafael, learning of and stopping the 1977 plot to kill her in Oslo, where she had moved after marrying her Norwegian defense lawyer, Annaeus Schjødt. And, after inquiring whether he was under CIA protection and receiving no answer, it continued to look after Ali Hassan Salameh, tracking him down in Beirut, where on January 22, 1979, another bright, ambitious young female Mossad agent pressed the button on her explosives-packed Volkswagen, killing him. After several decades of happily married life, Sylvia Rafael died of leukemia in South Africa in 2005.

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

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The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel
edited by Cary Nelson and Gabriel Noah Brahm
MLA Members for Scholars’ Rights, distributed by Wayne State University Press, 552 pp., $34.99

**Anti-Zionism has developed a language of its own, voicing in strongly felt terms a now-familiar litany of accusations and indictments directed at Israel.**

Last year, the British scholar Alan Johnson spoke up against a resolution to boycott Israel at the National University of Ireland, Galway. As he recounts the experience, “Anti-Israel student activists tried to break up the meeting by banging on the tables, using the Israeli flag as a toilet wipe, and screaming at me, again and again, ‘Fuck off our fucking campus you fucking Zionist!’” This outburst came from students whose heads were filled with the common sense of intellectual circles in Europe—Zionism is racism, the Zionists ‘ethnically cleansed’ the natives from the land in 1948, Israel is an ‘Apartheid State’, Israel is committing a slow genocide against the remaining Palestinians, and so on.” Johnson recognizes that students who recite this litany of angry accusations are “in thrall to an Anti-Zionist Ideology” that turns them into dedicated “Anti-Zionist Subjects.” Most probably know little if anything about the history of Zionism or have any first-hand experience of Israel, but this ignorance does not keep them from eagerly participating in the BDS (boycott, divestment, sanctions) movement or from putting forward resolutions such as the one to which Johnson objected. Johnson’s essay appears in Cary Nelson and Gabriel Noah Brahm’s impressively comprehensive collection *The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel.*

The students Johnson encountered in Ireland have their counterparts among students, faculty members, and community activists on college and university campuses across the United States, Canada, and various European countries. They are a diverse group, and their motives may vary, but they are linked by an ideological and political stance towards Israel fueled by what Paul Berman calls “inexhaustible sources of rancor and rage.” As the chapters of this book persuasively demonstrate, one can develop a strong case against the anti-Israel boycott proposals, but inasmuch as these proposals are fueled by overwrought and adversarial passions, rational counter-arguments are unlikely to change many minds.

Intelect, in fact, is not what is first and foremost at work here. Indignation is, and it is hard to persuade angry and indignant people to rethink their positions. How, for instance, could one hope to persuade Omar Barghouti, one of the founders of the BDS movement, who is certain that “we are witnessing the rapid demise of Zionism, and nothing can be done to save it.” He unashamedly boasts, “I, for one, support euthanasia.” Barghouti claims that some of Israel’s “racist” and “sadistic” actions against the Palestinians “are reminiscent of common Nazi practices against the Jews.” Needless to say, he offers no evidence to support these outlandish charges.

The Case Against Academic Boycotts of Israel
BY ALVIN H. ROSENFELD

Climate of Opinion

A **cademic scholars, of all people, should recognize that excoriation is not an acceptable substitute for argument, but, in fact, it pervades much of the discourse that today passes as ‘criticism of Israel.’ In 2009, for instance, a letter was sent to President Obama accusing Israel of pursuing an “insidious policy of extermination” so merciless in its character and extent as to constitute “one of the most massive ethnical atrocities of modern times.” It was signed by more than 900 academ-
Nevertheless, BDS is emphatically a movement with political goals and a reasoned strategy to meet those goals. Cary Nelson describes these in detail in his useful introduction, which offers a brief history of BDS. It began at the University of California, Berkeley in early 2002 and soon thereafter spread to Columbia, Harvard, MIT, Princeton, and elsewhere. Recognizing that academic boycotts violate the norms of academic freedom, hundreds of college and university presidents have spoken out against them, and virtually every major multidisciplinary academic organization has opposed them as well. Still, the movement maintains a good deal of momentum, and divestment drives and proposals to boycott Israeli universities are ongoing and will likely continue. Depending on which BDS spokesperson one listens to, the aims may vary somewhat, but all of them speak up for greater Palestinian rights and argue that Israeli universities somehow deny those rights. Yet any informed observer knows that Israeli universities are among the most liberal institutions in the country, that many of their faculty members and students actively advocate for a two-state solution, and that large numbers of Arabs attend these institutions. Ilan Troen’s chapter, “The Israeli–Palestinian Relationship in Higher Education: Evidence from the Field,” is particularly clarifying in this regard. Academic boycotts, divestments, and sanctions are not, in fact, likely to work in favor of the Palestinians. There is ample reason, therefore, to suspect that the movement has more ambitious goals in mind than boycotts of Israeli universities. One of its advocates says as much. As As’ad Abu Khalil writes:

The real aim of BDS is to bring down the state of Israel . . . That should be stated as an unambiguous goal. There should not be any equivocation on the subject. Justice and freedom for the Palestinians are incompatible with the existence of the state of Israel.

The political philosophy that guides such an eliminationist goal is deftly analyzed in several of this book’s most notable chapters, including those by Alan Johnson, Sabah Salih, and David Hirsch. Other chapters, by Martha Nussbaum, Russell Berman, Gabriel Noah Brahm and Asaf Romirowsky, and Emily Budick, expose the hollowness of the supporting arguments and the political bad faith of the BDS campaigns. Several other contributors—Sharon Ann Musher, Michael Bérubé, Donna Robinson Divine, Nancy Koppelman, Samuel M. Edelman, and Carol F.S. Edelman—point out the threats to academic freedom that BDS activities pose and offer revealing case studies of damage already done on certain campuses.

Cary Nelson’s dismantling of Judith Butler (“The Problem with Judith Butler: The Philosophy of the Movement to Boycott Israel”), the movement’s leading philosopher and political theorist, succeeds strikingly. His analysis of the abstract, ahistorical notion of justice on which Butler bases much of her argument for the dissolution of Israel is fully convincing. To Butler, as Nelson points out, the history of the Jewish people in the land of Israel and the land’s connection to Judaism are without meaning. She simply “eschews the Zionist linkage of nation to land” and rejects the very existence of a Jewish state, not just its policies. Adopting the moral stance of an absolutist, she insists on justice as the basis for a state’s legitimacy and finds justice only in the Palestinian cause. For her, “there is no valid case to be made for Israelis as citizens of a Jewish state.” In the rhetorical economy of her work there are no competing arguments. It is a conflict between truth and error. Positioned on the side of error, Jews, therefore, are to give up their state and submit to governance by a Palestinian majority; a prospect that the overwhelming majority of Israeli Jews are not likely to endorse. Nelson is correct to conclude, then, that Butler’s proposal for a one-state solution is “a recipe for war,” for Israelis would not stand idly by while the Jewish State disappears and they fall under the dominance of Muslim Arab rule. They would fight, an outcome that never figures into Butler’s fantasy of a non-violent route to a single state.

Is it also a recipe for or a product of anti-Semitism? The question comes up time and again in this book with respect to the whole BDS movement. Butler is Jewish, as she repeatedly avows, but that fact hardly adds validity to arguments she makes against the Jewish State or necessarily keeps her at a distance from Israel’s fiercest enemies. She is on record, for instance, affirming Hamas and Hezbollah as “progressive” movements that are to be supported as part of a global left wing, a position that most Jews would find abhorrent. Nelson claims no knowledge of what is in Butler’s heart, but his analysis of her thinking, which he finds “fundamentally flawed by its unmitigated hostility toward Israel,” leads him to conclude that the positions she argues for “have antisemitic consequences and lend support to antisemitic groups and traditions.” Kenneth Marcus devotes an entire chapter to this question (“Is BDS Anti-Semitic?”), offering a learned review of definitions of anti-Semitism, as well as several categories that are useful in thinking through the issue. He concludes that “in the last analysis, the BDS campaign is anti-Semitic.” Even if some of its proponents may hold no particular disdain for Jews, they “operate out of a climate of opinion that contains elements that are hostile to Jews.”

One wants to know more about this “climate of opinion” and, in particular, understand why certain academics are so receptive to it. Tammi Rossman-Benjamin answers these questions in her groundbreaking chapter, “Interrogating the Academic Boycoters of Israel on American Campuses,” a carefully researched, empirical study of...
To view the Palestinian-Israeli dispute in these terms is to reduce its complexity to Manichean notions of good and evil.

49 percent) or social sciences (336 or 37 percent). Those in engineering and the natural sciences comprise a mere 7 percent of the total (4 percent were affiliated with the arts). The departments with the largest number of boycotters are English or literature (21 percent), followed by ethnic studies (10 percent), history (7 percent), gender studies (7 percent), anthropology (6 percent), sociology (5 percent), linguistics or languages (5 percent), politics (4 percent), American studies (3 percent), and Middle Eastern or Near East studies (3 percent). Analyzing her data in order to understand the boycotters’ ideological motivation, Rossman-Benjamin discovers four recurring themes at the heart of their work: race, class, gender, and empire. Rossman-Benjamin posits that scholars invested in the study of these subjects are apt to understand human experience in terms of power relationships that divide the world into the oppressed and their oppressors. Thereafter, it is but “a short ideological leap to seeing the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in the same binary terms, casting the Palestinians as the oppressed and the Israelis as the oppressors.”

To view the Palestinian-Israeli dispute in these terms is, of course, to reduce its complexity to Manichean notions of good and evil. This is not the way one would hope that our teachers of history, literature, and society think, but, of course, Rossman-Benjamin is right that it is the kind of thinking that shapes much of the discourse of Israel’s academic boycotters. The language and the anti-Zionist politics they reflect are largely products of the ideological left, with which many of those who pursue race, class, gender, and empire studies align themselves. Within certain scholarly and intellectual circles, to be a member of the left in good standing today almost requires that one be an anti-Zionist. As Cary Nelson comments, “An overall progressive agenda cannot move forward without first dismantling the State of Israel. Anti-Zionism becomes the necessary precondition of all other progressive commitments.”

Try as they might, BDS and other campus-based anti-Israel activists will not succeed in dismantling the Jewish State, nor will the tiny minority of Israeli scholars who have emerged as boycott advocates (they deserve a study unto themselves). Their various boycott campaigns have scored no major victories to date, but by constantly maligning Israel as an unjust, racist, apartheid state, they no doubt are making the country seem sinister in the eyes of growing numbers of people. Instances of Israeli scholars being dropped from the editorial boards of certain journals or otherwise shunned are documented in this book. One also hears anecdotally of scholars who will no longer collaborate with Israeli colleagues or participate in conferences at Israeli universities. In such cases, it is more than just good professional manners that are being violated: decency is, and fairness, and personal and national dignity.

It is hard, personally and professionally, for Israelis to know how to respond to such insults. To answer indignation with indignation will not ease the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, but, then, neither will BDS and its faithful followers. What it will do is let the latter know that Israelis and their supporters will not remain passively on the receiving end of moral smugness and undeserved insults. To refuse to accept an imposed defensive crouch as one’s natural posture, as this book admirably does, also makes a case against academic boycotts of Israel.

Alvin H. Rosenfeld is the director of the Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism and Irving M. Glazer Chair in Jewish Studies at Indiana University, Bloomington. He is the editor, most recently, of Resurgent Antisemitism: Global Perspectives (Indiana University Press).
Dr. Ofra Benny is prepared to stop cancer in its tracks. An expert in drug-delivery systems, she developed Lodamin (from the Hebrew “no blood in”), a drug shown to inhibit skin, lung, brain, liver, breast, ovarian and pancreatic cancers. But the work is far from over, which is why she chose to continue it at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

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RESEARCH ENGINE FOR THE WORLD. ENGINE OF GROWTH FOR A NATION.
An Affair as We Don’t Know It

BY STEVEN ENGLUND

An Officer and a Spy
by Robert Harris
Knopf, 448 pp., $15.95

Captain Alfred Dreyfus can’t be the “spy” in the title of Robert Harris’ recent historical thriller, since he was entirely innocent. An Officer and a Spy, newly out in paperback, is, in fact, mostly about Lieutenant-Colonel Marie-Georges Picquart, the French Army counter-intelligence chief who eventually proved that the Jewish captain had been falsely accused and wrongly convicted of spying for Germany.

Harris retells the “Dreyfus Affair” from Picquart’s point of view, dramatically reconstructing how he zeroed in on the true culprit, Major Ferdinand Walsin Esterhazy, by setting up, among other things, a wonderfully quaint fin de siècle stake-out in the neighborhood of the German embassy in Paris. The climactic moment, however, comes at Picquart’s desk, staring at a recently obtained specimen of Esterhazy’s handwriting:

The writing is neat, regular, well spaced. I am almost sure that I have seen it before. At first I think it must be because the script is quite similar to that of Dreyfus, whose correspondence I have spent so many hours studying lately.

That was something Picquart had been ordered to do, in the hope that he would find additional evidence concerning Dreyfus’ motives.

And then I remember the bordereau—the covering note that was retrieved from Schwartzkoppen’s waste-paper basket and that convicted Dreyfus of treason. I look at the letters again. No, surely not . . .

The bordereau, in facsimile, is a column of thirty narrow lines of handwriting—undated, unaddressed, unsigned . . .

The leading handwriting expert in Paris swore that this was written by Dreyfus. I carry the photograph over to my desk and place it between the two letters from Esterhazy. I stoop for a closer look. The writing is identical.

Harris, a well-known British novelist with eight best-sellers to his credit, dramatically depicts Picquart’s transformation into what we now call a whistle-blower who switched sides and became the star witness for the “Dreyfusards,” the defenders of the Jewish captain imprisoned on Devil’s Island.

Picquart was a conservative Catholic and, as Harris makes clear, he did not like Jews—but then, few did. Nonetheless, he was fair-minded, and he understood that “The Affair” was not only a public moral failure but a political calamity for the French Army. The truly staggering moment, as Harris is well aware, was not so much Dreyfus’ ghastly public degradation in January of 1895, but his retrial and re-conviction four years later.

Late in the novel Picquart says to a group of Dreyfusards, including the prominent novelist Émile Zola and the journalist and future prime minister Georges Clemenceau:

As Harris recounts, the going view was that of the French minister of war: “We simply can’t allow ourselves to be distracted from these great issues by one Jew on a rock.”

Harris then has the sly and knowing Émile Zola reply, “It is already a work of art, Colonel . . . All that is required is an angle of attack.” Something similar might be said to Harris.

When Harris’ skillful and absorbing historical thriller appeared last year, it is not likely that many people read it with current events in mind. (Or if they did it was in a more general sense, in line with the blurb on the recent paperback edition: “A whistle blower. A witch hunt. A cover-up. Secret tribunals, out-of-control intelligence agencies, and government corruption. Welcome to 1890s Paris.”) Now, however, in the aftermath of the massacres that took place in Paris in January and with so much news about Jewish emigration from France, readers may come to Harris’ novel not only to hear an exciting tale but with some hope that it will help them better to understand the present-day France. If so, that would be unfortunate.

According to the standard version of the Affair, which Harris’ tale faithfully reflects, Dreyfus was condemned because he was Jewish and because France was an anti-Semitic society, notwithstanding the fact that the country had emancipated its Jews a century earlier. The ugly truth about France finally emerged at the end of the century when the French military elite, made up of Catholics in its great majority, conspired to accuse and arrest the only Jew on the General Staff. It took three years before the real story began to spill out. And even as it did, as Harris recounts, the going view was that of the French minister of war: “We simply can’t allow ourselves to be distracted from these great issues by one Jew on a rock. It would tear the army to pieces.” Largely thanks to Picquart, however, the forces of light managed to pull themselves together and take up the cudgels on the innocent Jew’s behalf. It then took another eight years—so, 11 in all—of enormous social and political turbulence that rent French society before the unhappy captain received a full pardon and reinstatement at the rank of major.

What’s wrong with this version of events? It has long been fashionable to quote the lament of the great writer Charles Péguy that “everything in the Affair” began as mystique and ended as political.” This sounds glorious but is misleading, for
the truth is that the Dreyfus Affair, from start to last, for better or worse, was about politics—and that includes the Affair’s career in posterity. Notwithstanding the mountain of unproven assertions and unwarranted assumptions to the contrary, the obsession with Dreyfus did not contort and convulse the whole of France. If we keep this gentle reminder firmly in mind, we shall have a much easier time understanding both what the Affair was about—and what it was not: namely, a crusade of evil against good. Much serious scholarship is there to tell us—and Robert Harris, if he had engaged in a more thorough study of the latest research—that the French had, as they like to say, other cats to whip. The “Dreyfus obsession,” as a leading historian of this period, Bertrand Joly, terms it, was largely a retrospective construction.

The social-psychological background against which everything took place in France in this period was the national resentment and self-defensiveness that accumulated in the wake of the country’s shocking military loss to Prussia, coupled with the latter’s transformation into the Kaiserreich—and at Versailles, no less. What Harris aptly calls “the lingering stench of defeatism after 1870” saw France develop a semi-conscious xenophobia and quasi-revanchist focus on military, diplomatic, and “national” might, together with a cult of its army (“the sacred Ark”) that hadn’t been seen since the Napoleonic empire. And as for spies, France showed, as the historian Vincent Duclert calls, “veritable espionnitis.”

Second, now that the Republic was re-established (after its overthrow in 1852, by Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte), the century-old rivalry between church and state returned with a vengeance. The Roman-Republican tension defined the era—and the Dreyfus Affair. What is essential to keep in mind is that French Catholics, though not quite persecuted, had good reason to feel penalized for publicly practicing their religion. Both church and state developed a real paranoia about the other, tending to see the hand of its enemy at every turn, while resorting to the highest-flown moral-ideal language to combat it. Given this explosive tension, it is quite remarkable how comparatively uninvolved the Catholic hierarchy itself remained in the Dreyfus case. Leo XIII made it clear that he thought the captain innocent. This said, priests and religion’s secular hacks were another matter, and this is where anti-Semitism came in.

French political cartoon by Louis Dalrymple, which appeared in Puck, 1898, depicting the Dreyfus scandal. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.)


Third, and finally, the Third Republic itself had serious structural weaknesses that made it hard for it to create enduring parliamentary majorities. French governments in these years were hopeless at dealing decisively with any crisis. Many politicians, including several prime ministers, privately had severe doubts about Dreyfus’ guilt and qualms about the military’s railroading of him but they were not inclined to take on the Ministry of War.

Dreyfus was arrested because there was some evidence to incriminate him and because his superiors were desperate to find a culprit. The fact that this captain was rich, arrogant, secularly trained (at L’École polytechnique, the French version of MIT, rather than West Point), and Jewish only further justified his arrest. The going logic was, in Joly’s priceless words, “It’s perhaps he, so then it must be he.” The military justice machine went into high gear to justify the hasty arrest. Rather than back off, the brass compounded error upon error, lie upon subterfuge, each step making it harder—and soon, impossible—for them to stop or step backward without ruining their own and the Army’s reputation. Until Picquart changed his mind, after Dreyfus’ first conviction but before the second, no one even tried to stop this implacable flight forward.

The Affair became politicized, then highly politicized, as it became clear that all sides on the contentious French public scene could use it to do their old business destroying each other’s reputations. The great success of the handful of leading anti-Dreyfusards lay not in rallying “the French against the Jew” but in managing to project and sustain the myth that the cause of a few criminal officers in military justice was the cause of the Army, hence (automatically) the cause of the “wounded” country.

But what about the infamous anti-Jewish riots that took place in the winter and spring of 1898, following Zola’s exposé of the framing of Dreyfus in his “J’accuse”? Harris is indeed true to the facts following Zola’s exposé of the framing of Dreyfus in his “J’accuse”? Harris is indeed true to the facts when he has Picquart observing an anti-Semitic demonstration in the Boulevard du Palais in Paris where there are cries of “Death to the Jews!” “Death to the traitors!” “Yids to the water!” Nor is he fictionalizing when he reports what Picquart witnesses a little later:

We cross the river and have barely travelled a hundred metres along the boulevard de Sébastapol when we hear the cascading sound of plate glass shattering and a mob comes running down the centre of the street. A man yells, “Down with the Jews!” Moments later we pass a shop with its windows smashed and paint daubed across a storefront sign that reads Levy & Dreyfus.

And not only in Paris but in a score of other French cities, jereing throngs spewed epithets at many targets, including the Jews. But, as Joly and others have shown, the crowds usually numbered only in the hundreds, rarely the thousands. They did material damage but shed no blood, and the turbulence stopped as swiftly as it arose, requiring only modest repressive action from police or military.

Even at the height of the Affair, Judeophobia did not translate into electoral support for enemies of the Jews. The elections of 1898 saw 23 deputies (out of a total of 565) returned to the Chamber whose political platforms contained anti-Semitic discourse, in some guise or other. These men were to prove wholly inactive, and all were defeated in the next elections. By contrast, the numerous
Austro-German anti-Semitic political parties mobilized hundreds of thousands of voters over two decades, and in the case of Vienna, the municipal administration of the capital fell into the anti-Semitic groups’ hands for a generation.

Édouard Drumont, the only important French anti-Semite, was certainly a rhetorical force to be reckoned with at home throughout the years of the Affair, with his incendiary denunciations of the “big Jews and their accomplices” who ought to be court-marshaled and executed. But Drumont was a political pariah who was viewed as a corrupt monomaniac. The few dozens of secondary and tertiary French anti-Semites who trailed after him were largely immature adolescents, a handful of failed artists, some police spies, and a plethora of accomplished hucksters and embezzlers. What is remarkable is how this farrago of frauds has mesmerized so many historians who have taken them for what they said they were.

The French public of the Dreyfus years did not dream of a Holocaust avant la lettre; they simply could not quickly make sense of the shrill opponents attacking each other and haranguing “the people” on all sides. Partly this ignoring of what posterity so badly wants to see as the leitmotif of the Affair stems from the fact that the France of the 1890s had very few Jews: around 80,000 in a population of 35 million. Many Frenchmen had never met one. The would-be assassin of Dreyfus’ lawyer at the retrial at Rennes in 1899 ran off after he shot Labori yelling, “I’ve just killed a Dreyfus,” meaning, one suspects, “a Jew.” (Labori was a practicing Catholic.) It took a solid year or two before all the disclosures of what really happened turned the tide of opinion against the anti-Dreyfusards. Finally, it became politically correct to see not simply the innocence of Dreyfus (which was, after all, long suspected) but the stupidity and criminality of a few officers, who did not necessarily represent “the Sacred Ark” of France’s army. This empowered a craven and weak government to act, and presently the Affair ended. But the fulcrum on which it all turned is not, was never, “the Jew”; it was raison d’État versus the rights of man.

At many points throughout the Affair, many parties tried to “explain” what was “really happening” in terms of plots against the state or the society—Jesuit, Freemason, Jewish, anti-militarist-anarchist, anti-clerical, anti-Semitic, and so on. Such thinking, such mendacity, such nonsense gained a lot of temporary ground, but few people took these allegations seriously for long. They were elements of verbal escalation in bitter partisan wars.

What we need to keep in mind—as Robert Harris certainly does not—is that the anti-Dreyfusard wave which unquestionably swept France did not imply widespread approval of Drumont or his anti-Semitic cause. Even most anti-Dreyfusard newspapers ignored the anti-Semites when they did not revile them, and the same held for most of the leading nationalists. Camille Krantz, who became minister of war in 1899 and was personally convinced of Dreyfus’ guilt, detested the Jew-haters (“they inspire me with absolute repugnance”) and refused to shake Drumont’s hand. Nor, on the other hand, were the leading Dreyfusards particularly wrought up over the Jewish question. When the League of the Rights of Man was founded in 1899 its statement said nothing about combatting anti-Semitism but spared no shot in firing at counter-revolution and clericalism, while equating Dreyfusardism with the battle for liberty, fraternity, and equality.

Seeing the Dreyfus Affair through the same lens as we view, say, the Mendel Beilis trial and the Leo Frank lynching of roughly the same period is common but mistaken. The blood libel accusations against Beilis in Kiev and of rape and murder against Frank in Georgia centrally turned on the accused’s religious identity, while in the Dreyfus Affair, this was (mainly) not the case. This is not to say that the assertion (far more than sincere belief) that the Affair turned on “the Jewish Question” was absent at the time—far from it!—but it was the curious to note that not one of the 57 images from French publications contains an anti-Semitic or Judeophobic theme.

It was understandably the Second World War that launched a reconsideration of the Dreyfus Affair. “[The Dreyfus Affair was] a huge dress rehearsal for a performance that had to be put off for more than three decades,” wrote Hannah Arendt. There was, it is true, plenty of Judeophobia on the French landscape of the late 1890s—as there was in every European country. But what the French had more of than other countries was freedom of expression, together with an old tradition of virulent, virulent polemics. The tiny handful of professional anti-Semiticites did themselves proud in this department, but this was the distant threnody in a minor chord of the long history of contempt for Jews and the use of “Jew”-language for every negative purpose.

So is history of any help to us in parsing the undeniable spike in Jew-hatred in France and elsewhere in Europe these days? Possibly, but not until we clean the Augean Stables before filling them up again. Despite her irresistible brilliance and good heart, Hannah Arendt had it wrong. L’Affaire (as the French still call it) is a complex saga which, at its most depressing, presents a truly pitiable portrait of French society and the Republic, but it wasn’t a “dress rehearsal” for anything. By 1899, both society and the Republic began to pick themselves up and do the right thing and continued to do so until the Nazis brought France’s anti-Semitic power during their occupation of the country.

As for the genuinely alarming events of today, it is important to register that the attackers are not assailing Jews in the name of France. In fact, it is hard to imagine a premier of an earlier Republic stating, as Monsieur Valls recently did, that if 100,000 Jews left France to make aliyah, “France will no longer be France.”

This being said, there is a connection between the anti-Semitism of the “old” France, and other Christianity-inscribed societies, and the violence of today. Muslim anti-Semitism no longer consists mainly in the contempt that the historian Bernard Lewis correctly distinguished from hatred. Rather, as Britain’s former chief rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, has pointed out, it traffics in the kind of chimerical charges and explosive violence, backed by official complicity or indifference, that once characterized anti-Semitism in nominally Christian cultures, from Imperial Russia and Austria to Nazi Germany—and yes, though to a far lesser degree, the French Third Republic.

Steven Englund is the author of Napoleon: A Political Life (Harvard University Press), which won the American Historical Association’s J. Russell Major Prize. He is currently writing a comparative study of political anti-Semitism in Germany, Austria-Hungary, and France.
The Life of Saul Bellow: To Fame and Fortune, 1915–1964
by Zachary Leader
Knopf, 632 pp., $40

There Is Simply Too Much to Think About: Collected Nonfiction
by Saul Bellow, edited by Benjamin Taylor
Viking, 544 pp., $35

IN his brilliant novella The Ghost Writer, Philip Roth sends his fictional alter ego, a young Nathan Zuckerman, on a pilgrimage to discuss the life and art of fiction with the eminent writer E.I. Lonoff, a character clearly modeled on Bernard Malamud (with a bit of Henry Roth thrown in). Eventually they come to their greatest contemporary. “The disease of his life,” Lonoff says, “makes Abravanel fly.”

I admire what he puts his nervous system through. I admire his passion for the front-row seat. Beautiful wives, beautiful mistresses, alimony the size of the national debt, polar expeditions, war-front reportage, famous friends, famous enemies, breakdowns, public lectures, five-hundred-page novels every third year, and still, as you said before, time and energy left for all that self-absorption. The gigantic types in the books have to be that big to give him something to think about to rival himself. Like him? No. But, impressed, oh yes. Absolutely. It’s no picnic up there in the egosphere. I don’t know when the man sleeps, or if he has ever slept, aside from those few minutes when he had that drink with me.

Abravanel is even more clearly Saul Bellow (with, maybe, just a bit of Norman Mailer thrown in), who, according to Roth’s recent chronicler Claudia Roth Pierpont, was not amused.

That his own fiction drew so heavily on his famously full and messy life has been both an obstacle and a blessing for his biographers.

Finally, in the 1990s, James Atlas was given full access to Bellow, his surviving family, friends, and papers (also his former friends, ex-wives, and enemies). Atlas succeeded in pinning Bellow down, and—to switch animals and famous poems (one Bellow once parodied in Yiddish, in fact)—when the novelist was pinned and wriggling on the wall Atlas alternated between shrewd insight and a competitive, snering condescension. (Three examples of Atlas’ tone from early, middle, and late in the biography, taken almost at random: “Bellow’s onerous duties as a parent didn’t slow him down on the literary front,” “it is a novel of ideas to put it in the kindest light,” and, “After four marriages, Bellow was forced to acknowledge his shortcomings as a husband, but he continued to cast himself in the role of victim.”) Most recently and poignant Bellow’s first son Greg has published a memoir, Saul Bellow’s Heart, which, while less than subtle in its literary readings, is nonetheless forceful in registering the human costs of his father’s art.

Bellow’s new biographer Zachary Leader is both authorized and judicious. His excellent biography is being published on the occasion of what would have been Bellow’s 100th birthday—he made it to 89—as is a new collection of his essays, lectures and reviews, There Is Simply Too Much to Think About, edited by Benjamin Taylor. The two books complement each other nicely and both should push the reader back to the great fiction, which is in the end their justification. (Taylor also put out a terrific collection of Bellow’s letters a few years ago, reviewed in these pages by Steven J. Zipperstein.)

Although Atlas did the initial spadework and interviewed many people who have since died, Leader has clearly done new and prodigious work in reconstructing and thinking through the details of a by-now familiar but still fascinating life, or rather the first half of it. Whereas Atlas took some 600 pages to tell almost the whole story (his Bellow: A Biography was published in 2000, five years before Bellow died), Leader takes almost 800 to get Bellow to the height of “fame and fortune,” after the publication of Herzog at the age of 49 in 1964. A second volume will carry Bellow through (to stop just at the highlights) a Broadway flop, a bitter divorce and decade-long alimony battle, Mr. Sammler’s Planet, co-editorship of several small literary magazines, journalism from Tel Aviv and Sinai in the midst of the Six-Day War, Humboldt’s Gift, the Nobel Prize, marriage to a glamorous Rumanian mathematician, then another bitter divorce, and his brilliant late-life renaissance culminating in Ravelstein, his novel about—an imprecise but unavoidable preposition with Bellow—his friend and University of Chicago colleague Allan Bloom. And, of course, his final, and finally happy, marriage to Bloom’s student Janis Freedman Bellow. It is hard not to be, like Roth’s Lonoff, overwhelmed just thinking about the rolling turmoil and gigantic achievements of such a life.
Petersburg before he was arrested for living there under false papers. In fact, the prosperity may have come from dealing in such papers (someone named “Belousov” was convicted of doing so around the same time, at any rate). Turn-of-the-century Russia is not Leader’s scholarly beat, but he is rightly more interested in the Russia of family lore that eventually made it into Bellow’s fiction than that of history. As Bellow once remarked “the retrospective was strong in me because of my parents,” so Leader moves swiftly from the Russia of Abraham Belo’s life to the old country that shadows his son’s fiction. Soon we are hearing of Herzog’s parents, who briefly lived like Bellow’s in a dacha in the old country, and of Pa Lurie in Bellow’s unpublished manuscript from the 1950s “Memoirs of a Bootlegger’s Son,” who was violent, “nervous like a fox,” and escaped from “Pobedonostseyev’s police” in Saint Petersburg, before eventually ending up in Chicago.

Bellow’s mother died when he was in high school. It hit him hard, and his relationship with his father was never easy. Although Bellow was a tough guy in print, Bellow’s father was a real tough guy, an operator who ended up running Chicago coal yards with his two older sons, and who could not understand his youngest or credit his success, even when it finally came. Of course things were not quite that simple; his parents had read Tolstoy and the other great Russian novelists (Dostoevsky was to become Bellow’s favorite), and, in an essay “On Jewish Storytelling,” included in there is simply too much to think about, Bellow credited him with his sense of narrative, or rather with his sense that everything was a story. “My father would say, whenever I asked him to explain any matter, ‘The thing is like this: There was a man who lived…’ [..] ‘There once was a widow with a son…’ ‘A teamster was driving on a lonely road…’” In Seize the Day, a beautiful novella published the year after Bellow’s father had died, the protagonist Tommy Wilhelm is asked if he loves his aged, emotionally remote father:

“Of course, of course I love him. My father. My mother”—As he said this there was a great pull at the very center of his soul. When a fish strikes the line you feel the live force in your hand. A mysterious being beneath the water, driven by hunger, has taken the hook and rushes away, writhing.

Although it took him a while to find it—he was in his late 30s and had already written two novels—Bellow’s first great subject was really his family and the Jewish Chicago in which he had grown up. He was in Paris on a Guggenheim fellowship, working on a depressing manuscript called “The Crab and the Butterfly,” in which two invalids philosophize in a hospital ward. As he later told Philip Roth: “I was walking heavyhearted toward my workplace one morning when I caught up with the cleaning crew who opened the taps at the street corners and let the water rush along the curbs, flushing away the cigarette butts, dogs’ caca, shredded letters, orange skins, candy wrappers into the large-mouthed sewers… Watching the flow, I felt less lame, and I was grateful for this hydrotherapy and the points of sunlight in it—nothing simpler.” Bellow walked away from the street washers repeating to himself “I am an American—Chicago born,” at least so he remembered it in one version of the story (there were several and Leader quotes another variant). “That is, he was suddenly writing the justly famous opening lines of The Adventures of Augie March:

I am an American, a Chicago born—Chicago, that somber city—and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent.

As Leader says, this is when Bellow “found his voice as a novelist,” that distinctive freestyling prose that affects not to care exactly how its sprung rhythms and startling observations knock the reader. The last semi-grammatical phrase of that famous opening sentence, “sometimes a not so innocent,” has an unabashed Yiddish flavor, while the one that follows reminds you that Augie is as American as Huck Finn but not unlettered.

But a man’s character is his fate, says Heraclitus, and in the end there isn’t any way to disguise the nature of the knocks by acoustical work on the door or gloving the knuckles.

Bellow later spoke of his first two novels, Dangling Man and The Victim, as too proper, narrow, and constrained, an attempt, perhaps, to glove his knuckles or change the door. Bellow’s not so innocent knock is generally taken as the moment when Jews barged into American literature without apology, but it wasn’t just a matter of voice. Augie March made an argument that the rough-and-tumble lives of Chicago Jews were as fit a subject for literature as any other. Standing there as the cleaning crew hosed down the Paris streets, Bellow says he thought of a “pal of mine whose surname was August—a handsome breezy freewheeling kid who used to yell out when we were playing checkers ‘I got a scheme!’” Charlie August, like his later fictional counterpart, Augie March, was a social type of the 1920s and 1930s that basically no longer exists in America, a poor immigrant Jew:

His father had deserted the family; his mother was, even to a nine-year-old kid, visibly abnormal, he had a strong and handsome older brother. There was a younger child who was retarded—a case of Down syndrome, perhaps—and they had a granny who ran the show. (She was not really the granny; she’d perhaps been placed there by a social agency that had some program for getting old people into broken homes.)

This recollection, along with that of the street cleaners’ “hydrotherapy,” comes from the wonderful (if fragmentary and repetitive) written interview that Philip Roth conducted on and off with Bellow in

First edition of Bellow’s The Adventures of Augie March, 1953.
It is perhaps this emphasis on literary art as the jolt of observant caring that brings memories and facts to life that explains a puzzling feature of Bellow's work. To him on West Augusta Boulevard, which is an Augustinian coincidence, though not impossible, even if it's an unlikely name for a Jew and the novel he ended up writing about him was cast as a kind of spiritual autobiography. He also said that he never knew what became of his pal, which is surprising, given that the book was a best-seller and the first chapters were a close, heartbreaking description of life in the March/August home. Wouldn't Charlie/Augie, or someone who knew him, have called? Everyone else Bellow ever wrote about seems to have. Atlas took this all at face value in his biography, but there is no indication that he checked it carefully, and I wonder if the Marches were a “purzer,” or at any rate more complicated, fictional invention than Bellow let on. Zachary Leader doesn't say this, but on the other hand he doesn't quite repeat Atlas' claim that the actual Augusts had the same familial set-up as the fictional Marches. Whatever the case here, one has the sense that, as a biographer, Leader has complete control of his material and does not feel the need to let the reader in on every calculation, contested reading, and judgment made in the back room.

Bellow gave Augie March himself—many of his own adventures and experiences, from teenage jobs and pranks to his visit to Leon Trotsky in Mexico, only to find the great man dying in a hospital from the wounds of his axe-wielding Stalinist assassin. And Augie's streetwise older brother Simon so closely resembles Bellow's older brother Maurice, down to the salacious details of a scandalous affair and love child, that it caused a rift between them. Years later, Maurice's daughter Lynn said of her uncle: “What kind of creative? He just wrote it down.” In the case of the humble, mostly Jewish cast of characters in The Adventures of Augie March, one can see him asserting their significance as subjects from the very beginning, conjuring up the world of his childhood as he sits at a writing desk in Paris. Grandma Lausch, Augie's dictatorial matriarch who “wasn’t really the gran-

An advertisement for Hart Schaffner & Marx Clothes by Jay Hyde Barnum, 1926.

He had a brain and many enterprises, real directing power, philosophical capacity, and if I were methodical enough to take thought before an important and practical decision and also (N.B.) if I were really his disciple and not what I am, I'd ask “What would Caesar suffer in this case? What would Machiavelli advise or Ulysses do? What would Einhorn think?” I'm not kidding when I enter Einhorn on this eminent list. It was him that I knew and what I understand of them in him. Unless you want to say that we're at the dwarf end of all times and beings of a different time better and stronger than ours.

There was no fairy tale time different and better and stronger than ours, or, even if there was, one is still obligated to live and reflect upon this age and one's own people. Of course, Mr. and Mrs. Einhorn were also based on figures in Bellow’s life, in this case the parents of his close friend, later enemy (he was his divorce attorney) Sam Freifeld, though it was another friend Dave Peltz, not Bellow or Charlie August, who really worked for them. As Leader quotes Bellow on the relation between fact and fiction: “The fact is a wire through which one sends a current. The voltage of that current is determined by the writer's own belief as to what matters, by his own caring or not-caring, by passionate choice.” It is perhaps this emphasis on literary art as the jolt of observant caring that brings memories and facts to life—as “when a fish strikes the line,” and “you feel the live force in your hand”—that explains a puzzling feature of Bellow’s work. He was, without a doubt, the most celebrated American novelist of his generation, winning every prize and most of them two or three times. But as compositions very few of the novels really hold together. Narrators overshare, narratives trail off, seemingly stray characters take over, and the individual elements of a novel can feel curiously unbalanced for a writer of such manifest artistry. The individual parts—breathtaking descriptions, brilliant dialogue, utterly original turns of phrase—often seem greater than the whole.

Philip Roth, who is Bellow's greatest champion, puzzled over this and once suggested that maybe he was in just too much of a hurry, which, in a way, is what Bellow himself wrote to Malamud in defense of Augie March: “A novel, like a letter, should be loose, cover much ground, run swiftly, take risk of mortality and decay.” He wasn’t aiming for a jeweler's perfection but rather to capture and requicken messy, creaturely, contingent moments of human life, when a “mysterious being beneath the water, driven by hunger, has taken the hook and rushes away, writhing.” And he loved a good joke.

Bellow's sense of the relation between life and literature and the purpose of the latter also helps to explain a curious feature of the non-fiction collected in There Is Simply Too Much to Think About. He was one of our great men of letters, the most discursive of fiction writers, a professor at the University of Chicago's August Committee on Social Thought who seemingly gave lectures and wrote essays at the drop of an (elegant, rakish) hat, but he disdained literary critics and even the act of literary criticism. His own few reviews are more in the way of astringent encouragement of his peers. Reviewing Philip Roth's now-famous first book of short stories, Goodbye, Columbus, he wrote “Unlike those of us who came howling into the world, blind and bare, Mr. Roth appears with hair, nails and teeth, speaking coherently.”

Critics, in short, ought to provide useful encouragement and then get the hell out of the way. This—as much as their differing temperaments and approaches—helps to explain the lifelong tension between Bellow and Lionel Trilling, the leading critic of his time, certainly among the Jewish intellectuals who came of intellectual age with Bellow in the 1930s. Invited to write a review of a new book of essays about Shakespeare's sonnets for Trilling's book club magazine The Griffin, Bellow writes “Perhaps the pleasure this collection gives me is in part...
the pleasure of seeing modern critics working hard in the 17th century. It is like having mischievous children at last out of the house." Around this time, the mid-1950s, Leader recounts a story of Bellow greeting Trilling at a party: "Still peddling the same old horseshit, Lionel?"

Calling his Bellow-character “Abravanel” was a good joke, though one doubts that either Philip Roth or Bellow would have recognized Don Isaac Abravanel if he had stepped out of Ferdinand and Isabella’s court and swatted them with a copy of his commentary to the Guide of the Perplexed. In the autobiographical lecture, which opens There Is Simply Too Much to Think About, Bellow wrote that he had tried “to fit his soul into the Jewish-writer category but it does not feel comfortably accommodated there.” And then comes the famous crack:

I wonder now and then whether Philip Roth and Bernard Malamud and I have not become the Hart Schaffner and Marx of our trade. We have made it in the field of culture as Bernard Baruch made it on a park bench, as Polly Adler made it in prostitution, as Two-Gun Cohen, the personal bodyguard of SanYut-Sen, made it in China. My joke is not broad enough to cover the contempt I feel for the opportunists, wise guys and career types who impose such labels and trade upon them.

Roth and Malamud also resisted the category, but both of them made the meaning of Jewish identity a central problem in their fiction in ways that Bellow did not. Although Bellow was, intermittently, a spiritual seeker, his sense of Judaism, or rather Jewishness, was visceral, not intellectual. When William Faulkner advocated, as chairman of a distinguished committee of writers empanelled by President Eisenhower, freeing the fascist poet Ezra Pound, who had been tried for treason but found insane, Bellow wrote to him:

Pound advocated in his poems and in his broadcasts enmity to the Jews and preached hatred and murder. Do you mean to ask me to join you in honoring a man who called for the destruction of my kinsmen? I can take no part in such a thing even if it makes for effective propaganda abroad, which I doubt . . . Free him because he is a poet? Why better poets than him were exterminated perhaps. Shall we say nothing in their behalf?

Bellow’s unapologetic moral clarity here (and not only here) derived, in part, from the same intuition as the famous opening of The Adventures of Augie March: that one can be Jewish and entirely American. His job was to make something of that. As he wrote in an introduction to an anthology of Jewish stories: “We do not make up history and culture. We simply appear, not by our own choice. We make what we can of our condition with the means available. We must accept the mixture as we find it—the impurity of it, the tragedy of it, the hope of it.” This was written in 1964, the last year Leader’s biography covers, but the sense of life and literature it expressed will carry his subject forward into the next volume. Bellow remained ineluctably Jewish and perpetually attuned to living in chaos.

This is the key to understanding his life, his live-wire approach to artistic creation, even his jokes. A friend of mine was invited out to dinner with Bellow sometime in the 1990s. At the restaurant, his wife urged him to order healthily to which Bellow replied “enough of this Tohu va-vohu!”—Tohu va-vohu being, of course, the book of Genesis’ description for the chaos out of which God created the universe.

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The Fifth Question

BY CHAIM SAIMAN

Whatever kind of Passover Seder one attends, there is a fifth question, usually only whispered, that arises sometime after those famous four questions which begin the long Maggid (literally, telling) section of the haggadah are recited: “When do we eat?” Of course, the haggadah itself says that “whoever elaborates in the retelling of the story of the exodus is surely praised” and illustrates the point with the famous story of the five sages of the 2nd century, who stayed up all night doing just that:

It happened that Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Joshua, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah, Rabbi Akiva, and Rabbi Tarfon were reclining at a Seder in Bnai Brak. They were retelling the story of the exodus from Egypt the entire night, until their students came and told them: “Our Masters! The time has come for reciting the morning Shema!”

Writing one thousand years later, Moses Maimonides took this story as precedent in the Mishneh Torah, his code of Jewish law. In his introduction to the laws of the Seder, he writes: “Even great scholars are obligated to retell the story of the exodus from Egypt. And anyone who elaborates in recalling the events that occurred is surely praised.” Three paragraphs later, he spells out what this means:

One begins by recalling that we were slaves in Egypt and recounting all the hardships Pharaoh wrought. But he should conclude with the miracles and wonders that were done for us, and with our freedom. That is, he should expound on the verse “my father was a wandering Aramean” until he concludes that paragraph. And anyone who adds and elaborates is surely praised.

This is the halakhic source for delaying the matza ball soup and brisket. What is surprising, given the text of the haggadah and Maimonides’ position, not to speak of common practice, is that the most authoritative code of Jewish law, the 16th-century Shulchan Arukh, disagrees:

One’s table should be set while it is still daytime, in order to eat immediately as it gets dark. And even if he is engaged in Torah study, he should conclude his studies and hurry [home] as it is a mitzvah to eat right away so that the children not sleep.

Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan (more popularly known as the Hafetz Hayim) was so shocked by this statement that, in his Mishnah Berurah Berurah, he insisted on glossing it as urging us to start the Maggid section right away; the talking not the eating. That makes sense in terms of 19th-century Ashkenazi practice, but it is not the plain meaning of the Shulchan Arukh.

In fact, its author, Rabbi Joseph Caro, is drawing upon the great halakhic code that appeared between Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah and his own “Set Table,” the 14th-century Arba’ah Turim (or Tur) of Rabbi Jacob Ben Asher. Both Rabbi Caro and his predecessor were thinking about the children, but there was also a deeper disagreement with Maimonides at play. Understanding that disagreement will help us understand what the Seder, and to some extent rabbinic thought, is all about.

Neither the Shulchan Arukh nor the Tur even cites the haggadah’s statement that “whoever elaborates in the retelling of the story of the exodus is surely praised.” This is particularly unusual, because the Shulchan Arukh tends to follow Maimonides’ lead—often verbatim—unless a line of competing authorities rule to the contrary. In this case, however, no such authorities are to be found, and yet the precedent is legislated cups, in order to stay awake.

The obligation to stay awake all night learning Torah, then, applies after the Seder has been completed. In fact, the section where this ruling is recorded is largely devoted to the rule that one should not drink any more wine after the fourth of the Seder’s legislated cups, in order to stay awake.

Once again, the apparent source for the practice is found in the Tosefta, which presents an alternate, or perhaps parallel, story about mishnaic rabbis who stayed up the night of the Seder:

One does not eat any desserts after the Pesach sacrifice [has been eaten], such as dates. A person is obligated to engage in the laws of the Pesach sacrifice all night. . . . It once happened that Rabban Gamliel and the elders were reclining at a Seder in the home of Beithus ben Zunin in Lod, and they were engaged in the laws of Pesach that entire night, until the rooster crowed. At that time, the tables were removed from before them, and they arose to attend the synagogue.

The first thing to note is that in the Tosefta’s version, the all-night study session took place after the Pesach sacrifice had been eaten (when we would now eat the afikoman), and what we would call the Seder is already over. Second, whereas in the haggadah’s story the rabbis stayed up all night to retell the story and miracles of the exodus, in the Tosefta, they spend all night learning the technical laws of the Pesach sacrifice. Finally, whereas the haggadah suggests that the students had to remind the rabbis to wrap up the Seder because they had lost track of time (the 19th-century Hasidic master the Sefat Emet even...
suggested that they had forgotten to eat the matza!), in the Tosefta the rabbis were not surprised to find that it was morning. They concluded their discussions and prepared for morning prayers in orderly fashion.

Maimonides never mentions the Tosefta’s story, nor any requirement to stay up all night studying the laws of Pesach. To the contrary, he ends his laws of the Seder with a discussion of what happens when someone falls asleep at the Seder (which will occasionally happen during all that praiseworthy discussion and elaboration). Further, he offers a very different reason for not drinking after the fourth cup: so that the last taste of the matza (the afikoman) remains the final memory of the Seder. “Why not? It’s no wonder, then, that in the haggadah itself it is Rabban Gamliel who reminds us that “whoever does not mention the Pesach sacrifice, the matza, and the maror has not fulfilled his obligation.” His statement immediately follows the elaborate expositions of the biblical verses, and we can almost hear Rabban Gamliel reminding us to keep the focus on the accessible, tactile experiences of the Seder: the ritual foods and their symbolism. (Incidentally this approach is probably closer to what happened during Temple times, when the food came first and the discussion followed.)

The difference between these two views of the Seder also relates to what is being taught. According to the haggadah and Maimonides, the centerpiece of the Seder is the retelling of the Pesach story, a form of narrative or aggada (a word that shares its root with both aggadah and maggid). By contrast, the Tosefta, whose views are incorporated in the ruling of the Shulchan Arukh, emphasizes studying the laws of the Pesach sacrifice.

A similar distinction runs through another of the Seder’s well-known passages, the discussion of the four sons. In our version of the haggadah, the wise son is taught the laws of the Pesach sacrifice, whereas the simple son is told the basic Pesach story. The Jerusalem Talmud, however, reverses the priorities: The wise son is taught the story of the exodus, whereas the simple son is taught the laws of the Seder. The first view sees in halakha not just a series of rules, but a complex religious world view developed from fundamental legal principles. Law is not only to be observed, but is to be studied, analyzed, and its meaning absorbed. By contrast, the story told to the simple son is just that—a story, for those who can’t handle more. Arguably, the Jerusalem Talmud teaches the exact opposite.

In assigning the story of the exodus to the wise son, story comes to mean the theology of Jewish chosenness, the service of God, and the corresponding complexities of freedom, slavery, choice, and destiny. The laws taught to the simple son are, on this account, just ritual directions: eat this, drink that, and so on.

The same tension exists between the two competing stories of how the great rabbis of the Mishnah spent the Seder night. Did these “wise sons” study the halakha of the Pesach sacrifice, or retell the aggada of the exodus? The disagreement is really a debate about how to preserve and convey the essence of the Jewish experience. Through law or narrative, legal reasoning or theology? This tension is present in the earliest rabbinic texts, carried forward in the positions of the later great halakhic authorities, and is still present at our own Seder tables.

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In short, two distinct conceptions of the Seder emerge from the classical rabbinic sources and are codified, respectively, by Maimonides and the Shulchan Arukh. The view of the Mishnah, Maimonides, and the haggadah itself is that what the Seder is about is the retelling and discussion of the story of the exodus from Egypt to the point where one sees oneself as having been personally redeemed. Here, the entire family uses story, study, and song to reexperience the entire family uses story, study, and song to reexperience the entire family uses story, study, and song to reexperience the entire family uses story, study, and song to reexperience the entire family uses story, study, and song to reexperience the entire family uses story, study, and song to reexperience the entire family uses story, study, and song to reexperience the entire family uses story, study, and song to reexperience the entire family uses story, study, and song to reexperience the entire family uses story, study, and song to reexperience the entire family uses story, study, and song to reexperience the entire family uses story, study, and song to reexperience the entire family uses story, study, and song to reexperience
Going Under with *Klinghoffer*

BY MITCHELL COHEN

When it came to New York's Metropolitan Opera this past fall, *The Death of Klinghoffer* faced angry—and, it must be admitted, some pretty shrill—demonstrators. Of course, this was to be expected. Its U.S. premiere at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) a quarter-century ago also led to controversy. The opera, which was created by director Peter Sellars, composer John Adams, and librettist Alice Goodman, famously depicts the October 1985 hijacking of the cruise ship *Achille Lauro* by terrorists from the Palestine Liberation Front (PLF), during which the title character, a 69-year-old crippled American Jewish tourist, was shot and thrown with his wheelchair into the Mediterranean.

The Met's program listed 25 productions of *Klinghoffer* since 1991, in Europe, the United States, and even New Zealand. These included concert performances and a heavy-handed film adaptation aired on British TV. (The Met's was the fourth version I have seen.) Not a bad record for a relatively new opera whose creators and backers complain that it has been repressed. Certainly there have been pressures, but perhaps the creators also protest a little too much. Too many critics have seemed concerned with those demonstrating in the streets (or in the theater) against this opera. Well, it makes snazzy copy.

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The opera certainly doesn't represent Adams' music at its best. His "post-minimalist" choruses in it are often beautiful and the orchestrations are frequently appealing. The interplay between strings and woodwinds—Adams grew up playing clarinet—can be especially attractive. Still, what passes for recitative (operatic song-speech) and aria don't differ significantly enough or in interesting ways from each other and are frequently overwrought or droning. Goodman has suggested that the opera's foibles ruined her literary career because she broke "taboos." That, of course, is an appealing way to think of oneself while sidestepping reasons for criticism.

Tom Morris, the director of the Met's *Klinghoffer*, considers it "powerfully relevant," and his version seemed to want to have things all ways. At the beginning a screen announced that this was a "fictionalized" account and not "an exact reconstruction." Well, even if the *Achille Lauro* had an orchestra aboard, all that would have been true, since it is an opera. Yet as the opening choruses, Palestinian and Jewish, sing one after another—they exchange costumes so that the first becomes the second—dates (1948, 1956, and so on through 2014) roll by on a screen as if to say: This is really history. A Met program note by Thomas May, editor of an anthology on Adams, says that the opera has been accused of "implicit" anti-Semitism and support of terrorism because of its "in-depth characterization of the Palestinians." But this misses the problem entirely.

**The opera begins by identifying the Israelis with the Angel of Death in the Passover story.**

An opera can be pro-Palestinian and depict Palestinian grievances without being anti-Semitic just as an opera can be pro-Zionist without being prejudiced against Palestinians. It is, however, another matter when an opera weaves old anti-Semitic stereotypes into its very texture. *The Death of Klinghoffer* does just that. While it speaks to Palestinian suffering, it is uncomprehending of Jewish agony and its sources.

Goodman reports that *Klinghoffer* originated in a joke "in rather bad taste" by Sellars as the three collaborators were finishing *Nixon in China*, their remarkable and highly original first opera. Sellars had turned his sights on the recent *Achille Lauro* hijacking and jibed that an opera should be written called *Klinghoffers Tod*, German for "Klinghoffer's death." It's a Wagnerian in-joke, playing on *Siegfrieds Tod*, the title of the first version of Richard Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* (Twilight of the Gods).

There is no better starting point to any discussion of anti-Semitism in opera than with Wagner. Both Adams and Sellars have been particularly engaged by his work, and there is nothing intrinsically suspect about that (I have been too). In *Siegfrieds Tod* the title character is a sacrificial victim, though as a youthful force of nature, he is radically different from the elderly Klinghoffer. Siegfried is slain by Hagen, son of the evil dwarf Alberich, who stole the Rhine's gold and renounced love in order to have wealth and power. *Siegfrieds Tod* has a happy ending. Sort of. Siegfried and the celebrated Brünnhilde are immolated and ascend to Valhalla. Hagen, by contrast, is drowned in the Rhine by the "Water Women" (later called the Rhine Daughters). And Alberich "sinks" with a "lamenting gesture." It is often said that Alberich (and other characters) invokes anti-Semitism with his lustful pursuit of the maidens and his desire for riches and power over love; Wagner, so it is claimed, is telling us that Alberich and his progeny must go under.

Wagner's venomous essay "Judaism in Music," published in 1850, accused Jews of many familiar sins. They controlled the artistic world, he claimed, turning culture into commerce, and dominated the press too. And Jews inevitably mangled the connections between words and music. This is especially thanks to the use of melismas—florid settings of multiple notes to a syllable—and the rhythms of synagogue music, that "nonsensical gurgling, yodeling and cackling." Money, manipulation, and melismas lurk in the "narrative, thwarting attempts by Jewish composers or poets to create anything "truly" human. Lifting this "curse," Wagner wrote, required the "redemption of Ahasuerus—decline and fall." That last phrase resonates in German because Wagner used a single word, a favorite, *Untergang*, literally "going under.

Critics who contend that Wagner's Jewish fixation is often embedded in his "music dramas" point often to 19th-century allusions that might not be as evident now. The allusions are certainly there, but conclusions need be cautious. There were many 19th-century treatments of the mythological Ahasuerus, the oddly named, accused wandering Jew, and Wagner admitted he had him in mind when he composed *The Flying Dutchman*. *The Flying Dutchman* doesn't really have anything to do with Jews, but Wagner's role mature comedy, *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*, is another
story, if a little indirectly. Some years ago a storm broke out when Barry Millington, a British Wagner expert, argued that not only was its libretto anti-Semitic, so was some of its music. In it, Beckmesser, town clerk and unbending keeper of singing rules for the Mastersingers’ guild, is an old creep who salivates for the beautiful Eva. She, however, loves the new knight in town, and her hand is the prize in an annual song contest. Beckmesser woes her by singing beneath her window and makes an ass of himself. Many critics, including Theodor Adorno, marked him out as an anti-Semitic figure; he is lascivious, limps (a characteristic often ascribed to Jews by detractors), and is the defender of law (read: Old Testament) against love (read: New Testament). Millington’s wrinkle was to show that Beckmesser’s song rouses mirth by exaggerated melismas, exactly what Wagner chastised as “Judaism” in music.

Critical howls ensued: Wagner was too much the artist to do such things, and, anyway, a Jew would never have been Nuremberg’s clerk. No he wouldn’t have been, responded Millington, but the issue is what Wagner evoked. He pointed to a letter in which Wagner wrote of another work that “I have learned to feel that to make one’s intentions too obvious risks impairing a proper understanding . . . in drama—as in any work of art—it is a question of making an impression not by parading one’s opinions but by setting forth what is instinctive.”

Goodman has not been so subtle, neither in Klinghoffer nor in her earlier, much better, libretto for Nixon in China. In it, Henry Kissinger has what might be called the Beckmesser function. He is the opera’s boor, allowing everyone else, including Nixon, to appear heroic. Goodman declared that she wanted an opera of “character” whose protagonist is eloquent. And so it is for Dick and Pat, Mao and Madame Mao, and Zhou Enlai. Kissinger, however, is a lump on legs, tongue hanging out (in Sellers’ Houston production), lusting for girls. He is “the only character I ended up disliking, and it is fitting that he is a buffo bass,” says Goodman.

In a brilliant scene Pat and Dick go to see the famous agitprop opera-ballet The Red Detachment of Women. On stage Wu, a peasant heroine, is victimized (and pawed) by Lao Szu, a creepy whip-bearing henchman of a tyrannical landlord. “Doesn’t he look like you know who?” asks Pat. Lao Szu is, in fact, sung by and played to look like Kissinger. If Beckmesser makes himself a chump by exaggerated melismas, Lao Szu/Kissinger does so with musical emotion as opposed to those of reason. We can be sure that Leon Klinghoffer’s assassin didn’t sing to him either.

Some advocates try to deflect censure of Klinghoffer by suggesting that all negative criticism of it comes from political “hardliners” (for the record, I am a left-of-center dove) or gesture irrelevantly at supposedly larger contexts. Take, for instance, musicologist Michael Steinberg’s liner notes for the opera’s first recording, in which he sneered that the opera was completed as the United States dropped “smart bombs” on Baghdad and premiered at the Gulf War’s end. These facts, it seems, should make us wonder who the real terrorists are. But what did the murder of an old man on a cruise ship in the Mediterranean in 1985 have to do with a war half a decade later, far on the other side of the region, provoked by Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait?

Actually, it is possible to make a kind of connection. The PLF’s leader, Abu al-Abbas, who master-minded the Achille Lauro hijacking and spent 10 months planning it, was a paid proxy of Saddam Hussein within Palestinian politics. He and Yasser Arafat applauded Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait. Arafat’s role in the Achille Lauro affair is uncertain (the PLF was a faction within the PLO). When the Met production projected “historical” pointers onto a screen, it told viewers that he denounced the hijacking, but neglected to mention that he pioneered the very tactic, along with making attacks on civilians and evasive pronouncements afterwards to elude responsibility. Targeting innocents was also regular PLF practice. The Achille Lauro’s hijackers demanded freedom for some 50 men in Israeli prisons, including “the great man from Nahariya”—the PLF’s Samir al-Qantari, who had murdered a child (and others) in the name of liberation in northern Israel in 1979.

Taking political sides doesn’t necessarily make an opera or an argument anti-Semitic. Yet something is amiss, something should make us queasy, when proponents speak of “truths” without explanation or don’t perceive that sides are being taken. When the opera was still a work in progress Sellars insisted that “the boys,” that is the hijackers, not be called “terrorists.” Well, boys will be boys and great men, like al-Qantari, will be great men. Adams says that “we weren’t making an overly conscious attempt to be neutral,” and after studying the background “it was impossible not to have strong feelings.” Still, he wonders why Klinghoffer was killed. “Whether this was a kind of Nietzschean decision on the terrorist’s part I don’t know . . . It seems like a kind of hectic, rash decision.” Does it seem so? And the previous seven PLF operations, each of which entailed hostage-taking—were they preceded by responsive reading of Nietzsche’s Beyond Good and Evil? Adams thinks that “neither side” in the Achille Lauro affair “is beyond reproach. Nor can either side be condemned.” Neither side? For what exactly, would Adams reproach Leon Klinghoffer?

Klinghoffer’s trio of creators has spoken openly of the kind of research they did while preparing it. Adams tells us he read about “the history of the Israeli-Arab conflict, the roots of Zionism, the Balfour Declaration, and the long history of British, French and American meddling” in the region. (Oddly, he seems to have missed German and Italian meddling in the 1936 Palestinian Arab revolt and the vigorous activities on behalf of the Third Reich by Palestinian nationalist leader Hajj Ammin al-Husseini.) He reread the Old Testament and the Koran ("difficult going"). He found Noam Chomsky’s writings “one-sided” but those of Edward Said “more reasonable.” And Adams learned that “the Israeli-Palestinian issue was the most carefully controlled and fastidiously managed debate in American political life” due to “lobbies” which spoke moderately in public but whose “considerable clout in Washington often smothered” efforts to present the Palestinian side in public.

Sellars believed the opera to be “beyond all political differences” because it was “human,” as if political differences are not human. It is, he thinks, comparable to Bach’s Passions and Greek tragedies. Goodman read “the Koran, the Book of Lamentations, the Psalms, Brecht” and Spanish Renaissance poetry. Absent from any of their studies were explorations of the

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The English National Opera’s production of The Death of Klinghoffer at the London Coliseum, February 2012. (© Robbie Jack/Corbis.)

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history of anti-Jewish prejudices (Christian, Muslim, secular) and how they have been presented in theology, in politics, or, say, on stage. To what extent do old tropes continually reappear, conscious or not, in new costume—tropes about obstructive, self-occupied Jews; rich, materialistic Jews; wily and screechy ones with hidden powers?

Before denying that anti-Semitic themes are embedded in *Klinghoffer* you must reflect on them in the first place. Adams does not seem to have done so and neither, apparently, has Anthony Tommasini, music critic of *The New York Times*, who long ago embraced Adams’ claim that *Klinghoffer* offers “the sad solace of truth.” His article entitled “Toward a Truth That Defies Precision,” published after last fall’s controversies, hails the opera as “courageous” and dismissed “parsing ‘Klinghoffer’ for evidence of a pro-Palestinian slant” because “artistic issues” would thereby be “sidelined.” Can an artist “tweak or fictionalize a story for artistic ends?” he asks. Does not art, especially music, have particularly important powers “to explore the emotional interiors of fictional and nonfictional characters, especially bad ones . . .”? He compares Lady Macbeth to the terrorists in *Klinghoffer.* “Just by giving voice to those being portrayed, music, in its subliminal way, can seem to be revealing inner lives and feelings” together with “seething grievances.” An artist, after all, may provide “a fresh way” of perceiving a “historical event” and thereby “lead to a deeper understanding of what was going on.” Journalists may be averse to fidgeting with facts but “on balance, artists can claim the right to bend a story to their aims.”

But of course artists tweak stories—that’s what they do. And of course art and especially music have unusual capacities to explore inner lives and grievances. The difficult question is: What are the implications when talented artists tweak history for political reasons, harnessing creativity for untruthfulness or perhaps, to be gentler, smug ignorance? After all, didn’t Leni Riefenstahl’s camera give fresh perspective on a political event? *Klinghoffer* and *Triumph of the Will* are not of a piece. Still, doesn’t comparing them make more sense than speaking in one breath of Macbeth and *Klinghoffer*? What do we know of one Lady Macbeth? Is Shakespeare’s tweaking of Holinshed’s *Chronicles* the same as Sellers’ tweaking of the history of PLF? Do historical proximity and political purpose count for anything at all in our judgments of artistic representation? If they don’t, then everything is simple: The better the imagination the better the propaganda. Or you can call it a matter of myth or spiritual depth, providing other layers of protection from scrutiny.

In a fall 2001 interview Adams avowed that *Klinghoffer*’s “sacrificial” murder was akin to the crucifixion in Bach’s Passions. “Both Jesus and Leon Klinghoffer were killed because they represented something that was suspect and hated.” But Jesus goes knowingly to his fate as part of God’s plan for humanity’s redemption while Klinghoffer was an elderly cripple on a last vacation with his terminally ill wife. For whose sake is he sacrificed? Jews? Palestinians? The souls of the opera’s audience? According to Bach’s *Saint Matthew Passion*, Jewish hatred led to Jesus’ death and culpability followed. Has Adams ever thought this through? Before, or after, all the controversy?

Accused of creating “CNN operas,” Sellers insists his aim is the opposite. Among “the most important reasons” for his kind of opera, he explains, is to alter American understanding of the world since media frenzies distort “actual history.” In our “Age of Information,” he elaborates, “we are strangely underinformed” and an opera can provide “a structure which is context rich,” filling in the “historical blank.”

Few can doubt that our news media are fast-moving and shallow. Is Sellers the credible alternative, the exponent of “actual history”? *Oedipus Rex*, he says, is not about “an exploding eyeball” but “why someone would dig out their own eyes.” Whether it is Oedipus or suicide bombers or 9/11 hijackers, he explains that “the question that is not allowed to be asked to this day is ‘Why would people do this?’ That’s the question, of course, that drama asks. Exactly to find what was not in the news, what was missing from the news: that’s why we worked in this genre.” The headline is not essential but rather providing “a longtime picture” is the essential goal.

A long time indeed. It seems to me that Sellers’ “question” has been asked for as long as any one has thought about history or theater. Answers, of course, may differ. Adams, Sellers, and their critical defenders have a bizarre sense of history. As we have seen, to fill in the “historical blank” they pair Lady Macbeth and the Palestine Liberation Front, Jesus and Klinghoffer, Oedipus and Osama. What Sellers calls the “longtime picture” depends, of course, on how, and if, you understand events. In the 20th century, according to Sellers, the United States was “the oppressor against every popular democracy movement” (presumably Washington did not oppose Nazi or Stalinist oppression). But Americans have never been “allowed” to ask, “What are these people hoping to achieve?” he says. Let’s bracket all of the journals, editorial pages, and books Sellers has apparently never read and examine how he sees the relation between art and democracy.
Democracy is the creation of and ability to sustain an environment where even difficult things can be talked about without inflicting further damage, in an atmosphere where all sides can be heard, as Alice Goodman likes to say, “as eloquently as possible,” and where the structure itself is large enough to contain all the voices. The heart of the operatic form is simultaneity, where all things are held in contingency. You have to recognize everything as part of a larger interlocking structure. That has incredible social and political implications. This eloquent scramble seems to confuse democracy (which only works when people listen to each other) with a postmodern version of Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk (a total work of art in which word, music, and dance meld). But in the end, “context” for Sellars—it is one of his favorite words—simply means tweaking stage events on behalf of his own views.

In fact, Sellars wanted Klinghoffer to be “much more pro-Palestinian than it is,” according to Goodman. Klinghoffer “deals with Palestinians,” says Sellars, but it “is about Americans in the middle of the situation, through the Klinghoffer family.” Here we must turn to a few lines in the libretto. Early on Molqi, the PLF team leader, sings, . . . we are soldiers fighting a war. We are not criminals . . . But men of ideals. Later, “Rambo,” a nickname for the most mean-spirited of the Palestinians, responds with contempt to Leon Klinghoffer’s one speech against his tormenters with this: You are always complaining Of your suffering But wherever poor men Are gathered they can Find Jews getting fat . . . America is one big Jew.

In his liner notes, Michael Steinberg admits this taunt is “nasty” but finds it “eloquent and horribly truthful,” indeed “a speech of a lifetime” because—and here he follows Adams—it tells off its bourgeois audience. What horrible truth? It would seem to consist in the identification of Jews with America and then both with global exploitation. More circumspect defenders of the opera argue that the pronouncements of Molqi and Rambo express what some Palestinians think, not the creators of Klinghoffer. “Yet doesn’t Rambo’s war against the ‘one big Jew’ justify Molqi’s self-image as a man ‘of ideals.’ And, with fervor tempered, how distant is this really from Sellers’ world view?

It is true, as Times critic Tommasini stresses, that the arts reveal human sensibilities in special ways. But one way is prejudice, as in the case of Wagner’s Beckmesser. As Klinghoffer opens a “Chorus of Exiled Jews” introduces a more artificial world: “When I paid off the taxi, I had no money left.” If Palestinians invoke loss of their idyllic natural place, wandering Jews mourn lost cash. The Jewish chorus becomes a love song to “the daughter of Zion” and, as music critic Edward Rothstein neatly summarized it, Israel represents in it “a sort of tourist’s recollection of devotional sentiment about the Promised Land, mentioning sights like military barracks, the Western Wall, movie houses picketed by Hasidim . . . and a goat in an orchard.” Jewish history is context-less, save for the memory of the Holocaust. There was no Jewish problem before then. If these choruses display even-handedness, it is with one hand cuffed behind the back.

Does this construction rest on Goodman’s scorn for her own education as a comfortable Reform Jew in Minnesota? “We were shown movies of the Holocaust in Sunday school,” she recalls, “. . . to create a sense of us and them. And it seemed to me that this was the wrong idea altogether.” She “converted to Christianity between writing the choruses and arias of Klinghoffer.” Ordained in the Anglican Church, she began to minister in London to a mostly Palestinian congregation. Goodman has also noted with evident amusement that her conversion posed a possible public relations embarrassment because “John and Peter and I had always said cheerfully that if anyone objected to the libretto they could push me forward because I’m Jewish.”

Those who went to the opera’s 1991 premiere in Brussels would have seen an oddly named Jewish family from New Jersey. “The Rumors” appeared between the two opening choruses, and Adams says they mirror the Klinghoffers. They live comfortably in a suburban world of materialistic well-being: ivy carpet, a fake Jackson Pollack, magazines like Architectural Digest and The New Yorker on a coffee table. Harry catches Reagan on TV (“What a mensch!”) while his wife Alma calls the president an “asshole.” As their visiting 30-year-old son Jonathan eats cold spaghetti, Mr. and Mrs. Rumor chatter about experiences on a luxury cruise. Well, rumors travel: they commended it to Leon and Marilyn.

And money is always on the family mind. The dollar is up, says Harry; “good news for the Klinghoffers,” says his son. They will have a great time, remarks Jonathan sarcastically: “Friday, Mannhatts by the pool/Saturday Eretz Yisroel.”

The affluent, world-wise Rumors have many souvenirs in their home. Harry describes Almán’s encounters with natives selling their wares:

. . . Tourist traps And sweatshops on five continents
Turn the stuff out. Your mother haunts
The markets when we go ashore, Looking . . . for some
Hideous relic to bring home.
Out rush the natives at first sight
Of her enormous summer hat
Rubbing their hands . . .

You were in the toilet all the time, she ripostes. (Perhaps he was waiting in line behind Kissinger.)

Alan Opie and Michaela Martens as Leon and Marilyn Klinghoffer, and Ryan Speedo Green as Rambo, a hijacker, in the Metropolitan Opera’s premiere of The Death of Klinghoffer, Lincoln Center, New York City, 2014. (Courtesy of Ken Howard/Metropolitan Opera.)

Yes, the Rumors are materialistic, although in different ways. After more banter—Jonathan should meet a nice girl!—the scene ends with Mrs. Rumor expressing disdain for Yasser Arafat and bother at press reports about world misery. “It’s never-ending. God knows why! I still get angry, but I do,” she says with the oblivious compassion of a well-heelèd liberal consumer.

Like Beckmesser, the Rumors represent a type, in this case someone you would find on the Achille Lauro. Instead of Beckmesser’s melismas, there is sitcom-like music; mockery after the Palestinian lament. Adams insisted that the scene was not anti-Semitic but misconstrued so badly by some viewers

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Salome's sly humor" in what was supposed to be a "come-
dic interjection in the middle of an intensely tragic
narrative." He doesn't ask if the motifs of the Rumor
scene still thread the opera even with it gone. For
Goodman, who like Adams assimilates the Rumors
and Klinghoffers, more was at stake:

I think what upset a lot of people was that
the libretto violates certain taboos . . . People didn't like the way that I presented
Klinghoffer as an ordinary, touchy, vulgar bourgeois—
there's this Jewish fantasy that our heroes
and our victims are always either highly
cultured or pious. Well, some of them can be
very vulgar—we aren't all Nathan the Wise.
And we have behaved very badly towards the
Palestinians, they have justifiable grievances,
and we and they are very, very much alike—
temperamentally, culturally, in family
dynamics and in ultimate origin.

Given Goodman's depictions of Jews and the
way that she imagines the dramatic alternatives—
either Jews are impossibly perfect like Lessing's Na-
than the Wise or they are vulgaritans like her Kling-
hoffer—her use of the first person plural is jarring.
(She is Jewish, she has elaborated, by "nearly every
definition" except that she has become a Christian.)

Now imagine some changes in the scenario.
Suppose a Jewish chorus opens the opera, adding
to Goodman's clumsy Jewish mourning some lines
about the pogroms of 1881 and the Mufti in Berlin.
Then Palestinian sitcom music lightens the mood.
Keffiyehs on their heads, men of the al-Hearsay
family sit outside their stone hut, fiddle with beads,
and smoke hookahs. Goats wander about as they
banter in guttural sing-song; but melisma animates
their voices when, agitated, they refer to infidels, ar-
banter in guttural sing-song; but melisma animates
their voices when, agitated, they refer to infidels, ar-
half as the now former Jewish vacationer sinks

The Death of Klinghoffer is, in fact, completely uncomprehending of collective
Jewish history and tragedy. It may aspire to be an
artwork of complex moral and historical imagina-
tion, but it depends on rumor.
Israel?” in Winter 2015). I was naturally disappointed, as I imagine any author would be, that, apart from saying I had done something deftly, he found little to commend and a handful of things, albeit none fundamental, to criticize. Whether the book is worthy of more commendation than he voiced is of course impossible for me to judge. But I feel confident that each of his criticisms is misplaced.

First Professor Arkush writes that my account of Israel’s alienated intellectuals is “puzzling” because I describe them as, in his words, “refugees from the left” who “find their bearings, once again, on the left.” What I in fact wrote was that as long as Zionism was dominated by Labor Zionism it was relatively easy to be both a leftist and a Zionist. When Israel turned rightward and abandoned socialism this dual identity became more difficult, and as a result some one-time leftist Zionists abandoned Zionism, not leftist.

Next, Professor Arkush writes that “Europe is still suffering from the after-effects of right-wing and Nazi anti-Semitism, and that the revival of anti-Israel sentiment...” etc. He complains that I “overlook” this. If so, it is because I find no sense in his formulation. Whatever the lingering impact of Nazi ideology it is preposterous to suppose that it grows stronger the further we get from the Nazi era. As for right-wing anti-Semitism, that alas is quite contemporary, not a mere “after-effect,” but it has no appreciable impact on the stances toward Israel of contemporary, not a mere “after-effect,” but it has no appreciable impact on the stances toward Israel of contemporary, not a mere “after-effect,” but it has no appreciable impact on the stances toward Israel of contemporary, not a mere “after-effect,” but it has no appreciable impact on the stances toward Israel of contemporary.

Lastly, Professor Arkush complains that I am too “dismissive” of the thought of Avraham Burg, Judith Butler, and Oren Yiftachel. It would suffice to reply that my subject was the impact of the Jewish and Israeli radical left and that engaging with the political philosophy of each of its exemplars was well outside the ambit of my book. But I confess that I find absurd individuals who would seek the prime ministership of a country and six years later forsake loyalty to it, branding it “fascist” and seeking citizenship elsewhere (Burg); or who would call it a “living hell” and not seek to leave it (Yiftachel); or who would make a career of radical feminism and explicitly embrace Hezbollah and Hamas (Butler). (I confess further that I laugh when I picture Professor Butler trying to explain her mantra that gender is constructed to such comrades as Khaled Meshal and Hassan Nasrallah.) I leave it to Professor Arkush to give these thinkers their due.

Joshua Muravchik Wheaton, MD

Allan Arkush Responds:

As Joshua Muravchik notes, I do not disagree with the fundamental argument of Making David into Goliath: How the World Turned Against Israel. In fact, I am more in accord with him than he seems prepared to recognize. I did not write, as he maintains, that his account of Israel’s alienated intellectuals is puzzling. I did say that some readers might find Muravchik’s account of the trajectory of these particular Israelis puzzling, but then, in the very next paragraph, I tried to show such readers how his analysis of the recent metamorphosis of leftist clears this matter up. I also registered my agreement with Muravchik’s contention that it was this metamorphosis and not, as Yoram Hazony has argued, the revival of Martin Buber’s anti-Zionism that spurred the growth of post-Zionism in Israel.

When I applauded, at the end of my review, Muravchik’s “timely warnings” against the dangers posed by Judith Butler and the other American as well as Israeli foes of Israel and said that his book had to be “complemented by vigorous refutations of what they have to say,” I was paying Muravchik at least something of a compliment. If he does not wish to stoop to the level of such too-influential writers by refuting their arguments directly, we must set his valuable history alongside that of others who will.

Where I actually differ most with Mr. Muravchik is in his assessment of the relevance of anti-Semitism/anti-Zionism stemming from quarters to the right of those he has investigated. I did not suggest, as he seems to think, that this animosity has grown stronger “the further we get from the Nazi era” or that it is of comparable significance to what has taken place on the left. But I do think that some European figures and Pat Buchanan, in particular, have had an impact over the last generation that has extended far beyond their own ideological circles. Who knows, for instance, how many of the people who heard Buchanan describe the Sabra and Shatila massacres as the “Rosh Hashanah massacres” began then to think differently about Israel—and later bought Walt and Mearsheimer’s The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy (and their arguments)? I remember reading “Patrick J. Buchanan and the Jews” in Commentary and being very impressed by it. I am only sorry that I forgot who wrote it. More than that, I am sorry that Joshua Muravchik didn’t return to this subject in his fine new book.

Corrections

The Rav Hisda’s Daughter series by Maggie Anton is not a trilogy as stated in “Common Clay” by Shai Secunda. It is two volumes: Apprentice and Enchantress.

The image on page 14 of the Spring 2015 issue of Abraham and his son was incorrectly identified as being from an Arabic manuscript. It is of Persian origin.
High Fives

BY THE EDITORS

When I was first out of grad school and looking for jobs, there was one, a plum, for which a member of the hiring committee, a Falstaff-sized professor of Christian thought, was asking applicants—I almost wrote suppliants—for their two favorite books. “Early Auden and late Wittgenstein.” I snapped back, happy with the speed and symmetry of my answer, but also worried as I watched his large puzzled face and realized that, obviously, he had been looking for an answer that was, well, more Jewish.

Standing there in my blue interview suit before this bluffed tenured eminence I felt like the dog in a joke my father used to tell: A man walks into a bar. “Will you give me drinks on the house if my dog can talk,” he asks. “Sure,” says the bartender. “Rover, what’s that?” asks the man pointing upward. “Rooft, Rooft,” says the dog. The bartender folds his arms. “Wait,” says the man. “Rover, who’s the greatest baseball player of all time?” “Ruth, Ruth,” says the dog. Out on the sidewalk, the dog turns to the man, “Maybe I shoulda said DiMaggio?”

Still, I do like a good book list. Lately, we’ve all—well, all five of us—been walking around the JRB offices smiling. (In a nutshell: Why Diaspora Is Good for the Jews (in a nutshell: clear Iran), which came out last year (we sent it out and looking for jobs, there was one, a plum, for which a member of the hiring committee, a Falstaff-sized professor of Christian thought, was asking applicants—I almost wrote suppliants—for their two favorite books. “Early Auden and late Wittgenstein.” I snapped back, happy with the speed and symmetry of my answer, but also worried as I watched his large puzzled face and realized that, obviously, he had been looking for an answer that was, well, more Jewish.

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