

Timothy D. Lytton on The Great Vinegar Scandal of Passover '86

JEWISH REVIEW

OF BOOKS

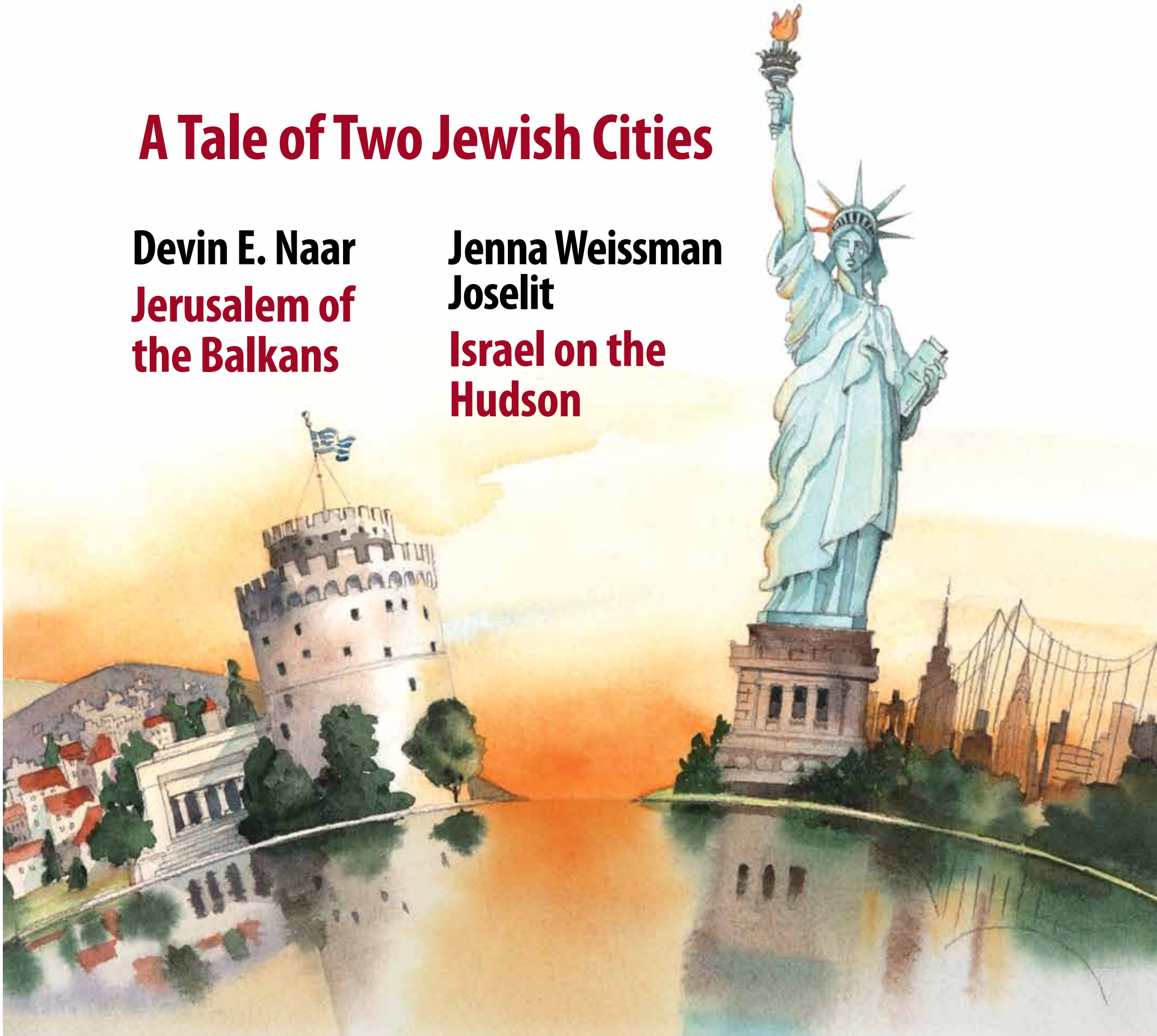
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Perpetual Peace?

In “Kissinger, Kant, and the Syrians” (Winter 2013) Shlomo Avineri describes an incident in which I criticized Kant in the prelude to a diplomatic discussion over the Syrian-Lebanese crisis of 1975. I have no recollection of that conversation now some forty years old, which is presented as more conceptual than substantive.

I have high regard for Avineri. His account of the diplomatic issues posed by the Lebanese crisis seems reasonable. But the philosophical byplay sounds strange. Avineri says I used *On Perpetual Peace* as a foil to its lack of realism and as a lead-in to discussing Hegel’s view on war. My first tutorial essay at Harvard was a sympathetic treatment of Kant. My undergraduate thesis was importantly devoted to Kant. I have quoted the essence of Kant’s essay *On Perpetual Peace* on several occasions, including in the conclusion of my last book, *On China*, always sympathetically. As for comparing Hegel’s to Kant’s view on war, it would be difficult for me to bring this off considering that I have never been attracted to Hegel. Nor have I ever seriously considered his view on war; I would have trouble even defining it.

What Avineri ascribes to me are respectable views, even if I do not recognize them as my own.

Henry A. Kissinger
New York, NY

Shlomo Avineri Responds:

As a great admirer of Henry Kissinger’s statecraft and writings, I am encouraged that he agrees with my assessment of the policies pursued by the United States and Israel regarding Syria’s incursion into Lebanon in the 1970s. This is another example of the strategic cooperation that has been the bedrock underpinning relations between our two nations.

On the other hand, I am not surprised that our recollections differ on the brief, extra-curricular exchange on Kant and Hegel, which emerged quite accidentally when I presented the secretary of state with a Hebrew translation of Kant’s *On Eternal Peace*. Memories naturally diverge, especially after almost forty years. Future historians—if they deem this interesting enough to research—will have to compare our recollections with what, if anything, survives in the archives.

I have no doubt that like any scion of the Enlightenment, Kissinger reveres Kant’s essay as a shining example of humankind’s striving for its loftiest goals; this comes out in the cryptic reference to it in his concluding remarks in *On China*. Yet as a political practitioner, responsible for life-and-death decisions, he knew that in this as-yet-unredeemed world one cannot limit oneself to what Hegel called the “*Seinsollendes*,” i.e., what *should* be, as opposed to what *is*. In this Kissinger wisely followed the sage advice of Metternich, whom he quotes approvingly in his magisterial 1994 study *Diplomacy*.

“Little given to abstract ideas, we accept things as they are and we attempt to the maximum of our ability to protect ourselves against delusions about realities.” And, “with phrases which on close examination dissolve into thin air, such as the defense of civilization, nothing tangible can be defined.”

I came across this passage while preparing my Introduction to the Hebrew translation of *Diplomacy*. It

was obvious to me that Kissinger realized that even while one should follow Kant’s vision as an ideal horizon, prudence, responsibility, and humanity may call for a less exalted approach to questions of politics in the here and now. We all owe much to the former secretary of state for his willingness to bear the burden inherent in such choices.

People of the Book

Haym Soloveitchik’s review of Talya Fishman’s *Becoming the People of the Talmud*, winner of the Nahum M. Sarna Memorial National Jewish Book Award for Scholarship, raises an important issue (“The People of the Book—Since When?” Winter 2013). It seems to me that in the future, each book award should list the names of its judges.

Bernard Scharfstein
KTAV Publishing House, Inc.
Jersey City, NJ



As a student of Professor Talya Fishman at the University of Pennsylvania, I was horrified when I read Professor Haym Soloveitchik’s review of *Becoming the People of the Talmud*. I know Professor Fishman to be a serious and cautious scholar, and the accusations lodged at the book and Fishman by Soloveitchik seemed unbelievable.

It is not my business to defend Fishman’s thesis here as I have not yet finished reading the book and I am not a scholar. Furthermore, I am certain Fishman will respond to the critiques with erudition and her characteristic grace and certainly does not need my help. However, I am disappointed at the choice of the editors to publish, or to at least neglect to tone down, a review with so much invective that it blurred the line between legitimate critique and ad hominem attack. Let me emphasize that I believe mistakes could have been made (Fishman would be the first to admit that she is not perfect), but publishing a review like Soloveitchik’s is unbecoming of any serious publication.

Much like Pete Wells’ review of Guy Fieri’s restaurant in *The New York Times* in November 2012, this review has brought the *Jewish Review of Books* some cheap social media attention. One claim that sparked the delight of some on Facebook was, “I spent considerable time trying to reconstruct Dr. Fishman’s thinking, to see where and how she went

astray in understanding the sources, until I realized that misunderstanding requires partial understanding. If this fractional comprehension is lacking, there are no parameters limiting the interpretation; the meaning of the source will then be whatever the writer wishes it to mean, or, absent this bias, whatever comes to mind.” Professor Soloveitchik presents no evidence for this contention; indeed it would be impossible to prove. Psychoanalysis like this does not help anybody understand the book or its apparent problems and has no place in a review of any kind.

Isaac Setton
University of Pennsylvania, Class of 2012
Philadelphia, PA

When reading a negative book review, one often comes away wishing the reviewer is just catty or has ill intent or ad hominem attacks. Why not just turn down the review rather than embarrass an author so publicly? Prof. Haym Soloveitchik’s scathing review of *Becoming the People of the Talmud* has no such stench. Even someone with a minimal knowledge of the Talmud can understand his points about its history and composition. How can such errors pass muster at a reputable university press? Isn’t there knowledgeable peer review and footnote checking?

Then, are there answers to Prof. Soloveitchik’s points on how the Jewish Book Council could award a major honor to such a flawed volume? Do other respected Talmud scholars support or disagree with Prof. Soloveitchik’s perceptions, and why?

Les Bergen
Arlington, VA

In the Winter 2013 issue of your magazine, to which I am a relatively new subscriber, you ran a long article by Haym Soloveitchik. The topic is far above my head and I do not have the chutzpah to comment or express any opinion on the merits of his arguments. However, I was shocked by the way the article concluded. The tone, the wording, and the expressions are uncivilized and un-Jewish.

I would like to take the liberty of strongly suggesting that Professor Fishman be invited to present her case. In this way the reputation of the magazine will not only survive but will be enhanced.

Iuliu Hescovici
Vicksburg, MS

In his review of Talya Fishman’s *Becoming the People of the Talmud: Oral Torah as Written Tradition in Medieval Jewish Cultures*, Haym Soloveitchik adverts to our late father, Prof. Nahum M. Sarna, “whose name,” he observes, “graces the prize the Jewish Book Council awarded” to Fishman’s book. He believes that our father’s memory “deserves better.” We happen to think that our father, who knew Talya Fishman, would have been delighted to see her win the Nahum M. Sarna Memorial Award for Jewish Scholarship. He, like us, had the greatest respect, too, for Haym Soloveitchik, one of the foremost Jewish scholars of our time. What would greatly have saddened him—and saddens us—is the association of Abba’s name, in any form, with what can only be described as *sinat hinam*, groundless animus. The unsupportable assertion that the anonymous judges of the Jewish Book Council award either “never read the book” or “know even less of

(Continued on page 50)

Chopped Herring and the Making of the American Kosher Certification System

BY TIMOTHY D. LYTTON

A few days before Passover in 1986, Rabbi Eliyahu Shuman of the Star-K kosher certification agency noticed some suspicious jars of Acme Chopped Herring in the Passover section of Shapiro's supermarket in Pikesville, Maryland. They were certified kosher by Kof-K, another agency, but they did not bear a kosher-for-Passover label. Some of the herring had already been sold.

Shuman and his colleagues at Star-K worried about what kind of vinegar had been used to flavor the herring. Vinegar contains alcohol, which, if derived from wheat or corn, renders it impermissible for Passover. Before issuing a consumer alert or ordering a product recall, however, Star-K officials decided to launch an investigation. If the vinegar turned out to be made with synthetic alcohol, it would be kosher for Passover, as would the herring, and no harm would come to consumers who had already purchased it.

The herring company sent Shuman to the vinegar supplier, who, in turn, sent him to the alcohol manufacturer, a French company called Sofecia. When Shuman asked whether the alcohol was derived from wheat or corn, Sofecia shocked him with the news that, in fact, it was derived from grapes. Under Jewish dietary laws, special restrictions apply to grape juice and its derivatives, such as wine and vinegar. In order to be kosher, these products must be produced exclusively by Jews. (The origin of this rule lies in an ancient rabbinic prohibition against benefitting from items used in pagan worship and a concern that wine produced by non-Jews might have been so used.) Sofecia produced marc alcohol, which is extracted from the solid remains of grapes that have been pressed in winemaking. These solid remains, which consist of skins, pulp, seeds, and stems, are known as pomace, or *marc* in French, and they are, under Jewish law, technically a form of wine. What all this meant was that the vinegar was not kosher for Passover or any other time of the year—it was simply not kosher.

Sofecia's marc alcohol had been erroneously certified as kosher by the OK kosher certification agency, under the direction of Rabbi Berel Levy, who prided himself on his meticulousness in verifying the kosher status of ingredients. "My father was a pioneer in *kashrus* in that he was the first one who insisted on going back to the source of any ingredient," recalls his son, Rabbi Don Yoel Levy, who today directs OK. Berel Levy occasionally discovered problems that other agencies had missed, and when he did, he was frequently very public about it.

Upon discovering that vinegar produced with Sofecia's marc alcohol was not kosher, Star-K officials wondered what other kosher-certified products, beyond Acme Chopped Herring, might contain it. They immediately contacted Levy and alert-

ed the other major certification agencies that might have relied on his certification. Star-K, Kof-K, and the Orthodox Union (OU)—the nation's largest certification agency—published consumer alerts, issued a ban on the use of OK-certified vinegar, and ordered their food company clients to recall prod-

head will spin. . . . Companies such as Heinz . . . their whole factories had to be *kashered* [ritually cleaned] because they were using *treyf* alcohol, which they bought in good faith. They didn't do anything wrong. The OU thought it was kosher, and it turns out that it wasn't.

We're talking about pickles, we're talking about ketchup, we're talking about mustard—look at a list of products that contain vinegar and your head will spin.

ucts containing vinegar. The list of suspect products was extraordinarily long because the agencies had no way of determining which particular batches of vinegar or consumer products contained the erroneously certified marc alcohol. To be safe, the

In his own defense, Levy claimed that Sofecia had misled him about the production of its alcohol. He denounced the other certification agencies as hypocrites, alleging that under their supervision, "vinegar companies had been buying alcohol from Sofecia since 1980 when it had no supervision at all. But no one was concerned with wine alcohol then. Who knew of such a thing?" The alcohol in question—ethyl alcohol—was normally made from grain or synthetically, and the general practice among kosher certification agencies was to assume that all ethyl alcohol was kosher. Due to a European wine glut in the 1970s, however, companies such as Sofecia began to distill ethyl alcohol from grapes. Moreover, Levy argued there were good halakhic grounds to argue that the products affected were not in fact rendered unkosher by the small amounts of *marc* alcohol involved.

His rivals accused Levy of lax supervision and of not understanding the production process. Sofecia published an open letter explaining that it was unaware that ethyl alcohol distilled from grapes posed a problem, that Levy had never raised the issue, and that no one from OK ever inspected the production facilities (a charge that Levy vigorously denied). When the other certification agencies suggested to OK clients that they switch certification agencies, Levy accused them of exploiting the scandal for economic gain. A year after the scandal broke, Berel Levy died. "He had so much aggravation from it," recalled Don Yoel Levy, "that he passed away."

The vinegar scandal threatened to erode consumer confidence in the reliability of kosher certification that had taken decades to build. The traditional means of regulating kosher trade in the Old World had been centralized communal control backed by government power, but this proved impossible in America, with its religious voluntarism and free markets. In the absence of the Old World system, fraud, racketeering, and violence were rampant in the American kosher food industry of the early part of the 20th century. The problem of kosher fraud proved too big for even government regulators.



Kosher agencies band together to warn consumers in the *Algemeiner Journal*, May 9, 1986.

agencies ordered the destruction of products even suspected of containing it. "Millions and millions of dollars of product was thrown out," recalls Rabbi Zushe Blech, who worked for the OU at the time.

We're talking about pickles, we're talking about ketchup, we're talking about mustard—look at a list of products that contain vinegar and your

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In the 1930s, New York City's Department of Markets employed six full-time kosher inspectors in addition to the ten inspectors from the State Kosher Enforcement Bureau, but they couldn't possibly police the 18,000 kosher food establishments operating in the city. Government investigators and industry insiders estimated that somewhere between forty and sixty percent of the meat sold as kosher at the time was *treyf*. Meanwhile, food companies signaled kosher certification by placing a generic "K" on food packages. The identity and integrity of the supervising rabbi was unknown to consumers, and, in many cases, there was, in fact, no rabbinic supervision whatsoever.

All of this changed with the rise of a new regulatory institution: the private kosher certification agency. These agencies created individual brands based on reliability. Each agency placed a distinctive symbol on products that it certified, symbols that kosher consumers learned to recognize and came to trust. (The Orthodox Union's  is the oldest and most widely recognized.) The agencies backed their brands with concrete measures that helped them avoid mistakes and prevent misconduct. They instituted multiple levels of management oversight to supervise kosher inspectors and provided professional training in Jewish dietary laws, food technology, and ethics.

By the 1980s, thanks to the rise of brand competition among the OU, OK, Kof-K, and Star-K—known collectively as the "Big Four"—kosher certification had become much more reliable, or so it seemed until

the vinegar scandal. Giving voice to widespread concern among consumers, the president of the National Council of Young Israel, Harold Jacobs, denounced not merely OK but all the agencies:

In the absence of the Old World system, fraud, racketeering, and violence were rampant in the American kosher food industry of the early 20th century.

The slow and incomplete release of information concerning the wine vinegar incident [is] typical of the delaying and stonewalling tactics used by many of the *kashruth* supervisory agencies, adding to the confusion and distrust of the consuming public. Seven weeks after the incident was discovered . . . the kosher consumer has not been given a complete list of those products affected or unaffected, nor an adequate explanation of how the mistake happened in the first place.

He warned that "rumors of other serious lapses in *kashruth* supervision continue to spread" and that "unless the *kashruth* agencies accept their responsibility, kosher consumers will be compelled to repudiate the reliability of these national supervisions and be forced to go back to an earlier standard, when we relied exclusively on the judgment of our individual rabbis."

In a fit of hyperbole, Jacobs compared the vinegar scandal to the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster. Although the contamination of pickles and mustard hardly seems comparable to the radioactive fallout from Chernobyl, the juxtaposition highlights an important feature of the kosher certification industry. Political scientist Joseph Rees describes nuclear utilities as "hostages of each other" because "a single catastrophic accident . . . at any one U.S. nuclear plant would have ruinous consequences for the entire industry." According to Rees, the 1979 nuclear accident at Three Mile Island demonstrated to nuclear utilities that "the insufficiency and failure of one of them has a potential for destroying the credibility of all the others."

Similarly, the vinegar scandal showed that industrial food production makes kosher certification agencies highly interdependent. A mistake by one agency has potentially widespread and serious implications for agencies that rely on it later in the production process, and any resulting public scandal can damage the credibility of the kosher certification industry as a whole. As Jacobs pointed out "in a highly centralized and technologically sophisticated kosher food industry, there is, in fact, only one *kashruth* standard, regardless of the symbol on the package, and that standard will be determined by the lowest common denominator of supervision and reliability."

He called on certifiers to "assume mutual responsibility to maintain those standards regardless of the specific *kashruth* symbol on the offending product." This is precisely what the Big Four proceeded to do.

Shortly before the scandal, the director of the Chicago Rabbinical Council (CRC) kosher certification agency, Rabbi Benjamin Shandalov, had convened a meeting of the heads of kosher certification agencies, which resulted in the founding of the Association of Kashrus Organizations (AKO). As the scandal unfolded, the need for such an umbrella organization became obvious. Since its founding, AKO's semiannual meetings have featured presentations and discussions that have helped shape shared standards, sometimes referred to collectively as the "American Standard of *Kashrus*." Topics have included methods of cleaning industrial food-processing equipment, the kosher status of different enzymes employed in industrial food production, the use of non-kosher oils to coat steel barrels used for ingredient storage in order to prevent corrosion, and securing storage areas to prevent the introduction of non-kosher ingredients.



Vats for the industrial production of ethyl alcohol.

In the wake of the vinegar scandal, AKO also established an information-sharing system to rapidly alert agencies about kosher certification problems, and it developed guidelines to deter agencies from actively soliciting companies currently under the supervision of another agency. Although AKO has no enforcement powers—the biggest agencies insist on maintaining their autonomy—it has provided a forum for the development of voluntary standards that are widely accepted. Equally important, AKO meetings, as well as informal conversations among agency personnel, have helped to temper the brand competition that characterizes the kosher certification industry and keep it from descending into acrimony. According to Star-K president Dr. Avrom

Pollak, “relationships amongst the largest organizations have gotten better simply because people are more familiar with one another. It’s easier to meet face to face and to talk to people. And inevitably when you do that, you find that a lot of your preconceptions about somebody else probably were not even true in the first place.”

The vinegar scandal also convinced agencies of the need to computerize recordkeeping in order to track ingredients and control the fallout from future mistakes. By the late 1980s, the leading agencies had all developed computer systems. There was, however, initial skepticism about whether the OU, which had an especially large and unwieldy amount of paper files, could successfully transition into the computer age. Rabbi Zushe Blech recalls an AKO meeting shortly after the vinegar scandal at which an OU rabbi addressed the group.

So he got up and he started explaining how the OU is going to computerize itself. An older fellow from the *va'ad* [kosher agency] of Queens got up, and he said, “I’ve known the OU for years, and I know how it works, and if you think that the OU will ever get a computer—*hair* will grow on my palms before the OU gets a computer!” At that point, Rabbi Moshe Heinemann [of the Star-K] got up and said, “I’m standing up for the *kovod* [honor] of the OU, and if it will take *hair* to grow on your palms before the OU gets a computer—then *hair* will grow on your palms!”

Today, the OU maintains a database that tracks more than 1.5 million ingredients used in the foods it certifies.

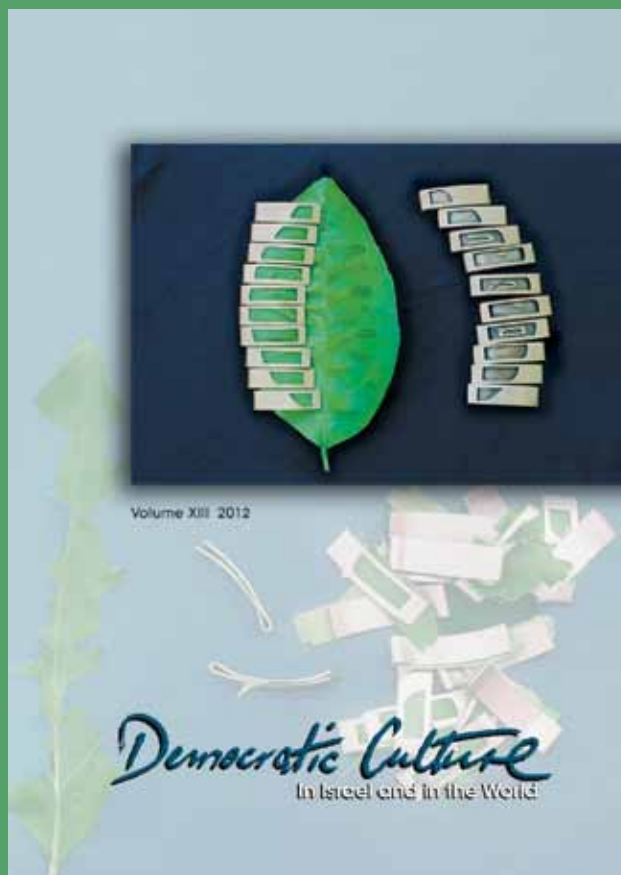
Kosher food is now a very big business. More than twelve million American consumers purchase kosher food because it is kosher, only eight percent of whom are religious Jews (the rest choose it for reasons of health, food safety, taste, vegetarianism, lactose intolerance, or to satisfy non-Jewish religious requirements such as halal). The U.S. kosher market generates more than \$12 billion in annual retail sales, and more products are labeled kosher than are labeled organic, natural, or premium.

None of this would be possible without a reliable system of kosher certification. This system depends on brand competition between private agencies that keep close tabs on each other and are quick to publicize mistakes. At the same time, appreciation of their interdependence engenders cooperation, which has produced shared standards and collective efforts to improve the quality of inspections by all agencies. This balance of competition and cooperation has made kosher supervision in America a model of private third-party certification. The success of kosher certification holds many valuable lessons for emerging private certification systems in other areas, such as food safety and ecolabeling. Many of these lessons can be traced back to Rabbi Shuman’s startling discovery when he picked up a jar of chopped herring in Pikesville just before Passover.

Timothy D. Lytton is the Albert and Angela Farone Distinguished Professor of Law at Albany Law School and the author of Kosher: Private Regulation in the Age of Industrial Food recently published by Harvard University Press.

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Jerusalem of the Balkans

BY DEVIN E. NAAR

When I told my grandfather that I was going to Salonica for the first time nearly a decade ago, he asked me why. There was “nothing left,” he assured me, by which he meant nothing Jewish. He himself had left as a boy in 1924 and never returned. “There used to be a big tower by the sea,” he informed me. “Maybe it’s still there.” When I told him that the tower still stood, he was pleased. I returned to Salonica again this fall to attend a symposium on the history of the city.

The White Tower, which looks out onto the Mediterranean, is still the iconic symbol of Salonica (Thessaloniki, in Greek). As with much in Greece’s second-largest city, its history is disputed. The Ottomans built the tower in the 16th century, but some locals remember it as a Byzantine or Venetian monument. A few days after I arrived in the city in October 2012, politicians, military, clergy, and thousands of residents, many donning traditional costume, gathered near the tower to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of their city’s liberation from Ottoman rule.

Everyone, including me, gazed out at the sea in anticipation. A navy gunship soon arrived. Officials unloaded an ornate icon depicting Mary and Jesus, brought for the occasion directly from the monasteries of Mount Athos. Bishop Anthimos, the metropolitan of Salonica’s Greek Orthodox Church, then delivered an impassioned speech reminding those gathered of the sacrifices made by the city’s inhabitants as they overthrew the Turkish “occupation” a century before, during the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913. He emphasized the inextricable connection between the Greek Orthodox Church, the Greek nation, and the Greek Christian identity of Salonica.

Salonica’s new mayor, Yiannis Boutaris, a soft-spoken 70-year-old, then began his speech about the city’s glorious history. Within moments, two Greek Orthodox priests charged him, shouting fiery denunciations. “Anathema!” one of them cried, before being wrestled away from the scene by police. Others in the crowd sympathized with the disgruntled priests. “Go away, Boutaris!” one woman shouted. The reason for their anger was clear: Boutaris avoids hardline, exclusivist, nationalist rhetoric. He envisions a very different future from those on the right, one that takes into account the fact that not only Christians, but also Muslims and Jews, called the city home for centuries. “We cannot look into the future without knowing the past,” Boutaris recently declared to *The Jerusalem Post*. Recognizing that Jews once constituted half of Salonica’s population, he continued, “Not for nothing was it called the ‘Jerusalem of the Balkans.’” He added: “And it could be that again.”

Jews have lived in Salonica since antiquity. The apostle Paul preached to Greek-speaking Jews there in the 1st century, and there has been a more or less continuous Jewish presence in the city ever since. The Jewish community blossomed

in the 16th century, when Salonica became a major refuge for Jews exiled from Spain and Portugal. Under Ottoman rule, Sephardic Jews added to the one Ashkenazi synagogue by establishing three dozen more based upon their places of origin throughout the Iberian Peninsula, as well as Italy and North Africa. Salonica became a center not

newspapers flourished, as did Ladino theater. The Jews of Salonica ranged from major industrialists who established the city’s first flour mill, distillery, and brick and tobacco factories, to stevedores at the port, fisherman, tobacco laborers, bootblacks, lawyers, teachers, customs officials, seamstresses, rabbis, pumpkin seed sellers, lemonade vendors, and

The apostle Paul preached to Salonican Jews in the 1st century, and there has been a more or less continuous Jewish presence in the city ever since.

only of rabbinic learning, but also of early modern Hebrew publishing. It was the birthplace of Solomon Alkabetz, the author of the Sabbath prayer, *Lecha Dodi*, and the city where Joseph Caro prepared his famous code of Jewish law, *Beit Yosef*. By the mid-16th century, Jews constituted half of the city’s residents and formed one of the largest Jewish communities in the early modern world. The image of the 16th-century golden age of Salonica as a center of Jewish refuge and Jewish learning is conjured by the expression, “the Jerusalem of the Balkans.”

There is another, more modern, image of the city that is evoked by this designation. The second half of the 19th century saw Salonica emerge once again as a regional capital—a cosmopolitan metropolis and an economic center at the crossroads of Europe and the Middle East. The Paris-based Alliance Israélite Universelle equipped a new generation of Jewish students with modern education and vocational skills. The publication of Ladino

halva makers. In 1911, David Ben-Gurion spent several months in the city and declared it “the only Jewish labor city in the world.” The role of Jews was so great that the port and virtually the entire city closed on Saturday in observance of Shabbat. At the turn of the century, Jews were the demographically dominant element in the population, comprising as many as eighty or ninety thousand of the city’s one hundred and seventy thousand residents. Indeed, in 1912, as the Ottoman Empire was collapsing, leading Jewish merchants in the city advocated turning their prosperous “Jerusalem of the Balkans” into an autonomous Jewish city-state.

Salonica was instead incorporated into the Greek nation-state. Over the following three decades the city’s socioeconomic complexion changed. A major fire in 1917 destroyed the city center, leaving most of the Jewish population homeless. In the 1920s the arrival of more than a hundred thousand Greek Christian refugees from Turkey changed the social dynamics of the city, and in the 1920s and ’30s Jews



Salonica while ruled by the Ottoman empire. (Courtesy of the Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki Archives.)

faced increasing prejudice. Nonetheless, the Jewish Community continued to operate Jewish schools, a rabbinical court, and over twenty philanthropic institutions; Ladino cultural productivity continued while the acquisition of Greek culture rose; and younger Jews started to feel at home in Greece. When the Nazi occupation forces arrived in April 1941, fifty thousand Jews remained in the city. Almost all were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1943 and murdered there.



Postcard of the Jewish cemetery in Salonica, ca. early 1900s. (Courtesy of the Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki Archives.)



The family of Rabbi Benjamin and Rachel Naar, seated center, Salonica, 1924. The author's grandfather, Isidore Naar, is at the far right. (Courtesy of Devin E. Naar.)

After World War II, Salonica was reduced to a border city of secondary significance and defended Greece against the Communist threat. Reflecting these anxieties, Salonica's administration for the past sixty years was particularly conservative. The open-mindedness of Mayor Boutaris, an aging, tattooed politician and former winemaker who recalls his youthful love affair with a Jewish girl, starkly contrasts with the narrow nationalism of his political predecessors. It's also at odds with the chauvinism of church leaders such as Bishop Anthimos and many of the city's residents. But one thing is evident: although for decades a taboo topic, the Jewish presence in (and absence from)

Salonica and Greece is increasingly entering public discourse in ways that are both promising and troubling.

As in other parts of Europe, the economic crisis has been a boon for the nationalist right and has led to a resurgence of anti-Semitic rhetoric. The ultra-right-wing, anti-austerity, anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, anti-Semitic Golden Dawn party now holds eighteen of the three hundred seats in Parliament. "There were no ovens. This is a lie,"

proclaimed the head of Golden Dawn, Nikolaos Michaloliakos, on Greek television in May. "There were no gas chambers either," he added. He follows syndicated journalist Costas Plevris, whom the Jewish communities of Greece brought to court in 2007 for his repeated statements denying the Holocaust and for inciting anti-Semitic violence. The superior court acquitted Plevris—Holocaust denial is protected by freedom of speech in Greece. One judge endorsed Plevris' animosity against the Jews, whom she agreed sought to control the world by nefarious means. Plevris has since countersued for libel and several Jewish leaders await trial. Moreover, in October 2012, Ilias Kasidiaris, an MP representing Golden Dawn, read a passage from the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* aloud during a parliament meeting without comment or censure from his colleagues. Although these statements are extraordinary, the acceptability of anti-Semitic discourse in everyday Greek life, despite—or perhaps because of—the fact that Greece's Jewish population now numbers only around five thousand, is startling.

For his part, Boutaris has publicly stated that most of the Golden Dawn's leaders ought to be jailed. Rather than closing the borders, he wants to open them—at least for foreign investment—in the hope of stimulating the city's rejuvenation. To this end, he has actively sought to strengthen relations with Turkey and Israel by inviting Muslims and Jews to return, as "heritage tourists," back to a city their communities once populated. To some extent, this has worked. Both Turkish and Israeli tourism are on the rise. Regular flights now link Tel Aviv and Salonica, a sign of Greek-Israeli rapprochement. Although one of the first countries to support the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, prior to

the Balfour Declaration in 1917, Greece became the last European Union country to officially recognize the state of Israel—in 1991. Since relations between Turkey and Israel cooled off following the *Mavi Marmara* flotilla to Gaza in 2010, Greek-Israeli relations have been "upgraded."

Boutaris included Hasdai Capon, a local Jewish leader, on his ticket. When they won, he became the first Jew elected to the city council since 1936. He is now vice mayor for economic management and has significantly cut the city's debt. Nonetheless, signs of the economic crisis are widespread: abandoned shops along the main drag, Tsimiski Street, and extensive graffiti. I had a chance encounter with my neighborhood baker, whose shop I frequented when I lived in the city several years ago. He had lost his bakery and was selling *koulouria* (Greek breads) out of a sack on the street. Garbage collectors were on strike one day, buses another, taxi drivers another, and airport workers yet another.

In contrast to Golden Dawn's Holocaust denial, Boutaris is the first mayor of the city interested in public Holocaust commemoration. Before, there was mostly silence. The increased, open discussion of Jewish presence and of the Holocaust was made clear to me as soon as I arrived in October. My taxi driver, who was pleased by my decent Greek, asked me, after he discovered I was Jewish, if I had returned to take back my family's house. This question was not idle. The few survivors who returned to Salonica after the war found Christians living in their homes. The restitution of the more than ten thousand "abandoned" Jewish properties remains unresolved today.

I arrived at Hotel Amalia, in the city center, on Ermou Street, adjacent to the Modiano market, one of the few sites in Salonica still bearing a Jewish name. Strangely, the first language I heard was Hebrew: Several older Israeli tourists were chatting in front of the hotel. We spoke in Hebrew and then Ladino. Their family had also lived in Salonica before the war, and, just as Mayor Boutaris had hoped, they wanted to see what had become of it.

I met two friends for dinner and a late-night stroll through the city center. In their thirties, these friends come from families of Greek Holocaust survivors and are among the relatively few Jews who remain in Salonica today (perhaps one thousand in a population of one million). Yet those who remain, especially these friends and other young Jews like them, have a deep interest in the past of their city and the traces that remain. The Holocaust occupies the center of the story, but to the remembrance of destruction must also be added the recognition of the life that once was. They take me on a tour of Jewish buildings, surviving inscriptions, and sites where Jewish communal institutions once stood.

The conference I had come to attend was called "Thessaloniki: A City in Transition, 1912-2012." The official publicity materials avoided nationalist rhetoric and did not refer to the "occupation" of the city by "the Turks," nor to its "liberation" by the Greeks in 1912. The selection of Mark Mazower, a history professor at Columbia University, to give the keynote address revealed the conference organizers' relatively open approach to the city's past. Mazower's 2005 book *Salonica, City of Ghosts* placed the city and its multicultural past on the international scholarly map. The Greek translation became a best-

seller and compelled the city's residents to confront its full history head-on for the first time.

But while it became apparent at the conference that certain controversial aspects of the city's past could be discussed openly, others remained cloaked in silence. The deportation of Salonica's Jews by the Nazis was an uncontested fact. But the centuries-long history of the Jews of the city was virtually reduced to that moment. Jews entered the narrative only in 1943 with their deportation and murder in foreign lands. Under the city's previous administration in 2008, the municipality rejected a proposal that Salonica join the Association of Martyr Cities, a network of ninety locales throughout the country that commemorates the "Greek holocausts" of civilians who died in the struggle against the 1941-1944 occupation. Salonica's City Council denied the proposal on two remarkable accounts: that the extermination of the Jews took place outside of Greece and that Jews have lived in Thessaloniki only since 1492.

As pointed out by the anonymous blogger "Abravanel," one of the few who actively reports on Jewish issues in Greece, the second point was particularly disheartening since it denies the documented presence of Jews in the city for two thousand years, prior to the expulsion from Spain. It is also an ironic argument given that Salonica's Jews are likely among the few present-day residents whose ancestors have lived in the city for more than a century. Most of the city's Greek Orthodox residents arrived in the 20th century, principally as refugees from Turkey.

With Boutaris as mayor, unprecedented discussions are underway to transform the recent, modest, and slightly equivocal Holocaust Memorial. It was erected in 1997 when Salonica was named "the Cultural Capital of Europe" by the European Union and moved to a more central location in 2006 when Israeli President Moshe Katsav visited. Now it may become something more substantial: a listing of names, in stone, of all of the Salonican victims of the Nazis. There is a painful irony in the concept of a future monumental tombstone for Salonica's Jews since the city's once vast Jewish cemetery, where actual tombstones once stood, completely vanished during the Nazi occupation. The story of the destruction of the Jewish cemetery—once the largest in Europe—remains largely shrouded in silence. It covered the space of *eighty* football fields and housed hundreds of thousands of graves, including those of famed personalities, dating back to the late 15th century—including the daughters of Joseph Caro, and the acclaimed Converso physician, Amatus Lusitanus.

The painful truth is that the municipality and the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki benefitted from the Nazi occupation to implement a plan, under development for more than a decade, to expropriate the Jewish cemetery and expand the campus of the university on top of it. At the municipality's expense, five hundred workers with pickaxes laid waste to the Jewish cemetery of Salonica in December 1942. The university was built in its place. Today, no marker or sign indicates that the former Jewish cemetery of Salonica lay below the university campus. Given the admirable sentiments animating the conference and the widespread willingness to speak about the Nazi deportations, it was alarming to listen to a paper presented by a professor from the university about the expansion of the campus since the 1930s. He never mentioned what had previously existed on the very

land on upon which that expansion occurred.

Despite this silence, traces of the Jewish cemetery of Salonica have been in the news. Before the economic crisis hit, in 2008, the municipality began work on a subway system. Controversy erupted amidst the construction of the stop for the university. Remains of the Jewish cemetery had been unearthed. Abravanel suggested the future train stop be named "The Jewish Cemetery" rather than "The University," or that relevant archaeological finds be

nient use of passive voice, "was destroyed due to the conditions of the German occupation." Art faculty from Tel Aviv University came for a visit to discuss creating a commemorative sculpture. In exchange, a piece of artwork from the University of Salonica would be installed at Tel Aviv University. The proposed arrangement, while unprecedented, is also remarkable because the responsibility to commemorate the destruction of the Jewish cemetery would lie with Israelis and only as a part of a quid pro quo



Members of Golden Dawn, the Greek extreme-right, ultra-nationalist party, Salonica, 2012. (© Sakis Mitrolidis/AFP/GettyImages).

put on permanent display. Neither that suggestion nor the construction of the subway more generally has progressed very far. Just a few months ago, in December 2012, a report that Salonica's police discovered over six hundred fragments of Jewish tombstones in the western corner of the city made international news. The Jewish community gained possession of the fragments and transferred them to the postwar Jewish cemetery, located in the suburb of Stavroupolis. This postwar cemetery has become, in effect, a graveyard for tombstones.

That the discovery, if it can be called that, of the tombstone fragments should be deemed newsworthy today is also remarkable considering the extent to which traces of them can be found in every part of the city. At the time of the cemetery's destruction, the municipality, the university, churches, and local residents appropriated the marble headstones for construction throughout the city, to pave roads, line latrines, and build courtyards. The Nazis also used them to build a swimming pool. A few tombstones with Hebrew inscriptions can still be seen on the university campus. Others can be seen today stacked in church courtyards, behind the St. George Rotunda, and built into various structures, such as the floor of the St. Demetrius church, the central Navarinou Square, and elsewhere.

Last year, at the urging of the Jewish community of Salonica, the rector of the university began speaking about the possibility of creating a monument to the Jewish cemetery—which, as the local Greek press reported, quoting the rector's conve-

arrangement. While a seemingly genuine endeavor, such a proposal may push Aristotle University and the city further away from coming to terms with their past.

Acknowledging the history of the Jewish cemetery in Salonica may be more difficult than commemorating the deportation of the city's Jews for another reason. The present Holocaust monument commemorates Jewish death on foreign soil during a single year, 1943. A monument to the city's burial ground would require a more robust recognition of Jewish life in Salonica for at least five hundred—if not two thousand—years. It would compel the city to confront its ghosts.

The aspiration to recognize Jewish life in the city had animated a cohort of Jewish intellectuals in interwar Salonica. They sought to combat the initial attempt by the municipality to expropriate the Jewish cemetery for the use of the university. The Jewish tombs, the local Ladino press proclaimed, were *pie-dras ke avlan*, "stones that speak," stones that told the story of the Jews in the city, of their contributions to the city, and of the city itself. For these reasons, Jewish intellectuals argued, the Jewish cemetery ought to be preserved as a monument of Salonican and Greek patrimony. Their argument did not succeed then. One wonders whether it could now.

Over dinner during the conference, I asked a senior Greek colleague why more Greek scholars did not study the history of Jews in Salonica. At first he suggested to me that it was a problem of language: we don't know Ladino. But in Greece, if a graduate stu-

dent really wanted to study French history, wouldn't he or she learn French? He answered by telling me that his parents, Greek Orthodox Christians, attended school during World War II. One day the Jews did not show up to school. No one cried, no one mourned, and there were no public displays of grief. This, he said, is why more Greek scholars do not learn Ladino and do not write about Jewish history.

In a recent address, the new minister of northern Greece publicly acknowledged Salonica not only as the city of Aristotle, but also of Solomon Alkabetz.

But perhaps this, too, is changing. The first to write about Jewish history in Salonica were Salonican Jews themselves. Picking up where interwar Salonican Jewish historians such as Joseph Nehama, Michael Molho, and Isaac Emmanuel left off, scholars such as Rena Molho reinstated Jews into the narrative of Salonica and Greece in the 1980s. Building upon these earlier efforts, in 2005, several local intellectuals, including both Jews and Christians, formed The Group for the Study of the History of the Jews of Greece, established



Broken Jewish tombstones in the yard of the St. George Rotunda, Salonica. (Photo courtesy of Andrea Soroko.)

a regular seminar at the University of Macedonia (across the street from the Aristotle University) and co-hosted a number of conferences. Up-and-coming non-Jewish scholars have also spearheaded an effort to increase accessibility to sources about Jewish history in Greece. In an unprecedented move at the most recent Holocaust commemoration on January 27, the new minister for Macedonia and Thrace publicly acknowledged Salonica not only as the city of Aristotle, but also of Solomon Alkabetz.

Although its membership is less than two percent of its prewar population, the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki persists under the leadership of its president, David Saltiel. Of the nearly sixty synagogues operating in the city on the eve of the war, only one still stands today: the Monastirioton Synagogue, established by Jews

who fled their native Yugoslavia in the 1920s. During the war, it was requisitioned by the Red Cross and thus survived. The Jewish Community uses it today only for the High Holidays and major life cycle events, such as weddings. On the other end of town, one of the only other prewar Jewish buildings still standing is the *Matanoth Laevionim*, which continued to function as the Jewish soup kitchen during the Nazi occupation. My great-uncle served on its council before being deported to Auschwitz along with his wife and two children, where they perished. Today, the building of the soup kitchen functions as a Jewish communal school with over forty students. It operates with the help of foreign assistance, in particular that of the American Jewish Committee.

The religious leadership also comes from abroad, from Israel, and some of the locals lament the loss of the distinctive Salonican traditions. During my visit, I met one of the last of the Salonican Jews intimately familiar with the distinctive liturgy and melodies—the octogenarian Davico Saltiel. We spoke for four hours, in Ladino, about Jewish life in the city before and after the war. He learned the ways of the Salonican traditions from Leon Halegua, the last Salonican-born rabbi of the city who died more than twenty years ago. Saltiel fears that the liturgy of Salonican Jewry will be lost when he dies. He may be right. Fortunately, he has released an album of popular Judeo-Spanish songs that preserve aspects of the community's rich folk tradition.

The primary site dedicated to the preservation of "Jewish Salonica" is the Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki, which serves as the main public face of the Jewish community. Government officials and foreign diplomats number among the more than four thousand annual visitors. Dedicated to the more than two thousand years of Jewish presence in the city, the Jewish Museum has curated several important exhibitions since it opened in 2003. Yet the museum begins with death—not the Holocaust itself, but rather with the Jewish cemetery. Without hinting at the possibility that someone other than the Nazis may have initiated its destruction, the Jewish Museum opens into a hallway lined with Jewish tombstones salvaged from the cemetery.

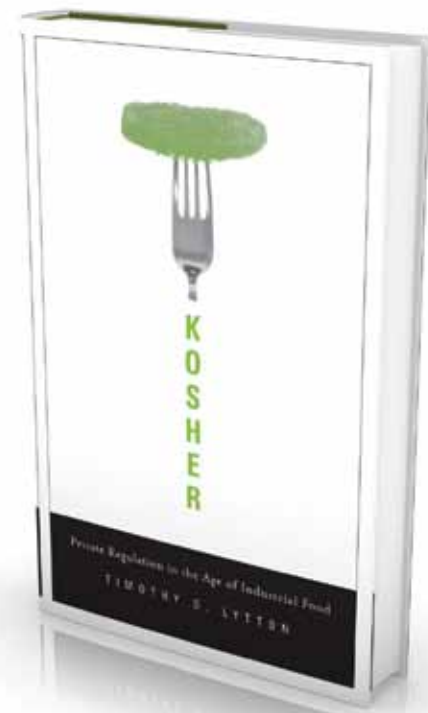
My Greek-Jewish friends, who guided me through the city late at night in search of remnants of the city's Jewish past, reminded me that despite the overtures of the mayor, the hopes of the leadership of the Jewish community, and the activities of a circle of intellectuals, the broader climate in the city and in the country remains ambivalent. Until the city accepts Jewish presence in Salonica both before and after the Nazi deportations of 1943; acknowledges its role in destroying the most important monument to that presence, the Jewish cemetery; and resolves the question of Jewish properties, efforts to truly remember the Jerusalem of the Balkans will be stymied. In the meantime, as a grandson of Salonica, I hope to help my friends tell their story.

Devin E. Naar is an assistant professor of history and Jewish studies at the University of Washington, where he coordinates the Sephardic Studies Initiative. He is working on a book about the history of Salonican Jewry during the 19th and 20th centuries.

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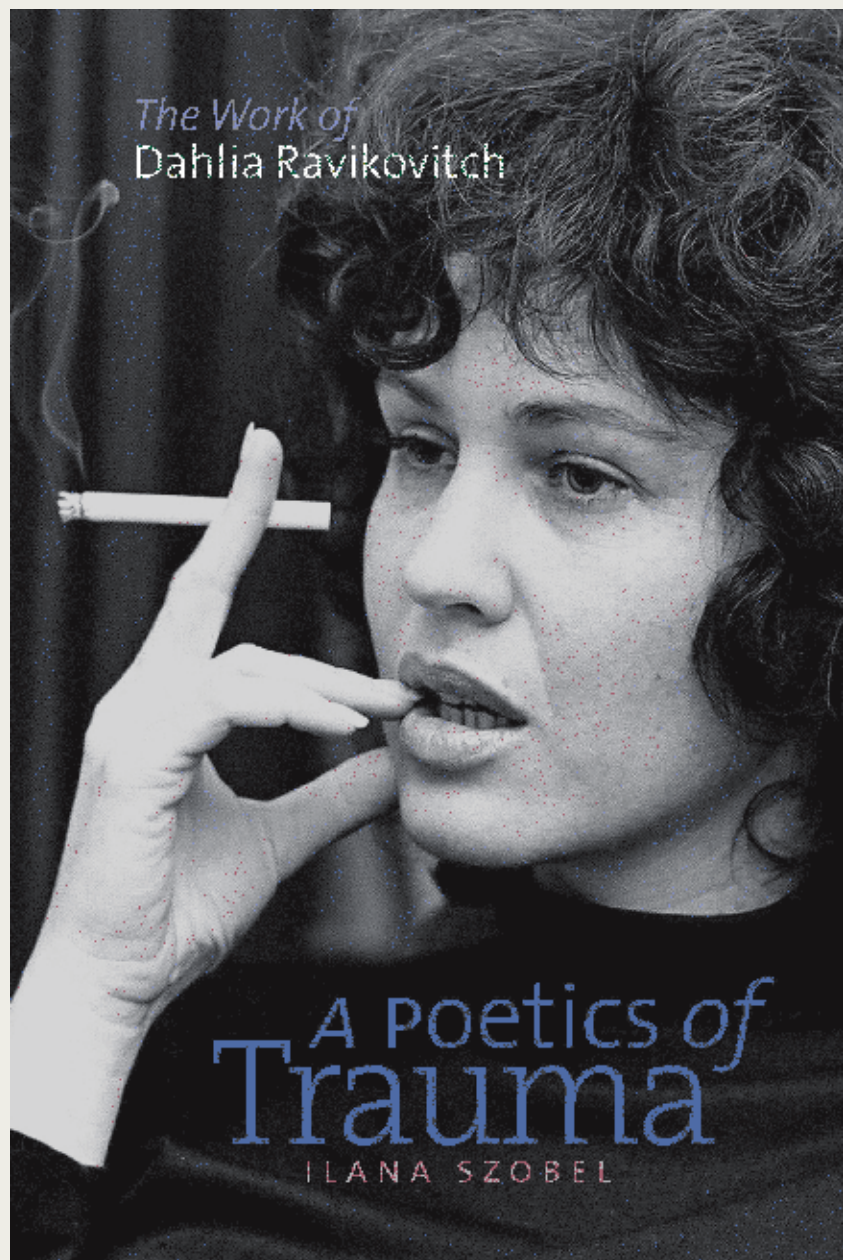
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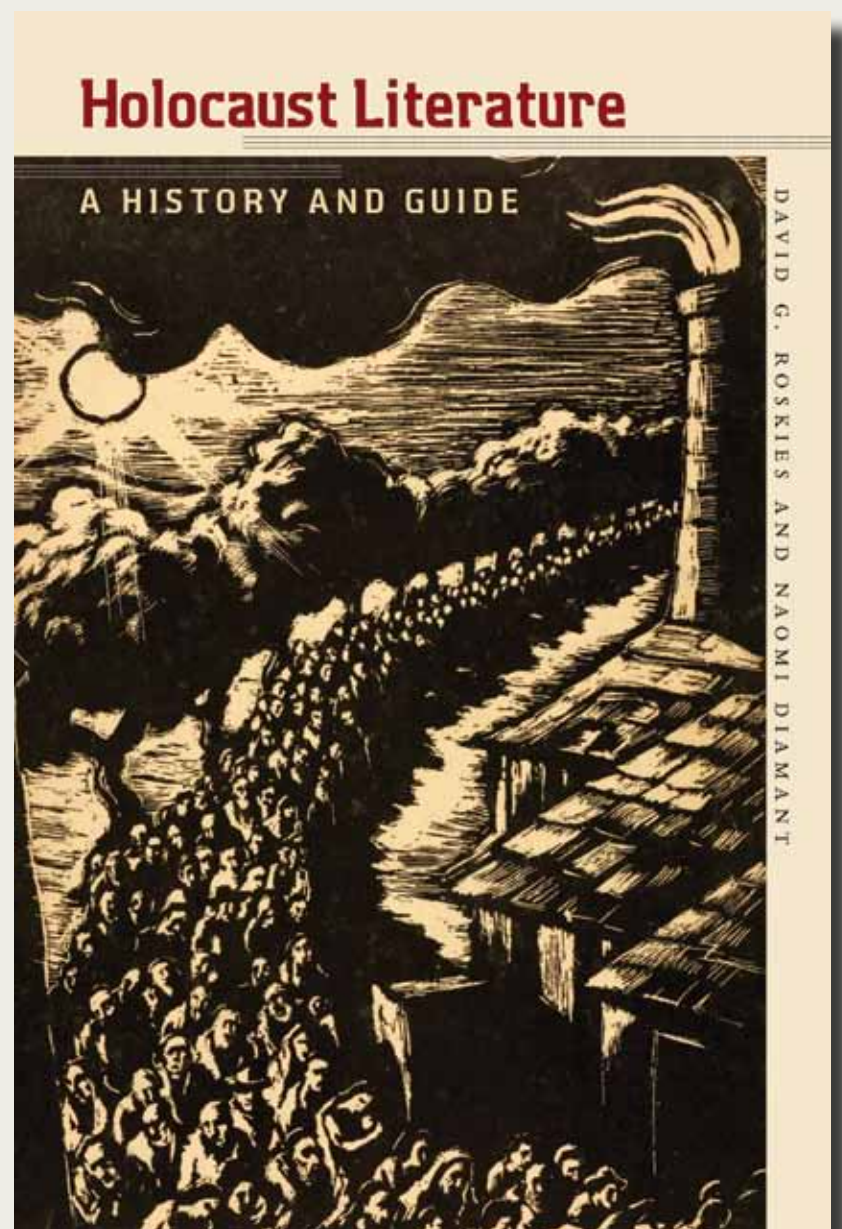
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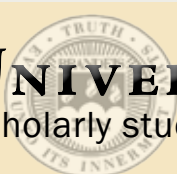
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Why Is This Haggadah Different?

BY DAVID STERN

The Haggadah of the Kaifeng Jews of China

by Fook-Kong Wong and Dalia Yasharpour
Brill, 216 pp., \$132

Few Jewish communities of the past have attracted more attention than the fabled, now vanished, community of Chinese Jews that existed for more than six hundred years in the city of Kaifeng. Today little remains of that community—a few families who claim to be descendants of its last Jews; several accounts about the community written by Christian missionaries in the 17th through 19th centuries; a few stone stellae or columns with inscriptions that the Kaifeng Jews themselves wrote about their history and beliefs; a number of Torah scrolls whose Hebrew letters remarkably resemble Chinese characters as written with an ink brush, and a scattering of other books. Of these, their Passover Haggadah is probably the most fascinating—if only because the idea of a family of medieval or early-modern Chinese Jews sitting through a Seder is such an irresistibly intriguing image to contemplate.

The Haggadah of the Kaifeng Jews of China is the first scholarly monograph devoted to this haggadah. The study's authors—Fook-Kong Wong, a Harvard-educated scholar of the Old Testament in Hong Kong, and Dalia Yasharpour, a preceptor in Persian language and literature at Harvard—have mined the text for all the information it contains about the Jews of Kaifeng in the 17th and 18th centuries, the time that the two surviving manuscripts of the haggadah were written. Most of the book is devoted to a detailed study of the haggadah's Hebrew text and its accompanying Judeo-Persian instructions, and what the language of the text can tell us about the Hebraic literacy of the Kaifeng Jews. These chapters will appeal mainly to scholars. But the larger story the haggadah tells about the Chinese Jews is of far wider interest, and the sight alone of the haggadah—one of the manuscripts is reproduced in full in the book, along with a transcription of the Hebrew text and an annotated English translation—is worth more than a fleeting look.

The Kaifeng Jewish community probably first took shape sometime in the early Middle Ages—around the year 1000—when Jewish traders on the Silk Route, most likely from Persia or Yemen, reached China. Of the several cities in which these traders settled, Kaifeng, then the capital city of the Song Dynasty, was the most prominent, and for all practical purposes, the only

Jewish community in medieval China about which we know anything. From all appearances, the Jewish community flourished from the outset. By 1163, the Kaifeng Jews had built an imposing synagogue, which, over the subsequent five centuries, was repaired and rebuilt several times, often after being destroyed by the floods that regularly washed over the city.

The Chinese seem to have embraced the Jews, who, in turn, underwent rapid acculturation, or Sinification.

So far as we know, Jews in China were never persecuted. Quite the opposite: The Chinese seem to have embraced the Jews, who, in turn, underwent rapid acculturation, or Sinification, the same process through which most other ethnic minorities amid the vast populace of China inevitably passed as well. The process can be seen most clearly in

the material remains of Kaifeng Jewry—in their Chinese-looking Hebrew script or in the architecture of their (now destroyed) synagogue. Like the neighboring mosque, the synagogue looked almost exactly like a Confucian shrine, with dedicatory tablets at the front alongside incense-bowls for ancestor worship—albeit with a few distinctively Jewish features like an ark for Torah scrolls, stone inscriptions with prayers like the Shema, and a monumental “Chair of Moses” upon which they sat while they read the Torah.

While the Chinese recognized the religious differences between themselves and the Jews—referred to as “the sinew-plucking” sect (after the injunction in Gen. 32:32 not to eat the tendon) or “the scripture-teaching/respecting” sect—the Chinese Jews faced no obstacles in rising quickly in the civil bureaucracy and attaining high and powerful positions in the imperial court and other sectors of government. Chinese Jews appear to have felt comfortable enough in their host-culture to have found no trouble intermarrying with native Chinese even as they continued to observe the Sabbath and holidays, to keep kosher in some fashion, and to hold traditional worship services in the synagogue. Nonetheless, acculturation inevitably exacted a price. Whether it was due primarily to their astounding success in assimilating to Chinese culture, or to their near-complete isolation from Jews everywhere else in the world, or to their gradual loss over the centuries of Hebraic and Judaic literacy, by the 17th century the Jewish community had begun to decline precipitously as more and more members were simply swallowed up into the enormous body of the Chinese population.

The existence of Chinese Jews first came to the notice of the West in 1605, after the arrival in China of Jesuit missionaries led by the Italian Matteo Ricci. When the Kaifeng Jews heard that a Western “priest” who believed in one God and was knowledgeable in the Bible had arrived in Beijing, they simply assumed he must be Jewish. Ricci did not disabuse them of their misperception, but he and his missionary successors also took real interest in the Jewish community (partly in the hope of converting them, and partly because they believed the Kaifeng Jews’ claim that their community had originated in the first millennium and therefore could provide them with valuable evidence of an “original” and “true” Judaism that pre-dated the Rabbis). To be sure, the missionaries were more interested in the Kaifeng Jews’ scrolls and books than in their survival, and they did nothing to help the Jews or stop the process of the community’s decline (although two of the Jesuits, Jean Domenge and Jean-Paul Gozani, did leave us extensive letters that serve as the main sources for our knowledge of the community). When the last leader and teacher of the Kaifeng Jews died in the early 19th century, Kaifeng Jewry disappeared. Their synagogue had



Ink rubbing of the 1512 stone inscription left by the Kaifeng Jews. (With permission of the Royal Ontario Museum © ROM.)

already been irreparably damaged by another flood, and their Torah scrolls and other books were dispersed among various owners and institutions, most of them Christian.

The two surviving haggadah manuscripts that are the subjects of Wong and Yasharpour's study are owned today by the Klau Library of Hebrew Union College (which purchased them in 1851 from the London Society for Promoting Christi-

Bread, leavened or unleavened, must have been a very unusual sight in China.

anity Amongst the Jews). Both are modest books, one written in Jewish-Persian hand, the other in Chinese Hebrew square script (like that of the Torah scrolls). While the two haggadahs were written by different scribes about a century apart, both preserve essentially the same text. That text primarily follows the Persian Jewish rite but from one of that rite's early stages, before the haggadah had undergone many of the expansions with which contemporary users of the text are familiar. As a result, the Kaifeng Haggadah doesn't have *Dayyenu*, *Shefokh Chamatekha* ("Pour Out Your Wrath," which probably did not appear in the Ashkenazic haggadah until after the Crusader massacres), or folk songs such as *Chad Gadya* (which did not become a regular feature until the printed Italian editions of the 17th century). However, the most startling omission is the absence of the blessing over the matzah (that follows the standard *ha-motzi*). The editors suggest that the blessing may have been so well-known that the copyists did not feel the need to record it, but it seems to me even more likely that the copyist either forgot to write the blessing or that it was already missing from their tradition by the 17th century. Bread, leavened or unleavened, must have been a very unusual sight in China.

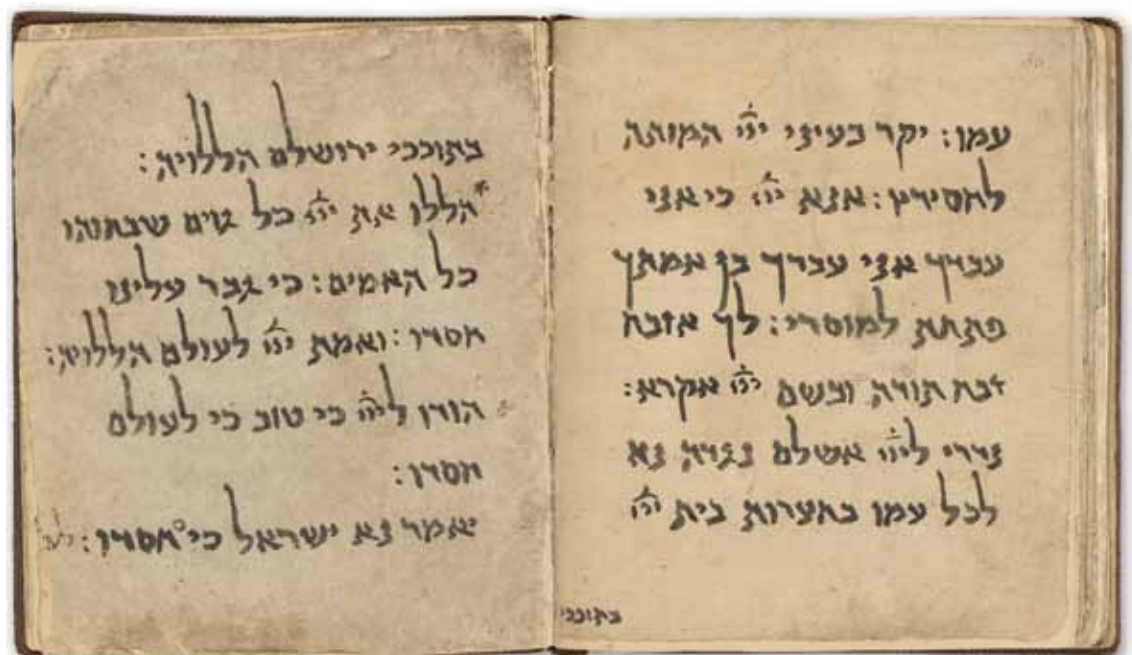
In general, however, the Passover haggadah has one of the most universally stable texts in all the Jewish liturgy—the core text is basically similar if not identical nearly everywhere—and for all its Judeo-Persian peculiarities and missing passages, readers of the Kaifeng Haggadah will have no more difficulty in navigating this haggadah than they would finding their way through the Maxwell House version. The Kaifeng Haggadah's most revealing features, as its editors demonstrate, are its many errors. Some pages are misplaced and out of sequence; others are missing. There are many misspellings and mistaken vocalizations, a good number of them resulting from phonetic transcription, that is, where the copyist wrote words on the basis of what he knew from hearing the word pronounced rather than from having seen it in a written form. This feature was complicated, in turn, by the fact (attested by the inscriptions as well as by the Jesuits' accounts) that the Kaifeng Jews spoke Hebrew with heavy Chinese accents (so that a word like *le-olam* became *re'oram*, for example). According to one account, their Hebrew sounded more like Chinese than the Hebrew the Jesuits knew from their European educations. All

these various features—the errors, the omissions, the peculiarities in order and in transcription, along with what they were able to cull from the marginal notes in the haggadahs, some of them in Chinese—indicate to Wong and Yasharpour that, by the 17th and 18th centuries, the time that the two manuscripts were written, the Kaifeng Jews may have still understood enough of the haggadah's Hebrew to be able to use the books at their Seders, but whatever literacy they possessed was already seriously impaired and presaged the complete disappearance that the community would experience not long after.

There is more than a little irony in the fact that this indication should come in the form of a haggadah. Of all the classical texts of Judaism, the Passover haggadah is the Jewish book of redemp-

to another, and from one period to the next, but invariably, every Jewish community has imagined redemption in the haggadah—sometimes with the addition of new passages or through the insertion of illustrations and pictures—in the image of its own diasporic experience.

The Kaifeng Haggadah does not have a distinctive vision of redemption. What is distinctive about this book—visible in the Sinified form of its script, in the error-filled and otherwise defective pages of the text—is not redemption but its opposite. What this book's pages capture is the specific historical moment in which this community was irretrievably on the way to its demise. The Kaifeng Haggadah is not a haggadah that looks forward to redemption. It is a haggadah of oblivion.



Passover Haggadah with Judeo-Persian translation HUC Ms 927. (Courtesy of the Klau Library, Cincinnati, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.)



Prayers for Sabbath Eve from the Chinese-Hebrew Memorial Book (Hazkarat Neshamot) HUC Ms. 926. (Courtesy of the Klau Library, Cincinnati, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.)

tion par excellence. It remembers the story of the Exodus from Egypt in order to re-experience the salvatory power of redemption in the present, and so as to anticipate the final redemption of the messianic age. Exactly how the haggadah imagines redemption has varied from one community

The Haggadah of the Kaifeng Jews of China is one of a spate of books about the Jews of China, some of them scholarly, others more popular, which have appeared in the last several decades, mainly in the English-speaking world, especially in America. This Western publishing phenomenon has been

remarked upon less than the widespread interest in contemporary China regarding Jews and Judaism. Amid the massive globalization—for all practical purposes, this means Westernization—that China is currently experiencing, the Jewish people—largely thanks to Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, and Alan Greenspan (whose name I have heard repeatedly invoked in my several trips to China as a paragon of the American Jew)—have come to be viewed in China as central to Western culture to a degree that no Jew in America would ever imagine him or herself to be. And while the reports of a Talmud or books about Jews on a shelf in every bookstore are exaggerated, I can testify from my own experience—having taught Talmud in the Jewish studies program at Nanjing University to

some fifteen undergraduate and graduate Chinese students (probably the most talented group of students I have ever taught)—that the appetite in contemporary China for real knowledge about Judaism and its culture and history is virtually insatiable.

The contemporary fascination in America with the Chinese Jews is different. Obviously, it has something to do with the unique exoticism of the community. But there may be more to it. The extent of the success of Kaifeng Jews in assimilating to Chinese society without resistance and achieving cultural acceptance along with great wealth, power, and status is almost unparalleled in Jewish history. The great exception is, of course, American Jewry, which has also prospered in, and been embraced by, its host culture with a success that

has been said by some to be unparalleled. And no other diaspora communities in Jewish history have experienced equivalent rates of assimilation or suffered from the same degree of Hebraic and Judaic illiteracy. American Jewry is in no danger of vanishing as precipitously as did the Kaifeng Jews, but as we sit down to our Seders and raise our glasses to drink the four cups, it may be worth remembering the haggadah of the Kaifeng Jews along with the Exodus from Egypt.

David Stern is Moritz and Josephine Berg Professor of Classical Hebrew Literature at the University of Pennsylvania, and the author, most recently, of The Washington Haggadah (Harvard University Press).

Israel on the Hudson

BY JENNA WEISSMAN JOSELIT

City of Promises: A History of the Jews of New York

edited by Deborah Dash Moore; Volume I by Howard B. Rock, Volume II by Annie Pollard and Daniel Soyer, Volume III by Jeffrey S. Gurock; visual essays by Diana L. Linden
New York University Press, 1,108 pages (three-volume boxed set), \$125

“**T**he great big city’s a wondrous toy, / just made for a girl and boy. / We’ll turn Manhattan into an isle of joy,” cheered Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart in their bright and bubbly 1925 salute, “Manhattan.” Chock-a-block with geographical references to the Lower East Side and Greenwich Village, Coney Island and Flatbush, “the Bronx and Staten Island too,” the song could very well serve as the anthem of New York’s Jews.

Their allegiance to the five boroughs fuels *City of Promises: A History of the Jews of New York*, an ambitious, three-volume work that attempts to capture and make sense of the entangled relationship between the New World’s greatest, most populous, city and its vast number of Jewish inhabitants. As virtually everyone knows, that relationship gave rise to some of the most emblematic of modern Jewish neighborhoods, institutions, and outsized personalities—from the Lower East Side, America’s very first “great ghetto”; to Russ & Daughters, purveyors of smoked fish, bagels, and other delicacies commonly associated with the Big Apple; to Stephen S. Wise, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, and Ed Koch, who was recently eulogized as “tough and loud, brash and irreverent, full of humor and chutzpah . . . [New York City’s] quintessential mayor.” Moving chronologically from the community’s 17th-century origins through the first decade of the 21st century, *City of Promises* explores, in vivid and generous detail, how

and why the Jews came to regard New York, New York as “their special place.”

A synthesis of the latest historical scholarship, whose combined bibliography and footnotes run to more than 150 pages, this project engaged the talents of several generations of American Jewish historians, from Howard B. Rock, professor emeritus at Florida International University and Jeffrey S. Gurock of Yeshiva University, to Annie Pollard of the Lower East Side’s Tenement Museum and Daniel Soyer of Fordham University. Its guiding hand and presiding spirit, though, is that of Deborah Dash Moore, who teaches at the University of Michigan

deep immersion in the sources, Moore’s perspective on the Jewish encounter with New York is anything but starry-eyed. “By the middle of the 20th century, no city offered the Jews more than New York,” she writes. “New York gave Jews visibility as individuals and as a group. It provided employment and education, inspiration and freedom, fellowship and community . . . But by the 1960s and ’70s, the Jews’ love affair with the city soured.” Equally sensitive to both the limits and the possibilities of the Jews’ encounter with the city, Moore makes a point of emphasizing its multiple twists and turns. At times, she notes, the New York Jewish experience more than exceeded its

At times, the New York Jewish experience more than exceeded its promise, at other moments, it fell short, and at still others, it soured entirely.

and directs its Frankel Center for Judaic Studies. Her 1981 book, *At Home in America: Second Generation New York Jews*, reaffirmed the centrality of New York to the American Jewish experience. Grounded as much in the new urban history of the time as it was in modern Jewish history, Moore’s account not only transformed ethnicity from a sociological category into an historical one, it also demonstrated the extent to which modern expressions of Jewishness were inextricably bound up with that cluster of behaviors and sensibilities known as urbanism; the two, we’ve now come to understand, go hand in hand.

In the years since the publication of *At Home in America*, Professor Moore has ranged widely, ably tackling such disparate phenomena as the Jews of Los Angeles and Miami and the experience of Jewish servicemen in World War II. With *City of Promises*, she now returns to the subject that first launched her career. One might call it a homecoming of sorts, but this is no sentimental journey. Informed by years of close reading and unusually

promise, at other moments, it fell short, and at still others, it soured entirely.

A lovely, if not entirely original, conceit that gives the series its name as well as its intellectual scaffolding, the rubric of promise helps to tame the unruliness that lies at the heart of New York’s Jewish story. For if ever there was a messy and uncontrollable tale, this is it. Within New York City’s precincts, nothing, not even the past, remained constant for too long. In quick succession, one kind of Jew gave rise to another, as did the various languages in which the community expressed itself. Synagogue minute books recorded the most humdrum of details, first in Portuguese and then in German, Yiddish, Ladino, and English, while newspapers ran the gamut from *The American Hebrew* and the *Jewish Messenger* to *La Vara* and *Der Blatt*. Meanwhile, life in the Jewish enclave of Kleindeutschland and neighborhoods such as the South Bronx and Harlem, Forest Hills and Boro Park ebbed and flowed, as did the

fortunes of those who called these areas home. Self-styled Jewish reverends, aspiring chief rabbis and a bona fide one, too, came and went, as did shopkeepers, union leaders and politicians, do-gooders and garment workers, sign painters, vaudevillians, *bundistn* and *yidishistn*, lovers of Zion, fanciers of Purim costume balls, and devotees of modern Hebrew. For a time, the Empire City housed them all.

The city's designated Jewish spaces were also continuously on the move. Buildings that seemed destined to last forever and that stamped the city as open and hospitable—the exuberant, Moorish-styled, Temple Emanu-El at 43rd and Fifth Avenue with its egg-shaped minarets or turrets and “Saracenic detail,” for instance—were torn down to make way for streamlined office buildings. Heralded by *The New York Times* as “one of the few distinctly Oriental examples in the panorama of New York architecture,” the building faced the wrecking ball in 1926. Its imminent demise prompted the paper to note glumly that “the sun is about to gild these turrets for the last time . . . Change, change everywhere.”

These days, cultural personalities whose imprint on New York Jewish life once seemed as indelible as Temple Emanu-El barely register with the latest generation of Jewish New Yorkers. Little over a month ago, New York's *The Jewish Week* carried a feature piece written by a Hunter College High School senior in which she noted casually that her peers knew not of Woody Allen. (The fact that she was aware of his identity actually set her apart.) “By middle school,” relates Basia Rosenbaum, “I was quoting Woody Allen (even when I didn't understand the punch lines) to peers who not only had no idea who he was, but erupted in giggle fits over his first name.” If it is Woody Allen's lot to be consigned to the distant shores of memory, what fate do we hold out for the chronically embattled Gershom Mendes Seixas of Congregation Shearith Israel; the plucky Minnie Louis, founder of the Hebrew Technical School for Girls; or the redoubtable Esther Jane Ruskay, author of that paean to Jewish domesticity, *Hearth and Home Essays*? Time and again, history has failed to remember many who proudly called New York their home.

Perhaps that's because the history of New York's Jews is a giant sprawl of a story, of a piece with the city's most characteristic geographical feature. Figuring out who to include and who to omit, which moment to highlight and which to minimize, is a thankless enterprise. Someone, somewhere, is sure to feel slighted. With that in mind, perhaps, the publisher of *City of Promises* makes much of the fact that its three volumes come in a boxed set. At first, I thought this purely a marketing decision wrapped up in an aesthetic gesture: attractively packaged as a unit, housed within a handsome container, *City of Promises* was made, well, more promising to potential readers, who would be much more likely to purchase all three volumes if they were sold as one. But on second thought, I now take the assemblage to be as much an intellectual statement as a commercial one, a way to house and contain the fluidity and variability of the history that resides within its aggregate 1,000 plus pages. It's an admission that what lies ahead is a whopping big yarn, a moveable feast of a story.

To be sure, *City of Promises* adds up to more than the sum of its parts; its impact is a cumulative one. Even so, like the mosaic of neighbor-

hoods that makes up the city, each of its volumes also stands apart—on its own terms and turf. (To bring home that point, all three volumes feature the same Foreword, written by Moore.)

The first volume in the series, *Haven of Liberty: New York Jews in the New World, 1654-1865*, sets the tone by looking closely at the ways in which

Nothing if not independent-minded, they refused to pay dues or to sit in the seats to which they had been assigned, much less observe the Sabbath or keep kosher. The more hot-headed among them even sought to settle disputes with their fists; brawls and bloodied noses were not uncommon in the years prior to and following the American Revolution.



Purim Ball at the Academy of Music illustrated in Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, April 1, 1865. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.)



The Lower East Side, ca. 1907. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.)

New York Jewry first developed under the impress of freedom—or, more specifically still, under the irrepressible conditions of republicanism. “New York's Jews incorporated American revolutionary ideology into the core of their individual and collective lives,” Howard B. Rock writes, adding, “Republicanism formed the seeds of the city of promises.” Deftly, he limns a portrait of a community learning to make its way.

Things didn't always go well. Time and again, New York Jews of the 18th century chafed under the authority of the city's only synagogue, Shearith Israel.

Eventually, New York's Jewish residents learned to avoid conflict, or at least to minimize it, by forming congregations of their own where like-mindedness prevailed. Alternatively, they sought community and companionship in more avowedly secular institutions of the mid-19th century such as B'nai B'rith, a fraternal organization, or the Jewish Clerks Aid Society, a philanthropic one, where the “horse-race speed” of the traditional weekday service was no longer of concern and keeping kosher had ceased to be the “diploma of a good Jew.” A wider world, and with it a bounty of new opportunities, beckoned



New York Jews receiving free packages of matzah and matzah flour, ca. 1908. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.)

enticingly, which the Jews of antebellum New York made quick to harvest.

Though it overlaps somewhat with Rock's account, the second volume of the series, *Emerging Metropolis: New York Jews in the Age of Immigration, 1840-1920*, chronicles New York Jewry's explosive growth throughout the latter half of the 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th. Sensitively drawn by Annie Polland and Daniel Soyer, this ac-

count trains its sights on the "story of how New York became the greatest Jewish metropolis of all time." Numbers had everything to do with it. In 1840, there were approximately seven thousand Jews in the Empire City. By 1920, their ranks had ballooned to more than a million and a half, the consequence of massive immigration from abroad. Hard as it is to imagine, New York Jewry was once so small a community that it was possible to tabulate its size based on how many people in the city purchased matzah for Passover. As the number of Jewish residents grew and grew, such informal tallies inevitably gave way to much more methodologically sophisticated and impersonal forms of accounting—a telling index of change.

Equally telling was New York Jewry's increasing heterogeneity. Throughout the latter half of the 19th century, the Jewish community was populated by "brownstone Jews," whose strong attachment to politesse, discretion, and other conventions of bourgeois behavior resulted in low-key, restrained forms of Jewish expression. By 1900, "tenement Jews," with their own highly differentiated and much more public norms of social behavior, would set a new tone. Fragmentation rather than unity became the order of the day.

Some New York Jews were quick to rue the Jewish community's metamorphosis into a hotbed of

fiercely held, competing allegiances. In 1910, seeking consensus, as well as a form of social control, they formed the Kehillah, a community-wide umbrella group—a "municipal government" is what one of its champions, Judah Magnes, called it—whose portfolio encompassed everything from what New York Jews ate and in what language they prayed (or didn't) to how their children spent their leisure time (at the movies). I suspect that the reader will not be terribly surprised to learn that this noble venture did not succeed, though it certainly wasn't for want of trying. By then, you see, New York Jews—the contentious, passionate, unmanageable mass of them—had come into their own.

The third and final volume in the series, *Jews in Gotham: New York Jews in a Changing City, 1920-2010*, takes the story up to the present day. With Jeffrey S. Gurock as its surefooted guide, the landscape of New York becomes an increasingly familiar one. Many local readers are apt to recognize themselves—and their city—in its pages. Much of the text focuses on the changing face of the urban landscape, when, in the wake of World War II, new Jewish neighborhoods took root. "Neighborhoods in every borough approached, each in their own differing ways, the opportunities and challenges that this city of promises presented and posed," writes Gurock. By the 1960s, Queens Boulevard in Forest Hills became a "Jewish avenue," giving Riverside Park and the Williamsburg Bridge promenade a run for their money. Meanwhile, the planned Bronx community of Co-op City—"for friendly people living together"—drew anywhere

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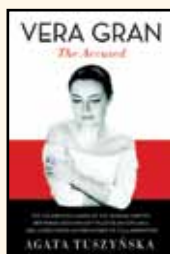
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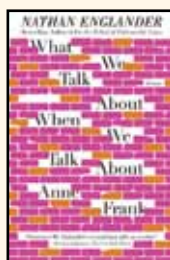
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from twenty-five thousand to forty thousand Jewish residents.

Gurock's narrative also gives pride of place to that bewildering mix of postwar cultural phenomena that transcended local boundaries, among them the Soviet Jewry movement, feminism, and the revival of Orthodoxy on one side of the ledger and the souring of Black-Jewish relations on the other. Although *Jews in Gotham* has more than its fair share of little-known institutions and events, from the Trylon—a West Bronx boys club, which inventively took its name from one of the 1939 World's Fair's most emblematic structures—to the Jewish Education Committee's "Children's Solemn Assembly of Sorrow and Protest" of 1943, those who inhabit its pages—Bella Abzug, Michael Bloomberg, Howard Cosell, Ed Koch, Ralph Lauren, Natan Sharansky—are household names. By the time we put down *Jews in Gotham*, we've come home.

Each of the three volumes in the series is also accompanied by a "visual essay" by Diana L. Linden, an art historian and museum educator. Drawing on objects, images and art, her perspective, we are told, "suggests alternative narratives drawn from a record of cultural production. . . Her view runs as a counterpoint and complement to the historical accounts." Much as I applaud the notion of fully incorporating non-textual materials into the repertoire of sources that constitute the historical record and for taking one's interpretive cues from things as well as words, both the placement and substance of Linden's "visual essays" work against this practice. For one thing, they are positioned at the end of each volume, where they function more as afterthoughts than as equal partners, let alone as interpretive "counterpoints." For another, the editorial treatment of the visual materials seems rather grudging. To shine, they need space, otherwise their presence doesn't register. Time and time again, the reproductions of engravings, maps, paintings, advertisements, and photographs—both of people and objects—are simply not given their due. More disappointing still, the contents of these visual essays leave something to be desired, their selection is uneven at worst and overly familiar at best, and their accompanying interpretation jejune and obvious. A missed opportunity, they do not go nearly far enough.

Much the same can be said of *City of Promises*. Taken as a whole, it falls short of its considerable promise. Dutiful rather than inspired, its trajectory does not quite match the grandeur of its subject. I wanted to be swept away by the narrative, caught up in the details, transfixed by a novel interpretation, heartened by a fresh turn of phrase, riveted by a striking image. Alas, that didn't come to pass. My disappointment, I suspect, is a casualty of the series' structure, which places a premium on chronology. Having to answer to the imperatives of time, each volume crams an inordinate amount of material into its pages, leaving little opportunity for daydreaming. The text covers a lot of ground but at the expense of a synthetic, freewheeling, thematic approach to the glorious material at hand. Compounding matters,

the series' armature—its leitmotif of promises made and lost—seems to constrain its authors rather than free them to be at their discursive best. Fidelity rather than imagination rules this roost.

Surely it is no coincidence that *City of Promises* puts me in mind of the recently opened core exhibition at the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia. Both sweeping gestures of interpretation, they reflect the difficulties inherent in the master narrative approach to history. The core exhibition, like *City of Promises*, is the handiwork of



Russ & Daughters, East Houston Street, NYC, 1949. (Courtesy of Russ & Daughters.)

a most accomplished band of historians. It, too, encompasses a vast array of material. It, too, is propelled by an overarching interpretation—that of freedom. And in the end, it, too, leaves me hungering for more.

Close kin, both the books and the exhibition lack fire in the belly. They're too cautious, restrained, and tamped down by half. Where, I wonder, is the pep and the exhilaration, the fun and the razzmatazz, the urgency and the speed and the noise and the spirit of *hefker*? Where, oh where, is the expansiveness and, yes, the sheer incommensurability of it all? Perhaps this is something that only poetry can do. Consider these lines of A. Leyeles' Yiddish poem of 1918, "New York," (translated by Benjamin Harshav). They really do the city justice.

Metal. Granite. Uproar. Racket. Clatter.
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Electric light in screeching maze. A spell.

Jenna Weissman Joselit, the Charles E. Smith Professor of Judaic Studies and Professor of History at The George Washington University, also directs its program in Judaic studies and its MA in Jewish cultural arts.

Brother Baruch

BY ALLAN ARKUSH

The First Modern Jew: Spinoza and the History of an Image

by Daniel B. Schwartz

Princeton University Press, 296 pp., \$39.50

There has never been and probably will never again be a more famous excommunication in Jewish history than the one inflicted upon Baruch Spinoza in Amsterdam in 1656. Less well known, but familiar to most students of modern Jewish history, is the symbolic effort to rescind that ban undertaken by Hebrew University Professor Joseph Klausner. In February 1927, at the newly established university's commemoration of the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Spinoza's death, Klausner delivered a lecture in which he objectively sized up the heretical philosopher's achievements. Then he jolted his audience with his unforgettable peroration:

To Spinoza the Jew, it is declared . . . The ban is nullified! The sin of Judaism against you is removed and your offense against her atoned for! Our brother are you, our brother are you, our brother are you!

Some people left the auditorium (Gershom Scholem tells us) mocking Klausner's theatricality and his improper recourse to the phrase traditionally used to end a rabbinic ban. In the long run, however, Klausner's words have become a frequently noted sign of the revolutionary turn in Zionist thinking that transformed quite a few former outcasts into heroes. That Daniel B. Schwartz would focus on it in his discussion of "Spinoza's meaning for Jewish modernity" was inevitable. But his exceedingly careful study shows that Klausner's position on this matter was not as simple as many have thought, and by no means as unequivocal as that of, say, Spinoza's greatest Zionist champion, David Ben-Gurion.

"The 'Old Man' of the Yishuv and Israeli politics," Schwartz reminds us, "was an ardent admirer of the Amsterdam philosopher." Ben-Gurion applauded his combination of a scientific spirit with a spirituality that had its roots in the Bible, his laying of the foundations for, as Schwartz puts it, "the prime minister's dream of transforming the Hebrew Bible from a work of transcendent revelation into a national epic," and, perhaps above all, his anticipation of Zionism. Like many Zionists before him, Ben-Gurion seized upon the passage in the *Theological-Political Treatise* where Spinoza speculates that the Jews might one day restore their independence, if only they were to abandon the principles of their religion that "effeminate their hearts," and read it, very implausibly, as a call to arms if not a prophecy.

Once he was prime minister, Ben-Gurion wanted to go far beyond a shout-out to Spinoza. He hoped to

honor the man he called "the most original thinker and the most profound philosopher that Jewry has produced in the past two thousand years" with "the publication of a complete and critical edition of Ba-

Not the actual Spinoza of history but "the Spinoza of memory" is the subject of Schwartz's book.

ruch Spinoza's writings by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem" in time for the three hundredth anniversary of his excommunication in 1956. Schwartz discusses this effort in some detail but, on the whole, devotes a lot more attention to the relatively obscure Klausner's attitude toward Spinoza than he does to that of the man who was arguably the most famous Jew of the 20th century. And he does so with good reason.

In his chapter dealing with the "Zionist rehabilitation of Spinoza," Schwartz makes no attempt to be comprehensive. Although he acknowledges, in his footnotes, that the "Zionist reception of Spinoza remains mostly understudied," he tells us in his text



Joseph Klausner, ca. 1911. (Courtesy of the National Library of Israel.)

only a fraction of what he obviously knows about it. He makes Klausner and not Ben-Gurion one of the pivotal figures in his narrative not because he considers him to be more important but because of what he represents. Fundamentally, he informs us, Jewish nationalism's appropriation of Spinoza added up to "a debate over the meaning of Zionist secularism," and in this debate, Klausner, over the years, occupied more than one position.

In 1927, in Jerusalem, Klausner argued that even though "Spinozism is *not* Judaism in the purest sense of the term," it was still, despite its atheism and its utter irreconcilability with the teachings of the prophets, "part of an uninterrupted chain" extending "to our generation and until the end of all generations." Klausner then regarded Spinoza's system, as Schwartz

puts it, as "a product of the Jewish national impulse." Back in 1911, however, in a dispute prompted by the attempt of Y. H. Brenner and some other young Hebrew writers to push the envelope of Jewish culture open too widely, Klausner had insisted, like his mentor Ahad Ha'am, "that secular Jewish culture had to maintain an organic link to its religious past and avoid the temptation of what he called "de-historicization." It could not leave the prophets behind.

As Schwartz shows, it was with very similar arguments that some secular Zionists objected, much later, to what Klausner tried to do in 1927 and what Ben-Gurion attempted at a later date. He mentions, for example, a man named Yehoshua Manoah, one of the founders of Deganyah, the first kibbutz, who from 1954 to 1956 "engaged in a dialogue in the Hebrew press" with the rather busy prime minister (believe it or not!) "over the propriety of celebrating Spinoza from a national Jewish perspective." As Manoah wrote,

"I am not religiously observant, but for me (and I don't care what others think) anybody who belittles the stature of Moses, our teacher (*Moshe rabenu*), speaks ill of the Prophets of Israel, shows disrespect to the Hebrew Bible, our book of books, which in my eyes has no equal—I want nothing to do with his philosophy.

In the sentences that follow his discussion of Manoah, Schwartz underscores his significance and at the same time clarifies the strategy underlying his own treatment of the Zionist reception of Spinoza:

One of the great secular champions of the reappropriation of the Amsterdam philosopher for Hebrew culture shared with one of its vehement secular critics a nearly verbatim concern over unchecked secularization. By going beyond attention-grabbing gestures like Klausner's lifting of the *cherem* [excommunication], and appreciating the anxiety over where to draw the line between "freedom" and "heresy" they obscure, we gain more complex insight not only into the Zionist use of Spinoza, but into an essential tension within the Zionist formation of the secular."

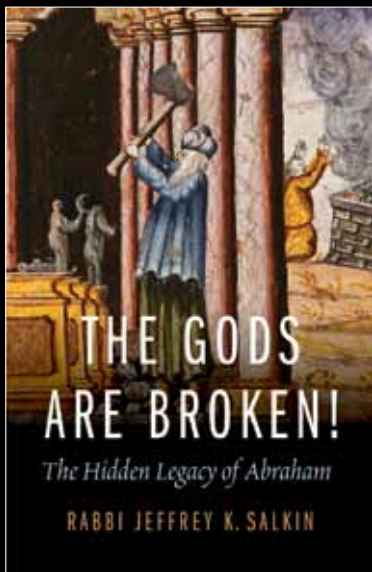
Not the actual Spinoza of history but what Schwartz calls "the Spinoza of memory" is the subject of this book, which examines this being's manifestations not only in the Zionist world but in "constructions of nontraditional Jewishness—as-similationist, cosmopolitan, and national—from the 19th century to the present." What Schwartz has produced is not, however, the catalogue that this sentence from the book's epilogue might lead one to expect. Throughout his narrative, Schwartz takes people out of the pigeonholes into which previous scholars have tended to place them.

Take Berthold Auerbach, for instance, the popular 19th-century German novelist who started out in

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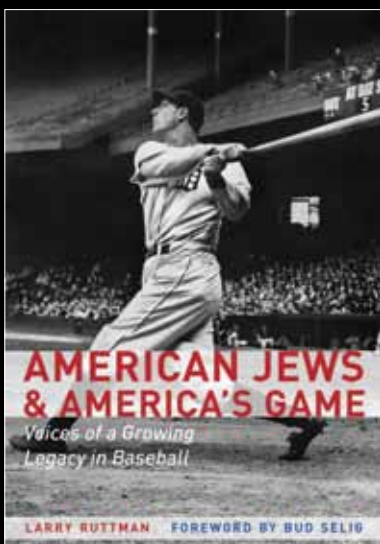
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life as a yeshiva boy and came close to becoming a Reform rabbi before he earned his fame as the author of stories about Black Forest village life. His 1837 *Spinoza: A Historical Novel* was, as Schwartz notes, not only "the first attempt ever made to portray Spinoza as a fictional protagonist" and an influential work in Germany in general but "a landmark in his Jewish reception." Auerbach wrote it only a year after he published a long pamphlet entitled *Judaism and Recent Literature*, in which he described Judaism, in Schwartz's words, "as a religion whose nature and history vouched for its capacity for progress." Some previous scholars have read Auerbach's *Spinoza* in the light of this pamphlet; more have perceived the book "as a plea for Enlightenment universalism against all forms of religious particularism." Schwartz, for his part, makes a strong argument that the narrative is ambiguous and leaves us wondering.

Is the enlightened and emancipated society imagined here as Spinoza's legacy compatible with an ongoing and positively affirmed Jewish difference—with the view expressed in *Das Judentum* that "Judaism can and will satisfy every need of mankind for all time"? Or is Spinoza being invoked as the forerunner of a fully assimilationist vision of the future that will climax in the dissolution of *all* confessional identities in a universal community of humanity?

Schwartz is no less attentive to the 20th-century reception of Spinoza in Yiddish than he is to the earlier one in German. "To this day," he says, Jacob Shatzky's *Spinoza un zayn svivoh* [*Spinoza and His Environment*], published in 1927, "remains the most significant exemplar of a Yiddish scholarly account of the life and times of the Amsterdam philosopher." (I haven't read the book myself, but I'm willing to take Schwartz's word for this and go out on a limb and predict that it will remain forever the most important such book in Yiddish.) But the figure in what he deems "the Yiddish Spinoza renaissance" to whom he devotes the most attention is Isaac Bashevis Singer. Schwartz astutely analyzes his famous story "The Spinoza of Market Street" as well as other much less familiar depictions not of Spinoza but of rather unworldly and pathetic Jewish Spinozists in his fiction. He arrives at the conclusion that "Singer clearly judged the modern Jewish attachment to Spinoza to be a path wrongly taken, a source not of comedy, but of tragedy."

At the very end of his book's last chapter, Schwartz observes that for Singer, unlike the other figures discussed earlier in the volume, Spinoza was neither a liberator from the ghetto nor a prototype of Zionism. But that doesn't mark the end of Schwartz's story. In a brief epilogue, he takes note of the most recent manifestations of the ongoing process of re-envisioning Spinoza, from Yirmiyahu Yovel's two-volume *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, a top bestseller in Israel in the late 1980s, to Steven Smith's *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity* from the following decade, to Rebecca Goldstein's idiosyncratic *Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity* in 2006. One of the things that emerges with clarity from these final pages is that the nationalist concern with Spinoza is simply gone. Yovel says that Spinoza may have been a "closet Zionist," and Smith thinks he may perhaps have been "the founder" of political Zionism, but neither of these scholars nor anyone else, it seems, has felt the need to reaffirm the connection



David Ben-Gurion's diary entry, August 7, 1951 on Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*. (Courtesy of the Ben-Gurion Archives, Be'ersheva, Israel.)



Berthold Auerbach, by Julius Hubner, 1846. (Courtesy of Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach.)

that meant so much to David Ben-Gurion. Another thing that stands out is the similarity between the positive depiction of Spinoza on the part of Berthold Auerbach and others and some of the most recent appropriations of Spinoza as a secular hero.

But there is also something new on the horizon. While Spinoza used to be, for so many thinkers, a guide and a model for rebellion and exit from Jewish tradition, Schwartz sees some signs that he might now be performing an opposite function. Could it be, he asks, that for contemporary secular Jews whose starting point is complete estrangement from Judaism "the turn to the prototype of the secular Jewish intellectual allegedly 'lost' to Jewish culture might also be understood as a *return* to identity?" It is hard to imagine anything that would have come as more of a surprise to Spinoza or, for that matter, the people who excommunicated him.

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

The Gaon of Modernity

BY SHAUL MAGID

The Genius: Elijah of Vilna and the Making of Modern Judaism

by Elijah Stern

Yale University Press, 322 pp., \$45

Elijah Stern's *The Genius: Elijah of Vilna and the Making of Modern Judaism* asks a big question about the very nature of Jewish modernity and offers a provocative answer, taking on more than one conventional academic narrative in the process. Most other works on Elijah ben Shlomo Zalman, known as the Vilna Gaon, focus primarily on his leadership, his rabbinic learning, his stature as a hero of Lithuanian Orthodoxy, and his polemic against Hasidism. Stern presents him primarily as a metaphysician and unwitting architect of an alternative version of Jewish modernity that has its roots in the traditionalism of Eastern European Judaism.

There are few instances in the annals of Jewish history where an individual is so identified with his residence and where a city is so identified with one of its inhabitants. Elijah was born in Vilna to Shlomo Zalman and Trainia Kremer of Slutsk on the first day of Passover 1720. At the time, Vilna was known as "the Jerusalem of Lithuania," perhaps the greatest center of Jewish learning in the diaspora, but it was also in a terrible state of disrepair. Numerous wars and natural disasters had decimated the Jewish community, which numbered only about one thousand in the early 1720s. Elijah quickly earned a reputation as a child prodigy and, as was the custom, studied privately with some of the most respected rabbis in the city. He never attended any traditional yeshiva. In adolescence, he studied either by himself or with a few peers. He married when he was 18 and afterward, leaving his wife, spent time travelling around Eastern Europe visiting many centers of Jewish learning. On those trips he began collecting books and manuscripts for what would later become his massive library in Vilna. He led a severely ascetic and largely solitary life, limiting his social interactions to a small circle of students.

The Gaon is one of those Jewish figures for whom myth and person are inextricably intertwined. While he was widely known in his time, he was almost never seen in public, his work was rarely read, and his reputation was that of a mythical "genius" who had the entire canon of classical Jewish literature at his fingertips and had mastered mathematics and the sciences on his own. After the founding of the Etz Chaim yeshiva by his disciple Chaim of Volozhin, he became even more celebrated. This institution trained tens of thousands of young men in the study of Torah and created not only a major center of learning but an entire culture of Lithuanian "yeshivish" Orthodoxy that still exists

to this day. The Gaon never saw the Etz Chaim yeshiva, but he has always been understood to be its symbolic leader.

The Gaon wrote a tremendous amount, and, except for a few letters, all of it was published after his death. He was devoted to the genre of the textual

sources in order to fully understand any text.

Stern quotes Chaim of Volozhin as describing the terse words of the Gaon's glosses as "stars that seem small from our perspective, yet the whole world stands beneath them." While his focus on the study of talmudic literature became the backbone

Chaim of Volozhin described the Vilna Gaon's words as "stars that seem small from our perspective, yet the whole world stands beneath them."

gloss and commentary to classical Jewish literature, talmudic and kabbalistic. His most expository text may be his commentary to Proverbs where he lays out his kabbalistic worldview in broad strokes. Most of his glosses, particularly his *Biur* to the *Shulchan Arukh* (Code of Jewish Law), point the reader back to rabbinic references, many of which contest or at least offer alternatives to the *Shulchan Arukh's* position. In general, the Gaon's works attempted to locate the correct rendering of the rabbinic text, which he often thought was in need of emendation. He directed his reader to venture back and examine the origi-

nal sources in order to fully understand any text. Stern's book is an innovative project. The great Jewish historians of the past half century—Jacob Katz being the most celebrated and influential—adapted Max Weber's paradigm in which "modernity" and "tradition" were viewed as

of Lithuanian Orthodoxy and his published works on the classical canon were studied in yeshivas throughout Europe, his particular method of textual emendation, which Stern deems his most radical, modernizing contribution, had little impact among many who considered themselves his disciples.



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incompatible categories. According to that narrative, modernity—in its economic, political, and social manifestations—inexorably undermined the structures of tradition in Europe. Weber argued that secularized modernity could not have come about without what he called the “disenchantment” of traditionalist conceptions of the world. In short, “tradition” for Weber embodies a societal stability that is undermined by a process of “rationalization.” This binary model of “tradition” and “modernity” informed the work of generations of scholars in several fields, including Jewish studies.

While historians such as Katz are not as rigid as Stern claims, the binaries of tradition and modernity do basically hold true in their work. Jewish historians such as Michael Silber and Gershon Hundert offer more Eastern European perspectives of Jewish modernity, but for the most part they have stayed close to Katz’s Weberian paradigm. Silber, following Katz, has shown that what is often termed “ultra-Orthodoxy” was itself a product of modernity.

Drawing upon recent social theorists, including Ulrich Beck and José Casanova, Stern challenges this entire paradigm by suggesting something akin to Shmuel Eisenstadt’s theory of multiple modernities, arguing that Eastern European traditionalists were not simply fighting a rearguard action against “modernity” but in fact constructing the building blocks of an alternative vision of the modern—one that was no less and sometimes even more radical than the Western European Enlightened version inaugurated by Moses Mendelssohn.

In *The Genius*, Stern examines the Gaon of Vilna as someone whose vision reached far beyond the circle of Torah scholars who have viewed him as their leader. He argues that the Gaon—viewed today, somewhat mythically, as the quintessential traditionalist and defender of normative Judaism—was, in several ways, a radical thinker. Not only did he seem to have more sympathy for the Enlightenment than is commonly assumed, he employed exegetical methods and metaphysical principles that would eventually become a part of the modern Jewish project. In his conclusion, Stern pits Moses Mendelssohn (the “Socrates of Berlin”) against Rabbi Elijah (the “Genius of Vilna”):

Many have already described the path that leads from Mendelssohn to Jewish emancipation, acculturation, and religious reform. It is now becoming increasingly clear that such a story represents at most only half of the modern Jewish experience . . . In particular it cannot render intelligible the religious and political proclivities of the fastest growing religious group, the Orthodox Jewish community; the breakdown of denominational Judaism; the phenomenon of gentiles converting to Judaism in order to marry desirable Jewish partners; the establishment in majority Jewish neighborhoods of charter schools that teach Hebrew to Christians; and the strong national element in Israeli politics.

One could add to this ambitious, even extraordinary list—the Vilna Gaon as patron saint of *Bridget Loves Bernie*?—several other phenomena, including the return of liberal Judaism to the study of sacred texts, ritual innovation, and the ongoing disassimilation of Jews in Israel and the diaspora.

Some might argue that this new religiosity or

return to tradition is a result of multiculturalism or what Peter Berger has recently called the “desecularization” of the world. Stern suggests it can also be seen as the activation of an alternative modernity, forged by the Vilna Gaon, that had lain dormant until social conditions made it a plausible alternative to assimilationism. “The Genius of Vilna,” Stern writes, “is embodied in those residents of Tel Aviv and New York who live as though they are majorities.” Before one gets too carried away with the originality of this claim or, alternatively, dismisses it as unfounded, it’s valuable to work through Stern’s historical argument.

Earlier historians have tended to focus on the Gaon’s rejection of Hasidism, but Stern persuasively argues that, though historically important, his opposition was only a small part of his life. This focus has tended to overshadow more significant dimensions of his work. Stern follows several other scholars in suggesting that the Gaon opposed Hasidism largely because he regarded it as a variety of Sabbateanism, the open or covert continued adherence to the failed 17th-century messiah Shabbtai Zevi, whose followers perpetuated a subterranean heretical movement that lasted from his conversion to Islam in 1666 into the 19th century.

Stern suggests that Sabbateanism created a Jewish catastrophe of “biblical proportions.” This may be an exaggeration, but that the Gaon suspected Sabbateanism is likely. As Yehuda Liebes has shown, the Gaon and his disciples contested Sabbatean Kabbalah while surreptitiously adopting its basic conceptual rubrics. On Liebes’ ingenious if somewhat speculative argument, the Gaon and his kabbalistic disciples experienced a kind of “anxiety of influence”—Liebes called it “ambivalence”—toward Sabbateanism that may have contributed to their polemic against Hasidism. According to Liebes, the Gaon’s circle portrayed him as a redemptive figure—“the second serpent,” since “serpent” (*nachash*) and “messiah” (*moshiach*) are numerically equivalent—who would rectify the sins of Shabbtai Zevi.

It is curious that the Gaon’s anti-Hasidic campaign never grew historical legs. Among traditionalists, the campaign largely petered out after a generation or two. The reasons for this remain a matter of scholarly debate. Perhaps once it became clear Hasidism was not, in fact, Sabbateanism, the act of mystical rectification was no longer necessary. While it is true, as Stern recognizes, that many factors contributed to the failure of the campaign against Hasidism—including the collapse of the *kehillot*, the privatization of Jewish communities, and the unraveling of hegemonic Jewish authority in Eastern Europe—one should not discount the possibility that when the Gaon’s arguments proved to be unfounded, the anti-Hasidic campaign simply deflated.

The privatization of religion in late 18th-century Eastern Europe and its effect on many areas of Jewish life is a central part of Stern’s thesis on many fronts. The slow separation of religion from the state in the geographical areas under examination undermined any central Jewish authority to effectually confront Hasidism at the same time it enabled Chaim of Volozhin to open his yeshiva with the kind of autonomy he desired. While this is an important observation, Stern does not adequately note that this “privatization” was neither smooth nor consistent. For example—though it extends beyond the subject of Stern’s book—the eventual demise of the Volozhin yeshiva in 1892 was due to the demand of the Russian authorities to make a place for certain secu-

lar studies in the curriculum, including the Russian language. To some degree at least this undermines the privatization theory Stern suggests enabled the yeshiva to be established in the first place.

The Gaon wrote more on Kabbalah than he did on rabbinics. While scholars such as Yehuda Liebes and, especially, Joseph Avivi have explored the internal dynamics of his kabbalistic thought, they have not compared it with the work of thinkers in other metaphysical traditions, or asked about its wider implications. Stern does so, arguing that the Gaon was a metaphysical modern, comparable in many ways to the great German philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. It is unlikely that the Gaon read anything by Leibniz directly. He did not have the languages (or probably the interest) to read what was published of Leibniz at the time. Stern does gesture toward possible indirect influence, citing Raphael Levi of Hannover, who knew the Gaon and had been a student of Leibniz, and the work of Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, who was probably familiar with Leibniz’s ideas and was a strong influence on the Gaon. But these unsubstantiated historical links are beside the point and may in fact weaken or at least distract the reader from the force of Stern’s phenomenological claim.

Stern’s suggestion is that Leibniz’s metaphysics (itself somewhat influenced by kabbalistic ideas) is strikingly similar to the Gaon’s Kabbalah. He points to the ways in which the latter echoes Leibniz’s notion that even evil has a good purpose, as well as his distinction between factual truths and eternal truths. Here Stern should have heeded Gershom Scholem’s remark that even though he doubted that there was any direct connection between Philo and medieval Kabbalah, he was open to structural and phenomenological similarities.

Stern does not go into much detail with regard to the Gaon’s opaque and complex renderings of the Zohar and Lurianic Kabbalah. But he has certainly read Liebes and Avivi carefully and works with the Gaon’s kabbalistic principles in a generally coherent way. One problem is that all the ideas Stern notes as present in both Leibniz and the Gaon also exist in classical kabbalistic metaphysics, specifically in Luzzatto. Leibniz would be more significant if Stern were able to show how the Gaon deviates from classical Kabbalah in a way that contributes to an alternative modernity. The Gaon’s Kabbalah, however, was fairly conventional, and, moreover, had no real impact on subsequent generations outside of his small circle of disciples in Shklov and Volozhin and in later mystical thinkers such as Shlomo Elyashuv, Abraham Isaac Kook, and some others. So even if Stern were able to make a convincing case for the Gaon’s quasi-Leibnizian kabbalistic originality, it still did not really have much impact on subsequent kabbalistic thought.

However, I think Stern is also making a different and more creative point in comparing Leibniz and the Gaon, one that he could have made more forcefully. He views the Gaon’s metaphysics as underwriting the idea that the foundations of nature and truth are mathematical and argues that this provided the Gaon with the epistemic justification for emending rabbinic texts. Stern writes, “Like Leibnitz, he [the Gaon] sees the world as the expression of the Absolute Idea” determined by mathematical reasoning. In Stern’s estimation, this

“Absolute Idea” is manifest in the Gaon as the ideal Torah. One who fully understands how the world is constructed through kabbalistic and mathematical knowledge can use textual interpretation and emendation to discern the ideal Torah. Now *this* is something that I am not familiar with in either classical Kabbalah or Luzzatto.

The metaphysical, as opposed to historical, foundation for textual emendation is also quite different from the one set down by Enlightenment philologists and historians. It also connects the Gaon’s metaphysics to his textual method in a way that is not the case in Mendelssohn (who was, in fact, a conscious follower of Leibniz and his student Christian Wolff). The Gaon’s metaphysics made textual emendation a new kind of learning Torah, in which *correcting* the text (at least the rabbinic text) rather than simply *interpreting* it becomes a redemptive act.

But there is also another explanation for why Mendelssohn did not engage in textual emendation as the Gaon did. As Stern insightfully observes, Mendelssohn, who wrote in Germany under the gaze of Christianity, was adamant in defending the authority and accuracy of rabbinic literature. By contrast, his contemporary the Gaon “was not threatened by the nascent [anti-rabbinic] theories of Michaelis and other Christian exegetes . . . Operating as a leader of a majority culture allowed Elijah to challenge and diverge from rabbinic tradition that Mendelssohn felt compelled to defend at all costs.”

Stern’s repeated comparison of the Gaon with Mendelssohn is largely heuristic rather than substantive, but that doesn’t detract from its impact. While the philosopher from Berlin is often considered the radical and the Talmudist from Vilna the great defender of tradition, Stern asks us to see things in a more complex way: “It was the Gaon’s hermeneutic idealism that called into question the canons of rabbinic authority, while Mendelssohn

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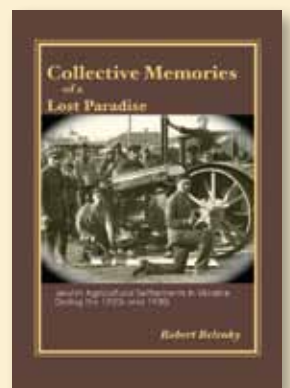
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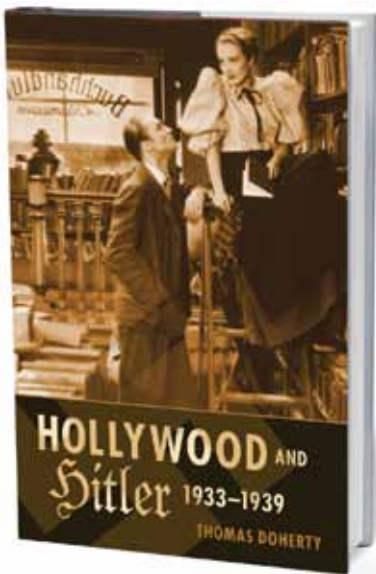
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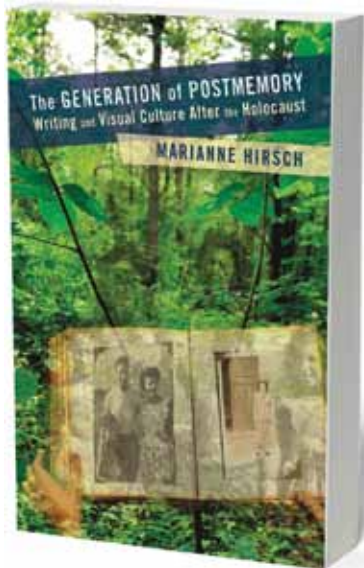
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tirelessly defended the historical legitimacy of the rabbinic tradition to German-speaking audiences.” Ironically, the traditionalists today who perpetuate an apologetic agenda by protecting rabbinic inerrancy in the name of the Gaon may be unwittingly closer to Mendelssohn!

The Gaon made a categorical distinction between biblical and rabbinic literature. Since the former is divine and thus inerrant, “the interpretive burden is placed on the reader to discern the writer’s wisdom.” However, for the Gaon “talmudic texts are malleable and susceptible to human error.” Stern’s original contribution is not so much in describing his textual practice as in joining it to his metaphysics. Here he uses Leibnizian language to striking effect:

Elijah’s emendations correspond with his broader philosophic project of restoring the rational pre-established harmony of a world confused by unnecessary human error and evil. To achieve this act of restoration, he addressed those ideas and texts that were unclear, mistaken, and therefore not yet rational or ideal.

Further adopting Leibniz’s nomenclature, Stern claims that rabbinic literature for the Gaon often expressed “factual truths” that could only be made “eternal truths” by having them conform with the ideal Torah, ascertained via human reason. Here one sees the force of regarding textual emendation as a redemptive act within the Gaon’s system. Stern’s claim that the Gaon’s theory of textual emendation was based on his metaphysical principles is key to his argument for his status as a modern, for it shows the way in which he elevated human reason above the textual authority of rabbinic tradition. In effect, as I read Stern, the Gaon offers us a modern textual sensibility without the aid of historicism.

The final part of Stern’s argument for the Gaon as a modernizing figure is in his depiction of his genius as manufactured by his biographers. During the Gaon’s lifetime, he was a recluse who only entered into public affairs on rare occasions. Nonetheless, during his lifetime, and especially after his death, he was widely-known for his “genius.” What is this category of “genius” that was later manufactured to serve as a commodity for parents to say to their children in Yiddish *Vil-nor Goen* (“if you will it, you too can be a genius”)? On the one hand the portrait of the “genius” is quite similar to the portrait of the “tzaddik” or “rebbe” in the other major model of leadership in Eastern Europe at that time: reclusive, ascetic, otherworldly, highly disciplined, emotionally distant. What distinguishes the Genius of Vilna from Hasidic rebbes, at least in the minds of most of those constructing his posthumous portrait, was that the Gaon rejected supernaturalism. Stern rightly points out that

neither his students nor his biographers saw his genius as something bestowed on him by the accidents of nature . . . Elijah is depicted as being in control of his own intellectual capacities. In taking this approach, Elijah’s biographers were rejecting notions of genius still prevalent in Eastern European Jewish life.

They were, in fact, doing more than that; they were beginning to construct the status of a modern

Jewish hero inside traditional Jewish life. Stern does not mention that members of the Gaon’s kabbalistic circle, such as Menachem Mendel of Skhlov and Yitzchak Izik Chaver Waldman, did in fact portray the Gaon as a mythic and mystical messianic figure (which may have been closer to his true personality). Nevertheless, their portrayal was not the one that made it into the homes where the Gaon’s portrait hung proudly for generations. “Genius” was invented as the modern alternative to the sage as divinely inspired, the latter being a category that has much deeper roots in rabbinic tradition and culture.

Stern writes that “by the end of the 19th century, the Gaon’s image and legacy were widely celebrated in modern European Jewish popular literature.” One can also move further into the 20th century and see how the Gaon was the hero of representatives of modern rabbinic elites such as Saul Lieberman, H. L. Ginsberg, and other members of the faculty at the Jewish Theological Seminary and Hebrew Union College, who viewed themselves as inheritors of the Gaon’s prowess and ethos. The same could be said of secular Zionists such as Hayyim Nahman Bialik and Joseph Hayyim Brenner, among others. Contemporary yeshiva Orthodoxy also absorbed the notion of the sage as a hero who succeeded because of hard work rather than preordained destiny. In this, it is the Gaon and not the Baal Shem Tov who serves as their model.

In *The Genius*, Stern argues that there was a modernizing movement at the heart of traditional Judaism, most significantly in the work of the Gaon and his followers. While Enlightenment thinkers such as Mendelssohn were defending Judaism against its Christian critics and adopting much of Western Christianity’s liberal ethos to construct what has become modern Judaism in its various forms (including Modern Orthodoxy), the Gaon and his students created the prototype of an unapologetic Judaism that in many ways is more relevant today than Mendelssohn’s Judaism of accommodation.

Writers such as the Gaon and his disciples were not forthcoming about their agenda. One can even go so far as to suggest that they may not have always been aware of it themselves. As their readers, we must continue to peel away layers, responsibly push back against regnant theories by deploying new approaches and methods in an attempt to decipher and sometimes, yes, even construct, a world obscured by a complex array of factors that we, as products of their struggle, may never fully understand. Eliyahu Stern has made an important contribution to that project. His approach is sometimes speculative but never careless, provocative but not overly audacious. Readers will surely find local errors of fact and interpretation, and disagree with some—perhaps many—of its conclusions. But in offering an alternative view of the complex genealogy of Jewish modernity, *The Genius* should generate serious conversation. That is a significant accomplishment.

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Schechter's Seminary

BY DAVID B. STARR

The Birth of Conservative Judaism: Solomon Schechter's Disciples and the Creation of an American Religious Movement

by Michael R. Cohen

Columbia University Press, 232 pp., \$50

There are, no doubt, corners of ultra-Orthodox Brooklyn where people still refer to the Jewish Theological Seminary derisively as “Schechter’s Seminary,” if not in honor then at least in memory of the man who placed his stamp on Conservative Judaism’s central institution at the beginning of the 20th century. Michael Cohen has much to say about Schechter and his school in his new book about the birth of the Conservative movement, but they are not the heart of his story. As the book’s subtitle indicates, it is not on the master himself but on his disciples that Cohen has chosen to focus, and he is more concerned with what they were doing in their synagogues and rabbinical institutions than he is with what went on in the seminary that educated them to be American rabbis.

Solomon Schechter harbored big plans for American Jewry and counted on his students at JTS to implement them. When the Romanian-born and Vienna-trained rabbi who was “perhaps the foremost Jewish scholar in the world” left England for the United States in 1902, his goal, as Cohen puts it, was to help to forge “a unified American Judaism that would be both committed to tradition and also would appeal to the children of immigrants.” Unity was extremely important to him. Judaism, he insisted, is “as wide as the universe, and you must avoid every action of a sectarian or of a schismatic nature.” The Jews of America should stick together, as part of a larger “Catholic Israel,” living in accordance with rabbinic law even as they adapted it to “the ideal aspirations and religious needs of the age.”

Schechter was indeed, as Cohen observes, “frustrated by what he saw as both the Reform movement’s rejection of tradition and “Orthodoxy’s unwillingness to modernize.” Most of his disciples were immigrants or the children of immigrants who also wanted tradition as well as change and who dismissed Reform Judaism as too alien to their sensibilities, viewing Orthodoxy as working class, European, backward, and even downright un-American. But Schechter, on principle, didn’t instruct them to start a third movement. Indeed, most of them “were forced to accept pulpits in congregations that were not particularly sympathetic to Schechter’s vision,” either because they were too traditional or not traditional enough.

Some who accepted pulpits in Orthodox synagogues found themselves locked in losing battles on behalf of the English language and “decorum.” Rabbi Louis Egelson, for instance, who took a position in a traditional Washington, D.C. synagogue, use-

lessly pleaded, according to his own report, “for the inclusion of some English in the prayers so that the younger people could recite *some* prayers.” Others, who managed to situate themselves in Reform congregations, complained to Schechter how they were reviled for their “orthodoxy.” But not that many of them succeeded in beating out the graduates of the Reform movement’s more established Hebrew

could the United Synagogue create an authoritative board that would make binding halakhic decisions. Following the advice of Seminary scholar Louis Ginzberg, it set up a committee that would merely “advise congregations and associates of the United Synagogue in all matters pertaining to Jewish law.” As Cohen observes, this troubled “those who wanted a clearer definition of just what they stood for,”

It was only after World War II, and the emergence of a new generation of rabbis, that the Conservative movement as such really began to take shape.

Union College, who had their own professional association, in the competition for such positions.

Schechter’s “boys” needed to create a counterweight both to compete and to overcome the inherent loneliness of life in a pulpit in what Schechter himself called “struggling synagogues,” far away from one’s teachers and colleagues. It was concerns of this kind that led to the creation in 1913 of the United Synagogue of America, an organization that pointedly avoided the use of the term “conservative,” in view of Schechter’s insistence that it not constitute “the mouthpiece of a third, or conservative party independent of either tendency.”

The big tent of all those who were, in the words of the United Synagogue’s preamble, “essentially loyal to traditional Judaism” could be erected and preserved only if its inhabitants agreed to disagree about a lot of things. It was impossible, at the outset, to design a new prayer book that all could use. Nor

but it “held the coalition together.”

The coalition survived Schechter’s death in 1915 and remained something other than a movement. It was, instead, in Cohen’s words, “an ethnoreligious group with elastic boundaries that stretched wide enough to unify the disciples who chose to join forces to implement the vision of Solomon Schechter.” This group included traditionalists like Louis Epstein, Charles Kauvar, Max Drob, and, most famously, Louis Finkelstein, who viewed with disfavor any separation from Orthodoxy. But it also included modernists like Mordecai Kaplan, who adopted radical assumptions about theology, culture, and history. For a long time, most of these people “downplayed their fundamental differences for the sake of unity and chose to identify with the United Synagogue primarily because of their shared commitment to Solomon Schechter and his vision of a unified American Jewry.” They continued to do so



Solomon Schechter (seated at center) in Tannersville, New York, with a group of students, professors, and their wives. (Photo courtesy of Vivian Rous.)

even as some in their ranks pressed unsuccessfully in their new Rabbinical Assembly for the formulation of “a platform that distinguished their movement from others.”

It was only after World War II, Cohen tells us, with the retirement and departure from the scene of most of Schechter’s direct disciples and the emergence of a new generation of rabbis, that the Conser-

attended the local day school named in memory of the great man himself, I remain embedded in the movement Solomon Schechter founded.

The synagogue we attend in Brookline, Massachusetts was once led by Rabbi Louis M. Epstein, whom Cohen rightly regards as one of the traditionalists, those who were unwilling to cut themselves off from a commitment to the larger totality of what

ing of Jewish home life and religious schools “as a bond holding together the scattered communities of Israel throughout the world.” The members met for daily study of the Mishnah, weekly study of the Bible on Sabbath afternoons, and the study of the Talmud at least three times each week. Each of them needed to attend study classes at least twice a week.

Impressive as this seemed, I had to wonder: Who came? How many? How long did it last? To what extent did it define the culture of the community? And what did this tell us about Rabbi Epstein? Did the congregants that he served, and the *agunot* whom he tried to release, care about his halakhic commitments? And if, perhaps, a large number of them really did, how many of the members of the movement that Rabbi Epstein once served care about such things today? Is there still, in other words, on the ground, a real Conservative Judaism, or is there nothing in America other than Orthodoxy and liberalism? Michael Cohen’s new book does not dwell on such questions, but it invites us to think about them.

In an age when people continue to fret about the culture wars with fundamentalist religious fanatics on the one hand and the emptiness of liberal religion on the other, I and many others have hoped that institutions like the Jewish Theological Seminary would produce rabbis who could articulate, teach, and in today’s parlance, “community organize” a compelling third way in Jewish life. But it has mostly failed to do so. Why? Is it because of its ideological incoherence, which left it destined to be chipped away at by Reform to its left and Orthodoxy to its right? Was it the lack of true conversation between rabbis who lived inside of one intellectual realm and lay people who lived somewhere very different? Was it the mediocrity of the rabbis, who aspired to lead flocks that in large measure consisted of congregants who surpassed them in their intellectual sophistication, successful professionals who were members of what Richard Hofstadter termed the American cult of the expert, people who liked and trusted their rabbis but lacked a compelling reason to think of their pastors as their intellectual equals, much less their guides. I would have liked Cohen to spend more time with these rabbis in their synagogues, watching and analyzing the ways they tried to take notions of Catholic Israel, or the indispensability of a Judaism neither Reform nor Orthodox, and infuse them into the souls of their parishioners, then assessing the record of successes and failures.

Modernity forces all of us to deal with unending and sometimes undesirable change. Unexpected developments force us to think anew about who we are and who we want to be. We make choices. Some of them stick; some of them stick even for our children and their children. Some pass away almost as quickly as they were made. It would be sad if a worldview and a movement that combined allegiance to God and to history as Conservative Judaism has sought so strenuously to do failed to hold its own. Current realities and forebodings notwithstanding, I still hold out some hope.

David B. Starr founded *Tzion*, a new program for teaching the history, texts, and ideas of Zionism and Israel. He also teaches at Gann Academy and in the Jewish community.

Is there still, on the ground, a real Conservative Judaism, or is there nothing in America other than Orthodoxy and liberalism?

vative movement as such really began to take shape. “This new generation held a fundamentally different view of the movement than the disciples, and they redefined it in a way they hoped would distinguish it from Orthodoxy, allowing it to grow into the third movement in American Judaism.” They did so most definitively in 1950, when the Rabbinical Assembly’s Committee on Jewish Law and Standards issued its famous landmark rulings that permitted the use of automobiles to drive to Sabbath services and the use of electricity to further home Sabbath observance. “Though the rulings were not binding on RA members, they did underscore the new reality that Conservative Judaism was emerging as a more unified movement that was no longer insistent upon deferring to the multifaceted Orthodox world.”

The members of this new generation believed that history was going their way. They exuded confidence that their version of Judaism was the one most suitable for Cold War America, in that it prized moderation and the power of community, even as it incorporated liberal notions of personal autonomy in religious practice. Their bullishness about the future rested on a strong faith in their reading of the past. *Tradition and Change*—the title of Mordecai Waxman’s 1958 collection of primary sources from the movement—defined the true Judaism.

Over the past half century, however, the Orthodoxy against which these leaders sought to define their movement has enjoyed a remarkable resurgence. Its day schools have proved to be far better incubators of knowledge and attachment to Judaism than Conservative Hebrew schools, or the Conservative day schools named after Solomon Schechter (which according to recent statistics are in decline), and even the relatively successful Ramah camps. Through these schools Orthodoxy has managed to modernize itself even as it has more effectively promulgated increasing behavioral and intellectual strictness regarding theology and practice. The Reform movement has once again re-embraced ritual and is increasingly challenging Conservative Judaism from the left. Neo-Hasidism is now in fashion for the generation that—unlike Solomon Schechter—never had the chance to rebel against the real thing.

I myself am a JTS graduate and a Conservative rabbi. Almost two decades have passed since I last occupied a pulpit, but since my family and I worship at a Conservative synagogue and my children

they regarded as true Judaism. Yeshiva-educated in Lithuania, Epstein assumed and asserted that tradition should be the way to solve contemporary problems like that of the *agunah*, the woman “anchored” to a husband who has either disappeared or refused to divorce her. He invested great scholarly and spiritual labor in this effort. To his chagrin, and to the ongoing agony of the women involved, he discovered that the politics of religion precluded a broad solution across boundaries. For decades, Epstein refused to see himself as belonging to a “Conservative” group, distinct from the Orthodox, but his



Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan by Enrico Glicenstein, ca. 1929. (Courtesy of The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.)

failure to make headway on the *agunah* question ultimately disabused him of this notion. In the end, he reluctantly acknowledged that his belief that law should be an instrument of necessary social and spiritual change made him a Conservative rabbi.

Attending the daily minyan in the chapel of what was once Rabbi Epstein’s synagogue, I can see all around me a rich collection of traditional texts, many of which date from his time. Not too long ago, I found between the pages of one of them a small pamphlet entitled *Constitution and By-Laws of Chebra Mishna of the Congregation Kehillath Israel*. Organized in 1924, this group expressed the loftiest ideals of the traditional Jewish virtue ethic: loyalty to Torah; observance of the Sabbath, festivals, and the dietary laws; the maintenance of the traditional liturgy and the Hebrew language; and the foster-

A Certain Late Discovery

BY SAMUEL MOYN

Derrida: A Biography

by Benoît Peeters, translated by Andrew Brown
Polity, 629 pp., \$35

The Young Derrida and French Philosophy

by Edward Baring
Cambridge University Press, 350 pp., \$99

Was Jacques Derrida a Jewish thinker? Although it has often been asked, it is a bad question, but, as it turns out, not for the most obvious reasons, which therefore makes it much more interesting.

Derrida, the originator of the philosophical method known as “deconstruction,” passed away less than a decade ago after one of the most remarkable academic careers in the 20th century. Nonetheless, it is already difficult to recall just how central and divisive a figure Derrida was throughout the humanities, especially here in America. His writing style, with its sudden shifts from the ponderously Delphic to the playfully mischievous and back again, was aped, praised, and ridiculed, while his campaign against what he called the “metaphysics of presence” in the Western philosophical tradition shook whole academic fields (especially but not only in literature) while leaving others (in particular, analytic philosophy) defiantly untouched.

Biography. A few minutes into the film Derrida delivers of himself the following speech, suggesting more than a bit of skepticism about the biographical enterprise:

We should not neglect the fact that some biographies written by people who have authority in the academy finally invest this authority in a book which—for centuries sometimes—after the death of an author represent the truth, “the truth.” Someone interested in biography writes a life, “life and works” . . . well documented, apparently consistent, and it’s the only one published by—under the authority of—a good press. And then . . . his life image is fixed and stabilized for centuries. That’s why I would say that the one who reads a text by a philosopher, for instance a tiny paragraph, and interprets it in a rigorous, inventive, and powerfully deciphering fashion is more of a real biographer than the one who knows the whole story.

Although in his writings Derrida was not entirely dismissive of studying the lives of thinkers, one still wonders what Benoît Peeters was thinking when he chose to write his book—precisely the sort of “well documented, apparently consistent” account of Derrida himself that the philosopher found so unhelpful compared with the tiniest bit of close reading.

And yet the basic facts are helpful. Paradoxically, the book is a success because it is so straightforward.

Peeters accumulates information, establishing a basic itinerary. He cites correspondence for what it reveals about Derrida’s private sentiments. And he narrates meetings with other intellectuals. Perhaps

Paradoxically, the book is a success because it is so straightforward.

most salaciously, Peeters confirms Derrida’s love affair with fellow philosopher Sylviane Agacinski, the torment he experienced when she bore him a son, and the bitter recriminations that followed through to the end of his life, when Derrida withheld his support from socialist presidential candidate Lionel Jospin, who had raised the child with Agacinski after marrying her.

All told, it is useful to have Derrida’s life reduced to reportage with so little ceremony or judgment. Peeters mostly leaves interpretation up to us, but there are a few possibilities his facts rule out. This is especially so when it comes to a long-standing debate about how “Jewish” Derrida’s thought is. For the book shuts down nearly every hypothesis one might initially float about a thinker too often presented as some sort of Jewish sage or postmodern midrashist.

Jacques Derrida was born at El Biar in the suburbs of Algiers and, later in life, he often claimed to suffer from “nostalgia”—as he put it in one of the neologisms, simultaneously playful and serious, at which he excelled. Yet while he loved the bright austerity of the Algerian landscape, and drank deep at the well of French Orientalism in his youth, it is hard to detect much that would help identify Derrida’s thought as flowing out of North African Jewish traditions, or even Jewish ones more broadly.

As a teenager, Peeters reports, “Jackie” became enamored with André Gide’s *The Fruits of the Earth*, telling an interviewer later that it was a sort of “Bible” for him—or perhaps better: a “counter-Bible.” Like *The Immoralist*, Gide’s more famous novel of liberation, *The Fruits of the Earth* offered a paean to sundrenched North Africa as the place where bourgeois taboos are optional. It mattered to Derrida, in his own words, as one of those “declarations of war on religion and families.”

In other words, if he was descended from Algeria’s Jews, Derrida learned from Gide that the French colony could also stand for emancipation from the strictures of God and propriety. Not that Derrida had much to liberate himself from when it came to the Jewish religion. His family, Peeters tells us, came to North Africa after the Spanish Inquisition. The French colonized the area in 1830, and forty years later passed the Crémieux decree, which gave Jews full French citizenship—a fateful policy that



Postcard of Algiers, early 20th century. (Courtesy of Derrida personal collection.)

Derrida, Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman’s 2002 documentary (now helpfully archived on YouTube) provides both a vivid reminder of the philosopher’s persona and a preemptive caveat against books such as Benoît Peeters’ *Derrida: A*

Peeters takes the singular enigma of the founder of deconstruction and makes him grist for an entirely conventional biographer’s mill. A longtime acquaintance of Derrida with practice at writing lives (including Alfred Hitchcock’s and Paul Valéry’s),

“civilized” the community as the rest of the indigenous population was mired in second-class status. Derrida’s father, like his grandfather, worked in wine shipping in Algiers, arranging transport on behalf of the vast grape cultivations of the interior. Peeters calls the family’s religious home life “low key,” and

stead, Derrida hung out in the Casbah while he was supposed to be preparing for his bar mitzvah—a rite of passage that could have been his farewell to Judaism had later events not intervened.

Derrida was eventually to follow the path the state offered him to Paris where, leaving aside his

At Lycée Maimonide, a school formed by purged Jewish teachers, Derrida decided to skip. “It was there,” he said, “that I began to recognize the ill-being that, throughout my life rendered me inapt for ‘communitarian’ experience.”

while Derrida cherished the Sephardic holiday customs of his family, he knew himself to be the product of a vast social transformation that had revolutionized Algerian Jewry across a few generations.

In his first decades Derrida’s Jewish background may have mattered most when his family strenuously attempted to avert his marriage to Marguerite Aucouturier, a non-Jew and the sister of a Parisian school friend. When his uncle wrote him a letter begging Derrida not to go through with the marriage—for what about the children?—Derrida responded angrily. Although this letter is no longer extant, Peeters quotes his uncle’s reply:

Having written to you in familiar everyday words, you now reply, after dissecting and carefully analyzing them (I suppose you’re just doing your job) a long bitter letter, very ‘uptight’ and sometimes quite impertinent in tone.

As Peeters remarks, Derrida seems to have written the letter in the style “that he would later make his own in philosophical polemics.” Derrida and Marguerite took their vows with a single friend as a witness in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on a year abroad in 1957. (The other highlight of his time there was his reading of James Joyce in Harvard’s Widener Library.)

This leaves one major fact out, of course. As a child, Derrida suffered from wartime anti-Semitism, especially after the Vichy regime revoked the Crémieux decree in 1940. In his memory, Derrida singled out the day the escalating imposition of *numerus clausus* policies—harsher in Algeria than even under Vichy rule generally—resulted in his expulsion from school in October 1942. Yet the Allies invaded North Africa within a couple of weeks, conquering it over the next months. Algerian Jews had an awful wait through the spring and summer for the Crémieux decree to be reinstated. General Henri Giraud, who had helped conquer the area for the Allies, hoped to make its abrogation permanent, but Charles de Gaulle finally put him in his place. Given the often-virulent anti-Semitism of the French settler population before and after, wartime events confirmed for Algerian Jews their deep allegiance to the emancipationist French state.

Anyway, if Derrida experienced his school expulsion as an “earthquake,” it most certainly didn’t fortify his (non-existent) interest in the Jewish religion. Sent to Lycée Maimonide, a school formed by purged Jewish teachers, he immediately decided to skip. “It was there,” he told a friend later, “that I began to recognize—if not to contract—this ill, this malaise, the ill-being that, throughout my life rendered me inapt for ‘communitarian’ experience.” In-

military service, his American year, a short teaching stint in Le Mans, and his later travels, he lived until he died. By his own testimony, anti-Semitism in metropolitan France was far less serious than what he knew from home. As he told one correspondent, the “saying (unfortunately common in Jewish circles), ‘everything not Jewish is anti-Jewish,’ was not true.” Even the stigmatized identity that (as Jean-Paul Sartre famously claimed) anti-Semitism prompted in many Jews “moved to the background.”



Derrida at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand, 1949-1950. (Courtesy of Derrida personal collection.)

If Peeters’ biography follows Derrida’s academic career that ensued through useful historical scavenging, Edward Baring’s new book is a very different matter. Confronting the claim that deconstruction is something like a “Jewish science,” as Sigmund Freud worried psychoanalysis might seem, Baring says, a bit slyly, there is better documentation for other sources. Relying on the same precious archives as Peeters but with much more philosophical depth, it turns out that Baring has in mind Christian rather than Jewish origins.

The Young Derrida and French Philosophy is, like Peeters’ biography, an entirely un-Derridean exercise, but in a different way. Baring is openly nervous about applying an ordinary historical interpretation of a figure who denied (most notably in his famous spat with Berkeley philosopher John Searle) the determinative role of context over utterances. Though he courts even more controversy in treating Der-

rida’s texts (rather than life) according to ordinary scholarly canons, Baring’s success is more remarkable. In this masterful book, he achieves the best picture available of the origins of deconstruction.

Baring starts out from the premise that, in spite of his colonial and Jewish ancestry, Derrida needs to be understood as a figure of the center: of the Parisian capital, of the mainstream of French philosophy after World War II, and especially of the elite institutions by and through which French thought was made in the 20th century. After a couple of years of lackluster performances on the advancement exams, Derrida made it to the École Normale Supérieure, where he returned to teach and wrote his most significant early works.

In particular, Baring argues that the philosophical world Derrida entered was one divided between Christian and Marxist philosophers—a cleavage in whose evolving terms the young thinker defined himself for two decades. The most fascinating and unexpected material in *The Young Derrida* shows how deeply, starting with some of his earliest student papers, Derrida adhered to a Christian existentialist emphasis on human finitude and abjection. Indeed, deconstruction may still bear the marks of this early influence, Baring contends.

At a minimum, it was because Derrida rejected the existentialist apotheosis of human liberty and the Marxist certainty in historical reconciliation that the Christian option beckoned. Baring’s rich chapters cover important issues such as Derrida’s reckoning with the two key phenomenological masters, Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, and demonstrate how the Christian/Marxist split, so strong at Normale Sup at the time, was crucial for him. Baring is highly persuasive in his suggestion that it was the resources for the claim of human insufficiency and impurity in Christianity—both in its great philosophers and in now forgotten Christian writers like René Le Senne—that conditioned Derrida’s lifelong desire to indict all metaphysical claims, even those made by religion itself.

Focusing so brilliantly on his story of mainstream debates and elite institutions, Baring unfortunately omits an equally important source for deconstruction. From childhood Derrida was as much interested in literature as philosophy, in particular certain transgressive, post-surrealist traditions represented by Antonin Artaud, Georges Bataille, and Maurice Blanchot. (On his deathbed, suffering from pancreatic cancer, Derrida was cheered by rumors that he might receive the Nobel Prize in Literature, reporting that he had always cherished most the hope of leaving a monument in the history of the French language.)

Given how intellectually unpromising the Algerian Jewish roots that Peeters lays bare were, Baring’s emphasis on Derrida’s Christian interests sets an indispensable baseline for considering the sort of Jew he made himself. Baring closes *The Young Derrida* in 1967, the remarkable *annus mirabilis* in which Derrida published *Of Grammatology*, his best-known book, alongside two others. And so he leaves this problem for others to take up—except that a crucial period in the story of Derrida’s interest in Judaism had already transpired.

It may have been due to early onset nostalgia that the first sign of any positive interest in Judaism on Derrida’s part came shortly after the Algerian War.



Derrida in Dublin, next to the statue of James Joyce. (Courtesy of Derrida personal collection.)

During the conflict itself, he had favored a brokered solution that would preserve the long-term coexistence of Arabs and Jews alongside the newer Christian settler population. But after the independence vote in 1962, he had returned home and helped his parents and relatives, whom history made into so-called *pied noirs*, hastily pack their bags.

It was in early 1963, just a few months after these events, that Derrida wrote on the Egyptian-born

Jewish poet Edmond Jabès, who had himself fled his North African homeland, in this case after the 1956 Suez Crisis. Derrida emphasized that Jabès made “a certain late discovery of a certain way of being part of Judaism.” Derrida, it seems, was also speaking about himself. This “certain way” was one that reclaimed Jewish textualism without Jewish belief, for “Judaism and writing are but the same waiting, the same hope, the same depletion.” That it was an emphatically un-

orthodox reading, Jabès—who noted that his “blood brothers” denied his Judaism if it did not involve going to shul—knew well. Derrida self-consciously welded his emerging censure of metaphysics, whose roots, as Baring shows, were entirely elsewhere, to the imaginative Judaism of Jabès’ poetry.

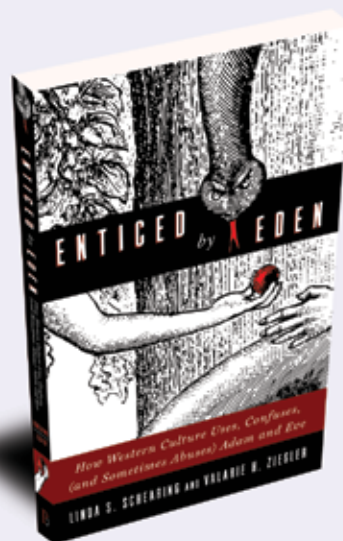
Much has been written about how Derrida also encountered the writing of Lithuanian-French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas around this time. But while Derrida acknowledged that Levinas’ thought can “make us tremble,” his response to it was ultimately negative. It was especially so when it came to Levinas’ invidious contrast of Judaism with “Greek metaphysics,” which Derrida famously countered with James Joyce: “Jewgreek is greekjew. Extremes meet.” And it is surely noteworthy that Derrida’s engagement with Jabès occurred just before he chose to write on Levinas. His praise for Jabès’ creole (and atheist) Jewishness influenced Derrida’s skepticism towards Levinas’ appeals to a more autochthonous (and theist) Judaism.

In the 1980s and 90s, Derrida often returned to topics that concerned Jews or Judaism: negative theology, German neo-Kantianism, Weimar Jewish intellectuals, and many others. Scholars still debate whether Derrida took a “religious turn” late in his life, which (if it occurred at all) intersected his definite preoccupation with Judaism in interesting ways. The astonishing range of topics and genres he took up coexists with a fascinating continuity in his appeal to that same “certain way” he had found in Jabès of regarding Judaism. It came after his childhood ignorance of—and adolescent disaffection from—his community’s faith, and after he had shrugged his

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shoulders about anti-Semitism's significance, though he had been its victim in wartime. There can be little doubt of the biographical centrality of the moment in 1963 when Derrida finally and suddenly found Judaism eligible for retrieval—and worthy of it.

Respectful of their protagonist, Baring and Peeters combine to explain the trajectory of the man and the makings of his thought. Since their agendas are elsewhere, neither writer says anything about the relevance of Derrida's career for Jewish life or even Jewish philosophy. But each helps us to take up the problem.

To be sure, not everyone grants monumental or even significant intellectual importance to Derrida's thought; it has always had detractors. Now that its most superficial vogue is long since over, it is possible for it to be given a more even-handed assessment. One thing is certain: The historical and biographical fact that the origins of deconstruction lie elsewhere does not make deconstruction irrelevant for Jewish thought and life. It would be incredibly tedious if the main purpose of such discussions were to claim or disclaim Derrida (or others) for the tribe.

In exceptional books a few years ago, Sarah Hammerschlag and Dana Hollander shifted the argument to philosophical ground, offering powerful cases for Derrida's relevance to making sense of Jewish particularity in a world of cosmopolitan identities—and for showing how Judaism is a crucial source in current debates. Others contend that Derrida wanted to offer a heroically unadulterated philosophical atheism, to which his affection for various Jewish resources would connect in a much more complicated way. But no matter which of these options is right, the Judaism at issue was of Derrida's own making. And of course, this is unsurprising. If Derrida insisted on anything, it was that there is nothing that stands independent of its own interpretations.

It is also true that this principle resonates with Judaism itself, whether or not its source lies there in Derrida's case. Jabès was perfectly correct in his romance of Jewish textualism and interpretation. Traditions depend for their very continuity on highly creative appropriations. "Classical Judaism expressed itself: it did not reflect upon itself," Gershon Scholem once observed. "To the mystics and philosophers of a later stage of religious develop-

ment Judaism itself has become problematical, [and so] they tend to produce an ideology of Judaism, an ideology moreover which comes to the rescue of tradition by giving it a new interpretation."

Yet Derrida did not explain—for that matter, neither did Scholem—whether there are boundaries to interpretation. Derrida was much better at showing that it is impossible to reduce a text to its meaning and that attempts to draw a hard and fast distinction between one thing and another always end up undoing themselves—processes that, Derrida insisted, leave nothing pure and unscathed. Can there be some ideologies that are so profound in their revisions that they betray rather than save a tradition? It is this question that has to be answered to know whether Derrida was a Jewish thinker. But he didn't answer it. If it is a bad or even a boring question, it is because one thing he taught is that there is no way to draw a boundary that would definitively exclude him.

Samuel Moyn teaches European history at Columbia University and has written books on Emmanuel Levinas, Holocaust memory, and human rights.

Golden Apples

BY MARGOT LURIE

Apples from Shinar

by Hyam Plutzik

Wesleyan University Press, 88 pp., \$22.95

If poets, as Shelley would have it, are the unacknowledged legislators of the world, then among the *most* unacknowledged is Hyam Plutzik—a poet who, says a voice-over for a 2007 documentary film of his life, "did a major work and then vanished."

Vanished! Well, it *was* Rochester. But still: not so fast.

In 1962, at the time of his death at age 50, Plutzik had authored five volumes of poetry. The year before, his blank-verse epic *Horatio*, which chronicled Hamlet's friend's failed attempts to redeem the prince's "hurt honor and name," was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. His poems were deep-drawn, gnomic things, and his tone was deaconish, if not outright godlike. "As nearly as I can tell," wrote the poet James Dickey, "the world he writes about is more God's than man's."

It isn't that Plutzik's contemporaries were unwilling to tackle large topics or even that they were averse to mulling over God and Religion and The Human Condition. But when Plutzik did so, it sounded like this: "The dignity of sorrow / Was the only blessing under the cloud of his god." Allen Ginsberg's version went like this: "Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness!" In the poetic landscape of the '50s, Plutzik's classicizing voice would lose out.

But his talent was undeniable, and, after his death, Plutzik's poems were anthologized and championed by Ted Hughes and Anthony Hecht. In 2007 came the aforementioned documentary, which bore the title *Hyam Plutzik: American Poet*. Now, *Apples from Shinar* (which originally appeared in 1959 and includes

**If Plutzik's bardic biblicism
is not on Bloom's radar, then
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be beyond hope.**

a 451-line excerpt from *Horatio*) has been reissued, to commemorate the centennial of the poet's birth and the 50th anniversary of the Plutzik Reading Series at the University of Rochester (where the poet, the school's first Jewish professor and a much-beloved teacher, spent his professional life).

Nonetheless, relative to his achievement, Plutzik is very much unknown. Nor did his fame, brief as it was, come quickly. His early work was poorly received by critics. "His taste is wicked, he boggles at nothing," said one. "Plutzik's muse is angry and too often explodes in ejaculations like 'victory! victory! victory! Victory!'" said another. The poet Donald Hall called *Aspects of Proteus* "surely the worst title of all time." Richard Wilbur was more charitable, writing that the allusion to the mythical shape-shifter offers a reviewer "the choice of saying regretfully that 'Mr. P. has not yet settled on a style,' or of saying happily that 'Mr. P. is agreeably versatile.'" Wilbur settles on versatile: while Plutzik's contem-

poraries were building reputations on short lyrics, he strove for (and achieved) technical range, veering from incantatory tetrameters ("Of all the waves of all the seas") to pawky, elliptical *pensées* reminiscent of another neglected poet, Laura Riding:

(As if to ask what meeting
Could overmatch the wonder
Of opaque hostile Being
Emergent out of nothing.)

Neither "modern" nor Modernist, Plutzik is ultimately notable for, in the words of Eric Ormsby, trying "to recreate a credible Shakespearean voice in American verse"—the very successful creation of which "doomed his verse to obscurity." Something else doomed his verse to obscurity: an affinity for Jewish concerns second only in English poetry to A.M. Klein's. (On another occasion, Ormsby noted Harold Bloom's omission of Plutzik from an anthology of American religious poems. If Plutzik's bardic biblicism is not on Bloom's radar, then his reputation might well be beyond hope.)

Plutzik's masterpiece, *Apples from Shinar*, was published at a time when the culture was in hot pursuit of the postwar American Jewish idiom, and expectations were set for a voice that was shrewd and wistful and rash and cracked wise. But the poet was more Blake than Bellow. *Poetry* magazine betrayed its disappointment: "Mr. Plutzik does not make his Jews ugly enough to be beautiful." No, indeed, and he had the number of those who *would* create Jews to the specifications of *Poetry* reviewers. In the poem "Portrait," he wrote:

Notice with what careful nonchalance
He tries to be a Jew casually,
To ignore the monster, the mountain—
A few thousand years of history.

....

he of all men might yet be master of self, all self-
possession,
Were it not (how gauche and incredible!) for the
one ill-fitting garment—
The historical oversight in the antique ward-
robe—
The shirt, the borrowed shirt,
The Greek shirt.

Notice how even when at ease he is somehow
anxious,
Like a horse who whiffs smoke somewhere near-
by faintly.
Notice with what nonchalance,
The magazine in his hand and the casual ciga-
rette to his lips,
He wears a shirt by Nessus.

Nessus, a centaur, killed Heracles by lending him
a shirt smeared with Nessus' own tainted blood.
In invoking this myth, the poet issues an emphatic
havdalah: There is Jew and Greek, slave and free, male
and female. We are *not* all one in material America any
more than we are in Christ Jesus, and we may as well
acknowledge this and wear our own damn clothes.

For those unwilling to confront this poem, there
are two routes of dismissal. The first, older evasion
was to acknowledge the potency of Judaism but to
call Plutzik irritatingly "obsessed" with it. The newer
evasion is to minimize the potency, as David Scott
Kastan does in an otherwise fine afterword to the
new edition of *Apples from Shinar*, writing that
"however much [Plutzik] refused to 'ignore' that
'monster,' he was not a Jewish poet, but a gifted poet
who happened to be born Jewish."

We've gotten accustomed to "happened to be" as
a well-meaning idiom, but Judaism, for Plutzik, was
no accident of birth. As T.S. Eliot put it, tradition
"cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must
obtain it by great labor." Plutzik was an active and
affirming Jew, and the roots of much of his poetry—
not only the subject matter but the sensibility,
the set of values, the voice—are in his Jewishness.
There's no "happened to be" about it.

This isn't to say that Plutzik can't be latitudi-
narian, or that he doesn't wish that Athens and
Jerusalem might not meet, if not mate (Shinar, as
it happens, is a biblical name for Babylonia). He
bestows Jewish honorifics on his favorite English
writers ("Our Master, William Shakespeare"), pairs
Greek and Hebrew ("The Mythos of the Man from
Enoch") in his titles, and avenges Freud (if not
Phyllis Diller) upon Shakespeare in an oedipal re-
telling of *Hamlet*:

... 'I have killed the murderer.'
"Who? Of whom?"
"Fang, who murdered my father . . .'
"And her eyes grew glazed in her bruised
face, and the scream
Entered her mouth and: 'Fool! Fang was
your father!
Him I lay with on the night you were conceived—
And often before and after . . .'

But his most tangled encounter is with Eliot
himself. In "For T.S.E. Only," he wrote:

You called me a name on such and such a day—
Do you remember?—you were speaking of Ble-
istein our brother,
The barbarian with the black cigar, and the pockets
Ringing with cash, and the eyes seeking Jerusalem,
Knowing they have been tricked. Come, brother
Thomas,
We three must weep together for our exile.

The poem is a response to T.S. Eliot's infamous
"Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar,"
with its yet more infamous lines "The rats are un-
derneath the piles. / The Jew is underneath the lot."

Yes, this is a minor work of a major poet. Still,
it's worth noting that Eliot himself chose to reprint
"Burbank with a Baedeker" both in his *Selected Po-*



Hyam Plutzik, ca. 1950s. (Courtesy of Department
of Rare Books & Special Collections, University of
Rochester Library.)

ems, published post-Holocaust in 1948, and in his
Collected Poems 1909-1962. Nor was Plutzik the
only Jewish poet to be indignant. The Anglo-Jewish
Emanuel Litvinoff read his own hot rejoinder aloud
at a literary meeting that included Eliot himself:

I am not one accepted in your parish.
Bleistein is my relative and I share
the protozoic slime of Shylock, a page
in Stürmer, and, underneath the cities,
a billet somewhat lower than the rats.

....

Let your words
tread lightly on this earth of Europe
lest my people's bones protest.

It's worth reading the two poems, Litvinoff's
and Plutzik's, side-by-side. They are both significant
achievements, but Litvinoff maintains a stance of
pure outrage while Plutzik is generously pitying and

seeks understanding: "In the time of sweet sighing
you wept bitterly, / And now in the time of weeping
you cannot weep":

You drew us first by your scorn, first by your wit;
Later for your own eloquent suffering.
We loved you first for the wicked things you
wrote
Of those you acknowledged infinitely gentle.
Wit is the sin that you must expiate.
Bow down to them, and let us weep for our exile.

....

You, hypocrite lecteur! mon semblable! mon
frère!

It *would* be just like Plutzik to bring Baudelaire's
famous line, *en version originale*, into a poem al-
ready freighted with Shylock, Dante, Jesus, Titus,
and Old Possum himself. But his more-in-sorrow-
than-in-anger affirmation of poetic fraternity may
be, if not the more effective rejoinder, in the end the
more effective poem.

Apples from Shinar's engagement with Judaism
is far from a matter of simply extracting an owed
pound of flesh from the canon. There is, for exam-
ple, his visionary "The Priest Ekranath" (evidently
an invented name) who is both William Blake and
the biblical Joseph prophesying famine: "They see
the desert in the growing leaf." Ekranath's mono-
logue is a sobering dream of figures who seduce and
destroy: an animal-eyed vagrant ("one of a tribe /
Cultureless, without iron, art, or altar"), a "White
Lady of splendid thighs and bosom / Without a
seedsman or a harvester," and most of all the "holy
harlots at Askelon," who close out the poem with an
unsettling recitation.

... I who am wise
Through the sacred harlots' embraces know the
syllables
(Ah, they are powerful and barbarous!)
Of the secret incantation that gives them
strength.
Hear how they thunder! Listen: *Issachar*
Levi simon reuben judah dan
Zebulun asher naphtali menassah ephraim.

The roll call of Israelite tribes is unsettling not
only because of its lofty authoritative tone, but be-
cause of its form. The tribes are not presented here in
birth order, nor are they divided according to their
mothers or territorial divisions. Only eleven names
are listed, with Gad and Benjamin omitted. But
while the names are presented irregularly, their ap-
pearance in the poem's final two lines marks a shift
from the previously irregular meter into a thumping
pentameter. Altogether, this is a mysterious work
worthy of its temple-cult subject, a brave Englishing
of what Marianne Moore called the "spontaneous
unforced passion of the Hebrew language."

The poems in *Apples from Shinar* are defiantly
lovely, limpid and ambiguous both. On every page,
there are ripe images and rich sound-play and a
shuttling among registers of insight. This is a golden
book.

Margot Lurie is the former editor of *Jewish Ideas Daily*
and a frequent contributor to the *Jewish Review of*
Books.

Famous Jews

BY EITAN KENSKY

Jewhooring the Sixties: American Celebrity and Jewish Identity

by David E. Kaufman

Brandeis University Press, 360 pp., \$40

Barbra Streisand's face makes a surreal cameo in Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. In the the pristine suite of a luxury hotel, Thompson introduces us to Lucy, a runaway obsessed with painting Barbra.

Lucy . . . was lying on the patio, doing a charcoal sketch of Barbra Streisand. From memory this time. It was a full-fledged rendering, with teeth like baseballs and eyes like jellied fire. The sheer intensity of the thing made me nervous.

Lucy has come to Vegas on pilgrimage to offer Barbra the portraits. The trip is, at the very least, misguided, but Thompson goes further and reminds us of the possible violence inherent in obsession. "What was she going to do when [she read] that Streisand wasn't due at the Americana for another three weeks?"

I kept waiting for Lucy to appear during the Barbra Streisand chapter of David E. Kaufman's new and entertaining *Jewhooring the Sixties: American Celebrity and Jewish Identity*. Kaufman's book is a packed study of Jewish identity, Jewish celebrity, celebrity in general, celebrity and homosexuality, Jews and homosexuality, and "the challenge of balancing universalist tendencies and particular concerns." It's all told through and around profiles of four exemplary Jewish celebrities of the 1960s: Sandy Koufax, Lenny Bruce, Bob Dylan, and Streisand—and the fans who loved them. Remarkably, Kaufman's book does not collapse under the weight of all these topics, though some are more expertly handled than others. *Jewhooring* succeeds as a study of Jewish identity and sheds new light on the lives of his four subjects by contextualizing them within the broader contours of American Jewish social history. But it stumbles as an inquiry into celebrity. There is a darkness to '60s celebrity that touched each of Kaufman's subjects, which he largely ignores.

Kaufman's themes of celebrity and Jewish identity intersect at the point of "Jewhooring," the game of publicly identifying (or "outing") celebrities as Jews and then viewing them through that prism. Discussion of a celebrity's physical appearance is the most obvious form of "Jewhooring." Streisand's nose, for instance, was a topic of great interest in the '60s ("a Brooklyn girl with small, sad eyes and an absurd nose," reported *Newsweek*). Kaufman even calls her decision not to have it "fixed" "the equivalent of Koufax's decision not to pitch on Yom Kippur, the

touchstone of her reputation for ethnic loyalty." But Jewhooring was not just a matter of looks. Take the activity of uncovering Jewish themes in Dylan's music, a special subdiscipline of "Dylanology." Thus, in a book entitled *Bob Dylan Approximately: A Portrait of the Jewish Poet in Search of God—A Midrash*,

first game of the 1965 World Series. Hank Greenberg's earlier decision not to play on Yom Kippur was, Kaufman says, "a harbinger of the turn from ethnicity to religion." Koufax, on the other hand, played at a time when American Judaism was redefining itself along minimalist religious lines, when

Jewish celebrity simultaneously represents persistent Jewish difference and "making it" in the wider American society.

Stephen Pickering argued that Dylan, embraced a "Martin Buber-like Hasidism," despite the lack of any explicit evidence.

Yet the core story of Kaufman's book is not any specific Jewhooring but the complex relationship between celebrities and their public. Jewish

being Jewish was widely defined as going to services on High Holidays. Koufax's decision not to pitch wasn't an act of religious devotion, but "an affirmation of the status quo." Koufax later wrote, "There was never any possibility that I would pitch. Yom Kippur is the holiest day of the Jewish religion. The club knows that I don't work that day." Tellingly, Koufax wrote "work" instead of "pitch." He could as easily have been an accountant asking to spend the day with his family. For Kaufman, Koufax's legendary status among Jews comes not from his personal piety, but for fulfilling the desire to be the insider-outsider: at the pinnacle of American society, but assertively Jewish.

This is interesting, even brilliant, but the argument slips when Kaufman tries to put Koufax back together again. The insider-who-is-also-an-outsider duality becomes his key to viewing all things Koufax. Kaufman writes that Koufax was Jewhoored as the intellectual anti-athlete, but instead of challenging the premise, Kaufman describes Koufax as the missing link between the egghead *nebbish* who seduces the girl with brainpower and overcompensating, macho Jews like Norman Mailer. Koufax, Kaufman writes, "projected an image of Jewish masculinity that was as much the mild-mannered Clark Kent as it was the muscle-bound Superman." But this requires a substantial revision of the historical record. Unlike Norman Mailer and Woody Allen, Koufax did not make sex part of his public persona. In fact, its absence fed the 2002 rumor, published by the *New York Post*, that Koufax was gay. Kaufman skims over the *Post* story, seeing it as a continued "othering" of Koufax, but neglects to note that such rumors are typical of the dark side of celebrity.

The Koufax chapter is emblematic of the book as a whole. Kaufman is not a biographer. He doesn't conduct new interviews with his subjects or perform new archival research, instead he reinterprets the existing record. In a nod to the haggadah, Kaufman sees our celebrities through the prism of the four children. Koufax and Streisand are the "good" children. Where Koufax was the insider-outsider, Streisand was the figure who used Jewishness to become famous. Lenny Bruce points to an irreverent Jewishness that calls on lingering marks of ethnic difference, while Dylan represents the "extraordinary urge to escape from Jewishness . . . and the



Press photo of a vampy Streisand, "the kooky kid from Brooklyn," ca. 1961. (Courtesy of Brandeis University Press.)

celebrity simultaneously represents persistent Jewish difference and "making it" in the wider American society. The Jewish celebrity has succeeded as a Jew, but then again, since he, or she, has made it as a Jew, he or she is at least partly unassimilated. The Jewish celebrity represents what it means to be Jewish to the wider American public, and, in doing so, often helps validate choices about Jewish life and practice.

In perhaps the best individual reading in this book of vivid readings, Kaufman deflates the hagiography surrounding Sandy Koufax's decision not to pitch on Yom Kippur when it coincided with the

extraordinary urge of others to see him as a Jew.” Kaufman even calls both Bruce and Dylan “the wicked son,’ as it were.” This doesn’t tell us much about the actual lives of Kaufman’s subjects, but it does illuminate their public personae and shows how their attempts to manage their lives clashed with their fan’s desires. No matter how interesting

We Jews deny—or at least denied—Bob Dylan the right to be a man in the street and a Jew at home.

Koufax, Bruce, Dylan, and Streisand may be, the interpretations and analysis they’ve received are equally fascinating, if not more so. Kaufman goes on for pages (yes, *pages*) on whether calling Barbra Streisand “kooky” is code for “Jewish.”

But *if* Kaufman is right that celebrity is best understood as a relationship between the famous and the rest of us, can we really ignore the darker aspects of that relationship, the way that public celebration leads to public denunciation, and the threat, even the reality, of physical violence?

In January 1971, A. J. Weberman, a Yippie, and possibly the inventor of Dylanology, led a group of students to Bob Dylan’s home in Greenwich Village to protest Dylan “and all [he’d] come to represent in rock music.” A year later, Dylan shoved Weberman on the streets of the Village. Weberman had promised to stop going through Dylan’s trash but had not. “I deserved it,” Weberman told *The New York Times* in 2006. In a final, bizarre turn, Weberman convinced Folkways Records to release an LP of a phone conversation with Dylan that he

illicitly recorded: *Bob Dylan vs. A.J. Weberman: The Historic Confrontation*. Kaufman acknowledges that some have questioned Weberman’s sanity, but refers to the album as “nonetheless a rare instance of a direct encounter between a superstar and a hardcore fan. It is also a dialogue between two Jews.” It is also stalking.

It is easy to dismiss such encounters, but all celebrity culture thrives on this root fascination with the famous. To be a celebrity is to see rumors about one’s sex life and public commentary on one’s every action printed in various media. Kaufman ends his Lenny Bruce story in the early 1960s, with Bruce more or less still ascendant. The legal troubles had begun, but they had not yet consumed Bruce’s life. But they did, in fact, consume his life: Bruce went from famous to notorious. His stage act degraded into readings of court transcripts and the charges against him. In a vicious cycle, his notoriety attracted more charges and more notoriety.

Celebrity is an endless dialogue about appearance, manifested in plastic surgeries and eating disorders. Jews may have taken pride in Barbra Streisand’s nose, and one of Streisand’s achievements may well have been, as Kaufman writes, helping to make “Jewishness aesthetically attractive and romantically appealing in 1960s America,” but this is only the “positive” side of what is a fundamentally unhealthy fixation on the body. *Life* magazine even once speculated that “it may be only a matter of time before plastic sur-

geons begin getting requests for the Streisand nose.” In the words of Cintra Wilson’s brilliant book title, celebrity is a “massive swelling” that ought to be “reconsidered as a grotesque, crippling disease.”

Celebrity is, at its very core, an erasure of private life. Not surprisingly, this turns out to have peculiar Jewish implications. Kaufman is unsure what to make of Dylan and whether to call him a Jewish art-

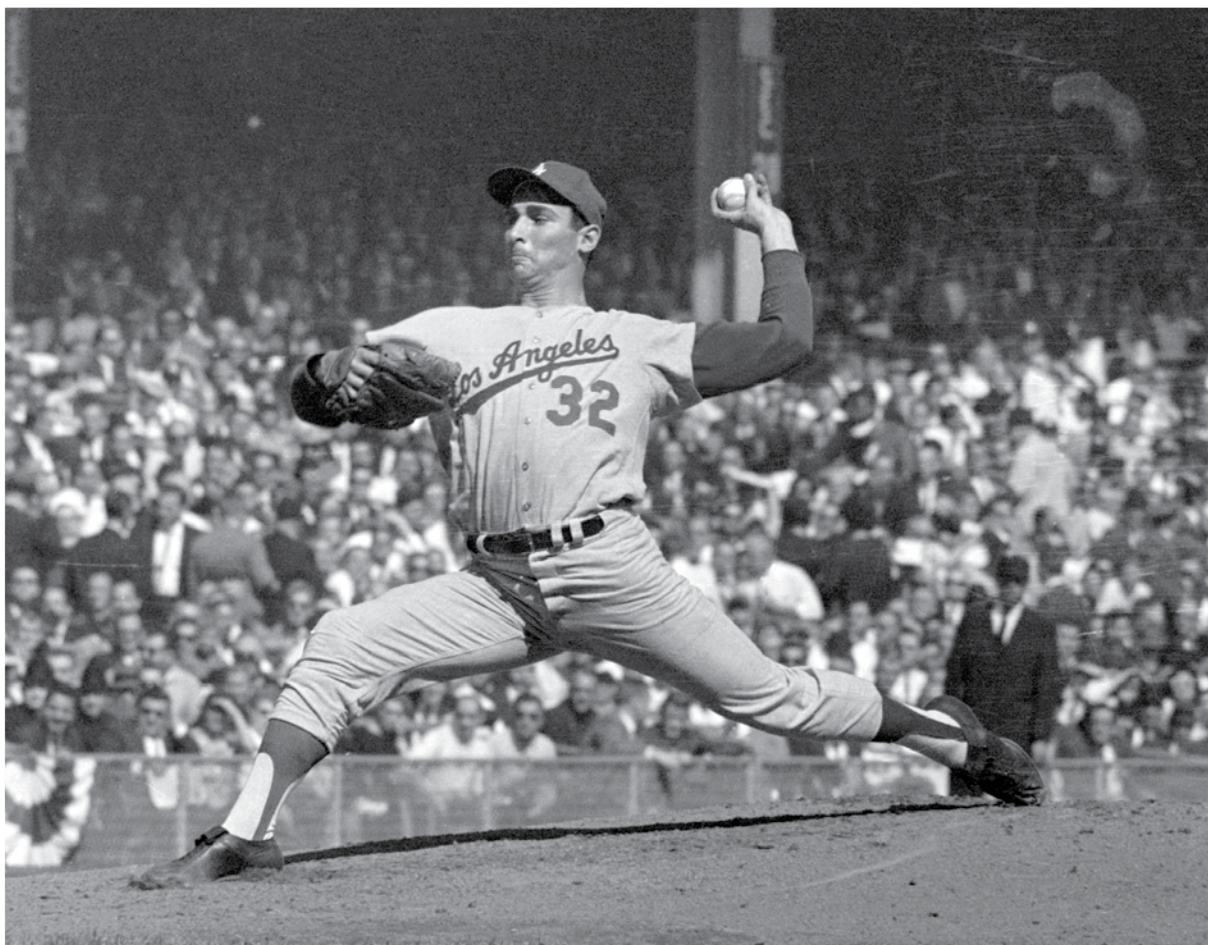


“The Best Of Lenny Bruce” by Lenny Bruce, 1962.

ist. Bob Dylan famously ran from and obscured his origins as Robert Zimmerman, but, as Kaufman acknowledges, this was less assimilation than an effort to connect himself to Woody Guthrie and American folk mythology. It’s what ultimately leads Kaufman to conclude that Dylan tries to escape from his Jewishness but in a way that appeals to Jews.

There is a counter-narrative to this story. Many who know Dylan have reported his deep interest in religion. Dylan’s brief phase as a born-again Christian even testifies to a sustained grappling with faith. I won’t pretend to understand Dylan’s personal, interior religion, but the public struggle over Dylan’s faith and the desire to see his songs as religious represents a demand that Jewish celebrities be publicly Jewish. We Jews deny—or at least denied—our celebrity the right to be a man in the street and a Jew at home.

Although it has its faults, *Jewhooing the Sixties* is never less than engaging. Kaufman has a provocative scholarly voice and his book raises interesting questions. After reading it, I wondered what the story of celebrity and Jewish identity would look like if we changed the variables. What if we pursued the story of Jewish celebrity without the goal of celebrating Jewish achievement? And could Kaufman have sustained his narrative if he had extended the time frame into the late 1960s, after the Manson murders? The early 1960s were, after all, not only a period of flux in the Jewish community. They were perhaps the last time the encounter with celebrity could be cast in such innocent terms. Meanwhile, Dylan is still releasing new albums and Streisand appears to be in the midst of a career renaissance. How are they “Jewhooed” now and what does it say about American Jewish life in the 21st century?



Dodgers star pitcher Sandy Koufax in the World Series opener against the New York Yankees, October 2, 1963. (© Bettmann/CORBIS.)

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From the Middle to the End

BY ANNE TRUBEK

The Middlesteins: A Novel

by Jami Attenberg

Grand Central Publishing, 288 pp., \$24.99

Fiction can provide emotional solace, historical knowledge, a hedge against loneliness, or, simply, pleasure. In *The Middlesteins*, Jami Attenberg reminds us of another function of literature: It can reduce the enormity of a human life to insignificance, the equivalent of looking at the stars for too long. She accomplishes this through the use of flash-forwards, and they are devastating.

But—and this may surprise—*The Middlesteins* is a great, light read, a real page-turner. Edie and Richard Middlestein settle in Chicago's suburbs. They go to synagogue and have a group of similarly Midwestern, middle-class Jewish families as friends. They raise two children, Robin and Benny. Richard is a passively successful pharmacist, and Edie works at a law firm, doing endless *pro bono* work for the needy and her friends.

Edie also eats. And eats. And eats. So much so

she is laid off by her law firm and develops diabetes and heart problems. The chapter titles signal shifts in chronology by tracking Edie's weight: "Edie, 241 Pounds" comes before "Edie, 160 Pounds," and

After all, if the characters will just go ahead and die, who cares if there was a chocolate fountain at a b'nai mitzvah party?

"Edie, 332 Pounds" is toward the beginning of the novel. Her family realizes that she is slowly killing herself, but Edie refuses to stop eating. Richard calls it quits, leaving Edie for a new, single life that he hopes includes sex, something he has not had in quite some time. The children are shocked by their father's betrayal, and, siding with Edie over their father, all but banish him from their lives. Benny and his wife Rachelle step in to help Edie cope; Robin reluctantly agrees to visit once a week.

While we wonder what makes Edie eat and why she won't stop, we get to know all the Middlesteins, sometimes through delightful set-pieces that are ancillary to the plot. In one, Robin is living in still-ungentrified Brooklyn while working for Teach for America. She and her twenty-something roommates are all equally miserable in their jobs and shocked by the exposure to real poverty. When the apartment becomes infested with bed bugs, they have a ceremonial burning of mattresses in the back alley, after which each girl announces she is moving back home. Robin returns to Chicago, gets a job in a private school, remains single, and drinks too much.

Benny is the cheerful Middlestein, happy in his protected life and his "brick, Colonial style with two sturdy pillars in the front" house. His tightly wound wife, Rachelle, indulges in a bit of pot with Benny at the end of each day.

What did she do all day anyway? She managed a household, and all their possessions. Drove her kids around, Pilates four times a week, an occasional Sisterhood meeting at the temple with all those old ladies who thought they knew

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everything about everything but only knew something about not much at all if you really wanted to get into it, got her hair done (regular bang trims, coloring once a month), her nails done, her toes, waxing, cooking, shopping. She read books. (She was in three book clubs but she only showed up if she liked the book they were reading.) If you asked her at the right time, she'd say, "Spend my husband's money." It was a joke. It was supposed to be funny. But it was true, too.

Her twins, Emily and Josh, are preparing for their b'nai mitzvah over the course of the novel, and Rachelle has placed them in dance classes for the after-dinner, before-the-slide show talent portion of the party. (After much deliberating, she decides on a chocolate fountain because she "would not disappoint her children, her babies, her miracles.")

Benny, taking after his father, is largely passive and so too is his son Josh, who "would never complain, he would just adapt, until it was too late: the curse of the Middlestein men." By leaving Edie, Richard takes action, but it is in the form of surrender: he cannot help his wife stop eating, so he gives up.

Attenberg is facile and funny with her descriptions and set-pieces—we go on Internet dates with Richard and to a family Seder with Robin's boyfriend. We meet a widowed, Chinese strip mall restaurant owner, Kenneth Song, who has been preparing "steaming pork buns, and bright green broccoli in thick lobster sauce" for Edie for years. In a surprising and touching turn, Kenneth falls in love with Edie, and toward the end of the novel he takes a turn at the narration, telling us his story. So too do the temple friends show up near the conclusion for a surprise, bravura performance.

But, from the opening scene, we are worried about Edie. Why does Edie eat? She makes people laugh. She is kind to her children. She does good works. Attenberg is never explicit—and there is no surprising biographical or psychological revelation. Edie seems to overeat because, as the child of a post-World War II Eastern European Jewish immigrant, "food was love," and plentiful food was a blessing. It seems to afford her a kind of emotional compensation in a family unable to express itself. When teenaged Robin's friend attempts suicide, Edie doesn't let her visit him in the hospital—too depressing. For the Middlesteins, the everyday is tenable—one can spend eight months planning a b'nai mitzvah party—but strong emotions are unpalatable. Each female character, at one point in the novel, lets out a scream, and each time Attenberg lets it simply end the chapter.

But Attenberg's most devastating technique is one that prevents us from ever getting too wrapped up—too emotionally invested—in the lives of the Middlesteins. Every so often—in the middle of a paragraph, while characters are walking along a street or sitting at a table, and after the reader has grown to care about them and their current travails—she flashes forward, shooting way past the ending, to tell us how the lives of the Middlesteins played out decades after the conclusion of the novel. The effect is upsetting and dizzying. Learning about the characters' futures while we are absorbed in their present, we stop caring about their days. After all, if the characters will just go ahead and die, who cares if there was a chocolate fountain at a b'nai mitzvah party?

When Benny first realizes he is losing his identity-

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defining full head of hair, he goes to his father's pharmacy for a prescription.

The two of them wandered uselessly out to the pharmacy; Benny would never step foot into that back room again until after his father had died a decade later, and there was no question that the business would be closed (it probably should have been closed five years before, but Richard had refused, saying that he offered a service to the community, though Benny knew that it was just because he needed a place to go all day), that the dusty shelves needed to be emptied and then tossed out the back door, a painful, clanking, depressing act that Benny, entirely bald by then, accomplished quietly, sadly, on his own. But for now, the Prophecy was on the house, and Richard walked Benny to the front door. "So maybe I can come by sometime?" said Richard.

And one finds oneself thrown from wondering whether Benny will go bald to deep questions: What

is the purpose of human life? And, more immediately, should I keep reading this book?

But you do because, despite Attenberg's existential plot-spoilers, you still want to know if Richard comes by Benny's house and if he finally has sex with the new woman he met on the Internet. Fiction plays tricks with time, and so do we, dilating an afternoon to a decade, forgetting years, imagining the paragraphs of our future.

These flash-forwards catapult this smart, well-written novel into something somehow annoyingly profound. "Just give us the Middlesteins!" one wants to yell—just gently parody suburban living and Midwestern Jews and we will be happy. But Attenberg is not so easy on us. In her novel lurks the sublime. After such knowledge, it seems petty to worry over cholesterol levels, and it makes perfect sense to eat that second dessert.

Anne Trubek is the author of A Skeptic's Guide To Writers' Houses and co-editor of Rust Belt Chic: The Cleveland Anthology. She is also a professor at Oberlin College.

Middle Position

BY ITAMAR RABINOVICH

Tested By Zion: The Bush Administration and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

by Elliott Abrams

Cambridge University Press, 352 pp., \$29.99

When National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice made Elliott Abrams her senior director for Near Eastern and North African Affairs at the end of 2002, she knew very well who he was and where he stood. “By choosing me,” Abrams writes in his excellent new book:

Rice was choosing someone who had already revealed to her—with my private complaints in 2001 and 2002 about the way the NSC staff was handling Israel—my own views. I was a Bush supporter, a Rice supporter, a “Neocon” and a proponent of the closest possible relationship between the U.S. and Israel.

Rice’s selection of Abrams to be her “Middle East guy” at the National Security Council (NSC) meant that she “was staking out a position: closer to Cheney and Bush and farther from Powell and State.”

Early in the Bush Administration, Colin Powell and the State Department had taken the lead in formulating U.S. policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They did so in the service of a president who had entered office without any great eagerness to address the conflict. Nonetheless, Bush and his team understood that the realities of 2001 did not afford him the luxury of ignoring it entirely. The second intifada was unfolding, terrorist attacks were rocking Israel, and Israeli counteraction generated Arab and European pressure on the Bush Administration to rein in Israel and seek a diplomatic solution to the crisis. President Bush’s relationship with Israel’s new prime minister, Ariel Sharon, was not a particularly comfortable one at that time.

All of this was altered by the transformation of two leaders and the non-transformation of a third. Bush was transformed by 9/11 into the prosecutor of “the war on terror.” In this war Sharon successfully placed himself and his country on the right side. Through a larger change in his orientation and policies, he managed to transform himself from the controversial leader of the radical right to a far-sighted, centrist leader, who gradually steered Israel out of a major crisis by defeating the second intifada. Meanwhile Arafat became associated in Bush’s mind with the wrong side, especially after he was caught red-handed in the act of importing weapons on the *Karine A* and lied about it to the president. One could disagree with or sometimes even annoy the

president, but as Sharon realized, you had to maintain his trust. In short, Sharon and his team managed to build a close working relationship with the Bush White House despite an unpromising beginning.

Between June 2002 and April 2004, with Abrams assisting Rice at the NSC, the United States spelled

phase would go through a similar but more modest exercise in the West Bank. This was not the political solution that the U.S. envisioned, but it decided to support Sharon’s decision nonetheless. In Israel itself Sharon’s disengagement from Gaza was deeply controversial. The right wing criticized it

Early in the Bush Administration, Colin Powell and the State Department had taken the lead in formulating U.S. policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

out a policy that supported the establishment of a Palestinian state as the last phase of a process through which the Palestinians would have to abandon terrorism, fight corruption, and build a more democratic political system. In time, Bush and his team also came to the conclusion that in order for this to happen, Arafat would have to be removed from leadership. They did manage to force him to appoint Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) as prime minister, but Arafat was powerful and devious enough to foil their efforts.

By 2004 it became clear to Sharon that more

vehemently as both silly and treacherous. The controversy forced Sharon to leave Likud and form a new centrist party, Kadima.

Even before Elliott Abrams assumed his new position at the end of 2002, he was an “enthusiastic supporter of the new Bush approach” to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including the idea of a two-state solution, and remained one. But he was also a supporter, if less than a completely enthusiastic one, of Sharon’s 2004 disengagement plan, which he saw as not much more than “the only game in town.”



Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas at the Tri-lateral Summit, Jerusalem. February 19, 2007. (Photo by Amos Ben Gershon, courtesy of Government Press Office, Israel.)

substantial progress toward a political solution was required. His own political views had changed; he now believed that it was no longer feasible for Israel to control the West Bank and Gaza and their populations. Since he also did not believe that a final status agreement with the Palestinians was possible, he developed instead a policy of unilateralism. Israel would dismantle its settlements in the Gaza Strip and withdraw from it, and at a later

He describes approvingly the way that the White House rallied to Sharon’s support when he faced severe difficulties. After Israel’s withdrawal from Gaza, however, and after Sharon’s disappearance from the scene, Abrams found himself increasingly at odds with his own government’s policy and that pursued by Sharon’s successor, Ehud Olmert.

By then Secretary of State Rice’s sympathy for Israel had been steadily diminishing, and her

readiness to exert strong pressure on it was increasing. Why? In part on account of its weak performance in the Second Lebanon War, which apparently shook her confidence in the country's ability to handle its own affairs. But her move from the White House to the State Department made a big difference too. Unlike George Shultz and Henry

Stephen Hadley, and with the president's deep trust, Rice came to dominate U.S. foreign policy. And she used her power to push consistently for a final status agreement brokered through active U.S. mediation. This led to strong tensions with Ehud Olmert, whose own conduct of his country's affairs was, in Abrams' assessment, deeply flawed. Abrams is high-

Rice came to dominate U.S. foreign policy. She used her power to push consistently for a final status agreement brokered through active U.S. mediation.

Kissinger, Abrams argues repeatedly, Rice did not pull State in her direction but rather was taken hostage by the bureaucracy she should have led:

To put the point more sharply, her Middle East hand at the NSC had been me; now she was getting information and advice from officials whose entire careers had been spent in the Arab world. Now Rice's advice came from officials of the Near East bureau, at home and in the field.

ly critical of Olmert's attempts to interpose himself between Rice and President Bush and of his willingness to offer, in the end, massive concessions to the Palestinians. "Above all," Abrams reports, he was led astray by "his own desire to achieve peace and prove that he was a consequential historical figure, not an accidental prime minister who had failed in Lebanon and was mired in corruption charges." His effort to achieve self-vindication via a "peace breakthrough" was something that "worried not only



The Red Sea Summit, Aqaba, June, 2003. From left, Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas, President George W. Bush, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, and King Abdullah II of Jordan. (Photo by Avi Ohayon, courtesy of Government Press Office, Israel.)

Even more important than Rice's malleability was her ambition to bring about an Israeli-Palestinian final status agreement as the crowning achievement of her tenure. Unlike President Bush, who "was already comfortable, in 2008, with his place in history," Rice was, Abrams writes, "still trying to make her mark and time was running out, so a Middle East peace agreement was an important goal." And there may have been more to it than that. On one occasion Abrams heard Rice compare the state of the Palestinians in the West Bank to that of the Blacks in the segregated American South. If he kept silent when she made this analogy it was apparently because in the end he "did not view the comparison to segregation as an expression of her fundamental view on Israel or of the Arab-Israel conflict but rather as the product of growing frustration."

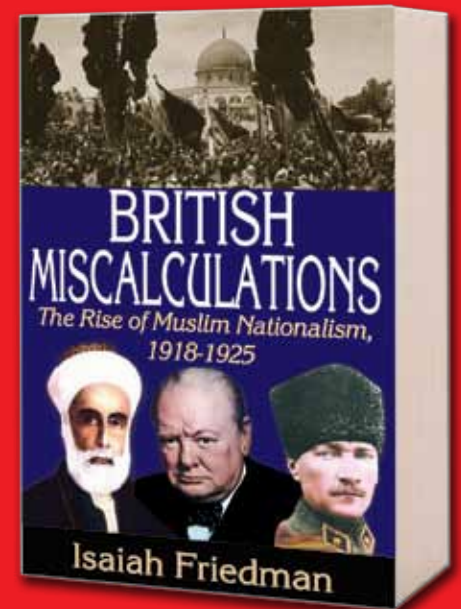
With Rumsfeld gone, Cheney weakened, an accommodating NSC director in her former deputy

his closest advisers but also a number of us on the American side."

Abrams was caught in the middle of all of this. Skeptical of the new policy, he "fought it internally" even as he supported some aspects of it in meetings with Israelis and Palestinians. "I stayed in the game," he writes, "pushing what I thought was a more realistic path: keep some negotiations going while building up the PA's security forces so that they could successfully fight terror."

There are still controversies and question marks surrounding the negotiation between Olmert and Abbas, and Abrams dispels some but not all of them. He argues that Olmert did in fact make an extremely far-reaching offer to which Abbas failed to respond, thus in effect rejecting it. Both Olmert and Rice wanted an agreement, but their relationship remained sour. Israeli politicians undermined Olmert, telling Abbas that Olmert had no mandate

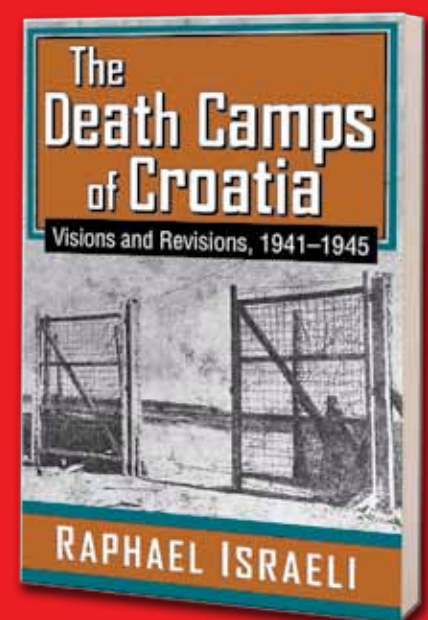
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Is Judaism a Proselytizing Religion? By Shlomo M. Brody

Yehoshua commented: There was a certain unintended benefit from the persecution of centuries. During those years, when any prospective convert knew that he would live his life in hiding, there was very little need to be in doubt of his sincerity and seriousness of purpose.

Yeshiva Revolution

By Yoel Finkelman

DF commented: Yeshiva lore is filled with stories of actual fighting and vandalism over the *mussar* question.

What are Israel's Rights in Judea and Samaria? Two Views

By JHH Weiler, Yaffa Zilbershats, and Avi Bell

Vernue commented: I suppose what troubles me about these articles is the underlying concept that law actually has something to say in situations like this. Law is a tool, not an end unto itself, and the goal of law is to support justice and order.

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to make the agreement, suggesting to him that it would be better for him to wait for the formation of the next Israeli government.

Throughout his narrative and especially in his penultimate chapter, entitled "Lessons Learned," Abrams sheds important light on the ways in which foreign policy is made within an American administration. He tells us both about the process and the players who made up George W. Bush's national security team. Wisely, Abrams makes frequent reference to the important book *Presidential Command* by the late Peter Rodman, who served in each Republican administration from Nixon onward. Rodman focused on the manner in which presidents managed their bureaucracies, dealt with internecine warfare, and placed their own imprint on policy. As an assistant secretary in Bush's Pentagon, Rodman was critical of the president's requirement that his lieutenants sort out their differences and present him with a consensual view of policy. Rodman argued that this managerial approach was wrong-headed and that the president should rather choose and decide between contending views.

Abrams' narrative underlines this criticism. He also shows us in great detail how personal relationships and rivalries shaped policy. He shows how, in Bush's first term, Cheney and Rumsfeld defeated Powell, and how Rice dominated foreign policy in the second term. Abrams remains loyal to his former boss, Stephen Hadley, but he also shows how Hadley's deference to Rice prevented the president's own apparent policy preferences and priorities from being implemented.

More significantly, President Bush himself displayed unusual pliancy when it came to Secretary Rice. Time and again he abandoned his preferences for the policies pursued by Rice. Consequently, Abrams suggests, he abandoned the sound policies of the middle years of his presidency to support a futile effort to seek a final status deal. But one wonders whether Bush himself did not become fascinated by the prospect of following up his controversial policy in the Middle East (Iraq is barely mentioned in the book) with a major Israeli-Palestinian peace accord. Needless to say, his administration didn't succeed in attaining one.

As Peter Rodman and now Elliott Abrams have showed in fascinating historical detail—and as I know from personal experience—the personalities and management styles of different people produce radically different foreign policy strategies and results. A team composed of Nixon, Rogers, and Kissinger is very different from one composed of Obama, Hillary Clinton, and General Jones. For a country like Israel, understanding the nature of the team and knowing how to work with it is crucial. Israelis, Americans, and others who read *Tested by Zion* will gain important insights not only into the history and nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but also the inner workings of American foreign policy.

Itamar Rabinovich, Israel's former ambassador to the United States, is president of the Israel Institute, Distinguished Global Professor at New York University, and Distinguished Non-Resident Fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy of the Brookings Institution. His most recent book is The Lingering Conflict: Israel, the Arabs and the Middle East, 1948-2011 (Brookings Institution Press).

The Vanishing Point

BY DARA HORN

Roman Vishniac Rediscovered

International Center of Photography
Through May 5, 2013

I remember the first time I looked through my parents' copy—every suburban Jewish family had one—of photographer Roman Vishniac's volume *A Vanished World*. It was 1988 and I was 11 years old; I pored over the photographs of bearded men and basement-dwelling children, surprised to find myself captivated. I was vaguely aware that most of the people in the pictures had been murdered, but that was not what haunted me. The photographs reminded me of my artist mother's favorite paintings by Rembrandt—where the light, as she described it, seemed to come not from any external source, but from within the figures' faces.

Ten years later, I began my doctoral work in Yiddish literature and came to know not only many of the dimensions of that “vanished world” (a place, as it turned out, where I would never want to live) but also the strange fire that burned within it. A half-century before the Holocaust, Ashkenazi culture was already ignited by what scholars call the ethnographic impulse—the urge its writers and artists felt to record whatever they could of a life and language that were already considered on the brink of extinction. Countless Yiddish stories, plays, and films include gratuitous scenes or descriptions of holiday observances, superstitions, ritual objects, food, and details of dress. The shtetl nostalgia that still flourishes in American Jewish life had already begun, fifty years before the gas chambers horrifically ended the argument or, at least, transferred it to other continents in shadowed form.

I didn't know any of this yet. All I saw, then, was the light within.

At “Roman Vishniac Rediscovered,” a major retrospective at New York's International Center of Photography (ICP) which will travel domestically and internationally later this year, the first thing I saw was a very different kind of light. The image that greets visitors to the exhibit is a floor-to-ceiling enlarged print featuring two crumbling houses, with two women and two children standing in front of them, along with two more women looking out through the houses' windows. Taken in the Carpathian village of Munkatsh [Mukachevo] in the late 1930s, it is, as a wall label points out, “a nearly perfect photograph.” The two houses' slanting roofs form a striking pattern of angles, and the figures appear in a startling symmetry of indoors and outdoors, young and old, brightness and shadow. But what arrests the viewer are the women's faces. On a blinding sunny day, the two women in the foreground and the women in the windows squint at the viewer beneath hands raised to block out the light. There is often an uncomfortable voyeurism implicit



Roman Vishniac, ca. 1935-1938, taken by an unidentified photographer. (© Mara Vishniac Kohn. Courtesy International Center of Photography.)

in photographs of foreign lives. But this image was the first time I ever felt that the people in such photographs were in fact looking back at me, shielding their eyes to see me better, wondering what I was thinking.

In Vishniac's case, the reality is simpler than the myth.

Maya Benton, the 37-year-old Yiddish-speaking exhibit curator whose mother grew up in a displaced persons camp that Vishniac documented, has succeeded tremendously in rescuing Vishniac from the amber in which his most iconic images are preserved. As she explained to Alana Newhouse in a long *New York Times Magazine* story in 2010, Vishniac's reputation rests on only a few hundred images out of the thousands he produced, and those few images are burdened with false mythologies perpetuated by the photographer himself—that he used a hidden camera, for instance, or that his was a “secret mission” intended to preserve a culture, or that the impoverished religious Jews he photographed were representative of that “vanished world.” But the exhibit itself is less about debunking myths than about revealing the fullness of a misunderstood artist's career. “Most of the images here have no mythology attached to them, because they've never been



Jewish villagers, Carpathian Mountains, ca. 1935-1938. (© Mara Vishniac Kohn. Courtesy International Center of Photography.)

seen before,” Benton told me. “It’s a body of work that introduces one of great photographers of the 20th century.”

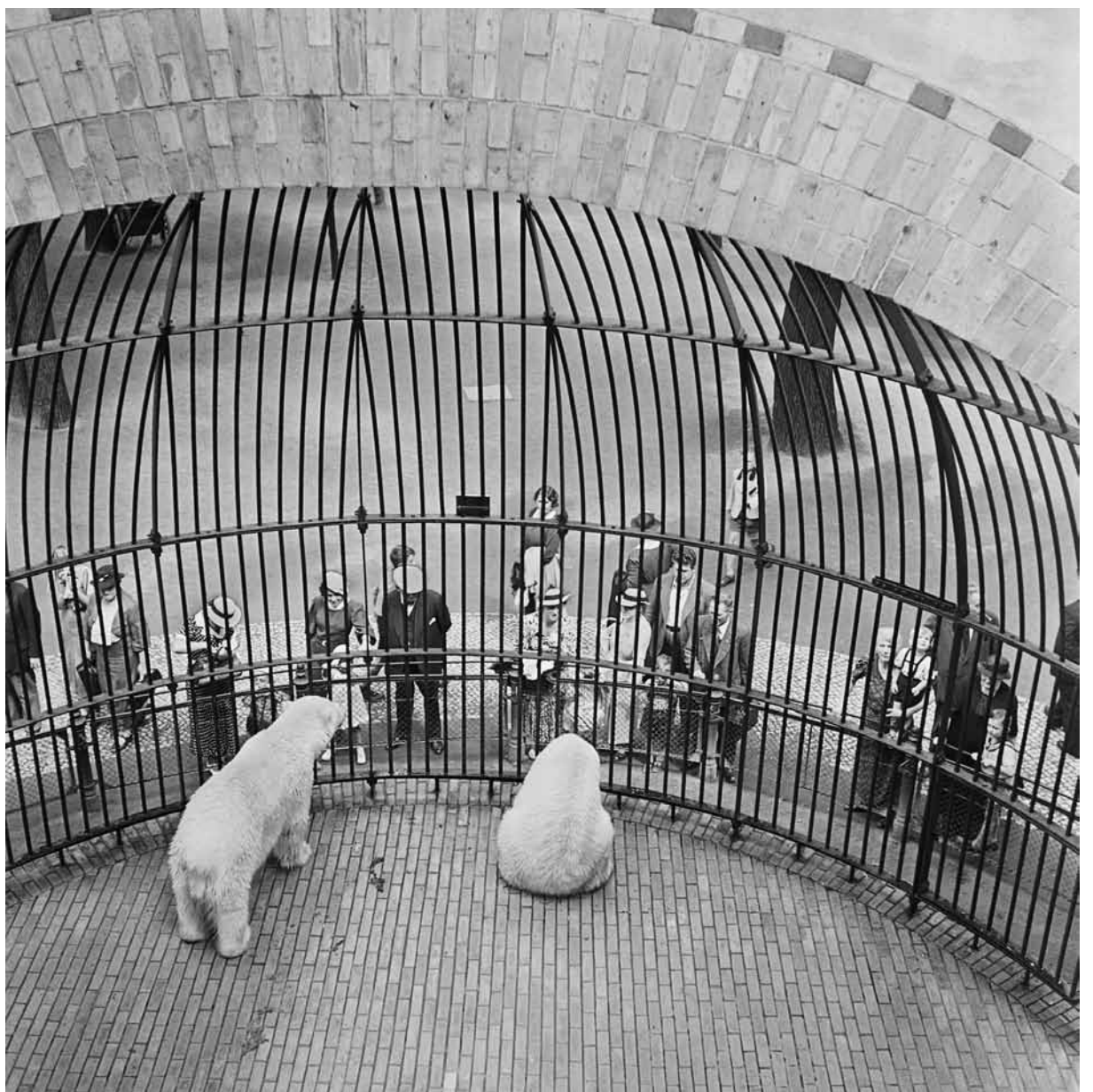
Vishniac was nothing if not versatile, moving Zelig-like through the cataclysms of his time. Born and raised in Moscow by affluent, secular Jewish parents who fled to Berlin after the 1917 Revolution, Vishniac studied biology before joining his parents in Berlin, where he established himself as a street photographer with a modernist eye akin to that of Henri Cartier-Bresson. His early work, shown here for the first time, is visually masterful but emotionally cool, marked by an outsider’s playful irony. Among the shots of German butchers and chimney sweeps, one image struck me as strangely resonant: a photograph of polar bears. Taken from behind the bears as they gaze out of their cage at spectators, the photograph shows laughing children in lederhosen and their overly delighted parents from the point of view of the caged animals. The title is “People Behind Bars, Berlin Zoo.” On the other side of the exhibit hall, in a photo where Vishniac poses his young daughter in front of Nazi phrenology machines, the playful caption is suddenly no longer a joke.

Many American Jews have come to see Vishniac as he retroactively presented himself in *A Vanished World*: as a prophet who foresaw the destruction of Eastern European Jewry before his naïve subjects did, and who poured his soul into preserving those vanishing people on film—the *cheder* boys with cherubic faces out of a Renaissance fresco, the aged rabbis lit from within like Rembrandt’s portraits of Jews centuries earlier—in the innocent moments before their tragic murders.

Intellectuals love to insist that the reality is more complicated than the myth. But in Vishniac’s case, the reality is actually simpler. Vishniac was on assignment. Just as Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange were sent by the Farm Security Administration in the 1930s to document American poverty in the South and West, Vishniac was commissioned by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (“the Joint”) from 1935 to 1938 to document Jewish poverty in the East.

The ICP show’s greatest success is in placing Vishniac firmly in the context of social documentary photographers of his time. His explicit assignment was to photograph people who were obviously poor and obviously Jewish (hence the preponderance of exhausted porters and bedraggled children, as well as men in traditional dress) and to document the Joint’s relief work in action so that American Jews would be moved to donate money and would know where their dollars were going. In the exhibit, visitors can see the brochures, promotional literature, and newspaper spreads featuring his images of the suffering Jewish poor.

The immediacy and bluntness of these UNICEF-worthy pleas to the public is jarring. “Hunger, fear and disease stalk through the Jewish streets in Poland,” one pamphlet’s captions read, introducing a Joint-sponsored summer camp. “Backward and defective children who constitute a burden for the coming generations are placed in institutions where wholesome nourishment and kindness improve their physique.” The famous image of “Sara,” an apparently bedridden girl with flowers painted on the crumbling wall behind her, was featured on the Joint’s letterhead.



People behind bars, Berlin Zoo, early 1930s. (© Mara Vishniac Kohn. Courtesy International Center of Photography.)



David Eckstein and classmates in cheder, Brod, ca. 1935-1938. (© Mara Vishniac Kohn. Courtesy International Center of Photography.)

“There was nothing ironic about Vishniac’s project,” Benton reminded me. “He was trying to encourage people to donate food and medicine.” It was only when his subjects were incinerated that the meaning of the photographs began to change.

Was Vishniac complicit in the schmaltzification of his most famous images? Nobody who has read his captions for *A Vanished World* can doubt it. One can hardly make out the text—much of which is misleading at best—over the strains of a tiny violin. (“I know of a situation where murderers broke into a yeshiva,” he writes in a typical passage, decades after the fact. “The Talmudists went on arguing, trying to reach an answer before their slaughter—so they could enter the world of God, of eternity, with greater knowledge. This is Judaism.”) The exhibit’s display of Vishniac’s scrapbook, which shows how he collected the many popular reprints and illustrations derived from his iconic photographs, also makes clear how aware he was of what his work became.

But the exhibit succeeds too well

in demonstrating the tremendous range of Vishniac's work for any viewer to see him as another Marc Chagall or Isaac Bashevis Singer, a talented artist who retreated into milking the past for pathos. An entire darkened room is devoted to screenings of his scientific microphotography, a field he pioneered for decades. Other displays show him hustling for work as an impoverished immigrant. A series of Chinatown images was part of a

failed Guggenheim application. In his New York apartment, he made remarkable portraits of Einstein and (yes) Chagall, among other famous figures, and took pictures in New York's nightclubs. One case shows his photos of a bar mitzvah in Queens in 1948.

His commissioned work also shows astonishing versatility. Some of the exhibit's finest images are from Vishniac's first assignment documenting

Jewish social services in Germany: A photo of a classroom in a Jewish middle school in Nazi Germany feels exquisitely alive, its astonishingly familiar-looking children sneaking looks at the camera, a girl's silver barrette gleaming in the light. A project on Werkdorp, a Zionist vocational farm in the Netherlands, shows its young Jewish subjects as hardy construction workers, building a bright future in stunning shots taken from below, looking up



Left: fish, the favored food for the kosher table, Eastern Europe, ca. 1935-1938. Right: grandmother and grandchildren in a basement dwelling, Krochmalna Street, Warsaw, ca. 1935-1938. (© Mara Vishniac Kohn. Courtesy International Center of Photography.)



Left: Sara, sitting in bed in a basement dwelling with stenciled flowers above her head, Warsaw, ca. 1935-1937. Right: Zionist youth, Werkdorp Nieuwesluis, Wieringermeer, The Netherlands, 1939. (© Mara Vishniac Kohn. Courtesy International Center of Photography.)



Marc Chagall, New York, 1941. (© Mara Vishniac Kohn. Courtesy International Center of Photography.)

toward a shining sun. The captions describing the young subjects' murders feel, for the first time, not inevitable but shocking.

And then, of course, there are the Eastern European works. And they are captivating, all the more so because the empathy, which seems so absent from Vishniac's earlier work, feels entirely genuine. Here, even the pictures that playfully echo famous artwork—like one of the Jewish quarter in Bratislava, where a child carrying a hoop down a cobblestone lane seems like a deliberate shad-

ow of de Chirico's "Mystery and Melancholy of a Street"—do so with an unprecedented intimacy. An image of a secular, lipsticked woman in Satu Mare (hometown of the Satmar Hasidim) has no irony to it. A series shot in basement apartments on Warsaw's impoverished Krochmalna Street (where Bashevis Singer grew up) resembles Jacob Riis' famous photos in *How the Other Half Lives*, but the light Vishniac draws from his subjects transcends charity. As these people looked at me through the camera's lens, I no longer felt like a spectator at the Berlin Zoo. Instead I felt privileged, a witness to captured beauty.

Most of Vishniac's photographs appeared only in brochures and newspapers at the time. But in January 1944, YIVO in New York mounted an exhibit of his Eastern European images—at a time when his Yiddish-speaking American audience knew what was happening to their friends and relatives in Europe, but also knew how little could be done. The Joint's attention by then had shifted from relief to rescue, and the ICP exhibit includes a letter Vishniac sent to President Roosevelt along with his photographs, pleading for intervention. Yet the situation was close to hopeless then, and one senses that everyone knew it. In a spare and quiet room, the exhibit achieves something wondrous: using Vishniac's original mounted prints, with Yiddish and English captions mostly mentioning only the towns and cities depicted, it recreates that YIVO exhibit from 1944.

The images in this section of the exhibit are familiar. Most of them—the anguished young woman facing the resigned old man, the little boys gathered over open Hebrew books, the dark-haired bearded man gazing up over wire-rimmed glasses—are the same photographs eventually immortalized in *A Vanished World*. More significantly, the YIVO exhibit marks the beginning of Vishniac's descent into amber. It became the basis for Vishniac's *Polish Jews*,

whose publication by Schocken in 1947 began the process of canonizing this perspective on Eastern Europe in the minds of American Jews. The book's preface, by Abraham Joshua Heschel, was later expanded into another influential elegy for Eastern European Jewry, *The Earth Is the Lord's*. Heschel's preface originated as a talk at YIVO in 1946. When he finished, the secular Jews assembled spontaneously rose and recited Kaddish. It is difficult, generations after the fact, to penetrate the fog of ritualized and bowdlerized memorials to sense the power these images once held.

But that power is present in this silent white room. One sees these stunning portraits and imagines standing there in 1944—in Munkatsh, in Lublin, yes, but also in New York, powerless before these

As these people looked at me through the camera's lens, I no longer felt like a spectator at the Berlin Zoo.

people who are looking back through the fading light. And one is permitted to feel once again, as if for the first time, the beauty and anguish of all that was lost.

Yet the photograph I found the most uncanny is not one of Vishniac's many masterpieces, but a mediocre snapshot. In a display of family memorabilia, there is a tiny picture taken at a child's birthday party in Vishniac's apartment in Berlin. Like the polar bears, the children sit with their backs to the camera, enjoying a spectacle: an elaborate puppet theater at one end of the high-ceilinged salon. The picture is unremarkable except for another image contained within it. Alongside the puppet theater, on a wood-paneled wall in the elegant room beneath a crystal chandelier, there hangs an enormous photograph of an old man with a long white beard and sidelocks, wearing a caftan and a black hat.

At first I assumed that this was one of Vishniac's own portraits hanging in his home as an example of his work, as artistic, affectionate, and slightly maudlin as the copies of *A Vanished World* on the coffee tables of suburban Jewish homes—or, if I were cynical, as offensively schlocky as the "rabbi" puppets I saw for sale in Poland twenty years ago. But the snapshot was dated 1934, and Vishniac's Eastern European work only began in 1935. As I squinted at the picture within the picture, I recognized the old man from a photo on the other side of the same display case. It is Roman Vishniac's grandfather.

Is there something kitschy or maudlin about this larger-than-life portrait of tradition in this opulently modern room, this aged Torah-bound ancestor gazing down on these secular puppet-watching children? Maybe, but I doubt it. As I stared at this snapshot amid the detritus of a vanished world, I could detect no irony, no voyeurism, no caged bears or people on display, no puppet theater of the past. I saw only a family memory of a person who once lived and loved the people in the room.



Puppet theater party in the Vishniac family apartment, Berlin, ca. 1934. (© Mara Vishniac Kohn, courtesy International Center of Photography.)

Dara Horn's fourth novel, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, will be published by W.W. Norton & Co. this September.

New Beats for Old Brooklyn

BY ITZIK GOTTESMAN

Old Brooklyn

by Andy Statman

Shefa Records, 98 minutes, \$17.99

On the first cut of Andy Statman's new star-studded double CD actor John Goodman gruffly intones the title: "Old Brooklyn," introducing an old folky banjo strumming that makes way for Statman's wild screeching free-jazz clarinet, which, in turn, roars into a bluegrassy banjo and mandolin (Statman again), before returning to the jazzy side of things. The lap steel guitar of Jon Sholle never lets us forget the country music connection but then also spaces out into rock territory. The second track, "My Hollywood Girls," takes us over the seas to Russia and the most adept mandolin playing you are likely to hear this side of Moscow or Appalachia.

In *Old Brooklyn*, Statman moves easily from

and Shloymke Beckerman were the great Eastern European klezmer clarinetists who had arrived in New York by the 1920s. Long after the height of his career, retired and basically forgotten, as was his

Statman moves easily from bluegrass to blues to klezmer to Hasidic to rock, among other musical genres.

style of Jewish music, Tarras agreed to mentor Statman on the clarinet and even played on the same bill with Statman and Feldman. Sometimes couples whose weddings he had played at decades before came to hear him again. Tarras' 78 RPM recordings became part of the core repertoire of the klezmer renaissance that began in the late 1970s, and Statman is the great exponent of his style.

Although Eastern European Jews had a tradition in the 20th century of Jewish mandolin orches-

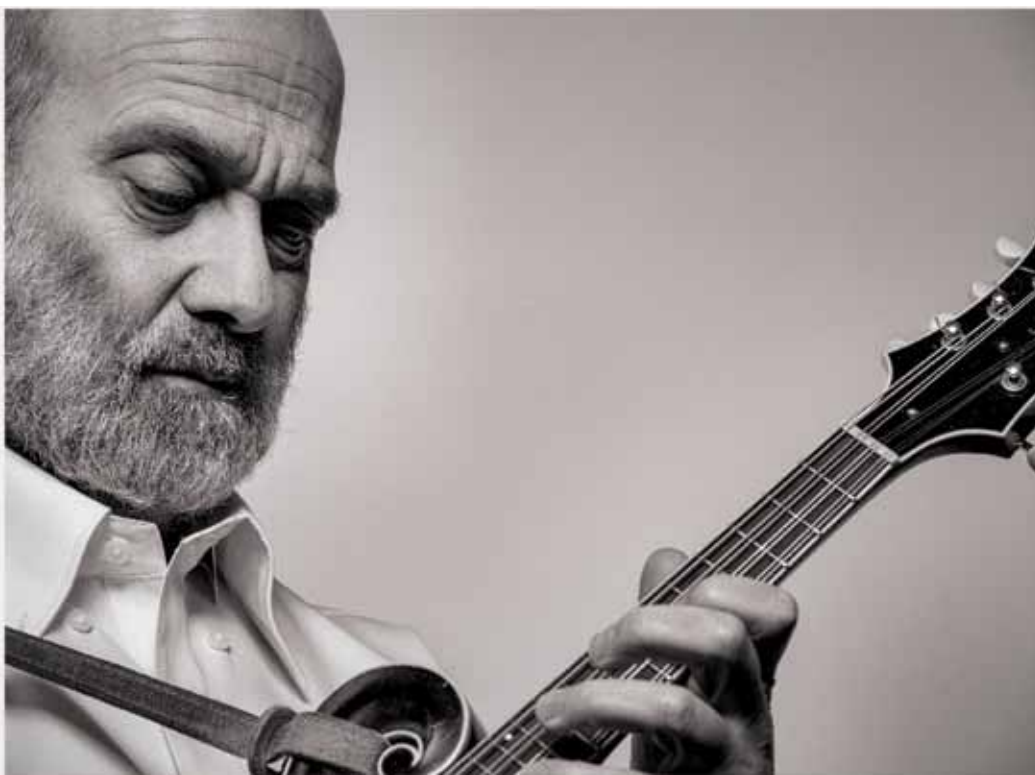
each of whom bring along musical backgrounds as diverse as Statman's. Other special guests, including David Letterman's musical director Paul Shaffer (bringing a '70s sound on the keyboards) add to the fun of this recording, but at the heart of it all is Statman's tight, longtime trio with Larry Eagle on drums and percussion and Jim Whitney on bass. When the three of them play "Zhok Mahoney" (a *zhok* is a dance tune in the slow Romanian hora rhythm) the traditional Jewish clarinet of Statman plays in sync with the nontraditional klezmer drumming of Eagle as they riff off each other for the entire song. (At Statman's weekly gigs in the intimate, funky basement of the Charles Street Synagogue in Greenwich Village one really sees and hears the closeness of his three-piece band, but you feel it on *Old Brooklyn* too.)

There are a few surprises on *Old Brooklyn*. In "Totally Steaming," the fifth tune on the first CD (but the first that is outright Jewish in character) one hears a duet between clarinet and a boiling tea kettle. Here and elsewhere, Statman showcases his ability to transition from klezmer to improvisatory free jazz. His playing here has an emotional depth and the kettle serves as a drone, keeping you on earth as his clarinet soars. The most surprising number, at least if you think of Statman only as a Jewish performer, is the song "The Lord Will Provide," written by John Newton, who also wrote "Amazing Grace." It is sung by country and bluegrass star Ricky Skaggs, accompanied only by Statman's clarinet. The pairing of Skaggs' gospel singing with the clarinet, which cannot help but sound spiritually Jewish, is inspired.

Those sparse duets contrast with the rollicking tunes in which Paul Shaffer joins the band. In "Eitan and Zaidy" and "A Boppin' Crib" the band—with Berline, Shaffer, and Sholle—rock out, but it is Statman's mandolin that grabs center stage. To my ear, those jams do not equal the country music and bluegrass perfection found in the smaller ensembles that play "A Brighter Day" or "Pretty Little Gal" among others, but they are fun. While the bluegrass material might strike some as conservative, not many musicians would attempt the solo as Statman dares with his clarinet in "Life Cycles," combining Hasidic *nigunim*, klezmer, and American folk melody. One becomes absorbed in the clear tone of the instrument and is saddened by the final note, still too early at the near five-minute mark.

Statman takes risks and usually succeeds. *Old Brooklyn* proves once again that his mandolin playing is unequaled; and his clarinet will blow you away.

Itzik Gottesman is the associate editor of the Yiddish Forverts, teaches Jewish folk music at the Bard-YIVO Institute for East European Jewish History and Culture, and runs the "Yiddish Song of the Week" blog.



Andy Statman on mandolin. (Photo courtesy of Jason Marck.)

bluegrass to blues to klezmer to Hasidic to rock, among other musical genres. For those who know his history, this versatility is not surprising. He began as an unlikely prodigy: a New York Jewish kid playing bluegrass on the mandolin. In the 1970s he became interested in klezmer (along with Judaism) and began seriously playing the clarinet. The story of how he and ethnomusicologist Zev Feldman looked up long-retired klezmer great Dave Tarras (who died in 1989) in Coney Island is now a part of modern klezmer lore. Tarras, Naftuli Brandwein,

tras as well as mandolin accompaniment to singing, Statman's playing emerged from a virtuosic American folk mandolin tradition, exemplified by the bluegrass pioneer Bill Monroe, with whom he played as a young man. Though other great mandolinists perform in the klezmer world today, such as Jeff Warschauer, Eric Stein, and Joey Weisenberg, Statman has them beat, certainly in terms of speed. One of the wonderful things about this album is that he plays with virtuosic equals, Béla Fleck on the banjo and Byron Berline on the fiddle,

No Joke

BY RUTH R. WISSE

Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, loved Jewish jokes and for many years collected material for the study that would appear in 1905 as *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. He appreciated one-liners: “A wife is like an umbrella; sooner or later one takes a cab.” He was fond of wordplay: old people fall into “anecdote”; the Christmas season kicks off the “alcoholidays.” He especially favored Jewish jokes in which matchmakers, rabbis, and sophisticated beggars, or schnorrers, upend our expectations of them:

The young man was most disagreeably surprised when the proposed bride was introduced to him, and drew aside the *shadkhen*—the marriage broker—to whisper his objections: “Why have you brought me here?” he asked reproachfully. “She’s ugly and old, she squints, and has bad teeth . . .” “You needn’t lower your voice,” interrupted the broker, “she’s deaf as well.”

Two Jews meet in a railway carriage at a station in Galicia. “Where are you going?” asks one. “To Cracow,” replied the other. “What a liar you are!” objects the first. “If you say you’re going to Cracow, you want me to believe you’re going to Lemberg. But I know that in fact you’re going to Cracow. So why are you lying to me?”

A schnorrer, who was allowed as a guest into the same house every Sabbath, appeared one day in the company of an unknown young man who was about to sit down at the table. “Who is this?” asked the householder. “He’s my new son-in-law,” the schnorrer replied. “I’ve promised him his board for the first year.”

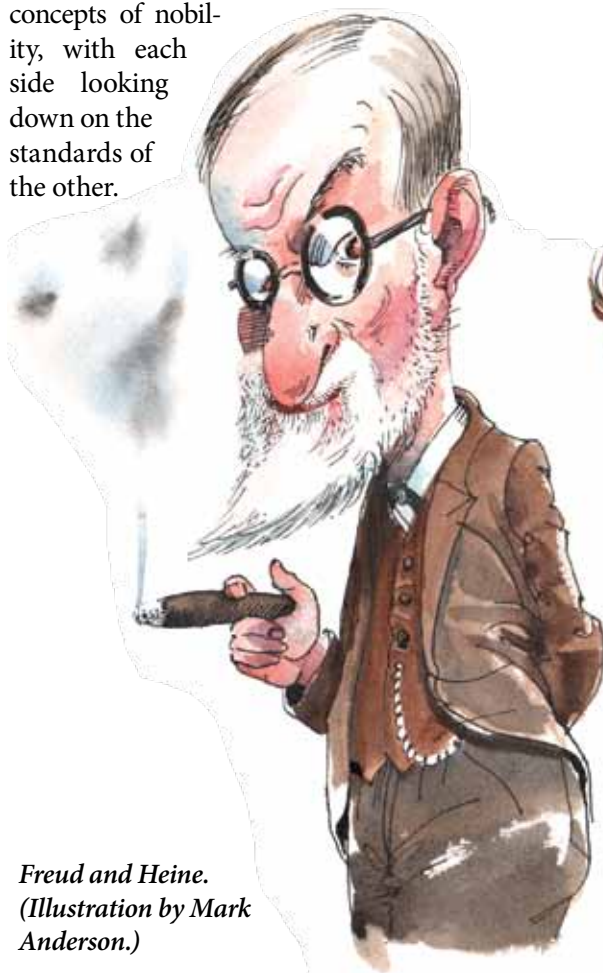
In the first joke, expecting the *shadkhen* to parry the young man’s objections, we are surprised that he reinforces them instead. In the second, convolution, which normally serves to obscure the truth, ends up confirming it. In the third, the beggar assumes the host’s prerogative, manifesting largesse at the expense of his benefactor. Reversal, displacement, and turning the tables are the wellsprings of a tradition that mocks the contradictions of Jewish experience—the gap between accommodation to foreign powers and promise of divine election. Although many religions acknowledge a tension between the tenets and confutations of their faith, few have had to balance such high national hopes against such a poor political record. Jewish humor at its best interprets the incongruities of the Jewish condition.

Although Freud draws heavily on the humor of his native Jewish culture, he extrapolates from it only such findings as are presumably universal. He is interested in the relation of joking to other psychological phenomena, not in relation to Jews. “[We] do not insist upon a patent of nobility from

our examples,” he writes. “We make no inquiries about their origin but only about their efficiency—whether they are capable of making us laugh and whether they deserve our theoretical interest. And both these two requirements are best fulfilled precisely by Jewish jokes.” One can’t help musing on the analyst’s reluctance to comment on the Jewishness of the Jewish material he discusses. Take a phrase

Reversal, displacement, and turning the tables are the wellsprings of a tradition that mocks the contradictions of Jewish experience.

like “patent of nobility”—transposed from the Yiddish *yikhes-briv*, a hybrid Hebrew-Yiddish term for pedigree. The irony implicit in Freud’s use of the term derives from the distinction between Jewish and Christian-European concepts of nobility, with each side looking down on the standards of the other.



Freud and Heine.
(Illustration by Mark Anderson.)

Freud’s obvious pride in the claim of Jews to primogeniture as well as cultural and ethical advantages over their Christian overlords belies the scientist’s claim to be transcending parochialism.

Only once in this book does Freud indulge in some speculation about the specifically Jewish affinity for humor. He does so during a discussion of tendentious jokes, “when the intended rebellious criticism is directed against the subject himself, or, to put it more cautiously, against someone in whom the subject has a share—a collective person, that is

(the subject’s own nation, for instance).” In other words, Freud makes a distinction between jokes directed by Jews at Jews and jokes directed at Jews by foreigners—not because the former are any kinder, but instead because Jews know the connection between their own faults and virtues. “Incidentally,” he concludes this part of the exploration, “I do not know whether there are many other instances of a

people making fun to such a degree of its own character.” The offhand quality of this observation has not prevented it from becoming the most quoted sentence in Freud’s book, perhaps because others have realized better than the author how much it says about the Jewish condition.

Freud put up with anti-Semitism in much the same way that he accepted civilization *with* its discontents. He therefore welcomed joking as a compensatory pleasure—the expressive venting of people who lived under the double weight of their own disciplining heritage and the collective responsibility to behave well among the nations.

A writer Freud cherished as both a poet and a wit was Heinrich Heine (1797-1856). Coming of age at a moment when Jews were being admitted to German society, Heine knew he had something fresh to introduce into the high culture of Goethe and Schiller—a literature less focused than theirs on achieving comprehensive truth and classical perfection, and thus truer to volatile reality. No Jewish writer ever took more aggressive risks.

Born in Düsseldorf, then under French rule, Heine published his first book of poems in 1821.

Though he studied law and philosophy, he was a natural poet, pushing the form to the limits of lyrical, political, and critical expression. His writing drew on warring elements in his nature: romantic longing versus analytic skepticism, socialist sympathies tempered by monarchist preferences, and a love of the German language and homeland that endured a quarter century's residence in France. In his lyrics, Heine proved that he could "do" perfection; more than seventy-five composers, including Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Liszt, and Wagner, set his poems to music. Sharing a widespread contemporary attraction to folk poetry, Heine achieved some of its effects of "artlessness" in his art.

But he was just as keen to register imperfections—in politics, human nature, and himself. Heine's best biographer, Jeffrey L. Sammons, advises extreme caution in describing both who Heine was and who Heine thought he was, and the avalanche of arguments over his legacy renders foolish any attempt to provide a definitive characterization of the man and his career.

Heine's conversion to Christianity, for example—an act that was fairly common among his Jewish contemporaries—acquired notoriety only because he cast himself as at once a renegade Jew and phony Christian. He called his conversion an *Entréebillet zur europäischen Kultur*—a jibe that had many teeth. By using the French term for "ticket of admission," he implied that the German language had to pay its own ticket of admission into European culture, just as the Jew paid through baptism for his. In addition, the commercial terminology mocks both conversion as a religious experience and the person who submits to it, not to mention others as well. Christians are ridiculed for accepting inauthentic converts, Jews for trading their culture for one that despises their own, and enlightened Europeans for exposing the bias at the heart of their liberal affectations by requiring the credential of Christian baptism that they otherwise pretended to spurn. In a single breath, Heine thus damns all parties to the dishonest bargain and himself most of all, since he knew that the teaching post he hoped to gain by his conversion had not come through.

When I studied 18th- and 19th-century European literature in college, Heine's lyric "*Ein Fichtenbaum steht einsam*" (translated here by Emma Lazarus) was presented as the epitome of Romantic longing. It depicts a pine tree standing lonely on a northern height, slumbering under its cover of snow and ice, and dreaming of a palm tree in the East, that mourns lonely and silent on a blazing cliff.

There stands a lonely pine-tree
In the north, on a barren height;
He sleeps while the ice and snow flakes
Swathe him in folds of white.

He dreameth of a palm-tree
Far in the sunrise-land,
Lonely and silent longing
On her burning bank of sand.

Male pine and female palm, each solitary, majestic, and destined to yearn for what can never be joined, are coupled in the harmonious medium of a lied—German for both poem and song—that forges their conciliation across the gap between the two stanzas. The

accord of the words supplants the rupture of feeling.

This is the kind of poetry at which Heine excelled, but it was not the only kind. Another way of expressing the same *Zerrissenheit*—the condition of being torn apart—was through wit. This, too, yokes opposites, although instead of harmonizing the disjunction, wit accentuates it with a verbal surprise. Although by no means the only practitioner of the aggressive wit that came to be known as *Judenwitz* (a form also practiced by non-Jews), he became its master.

If I were teaching European Romanticism today, I might tweak the syllabus to include, alongside "*Ein Fichtenbaum*," one of Heine's comic takes on the Romantic poet (that is, himself). "The Baths of Lucca," one of his four so-called travel pictures, has the added advantage of being a send-up of Jews. The parody begins with his choice of genre. Modeling himself on then-popular accounts of which the best known was Goethe's *Travels in Italy*, Heine confesses that "there's nothing more boring on this earth than to have to read the description of an Italian journey—except maybe to have to write one—and the writer can only make it halfway bearable by speaking as little as possible of Italy itself." Accordingly, the Tuscan resort town of Lucca serves Heine merely as the setting for an encounter among displaced German Jews who have come to take the baths.

The narrator, "Dr. Heine," drops in on Lady Matilda, whom he had previously known in London. In doing so, he recognizes a second visitor as the converted Jewish Hamburg banker Christian Gumpel, now the Marquis Christoforo di Gumpelino, who pronounces himself madly in love with Matilda's countrywoman, Lady Julie Maxfield. To while away the time, the two prospective suitors set out to visit Gumpelino's local Italian lady friends. Huffing and puffing through the picturesque hills of Lucca, they encounter Gumpel's valet, whom the author recognizes as Old Hirsch, his former Hamburg lottery agent. While the author and Gumpelino pay an extended visit to the Italian courtesans, the servant is dispatched to arrange an evening rendezvous for his master with Lady Maxfield. The erotic adventure subsequently falls through, and the work concludes with an improbable discussion of poetry in which merciless fun is made of August von Platen (1796–1835), a real-life fellow poet of Heine's. The ridicule ended up damaging Heine's reputation more than it did von Platen's.

In the sunny opening chapters of "The Baths of Lucca," however, the main target of ridicule is Gumpelino, the Jewish convert to Catholicism and newly minted marquis. Matilda reveals her prejudice against this man when she tells Dr. Heine not to be put off by his nose, which for the latter then becomes the focus of an extended comic riff, or *shpritz*, following Peter Wortsman's translation:

Matilda's warning not to knock against the nose of the man was sufficiently well-founded, a little more length and he'd have surely poked my eye out with it. I don't want to say anything bad about that nose; quite the contrary, it was of the noblest form, and in a sense it's what gave my friend the right to add a Marquis' title to his name. For one could tell from his nose that he came from noble stock, that he descended from an ancient international family with which even our Lord God established nuptial ties without fear of



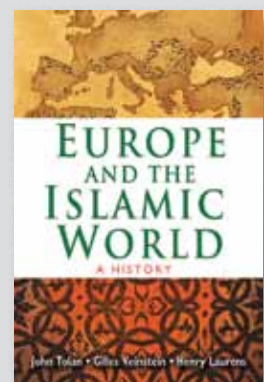
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rendering Himself *déclassé*. This family has indeed come down in the world a notch or two since then, so that, ever since Charlemagne's day, most are compelled to earn their living by peddling old trousers and Hamburg lottery tickets, albeit without in the least letting up on their pride of ancestry or ever abandoning hope of recuperating their old holdings, or at least receiving adequate compensation for emigration, if ever their old legitimate Sovereign fulfills his promise of restoration, a promise by which He's already led them around by the nose for two thousand years. Did their noses perhaps grow so long from being so long led around by the nose? Or are these long noses a kind of uniform whereby Jehovah, the King of Kings, might recognize His old yeomen of the guard even if they deserted the ranks? The Marquis Gumpelino was just such a deserter, but he still wore his uniform, and it was ever so brilliant, adorned with little crosses and stars and rubies, a red coat of arms in miniature and plenty of other decorations, too.

Ah, that nose. Where Matilda mocks Gumpel's protuberance, the narrator, speaking as a proper Protestant and without betraying his Jewish origins, beats her at her own game by mocking the bloodline that, as a Christian, she shares. Religion is treated as a social commodity. Judaism gets the brunt of the ridicule, but the credulous Jewish tribe comes off more appealingly than does the Jew who believes he is trading up by discarding it. Like Freud, Heine draws attention to the "noble stock"—ancient and related to God—that he simultaneously puts down,

with the nose as the ambiguous marker of both superiority and slavish servitude. Underlying this ambiguity is the reality of Europe, some of whose autocrats were intent on preventing the "progress" of their restive subjects. In such changeable times, did Jews prove their mettle by staying Jewish or by leaving their Jewishness behind?

The dramatic construction of this work assigns to Matilda the meaner prejudice and to the Heine stand-in a loftier skepticism—one that also distinguishes him from Gumpelino's wholehearted devotion to his new religion and position. Both men are converts, but Gumpelino is *sincere*—in his adopted Catholicism, acquired romanticism, and passion for a married woman. An all-purpose worshipper, an enthusiast of nature, he declares Heine a torn man, a torn soul, "a Byron, so to speak." But the Byronic author revels in the discordances of his life. "Whosoever claims that his heart is still whole merely acknowledges that he has a prosaic . . . heart." Once upon a time the world was whole, but since then the world itself has been ripped in two. "[The] wretched worldwide tear of our time runs right through my heart, and for that very reason I know that the great gods have shown mercy and deemed me worthy of a poet's martyrdom." The divided being personifies the spirit of the times, and none more so than the Jew, living in one place while belonging to another, claiming election and experiencing subjection, and in Heine's case, raised in one religious tradition and acculturating to another without wholly letting go of the first.

It is worth recalling that Heine's near-contemporary Nachman of Bratslav (1772–1810) is credited with having said *Es iz nito keyn gantsere zakh vi a tsebrokhn harts*, "there is nothing as whole as a

broken heart." For their part, Nachman and Heine accept fracture—the former in metaphysical and the latter in earthly terms. Yearning is Nachman's expression of faith in the ultimate, messianic reunion beyond the world as we know it. Heine treats his yearning as a comic relic, as if the human were longing for his absent tail.

Another comically bifurcated modern is Gumpelino's valet, Old Hirsch, the third Jew of "The Baths of Lucca," who never converts to Catholicism like Gumpelino or to Protestantism like Heine, but instead accepts the position of servant as the price of remaining the Jew he is. As Hirsch approaches from the distance, the narrator tells us,

I recognized someone whom I'd have sooner expected to meet on Mount Sinai than on the Apennines, and that was none other than Old Hirsch, sometime resident in Hamburg, a man who had not only made his mark as an incorruptible lottery collector but who was likewise so knowledgeable about foot-corns and jewels that he could not only distinguish between the two but also skillfully excise the former and precisely appraise the latter.

On drawing closer, Hirsch hopes that the author will still recognize him even though his name is now . . . Hyazinth. Gumpelino is outraged at the servant's revelation of their common past, but Hirsch-Hyazinth compulsively blurts out what his master has tried to conceal. The entire passage is a palimpsest of the newly minted European superimposed on the ghetto Jew—a figure who has adapted to his new condition and name without shedding his old skin. Heine, who elsewhere pits Hebraism against Hellenism, here forges a character in whom Jew and Greek are improbably combined. No wonder this man should be a connoisseur at once of bunions and gems, the irritants and adornments of living. Hyazinth later boasts about the money he has saved by retaining his initial when he changed his name—a little joke at the expense of the author, who had exchanged Harry for Heinrich, but who turned out to be both less competent and less well-adjusted.

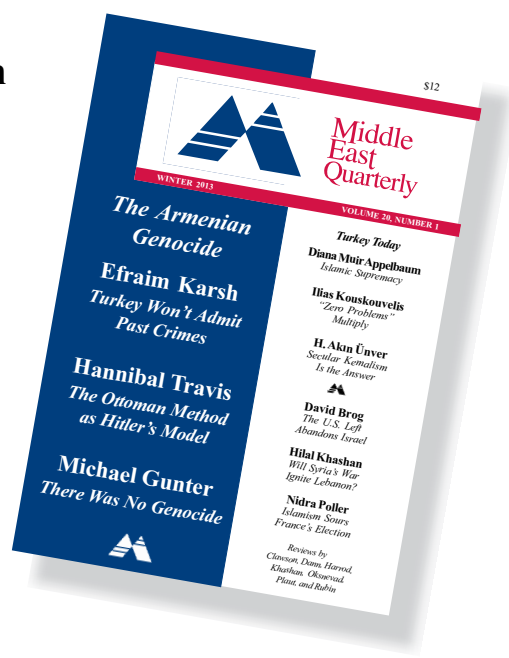
He is also not as funny. Though Heine declares himself the master poet of *Zerrissenheit*, he assigns Hirsch-Hyazinth the wittiest wordplays. The servant describes his master Gumpelino kneeling in adoration every evening for a full two hours before the "primadonna with the Christ child"—a painting that cost him six hundred silver coins. He also yearns for "Hamburg with its apes and excellent humans and Papagoyim." *Papageien*, German for parrots, are here punned into a species of humans who mimic Gentiles. And then there is the one that was analyzed to death by Freud: "I sat next to Salomon Rothschild, and he treated me as his equal, altogether *famillionairely*." Freud mined Jewish joking for what it could tell him about the workings of the human psyche. But Heine, his primary source, paid closer attention to the conditions that generated the humor: his comedy was fully alive to the dangers that produced it.

Ruth R. Wisse is Martin Peretz Professor of Yiddish Literature at Harvard University. She is the editor of *The Glatstein Chronicles* (Yale University Press). Her new book is titled *No Joke: Making Jewish Humor* (Princeton University Press), from which this article is adapted.

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People of the Book—Since When? A Response

BY TALYA FISHMAN

Professor Haym Soloveitchik's remarks regarding my book *Becoming the People of the Talmud: Oral Torah as Written Tradition in Medieval Jewish Cultures* deserve a fuller answer than I will supply in this venue. More complete comments—on matters he mentions (e.g., textualization and putative errors) and on those he does not (e.g., debates over historical interpretation in which he is deeply invested)—are posted on the website: BecomingPeopleTalmud.wordpress.com

Professor Soloveitchik's wish is that my book might sink "under the weight of its own insufficiencies." My wish is that people read it and judge for themselves. My aim in writing *Becoming the People of the Talmud* was to contribute towards bridging the largely separate domains of rabbinic scholarship and cultural history, that each might enrich the other. The book's ambitious scope and interdisciplinary approach enabled me to offer rudimentary answers to long-standing riddles, but it also made errors inevitable. I thank Professor Soloveitchik for pointing out those that I acknowledge. In the academic environment that I inhabit and try to cultivate, scholars turn to others with greater knowledge in their own specialized arenas in order to improve their own work, and they do so without shame. Conscious of my limitations, I will take Professor Soloveitchik's corrections to heart (as I have in the past). A future edition of the book will reflect the changes that are warranted. None of these corrections undermine either the book's thesis or the wealth of supporting evidence it presents.

Professor Soloveitchik has oddly portrayed *Becoming the People of the Talmud* as a work about the tosafists, 12th- and 13th-century scholars best known for their talmudic glosses. Though he avers that my book is "formulated simply and clearly," this construal of a book whose focus and scope are so vastly different—chronologically, geographically, and culturally—suggests that Professor Soloveitchik has not understood it. As any other reader of my book will attest, neither the glossators nor the glosses constitute "a major crux" of my argument.

As a work of cultural history with its own arc of inquiry, *Becoming the People of the Talmud* is interested in tracking concerns and perspectives, voiced between (loosely) the 10th and 12th centuries, that might be construed as markers or witnesses to certain types of Jewish cultural change. The book thus has many actual foci, including the culture of the *geonim*, the 11th-century Qayrawanese rabbinic commentators, the Andalusian halakhists and poets, the tosafists' North European rabbinic predecessors, medieval Jewish criticisms of curricular talmudo-centrism, the prominence of custom in medieval Ashkenaz, the worldview and practices of Rhineland Pietism, and, for that matter, the burning of the Talmud by 13th-century Christians. None of these cultural developments is of merely peripheral interest or importance. They collectively map the historical matrix within which the tosafists have an

important, but not the sole, or even the most important, place.

Professor Soloveitchik seems to think that perspectives of Rabbenu Tam preserved in *Sefer Ha-Yashar* (outside the talmudic glosses) are of negligible importance because they are proportionally insignificant relative to that tosafists' oeuvre as a

Both Rabbenu Tam and Rabbenu Meshullam maintained the ancient rabbinic distinction between *halakha* and *halakha le-ma'aseh*.

whole. Such a calculus has no bearing on the historical questions posed in my book. From *Becoming the People of the Talmud*'s perspective, Rabbenu Tam's concern with textual emendation and his predilection for consulting what he referred to as "old books" are made no less significant by considerations of proportionality.

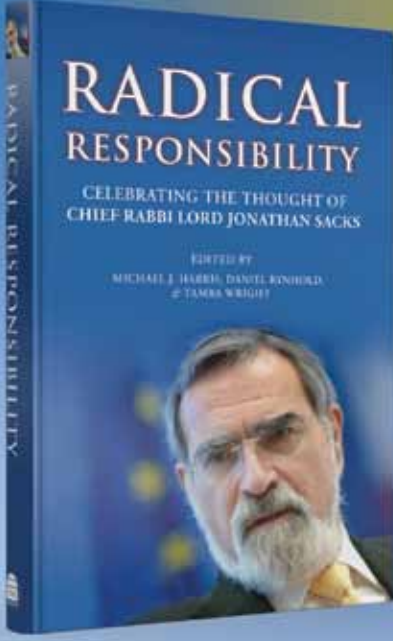
I will cite one incident discussed in *Becoming the People of the Talmud* (unmentioned by Professor Soloveitchik) because it gives a sense of what might be lost were the tosafists' cultural profile to be constructed solely from their talmudic glosses. A sustained vitriolic exchange between Rabbenu Tam and Rabbenu Meshullam concerning the *manner* in which the Talmud was to be deployed in the service of legal decision-making is preserved in *Sefer Ha-Yashar*. Like their geonic predecessors, both parties to this 12th-century debate understood—and maintained—the ancient rabbinic distinction between *halakha* and *halakha le-ma'aseh*, that is, the difference between a received legal teaching and the attestation that the teaching in question was one implemented in practice. Both scholars realized that talmudic legal teachings needed to be mediated, or vetted, before they could be presented as applied law. They differed over the precise sources of authority that were to be used *together with* the Babylonian Talmud in deciding law. At stake in this altercation was nothing less than rabbinic legal epistemology.

This medieval feud challenges Professor Soloveitchik's assertions in several ways. It reveals that the tosafist Rabbenu Tam was not solely a dialectician, uninterested in practical matters of applied law. The debate also constitutes an important "anomaly" vis-à-vis the historiographic narrative restated, unreservedly, by Professor Soloveitchik. It forcefully demonstrates that, *as late as the 12th century*, there was no rabbinic unanimity regarding the manner in which Talmud was to be used in adjudication. This historical datum (and not my own "revolutionary" claims or my reliance on secondary sources, pace Professor Soloveitchik) is but one of many discussed

in *Becoming the People of the Talmud* that impel and necessitate the search for a new paradigm.

Finally, the argument between Rabbenu Tam and Rabbenu Meshullam illustrates why *Becoming the People of the Talmud* pointedly avoids referring to the Talmud as "normative." Neither medieval scholar denied the Talmud's authority, after all. Not only is my study not equipped to measure "normativity," I regard the term itself as one that obscures and flattens historical complexities. Cultural authority has never taken one single form; it is continually shaped (and reshaped) by a web of nuanced factors. For this reason, the book I wrote highlights changes in the ways that the Talmud was used in different places and times, but identifies no single development or phenomenon as the "flipped switch" that made it "normative." Professor Soloveitchik's ascription to me of the claim that the "Talmud became normative only in the course of the 12th and 13th centuries" is thus wrong on two counts. Similarly unsupportable is his claim that the thousands of responsa written by *geonim* "attest to the acceptance of the norma-

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tive standing of the Talmud by the beginning of the 9th century, if not somewhat earlier.” The impressive number of responsa attest to a quest for guidance, but they tell us precious little about the ways in which the *geonim* used the Talmud or about the reception accorded the responsa by their recipients.

Some readers may have thoughts about the dis-

missive and derisive tone that Professor Soloveitchik adopts; the virulence of his attack suggests that my book—and/or the award bestowed on it—hit a nerve. Having known Professor Soloveitchik over the course of years as a gracious scholar, willing to share his erudition with others, and as a gentleman, my hope is that his pugilistic remarks

were intended as an expression of the combative form of rabbinic discourse known in the Talmud as “*milchamtah shel Torah*.”

Talya Fishman is an associate professor of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization at the University of Pennsylvania.

A Rejoinder

BY HAYM SOLOVEITCHIK

Professor Fishman’s response points out the wide gamut of subjects that her book treated and then faults me for concentrating on the tosafists. The central issue, however, is not the range of Professor Fishman’s topics, but whether the sources support what she said about these topics. Generally they do not; as often as not, they state the opposite.

Rather than refer back to Professor Fishman’s book, which most of the readers do not possess, let us analyze the example (chosen from her book) to demonstrate the validity of her argument. Putting her best foot forward in this public letter, she invokes the controversy between Rabbenu Tam and Rabbenu Meshullam as evidence of the central contention of her book that talmudic authority was problematic even in Ashkenaz as late as the 12th century.

Like their geonic predecessors, both parties to this 12th-century debate understood—and maintained—the ancient rabbinic distinction between *halakha* and *halakha le-ma’aseh*, that is, the difference between a received legal teaching and the attestation that the teaching in question was one implemented in practice. . . . At stake in this altercation was nothing less than rabbinic legal epistemology.

The controversy between Rabbenu Meshullam and Rabbenu Tam, Fishman writes,

forcefully demonstrates that, *as late as the 12th century*, there was no rabbinic unanimity regarding the manner in which Talmud was to be used in adjudication. This historical datum (and not my own “revolutionary” claims or my reliance on secondary sources, pace Professor Soloveitchik) is but one of many discussed in *Becoming the People of the Talmud* that impel and necessitate the search for a new paradigm.

What, indeed, would prove the need of a new paradigm better than demonstrating that the very founder of the tosafist movement and arguably its greatest thinker, Rabbenu Tam (d. 1171), believed that the application of talmudic dicta had to be mediated by extra-talmudic writings such as the *midrashim*? Let us investigate her evidence, as it provides insight as to Professor Fishman’s methods of citation.

Contrary to what Professor Fishman claims, Rabbenu Tam never distinguishes between *halakha* and *halakha le-ma’aseh* in his exchange with Rabbenu Meshullam; indeed, he never mentions these terms at all. He does discuss, as Professor Fishman claims, the

authority of the Talmud vis-à-vis other traditional literature, such as the aggada and *midrashim*. What he says, however, is the *exact opposite* of what Professor Fishman asserts. Rabbenu Meshullam, a Provençal scholar who moved to Melun (some 65 miles west of Troyes where Rabbenu Tam resided) undertook to alter a number of customary practices of the Ashkenazic (North European) community, as, for example, that of women reciting a blessing over the Shabbat candles. Astonishing as it seems, there is no talmudic directive regarding women lighting candles on Friday evening, not to speak of reciting a blessing on them. This universal and much cherished practice is custom pure and simple, as is much of traditional religious behavior. Religious life is experienced as a whole and is taken by its participants as being cut from one cloth. However, the fact is that some seventy percent of the prayers recited regularly in the synagogue are not products of talmudic

books of aggadah, must not destroy the words of the Early Ones and their customs . . . And many of the customs that we possess follow them.

Three dots in a citation indicate an omission of some words. The words elided in her citation are “*where they do not conflict with our Talmud, but add to it.*”

There is no space here to illustrate how widespread the problem of misstatement is in *Becoming the People of the Talmud*; nor would it be profitable, as I have said, to refer readers to a book that most of them do not possess. I simply refer the reader to my reply at haymsoloveitchik.org (which addresses a lengthier rebuttal of my review that Professor Fishman distributed among colleagues and placed on the Internet in December 2012). In her online rebuttal, Professor Fishman restates in two paragraphs another central theme of her book: the oral-

Rabbenu Tam never distinguishes between *halakha* and *halakha le-ma’aseh* in his exchange with Rabbenu Meshullam, indeed, he never mentions these terms at all.

dictate but of age-old traditions. Much of the Seder on the eve of Passover is not halakhically mandated, but rather the aggregate of immemorial usage. Needless to say, Rabbenu Tam vigorously opposed Rabbenu Meshullam’s numerous innovations. He stated that when dealing with time-hallowed religious conventions, one can’t lay them out on a Procrustean bed of talmudic law and lop off every excrescence. One must search carefully for references to these traditional practices in the midrashic literature and its cognates. Custom and midrashic literature should be relied on, Rabbenu Tam writes, “where they do not conflict with our Talmud, but add to it.” He specifically states that the Talmud is *the* normative text. Midrashic literature and custom play a significant role in the *interstices* of the talmudic system, but never when they stand in opposition to it. Rabbenu Tam’s remarks here would have won the full endorsement of the arch-talmudist of the modern era, the Gaon of Vilna.

In short, Rabbenu Tam’s words run contrary to Professor Fishman’s central thesis. How is this passage dealt with in *Becoming the People of the Talmud*? Very simply, she cites it thus:

Whoever is not proficient in the *Seder Rav Amram* and in *Halakhot Gedolot* and in *Massekhet Sofrim* and in *Pirke de-Rabi Eliezer*, and in *Rabbah* and in *Yelammedenu*, and in the other

ity of the Talmud in geonic times, so crucial for the contrast she then makes with its subsequent textualization. She evidences her argument with four footnotes. Reaching out to the larger audience of the Internet, there is every reason to assume that she here too took extra care to insure the validity of her proofs. In my reply, I have reproduced verbatim the text of these two paragraphs together with its documentation and examine them, one by one. They do not sustain the claims made by Professor Fishman. All of her evidence is drawn as usual from secondary sources, most of which state the *very opposite* of what Professor Fishman asserts.

Professor Fishman faults me for concentrating on the tosafists in my review. I had to review a book in a brief compass. I thought it proper to characterize her general familiarity with the subject about which she was writing and instantiate it by discussing a central chapter. The title of the book was *Becoming the People of the Talmud*, a process that culminated, in her view, in the 12th and 13th centuries, so I concentrated on those centuries: the era of the tosafists. Professor Fishman protests that her book treats many topics other than that of the tosafists. Indeed, it does, but her portrayal of those other topics is of the same caliber as her portrait of the tosafists. The book’s problems are systemic.

Imagine a French literature professor whose command of English enables her to read 19th- and 20th-century English literature, but who can in no way comprehend Milton, Marlowe, and Shakespeare, not to speak of Chaucer. She nevertheless undertakes to read the critical literature on these writers. She scrutinizes, for example, many essays with differing views on *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *The Winter's Tale*, without ever having actually read the plays themselves. She does the same with *Paradise Lost* and *The Canterbury Tales*. She reads the secondary literature assiduously, but cannot comprehend passages of the originals that these essays cite. The chance of her grasping what the essays are saying is not great; indeed, she may even infer the opposite of what they actually say. She then gathers her insights together, links them with her readings in some school of literary criticism, and proceeds to offer a new interpretation of the shaping of English literature from Chaucer to Milton. This, in effect, is the story of *Becoming the People of the Talmud*.

What is most significant in Professor Fishman's reply is what she does not say. While she thanks me for "pointing out those [errors] that I acknowledge," she does not deny that many of these errors would have been avoided by anyone who had seriously studied the texts of the figures she discusses (e.g., the Babylonian *geonim*, Rabbenu Hananel of Qayrawan, Rabbenu Gershom Meor ha-Golah of Mainz, Rashi, or the *tosafists*). The rabbinic literature of well over a millennium, from its inception to the end of the 13th century (where her book terminates), is, from the evidence of her book, *terra incognita* to her.

In the absence of substantive access to the primary sources, Professor Fishman systematically

misread the secondary ones. I referred to the problem, writing:

... one might still suggest that a basic familiarity with the primary sources is necessary to read the secondary sources with some discrimination... It may equally be needed simply to save oneself from drawing a seemingly reasonable inference from a secondary source, but one so outlandish to anyone in the know that the writer never thought there was any need to preclude it.

Note simply that Professor Fishman also does not deny that she misunderstood, as claimed in my review, both Brody and Lifshitz on the central issue of geonic authority. Indeed, she stated the very opposite of what Lifshitz actually said. Neither does she dispute the fact that she drew from a brief footnote of mine sweeping inferences about the scope and practice of the laws of mourning that had no basis in fact. These are not isolated instances of misreading, as indicated by the "evidence" she adduced from Rabbenu Tam and for the orality of the Talmud in the time of the *geonim*. The claims made in *Becoming the People of the Talmud* are simply not substantiated by the documentation provided in its footnotes. I will not trouble the reader with further examples. Those interested can find them (and my answer to her argument in her letter about not knowing how "the *geonim* used the Talmud") in my online reply to Professor Fishman.

Becoming the People of the Talmud is based on snippets culled from a host of secondary sources. Professor Fishman then proceeds to locate these

snippets, not in the context of the wider literature of her subject matter, which is closed to her, but rather the context of her own personal vision. This does not constitute history, cultural or otherwise.

Finally, a word about the award bestowed upon *Becoming the People of the Talmud*. There is a strong desire in the American Jewish community, almost a felt imperative, to make the cultural riches of Judaism available to a broader public. This finds constructive expression in the flourishing industry of translations. A less positive manifestation is a misguided populism that seeks to cut through all the needless complications of scholarship and to engage the student and general reader as quickly as possible in discussions of halakha, Kabbalah, or whatever. The "discourse" must be "Jewish" and "intellectual"; whether there is any substance to it doesn't really matter.

The motivations may be the best; the consequence is increasing pressure for the reduction of standards in Judaica, especially in its oldest and traditionally most rigorous disciplines, talmudics and rabbinics. While Americans have no interest in how American studies are taught at universities, there are segments of the Jewish community who care very much how Jewish studies are taught. This involvement has its upside: the largesse it engenders; it also has its downside: there are agendas afoot, one or two of which are inimical to scholarship. The National Jewish Book Award for Scholarship that was bestowed on Professor Fishman's book is a good example of this detrimental tendency, and the confidentiality of the names of the judges, a recent innovation, is but its natural complement.

Haym Soloveitchik is the Merkin Family Research Professor of Jewish History and Literature at Yeshiva University.

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rabbis than does the [award's] recipient" has no place in a scholarly review.

David E.Y. Sarna
WoodallTech, Inc.
Mahawah, NJ

Jonathan D. Sarna
Joseph H. & Belle R. Braun Professor of American
Jewish History
Brandeis University,
Waltham, MA

Haym Soloveitchik Responds:

David and Jonathan Sarna describe my concluding remarks about the award committee of the Jewish Book Council as "groundless animus." I would term it outrage rather than animus. The characterization "groundless," however, puzzles me. I had thought that the 5,000 words that preceded the concluding paragraph spelled out the grounds of that "animus." As for my remarks about the anonymous judges (whose faces still remain modestly veiled), I am curious to know what Dr. Sarna's reaction would have been had the Nahum M. Sarna Award for Scholarship been bestowed upon a book in, say, American Jewish history, whose author displayed a comparable understanding of English sources.

On page 47, Talya Fishman responds to our review, followed by Haym Soloveitchik's rejoinder.

Faith of Our Fathers

Shai Held's elucidation of Jewish faith that is grounded in anguish and indignation is helpful in understanding the theological choices faced by religious survivors of the Holocaust, who personified the "powerful reasons to believe and powerful reasons not to." A vivid childhood memory is my father's explanation for why he chose to remain religious while many of his fellow survivors abandoned the faith: "Of course I had complaints to the *ri-boynoy shel oylom*, but if I stopped believing in God, in whom would I believe? In this civilized educated humanity which brought about the destruction?" Although I always comprehended the psychology behind this argument, its Jewish validity escaped me, *ad she-drashah ben Held*.

Cantor Sam Weiss
Jewish Community Center of Paramus, NJ

Shai Held's fascinating article ("Wonder and Indignation: Abraham's Uneasy Faith," Winter 2013) inspired me to write this poem:

"Is the Palace Illuminated or in Flames?"

Was the palace Abraham once saw
illuminated making him believe that there must be
a God
who'd lit its light, or was he filled with awe
by flames a God had kindled to destroy it, which he
found so odd—

Why would a God, he asked, be so destructive?—
that he proceeded to find out not who controlled
the world but why
He's as destructive as he is productive
the world His palace like a neighborhood He fails
to gentrify.
The problem that confronted Abraham
is one that still confronts us when we look around
the world and wonder:
is God around, or is He on the lam,
feeling burned when watching people burn what
turned into a blunder.

Gershon Hepner, MD
Los Angeles, CA

Isaiah Berlin's Hunchbacks

Joshua Cherniss's thoughtful review "It's Complicated," (Fall 2012) makes me want to read the Arie M. Dubnov biography of Sir Isaiah Berlin. I was a pupil of his in the late 1950s. His ambivalence about Zionism was the subject of some of our many conversations.

Two comments about what Cherniss says is Sir Isaiah's "ill-judged analogy" to diasporic Jews as "like people with an obvious physical disability—'Let us say hunchbacks.'" First, he did not give enough stress to the "Let us say." It's a suggestion. Second, as he must know, Isaiah did, Moses Mendelssohn was a hunchback, as were some of his descendants, for example, his granddaughter, Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel, Felix's sister. This may be the background to Sir Isaiah's simile.

William Josephson
New York, NY

Joshua Cherniss Responds:

Isaiah Berlin's hunchback analogy maintains its power to provoke. I suggested that it was "ill-judged" precisely because of its tendency to distract from the larger point Berlin was trying to make. Berlin himself seems to have agreed: his earlier biographer, Michael Ignatieff, suggests that it was partly due to the offense that it caused some readers that he refused to republish the essay in his lifetime. Regarding the origins of the image, Berlin may well have had Mendelssohn in mind; there was also no dearth of images of other hunchbacked Jews in the European imagination. (George Cruikshank's illustrations of Dickens' Fagin are among the many grotesque examples.) Ignatieff points to another inspiration, which seems more explicitly connected to Berlin's point about the futility of trying to escape one's Jewishness. According to a story of which Berlin was fond, the hunchbacked inventor Charles Steinmetz and the assimilated financier Otto Kahn were walking down the street one day when they passed a synagogue. "I used to go there," remarked Kahn. "Yes, and I used to be a hunchback," Steinmetz replied. Whether this makes Berlin's use of the image more or less objectionable, I leave to the reader. I hope all of this won't distract from engagement with Berlin's important reflections on Jewish identity, and I thank Mr. Josephson for his warm recollections of his teacher.

Correction

In Suzanne Garment's article "With Words We Govern Men," (Winter 2013), the quote from Benjamin Disraeli used by Ambassador Daniel P. Moynihan was taken (liberally) not from *Sybil* but from *Contarini Fleming*.

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Light Reading

BY ABRAHAM SOCHER

In Michael Chabon's *Telegraph Avenue*, Archy Stallings carries around a paperback copy of Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* "that he must have read 93 times." Archy, a jazz musician, wayward husband, and almost-father who sells vinyl records in Oakland, is more lovable screw-up than Stoic, and we never do learn exactly what he treasures in the *Meditations*, but Stoicism has been making a comeback of late.

Back in 1998, around when Chabon's novel is set, the hero of Tom Wolfe's *A Man in Full* discovers Epictetus in prison and comes out to preaching the good word of *apatheia*, or freedom from passion. "We ought not spend our feelings on things beyond our power," Epictetus said, which is good advice when possible, especially for those obsessed with the things Tom Wolfe's characters tend to be obsessed by (money, prestige, excellent trapezius muscles). More recently, William Irvine wrote a pretty good self-help book called *A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy*. (Irvine, a professional philosopher, rather charmingly admitted that he first learned of Stoic ethics from Wolfe's novel.) Down on the deeper end of the philosophical pool, Martha Nussbaum has recently elaborated an interesting Neo-Stoic theory of emotions.

More recently, classicist Philip Freeman has repackaged some of Cicero's political insights in a little book entitled *How to Run a Country: An Ancient Guide for Modern Leaders*, and Seneca is the philosophical hero of Nassim Nicholas Taleb's best-selling *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder*, although as far as I can tell the Roman philosopher is never quite quoted directly. "My idea of the modern Stoic sage," the *Black Swan* guru of financial pessimism says, "is someone who transforms fear into prudence, pain into information, mistakes into irritation and desire into undertaking." Italics notwithstanding, this is not always possible. The phrase "pain into information" reminds me of a moment early on in *Catch-22*, when Captain Yossarian's lover tells him that God created pain as a useful warning system. "Why couldn't he have used a doorbell, instead?" he asks. Maybe if Yossarian had carried Marcus Aurelius around he might know that neither pain nor doorbells are evils in and of themselves but only insofar as we regard them as such and *this* is always in our power.

Among Jewish philosophers, the Stoic ideal of "living in agreement with nature" comes out most clearly and deeply in Spinoza, who taught that the only freedom was in recognizing necessity. I was actually just about to teach a Spinoza seminar when I realized that the ideals of Stoicism were not just impossibly difficult but false to human experience, or at any rate false to mine. I was in the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit of the Rainbow Babies & Children's Hospital sitting with my newborn daughter Bayla who had just returned from what was—thank God—successful heart surgery. What I realized was that the ideal

of being emotionally impervious, on "not spending feelings" on matters beyond my power or turning pain into information wasn't just impossible, it wasn't desirable. Who would aspire to that?

Tales of Stoic heroism are often impressive. Seneca tells of a certain Julius Canus who got up from a chess game and went to his execution discussing philosophy.

Tales of Stoic heroism are often impressive. Seneca tells of a certain Julius Canus who got up from a chess game and went to his execution discussing philosophy with as much tranquility as Rabbi Akiva discussed the Shema under similar circumstances. But who would want to be super-duper antifragile when it comes to one's loved ones?



Marcus Aurelius.
(Illustration by
Mark Anderson.)

It wasn't just the Stoics who aspired to an inhuman ideal, it may be a permanent temptation of philosophy. This semester I am teaching Maimonides, and I am hoping that we get to the magnificent end of the *Guide for the Perplexed*, in which he describes the four types of human perfection, "according to the ancient and modern philosophers." The first is perfection of goods or wealth. This, Maimonides, says, is plainly the lowest kind of perfection because "if such a person were to look at himself he would discover that all this is outside him," and he could lose it all in a moment. The second kind of perfection is physical, which may be more intrinsic to the

person, but only insofar as he is an animal—and not a particularly impressive one either. After all, Maimonides says, the strongest man is no match for a good mule, let alone a lion.

The third kind of perfection is that of moral virtue or character, which, Maimonides admits, reaches deeper. But if you were on a desert island, you would have no need of the virtues. "It is only with regard to others that man needs them and receives any benefit from them." This leaves us, or at least Maimonides, with the one and final human perfection: intellect.

Consider each of the three preceding types of perfection, and you will discover that they belong to others . . . or to you and others at the same time. This last perfection, however, belongs to yourself exclusively, and no one else has any share in it: "They will be yours alone, others will have no part with you." (Proverbs 5:17)

You and only you know what you know and you would still know it on a desert island (or in the afterlife).

This also leaves Maimonides with a classic problem: Why spend any time at all on others when you could just spend all your time thinking? His answer, which ends the *Guide*, is justly famous: "the perfection of man is . . . achieved by him who has attained comprehension of God . . . and knows how God provides for His creatures . . . and grasping this aims in his own conduct at mercy, justice and righteousness, so as to imitate God." Just as God does not merely think the universe but, in His perfection, somehow turns, or overflows, toward it, and cares for it, so too the perfect human being turns toward his fellow creatures.

But is this enough? I doubt it. Maimonides' God is precisely one who does not depend in any way on the world, though the world depends on Him. The care we have for another person isn't care at all if we are not dependent, vulnerable, and susceptible to pain that cannot be turned into information. The moral life is not an act of Neoplatonic noblesse oblige, as Maimonides would have it. Nor is it a Stoic recognition of inevitable human fragility.

According to Cicero, when Anaxagoras was told of his son's death, he replied "I was already aware that I had begotten a mortal."—But not, apparently, that he was one as well.

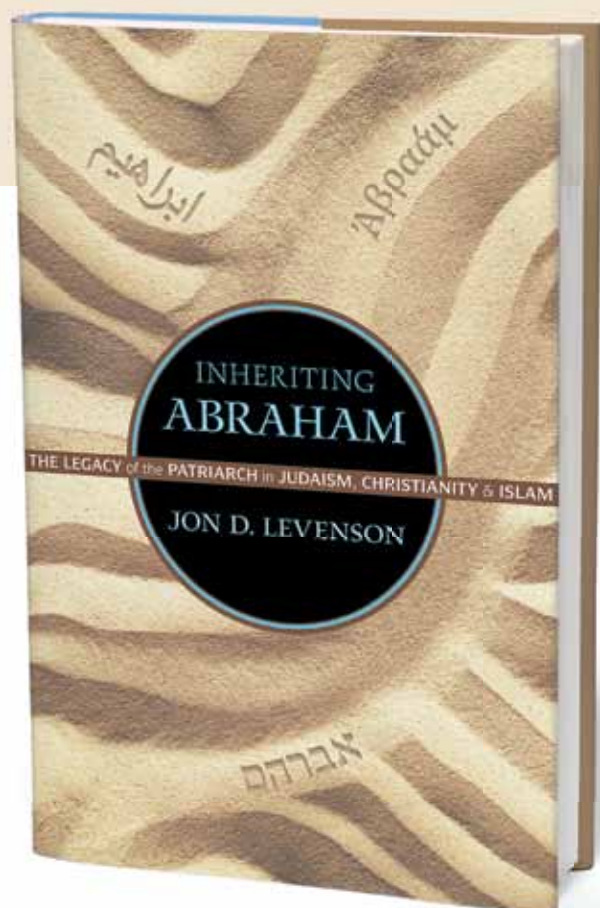
Abraham Socher teaches at Oberlin and is the editor of the Jewish Review of Books.

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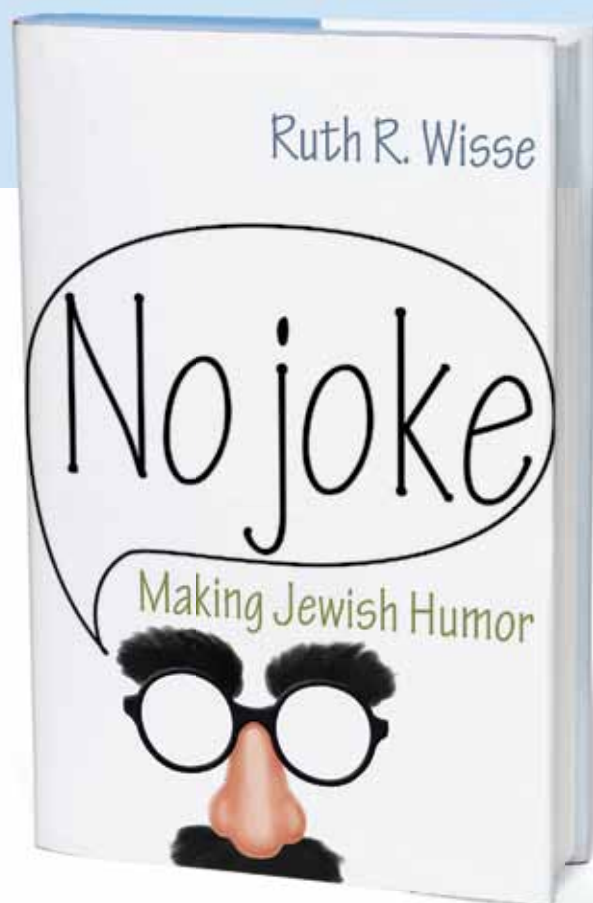
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