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JEWISH REVIEW OF BOOKS

Special Edition October 2015

Ten Favorites from Our First Five Years

2010–2015

Daniel Gordis Requiem for Conservative Judaism

Dara Horn Why Raise Children?

Adam Kirsch Lincoln's Jews

Stuart Schoffman Ben Hecht, Begin, & the Hoodlums

Suzanne Garment Moynihan at the UN

Leonidas Donskis Fear & Loathing at the EU

Ruth R. Wisse Poet of the Vilna Ghetto & Tel Aviv

Alan Mintz A Hasidic Rabbi, a Tibetan Yak, & Israeli Fiction

David Gelernter Frank Lloyd Wright's Shul

Abraham Socher Salsa & Sociology





Jewish Review of Books

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Welcome to the *Jewish Review of Books*

BY ABRAHAM SOCHER

Spring 2010

This is an especially good time to launch a Jewish magazine of ideas and criticism. Perhaps it has always been a good time: the history of Jewish thought over the last two hundred years could be charted through a dozen periodicals in a half-dozen languages. But we live at a moment in which more Jewish books, and books of particular Jewish interest, are being published than ever before. Of the making of such books, it seems, there is no end. But of real criticism, considered judgment rendered in graceful, accessible prose, there is something of a scarcity.

The problem is not a lack of interesting Jewish writers, thinkers, or scholars. There are, to begin with, dozens of journals of Jewish studies, for the most part geared to specialized academic work. Such scholarship is necessary and often important. But it does not suffice for understanding what it means to be a Jew in the modern world, or what Jewish texts and ideas might have to contribute to the larger discussion of important issues—religious, philosophical, political, ethical, literary—of the day. Then there are the newspapers, magazines, and websites that make it their full- or part-time business to report on Jewish culture. Here, with noble exceptions, the pressure of timeliness and the constraints of space combine to restrict the full, measured consideration that Jewish books and issues, in the widest sense, deserve.

We aspire to offer something different: a lively magazine of ideas and argument, criticism and commentary, written especially for intelligent men and women who believe, as I do, that Jewish subjects are worthy of attention that is serious, accessible, and occasionally even playful.

In the pages of the *Jewish Review of Books*, leading scholars, critics, writers, and journalists will discuss Jewish thought, literature, culture, and politics as well as fiction, poetry, and the arts, with wit and erudition. Here you will find review essays on everything from Maimonides' theology to the latest court decision in Europe; from translations of Hebrew and Yiddish poetry to bestselling novels; from controversy over the Dead Sea Scrolls to controversy over the Israeli Rabbinate; and from the history of the *shtetl* to the present challenges facing American Jewry. Not only will we cover books published in English, we will bring news of some of the most interesting and important books published in Israel and Europe. We will also reconsider literary, scholarly, and religious classics and offer new translations of documents that open a window onto fascinating historical figures and moments.

The *Jewish Review of Books* is a forum, not a platform; a conversation, not a polemic. In particular, it is founded in the conviction that the ideas and achievements of Jewish religion, literature, and scholarship are interesting and valuable in and of themselves. They are not reducible to any position or program, no matter how worthy.

This is not to say that our authors will refrain from addressing political issues, particularly with regard to Israel. Critics in and outside of Israel are too often tempted to judge its behavior and its politics from the standpoint of redemption, whether of the messianic or secular variety. But there can be no such standpoint until utopia dawns or the messiah comes. In the meantime, cool reason and factual sobriety will be our standard.

Franz Rosenzweig, an early 20th-century Jewish thinker of no particular party who has since been claimed by several, once adopted a famous line from the ancient Roman playwright Terence: "as I am human, nothing human is alien to me." Rosenzweig gave the line a witty tweak by challenging his Jewish reader to assert that, as a Jew, "nothing Jewish is alien to me."

What Rosenzweig understood is that no one leads a life that is simply "human." Just as we speak a particular language, not language as such, we live and flourish within particular communities, cultures, and traditions. Rosenzweig's claim was not that everything Jewish was worthy of celebration, only that it was worthy of understanding, and he suggested that a "Jewish Renaissance" could begin with just these words. For our part, we will aim to produce an excellent magazine, in the full knowledge that this, too, is as difficult as it is rare. Welcome to the *Jewish Review of Books*.

Conservative Judaism: A Requiem

BY DANIEL GORDIS

Winter 2014

The numbers are in, and they are devastating. The Pew Research Center's "A Portrait of Jewish Americans" portrays a community in existentially threatening dysfunction. Some of the numbers are already well-known: Intermarriage rates have climbed from the once-fear-inducing 52 percent of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey to 58 percent among recently married Jews on the whole. (The rate would be about 70 percent if one were to leave out the Orthodox, who very rarely intermarry.) Only 59 percent of American Jews are raising their children as Jews "by religion," and a mere 47 percent of them are giving their children a Jewish education. And the communal dimension of Jewish life, which has for millennia been the primary mainstay of Jewish identity formation, is all but gone outside the Orthodox community; only 28 percent of those polled believe that being Jewish is essentially involved with being part of a Jewish community.

Barring some now unforeseeable development, the Conservative movement's future is bleak.

Stakeholders in the status quo are running for cover, questioning the Pew methodology, and quibbling with its results. But one fundamental conclusion is inescapable: The massive injection of capital into the post-1990 study "continuity" agenda has failed miserably. Non-Orthodox Judaism is simply disappearing in America. Judaism has long been a predominantly content-driven, rather than a faith-driven enterprise, but we now have a generation of Jews secularly successful and well-educated, but so Jewishly illiterate that nothing remains to bind them to their community or even to a sense that they hail from something worth preserving. By abandoning a commitment to Jewish substance, American Jewish leaders destroyed the very enterprise they claimed to be preserving.

Nowhere is this rapid collapse more visible than in the Conservative movement, which is practically imploding before our eyes. In 1971, 41 percent of American Jews affiliated with the Conservative movement, then the largest of the movements. By the time of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, the number had declined to 38 percent. In 2000, it was 26 percent, and now, according to Pew, Conservative Judaism is today the denominational home of only 18 percent of Jews. And they are graying. Among Jews under the age of 30, only 11 percent of respondents defined themselves as Conservative.

Barring some now unforeseeable development, the movement's future is bleak. As Rabbi Edward Feinstein, one of the movement's leading pulpit rabbis noted at the recent post-Pew United Synagogue Convention, "Our house is on fire . . . If you don't read anything else in the Pew report, [you should note that] we have maybe 10 years left. In the next 10 years, you will see a rapid collapse of synagogues and the national organizations that support them."

The likely demise of Conservative Judaism greatly saddens me. I was raised in a family deeply committed to the Conservative movement. My paternal grandfather, Rabbi Robert Gordis, was in his day one of the nation's leading Conservative rabbis, a long-time member of the faculty of the Jewish Theological Seminary, one of the Conservative movement's most articulate spokespeople, and president of the Rabbinical Assembly. My mother's brother, Rabbi Gershon Cohen, was chancellor of JTS from 1972 until 1986. There are other Conservative rabbis strung along our family tree, me among them. I came of age in the Camp Ramah system, was ordained at JTS, and was the founding dean of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, the Conservative movement's West Coast rabbinical school. Even if I've long since meandered to a different religious community, the impending demise of Conservative Judaism means the disappearance of the world that shaped me.

My personal sadness, though, is of no account compared to the loss this represents for American Jewish life. Not long ago, it appeared that Conservative Judaism might be an option for those for whom the rigors of Orthodoxy were too great, but for whom Judaism as a conversation framed around profound issues and texts was still compelling. That was the era in which Conservative rabbis, reasonably conversant in Jewish

classical texts and able to teach them to their flocks, could mitigate the increasingly pervasive tendency of liberal Judaism to recast Jewishness as an inoffensive ethnic version of American Protestantism-lite.

But this reframed Judaism, saying little and welcoming all, has proven irresistible to an American Jewish generation to which difference is offensive and substance is unnecessary. Gabriel Roth's response to the Pew report in *Slate* is a case in point. He notes, inter alia, "Here are some of the things I cherish about Jewishness: unsnobbish intellectualism, sympathy for the disadvantaged, psychoanalytic insight, rueful comedy, smoked fish."

That Jewish self-conception must be offensive to Protestants and Catholics, who are entitled to believe that they, too, are capable of unsnobbish intellectualism, sympathy for the disadvantaged, and psychoanalytic insight. But the real issue is that Judaism recast as a variant of American upper-crust social sensibilities simply says nothing sufficiently significant to merit survival. Indeed, Roth then predicts quite convincingly, "For my grandchildren, the fact that some of their ancestors were Jewish will have no more significance than the fact that others were Welsh."

Conservative Judaism was supposed to have prevented the American Jewish slide into this abyss. Despite the triumphalism so in vogue in contemporary American Orthodoxy, the fact remains that a plurality of American Jews will not adopt the halakhic rigors that lie at the core of Orthodox communal expectations. There are theological, moral, intellectual, and "lifestyle" reasons for that. For those people for whom Orthodoxy was not an option, it was Conservative Judaism that offered a vision of Jewish communities colored by reverence for classical Jewish learning and for Jewish tradition, albeit with a somewhat looser adherence to its particulars.

Sans Conservative Judaism, the vision of a traditional, literate non-Orthodox Judaism will be gone. And that is a terrible loss, for Orthodoxy no less than for American Jewish life at large.

Given the enormity of the loss, it behooves us to ask, "What went wrong?" There were many factors, of course. America's openness proved to have a Homeric siren-like allure too powerful for many to resist. And then, with no courage of whatever convictions they might have had and animated primarily by fear, leaders of all varieties of liberal Judaism decided to lower the barriers in order to further constituency retention. They expected less of their congregations, reduced educational demands, and offered sanitized worship reconfigured to meet the declining knowledge levels of their flocks. In many cases, they welcomed non-Jews into the Jewish community in a way that virtually eradicated any disincentive for Jews to marry people with whom they could pass on meaningful Jewish identity.

But those, of course, were precisely the wrong moves. When people select colleges for their children, professional settings in which to work, or books to read, they seek excellence. Lowered expectations mean less commitment and engagement; less education means greater ignorance—why should that attract *anyone* to Jewish life? It didn't, as it turns out.

Much ink has been spilled on these and other causes of the Conservative movement's demise, and this is not the place to review the arguments. But one factor has been almost entirely overlooked, and it ought to be raised, because if we can articulate where Conservative Judaism went wrong, we can begin to describe some of the characteristics of what one might hope will arise in its place.

Because many of the leading Conservative ideologues of the mid-20th century had hailed from Orthodox circles, it was important to them to sustain the claim that Conservative Judaism was halakhic Judaism. Yes, they acknowledged, Conservative Jewish life looked very different from Orthodoxy (women could assume roles that they could not in Orthodox settings, for example), but that was simply because Conservative Judaism was reclaiming the "dynamic Judaism" to which the rabbis of the Talmud had actually been committed. It was Orthodoxy that was a corruption of authentic Judaism, they insisted, and Conservative Judaism had come on the scene to protect ("conserve") the genius of legal fluidity that had always been key to rabbinic Judaism.

That argument was not entirely wrong. In somewhat different and obviously much-softened language, it has even been adopted by some leading modern Orthodox rabbis. Nor was what doomed Conservative Judaism the incessantly discussed vast gulf in practice between the rabbis and their congregants. What really doomed the movement is that Conservative Judaism ignored the deep existential human questions that religion is meant to address.

As Conservative writers and rabbis addressed questions such as "are we halakhic," "how are we halakhic," and "should we be halakhic," most of the women and men in the pews responded with an uninterested shrug. They were not in *shul*, for the most part, out of a sense of legally binding obligation. Had that been what they were seeking, they would have been in Orthodox synagogues. They had come to worship because they wanted a connection to their people, to transcendence, to a collective Jewish memory that would give them cause for

rejoicing and reason for weeping, and they wanted help in transmitting that to their children. While these laypeople were busy seeking a way to explain to their children why marrying another Jew matters, how a home rooted in Jewish ritual was enriching, and why Jewish literacy still mattered in a world in which there were no barriers to Jews' participating in the broader culture, their religious leadership was speaking about whether or not the movement was halakhic or how one could speak of revelation in an era of biblical criticism.

Who really cared? Very few people, it turns out.

To the irrelevance of the central argument at the core of much Conservative discourse must be added its hypocrisy. These men and women of the pews were not talmudic scholars, but they were sufficiently educated and had enough common sense to know that if combustion on Shabbat was prohibited, then driving on Shabbat simply had to be a violation of Jewish law. So when Conservative Judaism declared, in its (in)famous 1950 "Responsum on the Sabbath" that it was permissible to drive to synagogue on Shabbat, Conservative Jews smelled a rat. Whatever Conservative Judaism was advocating, it was not Jewish "law." They appreciated, perhaps, being told that they were not sinning when driving to the synagogue (not that "sinning" was a terribly central facet of their religious worldview), but they also knew that a game was being played.

Some rabbis called it like they saw it. Rabbi Emil Schorsch (father of Ismar Schorsch, who later served as chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary) asked, "Too many of our people do not want to observe the Sabbath, whatever excuse or reason you may give them. Why should we play ball with this insincerity?" But by and large, the Conservative movement succumbed to the pretense that Rabbi Schorsch the elder was too honest to sustain.

Slowly but surely, the rank and file understood that they were witness to what was more than a bit of a charade. Yes, a small intellectual elite subscribed to Conservative Judaism's unique brand of halakhic life coupled, for example, with principled gender egalitarianism, but the vast majority of kids who came back from Camp Ramah or from the movement's Israel programs seeking a halakhic community found themselves, in the space of a few short years, in the bosom of Orthodox synagogues (a significant and telling phenomenon, however statistically small, that flies entirely under the Pew radar). And those who remained in the movement, by and large, encountered a conversation that simply did not address their need to define their place in the cosmos.

So self-referential has the Conservative conversation become that the movement today continues to insist on the centrality of Jewish law, without so much as even trying to make a case for it. In its recent much-ballyhooed publication *The Observant Life: The Wisdom of Conservative Judaism for Contemporary Jews*, a massive 981-page tome, Conservative Jews are exposed to discussions of kashrut and Shabbat but also pornography, employing gays in synagogues, neutering animals, and biodiversity. The Table of Contents is both revealing and devastating; astonishingly, there is not a single chapter on *why* they should care about halakha in the first place.

Instead, the conversation that hasn't worked for half a century is trotted out once again. In the volume's Foreword, Chancellor Arnold Eisen reflects the historical bent of most of JTS's chancellors and writes:

> "Law and tradition" has long been the watchword of "Positive-Historical" or Conservative Judaism. That was particularly so in early decades when the movement's major thinkers in Germany and America struggled to explain what was unique about their approach to Judaism . . . [Solomon] Schechter and [Zacharias] Frankel would have welcomed The Observant Life, I believe; I certainly do.

Eisen is one of America's greatest Jewish scholars. Yet half a century after Conservative Judaism began its precipitous decline, his language with respect to the centrality of history as a central facet of Conservative Judaism is identical to what my grandfather was saying in the 1940s. Given all that has changed in the world, who is likely to read the 981 pages that follow?

Could matters really have ended otherwise? To be honest, I don't know. But we also didn't really try. Looming unasked in Conservative circles is the following question: Can one create a community committed to the rigors of Jewish traditional living without a literal (read Orthodox) notion of revelation at its core? Are the only choices that American Jews have Orthodoxy (modern, or less so), radicalized liberal Jewishness with its wholesale abandonment of tradition, or *aliyah* to Israel?

American Jews deserved more choices, and a Conservative Judaism with a different discourse at its core might have provided one. Conservative Judaism could have been the movement that made an argument for tradition and distinctiveness without a theological foundation that is for most modern Jews simply implausible; instead of theology, it could have spoken of traditional Judaism and its spiritual discipline as our unique answer to the human need for meaning.

Imagine that instead of discussing whether or not it was halakhic, Conservative Judaism had said to its adherents something like, "None of us come from nowhere. Not so very deep down, we know that we do not want to be part of an undifferentiated human mass, loving all of humanity equally (and therefore loving no one particularly intensely), abandoning the instinct that our people—which has been speaking in a differentiated voice for millennia—still has something to say to humanity at large."

Imagine that instead of inventing arguments that somehow sought to maintain an effective claim for revelation even after the movement's infatuation with biblical criticism (which, of course, undermined the most obvious argument for the authority of Jewish law), Conservative Jewish leaders had invoked an argument similar to that of the Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor, who reminds his readers:

> What is self-defeating in modes of contemporary culture [is that they] *shut out* history and the bonds of solidarity . . . I can define my identity only against the background of things that matter . . . Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order *matters* crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial.

That is the sort of argument that mainstream Conservative Judaism (which celebrated Abraham Joshua Heschel's poetic take on Jewish life but marginalized him from the halakhic-Jewish practice conversation) could have and should have invoked. Life is about asking important questions (think the Talmud), and yes, much of contemporary American culture is self-defeating. And meaningful life is about demands and duties. "That is why we are here," Conservative leaders could have said. "We need bonds of solidarity, duties of citizenship, and yes, the call of God. Otherwise, we are trivial."

The movement never wrote the way that Taylor writes, and it never taught its rabbis to think or to speak with that kind of deep existential and spiritual seriousness. It could have, though. It could have invoked Jewish intellectuals, like Michael Sandel, who wrote in *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, that:

> [W]e cannot regard ourselves as independent . . . without . . . understanding ourselves as the particular persons we are—as members of this family or community or nation or people, as bearers of this history, as sons and daughters of that revolution, as citizens of this republic . . . For to have character is to know that I move in a history I neither summon nor command, which carries consequences nonetheless for my choices and conduct. It draws me closer to some and more distant from others; it makes some aims more appropriate, others less so.

Arguments such as those would have put the most human, most self-defining, most existentially significant questions of human life at the center of Conservative Jewish discourse, and the result might well have been a very different prognosis for the only movement that was primed to raise these questions. It is true that young Americans might still have opted for triviality; but they might also have returned to something less vacuous as they grew older and wiser.

The moral of the sad story of Conservative Judaism is this: Human beings do not run from demands that might root them in the cosmos. They seek significance, and for traditions that offer it, they will sacrifice a great deal. Orthodoxy offers that, and the results are clear. Liberal American Judaism does not, and it is paying the price.

Those who will live in the aftermath of Conservative Judaism's demise will live in an American Judaism diminished and robbed of an important voice. This is not the moment for gloating or for self-congratulation—even within Orthodoxy. This is the moment to begin to ask the question that the Pew study puts squarely in front of us: If Orthodoxy is intellectually untenable for many, and liberal Judaism is utterly incapable of transmitting content and substance, is there no option for Jewish continuity other than Israel? There must be. Those who care about the future of the Jewish people had better embark now on the search for what it might be.

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Pro-Creation

BY DARA HORN

Fall 2012

Selfish Reasons to Have More Kids: Why Being a Great Parent Is Less Work and More Fun than You Think
by Bryan Caplan
Basic Books, 240 pp., $15.99

From Amy Chua's *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* to Pamela Druckerman's *Bringing up Bébé* to Mayim Bialik's *Beyond the Sling*, a spit-up-like effluvium of books has been released on today's parents, informing them that the best way to ensure their children's success in life is to drag them to music lessons, drag them to adult cocktail parties, or drag them around in an elaborate baby wrap. Despite their contradictory advice, these books have all gotten one thing right: no matter how you do it, *some* aspect of parenting is bound to be a drag.

For many of us, the biggest drag may be the parenting advice itself. The oddest and most unnoticed feature of these parenting books is that they are all written by relatively inexperienced parents. All of the current parenting bestsellers are authored by people who have small-to-medium-sized families—and almost none are authored by people who have actually raised children to adulthood. This is not a problem if readers merely want advice on how to make a 12-year-old practice the flute or how to make a 2-year-old stop eating deer feces, but it falls a bit short for those searching for proven ways to make children into caring and competent adults.

The sort of person I wouldn't mind hearing parenting advice from would be more like Glückel of Hameln, the 17th-century Yiddish writer and mother of fourteen whose memoirs recount her experiences as an international businesswoman and helicopter mom. While revisiting her work recently, I found myself wishing she had expressed her thoughts in handy bullet points:

- Have your first kid at 14 and your last at 42.
- Farm out children over the age of 12 to foreign in-laws in order to build multinational business connections.
- If your kid has a rash, cover it with a sleeve so the community doesn't run you out of town when they assume the kid has plague.

According to Caplan, Pirkei Avot should say: "Educate a child, or park him on the couch playing Angry Birds: either way he will turn out like you."

Alas, few modern parenting writers are so wise, as I was reminded while reading Bryan Caplan's *Selfish Reasons to Have More Kids: Why Being a Great Parent Is Less Work and More Fun than You Think*. Caplan should know: he has three children, you see, all under the age of 8.

Caplan's book isn't quite as chutzpahdik as its title suggests. The author is an economist, and *Selfish Reasons to Have More Kids* is not a personal tale but a modest economic proposal. According to Caplan, many modern parents "overcharge" themselves when it comes to their investments in their children, devoting endless energy and anxiety to raising them. But the cost of rearing children is "artificially inflated"—not because of the cash outlay for mommy-and-me classes, but because, as Caplan argues, research shows that almost nothing that parents do has any lasting effect on the adults their children become. This provocative idea is the premise of this intriguing but ultimately frustrating book.

The bulk of the book recounts research results on identical twins and adopted siblings, which consistently demonstrate the miniscule effects of nurture compared with those of nature for just about anything parents might wish for their children—health, intelligence, future income, and even more nebulous categories like happiness, character, and values. "Good kids do tend to come from good families," Caplan concedes. "Yet contrary to what everyone

thinks, the overarching reason is heredity." Sifting through dozens of studies, Caplan summons numbers showing that identical twins raised apart are more similar as adults than adopted siblings raised together. Interviews with 8,000 adult twins in Virginia found "zero effect" of nurture on self-esteem, for instance; a survey of 15,000 Danish adoptees found that criminal behavior correlated only with the rap sheets of the respondents' biological parents; personality tests on 500 identical Swedish twins raised together and 600 raised apart found that adult agreeableness and conscientiousness corresponded overwhelmingly to genes.

Indeed, one of Caplan's most compelling bullet points of advice is one that Glückel of Hameln would have agreed with: If you really want to invest in your children's future, "choose a spouse who resembles the kids you want to have." Caplan clarifies that these studies are restricted to middle-class families in industrialized countries, and that real abuse or neglect will indeed harm children. But assuming you don't live in a ditch and aren't selling your kids on eBay, he insists that your long-term effect on your children is minimal. Rather than finding this deflating, Caplan finds it stimulating, in the economic sense—because it means that children do not require the immense resources many parents invest. "What does enlightened self-interest tell you to do when you find out that something is cheaper than you previously believed?" he asks, then answers: "Buy more."



The children's house at Kibbutz Afikim, Jordan Valley, ca. 1960s.

Yet it was hard to read this book as I did, while nursing my fourth child, without experiencing some buyer's remorse. Considering that Caplan is an economist, it's especially strange that he overlooks certain enormous and non-negotiable financial costs of "buying more." Even if one pretends that the middle-class families who are Caplan's audience don't give a hoot about paying for college, there remains the fact that since we don't live in Sweden, free childcare (read: school) only begins at age 5 and only lasts until three o'clock. This means that someone, in most cases a paid someone, has to watch the children while parents are working—or that one parent must quit or reduce work for at least five years.

I was an adjunct college professor with only one baby when I realized that I was earning less per hour than my babysitter. The math in my very typical case was not conducive to selfishness. Caplan counters that the high-impact years of raising young children are brief and that parents should take the long view: "If you were good at being self-interested, you'd ask yourself, 'How many kids will I want when I'm 60?'" But he neglects to note that each additional child makes those challenging years longer—potentially a lot longer. Shortly after completing my fifth of at least ten years of escorting children to preschool, I asked my mother why people always say that childrearing "goes by so fast." Does it really, I asked her? My mother, a parent of four and grandparent of nine, looked at me and said gravely, "It's interminable." Glückel of Hameln, who delivered her first child the same week her mother delivered her last, would have agreed.

The more disturbing aspect of Caplan's book is that if one follows its argument to its natural conclusion, it's actually claiming that education itself is pointless. The obvious effects of childrearing that parents observe in their own children—such as those "tiger moms" who successfully force their children to practice piano—are dismissed by Caplan as short-term results that "fade out" over time. "Think about how many parents try to inspire a love of books," Caplan notes. "At the time, they succeed: lots of kids won't sleep without a bedtime story. Ten or twenty years later, however, only a small minority read for pleasure. That's fade-out for you." Pirkei Avot advises us to "Educate a child in the way he will go, and even when he grows old, he will not depart from it." Such ancient wisdom is handily unseated by 1,100 Swedish twins who decided to mail in their questionnaires. In light of this research, the Mishnah's revised version might read,

"Educate a child, or park him on the couch playing Angry Birds: either way he will turn out like you."

The problem with this argument is not so much that it is false—which, given that research is imperfect and genetics is not simple, it may well be—as that it focuses on the things that matter least. Most parents are acutely aware that there's not much they can do to alter their children's personalities. Even the Haggadah, a wildly successful model of what educators now call "differentiated instruction," never suggests that parents can turn wicked sons into wise sons, or even that they should try. And most parents don't choose to have more children based on "marginal returns." Parenting means joining a hundred-thousand-year-old chain of sharing what it means to be human and ensuring that that meaning will survive us. The question of what it means to be human can't be answered by surveying people's income or intelligence or asking their peers how agreeable or conscientious they are, because the answers lie in why they find it important to be agreeable or conscientious, or what they hope to do with their income and intelligence. It is only education, beginning with the possibilities that parents model for their children, that gives children the language and context to eventually answer this question for themselves.

In the early decades of the Zionist movement, many kibbutzim separated children from their parents, raising them in special "children's houses" and only allowing them to see their parents for a few hours a day. The purpose of this was not merely to strengthen the community's collective responsibility, but also to sever the intergenerational ties that would have made the creation of a new Hebrew language and culture—and the sloughing of the old Diaspora perspective—among this new Zionist elite close to impossible. The kibbutz model, utopian experiment that it was, ultimately succumbed to the social and economic realities of an evolving modern state. But it is also coincidentally true that once a new Hebrew-speaking culture was in place for over a generation, the drastic measure of separating children from parents was no longer necessary; parents could go back to raising their own children and imbuing them with their now-native sense of meaning and purpose, expressed in the language and culture through which they themselves grew up.

Unfortunately for parents like me, there really aren't any "selfish reasons to have more kids," short of the possibility of having your own reality show if you have eighteen or more. (If you were hoping they'd support you in your dotage, the Swedish twins apparently disagree.) Nor is it compelling enough to know that kids are "fun," as Caplan's subtitle announces, or that grandchildren are even more so. All parents, consciously or not, face the task of giving the children they raise a language—expressed not only in words, but in images, rhythms, gestures, patterns of reasoning, and just about every other way that humans have communicated with each other—as their children's most elemental connection to the human past.

The reason to have more kids is because you care enough about whatever languages you speak, and the chains of stories and ideas and commitments that have carried those languages through time, to want more people to speak those languages in the future, no matter what they may choose to say. Giving children a language rich enough to express the past's mistakes and the future's possibilities isn't a task for chromosomes. It's a task for parents and teachers. Perhaps the Swedish twins are right, and the history of humanity that distinguishes us from gorillas has been pointless. But at two in the morning, when I'm singing my baby to sleep with Hebrew songs my parents taught me and whose melodies comfort me still, I tend to doubt it.

Toward the book's end, Caplan asserts, "I had kids because I love kids." But by his own reasoning, that's short-term thinking. One should have kids because one loves adults.

Dara Horn is the award-winning author of several novels including A Guide for the Perplexed *(W.W. Norton & Company).*

Lincoln and the Jews

BY ADAM KIRSCH

Spring 2015

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

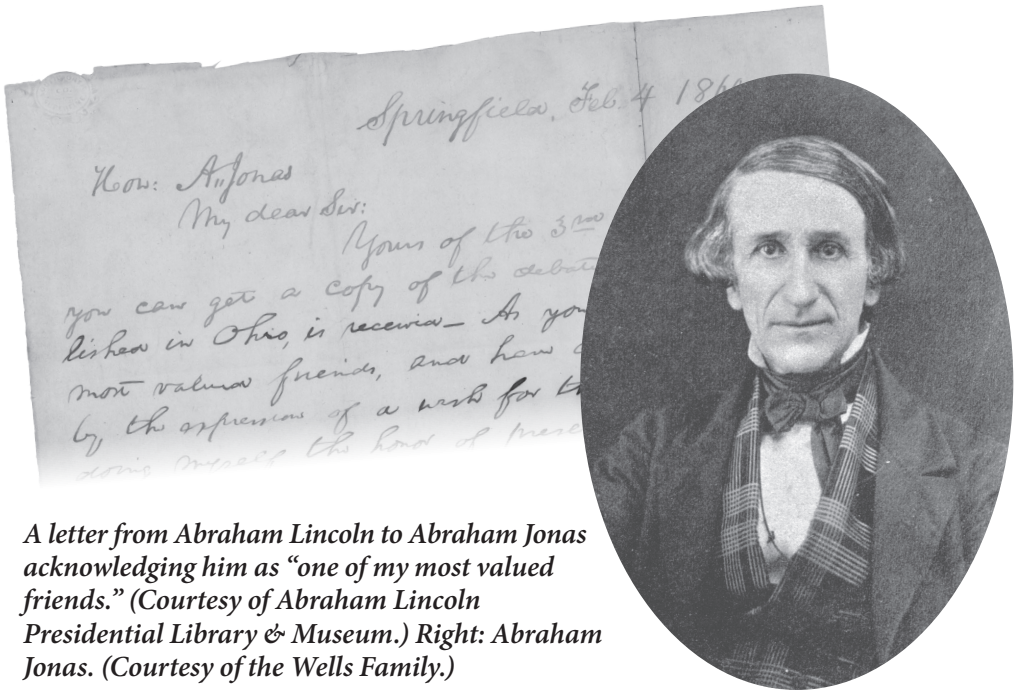
The Civil War is, even now, the most important event in American history, but it is one to which fewer and fewer Americans can claim a direct familial connection. If your ancestors came to this country after 1865—if your background is Italian or Greek, Puerto Rican, or Korean—then you probably have no relative who took part in the struggle over America's destiny. But does this mean that you are less connected to American history than if your forebears wore Union blue or Confederate gray? Are you less susceptible to the "mystic chords of memory" of which Abraham Lincoln famously spoke in his first inaugural address? Only a mind immune to the power of historical imagination could answer yes.

The Civil War continues to make a double claim on the memory of every American, regardless of when his or her family became American. The first is that the issues about which the war was fought—slavery and sectional division—continue to define American society and politics to this day. It's impossible to make sense of quite a few daily headlines or election results without knowing about the Civil War's causes and consequences. Second, and even more important, is that at a distance of 150 years, no American can claim any living memory of the war. To possess it imaginatively today requires the work of reading and thinking, which are open to anyone, regardless of ancestry. To say otherwise is to deny the very premise of America, which is that it is a country founded not on blood but on an idea of freedom.

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

Why Lincoln was immune to this conventional prejudice is cause for speculation.

This means that Lincoln and the Jews is a less unlikely conjunction than it might first appear. It cannot be said that Lincoln spent a great deal of time thinking about Jews or Judaism, or that Jewish questions formed a significant part of the politics of the period. But Sarna, who wrote the book's text, and Shapell, a Civil War collector who provided many of the documents and artifacts that illustrate it, show that Lincoln encountered a surprising number of Jews throughout his life. *Lincoln and the Jews* is largely a catalogue of the American Jews whose paths happened to intersect with his, from his early career in Springfield, Illinois to his years as president and commander-in-chief. Throughout, he seems to have treated them with the benevolence and absence of prejudice one would expect from the Great Emancipator. As Sarna summarizes on the book's last page: He "interacted with Jews, represented Jews, befriended Jews, admired Jews, commissioned Jews, trusted Jews, defended Jews, pardoned Jews, took advice from Jews, gave jobs to Jews, extended rights to Jews . . . His connections to Jews went further and deeper than those of any previous American president."



A letter from Abraham Lincoln to Abraham Jonas acknowledging him as "one of my most valued friends." (Courtesy of Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library & Museum.) Right: Abraham Jonas. (Courtesy of the Wells Family.)

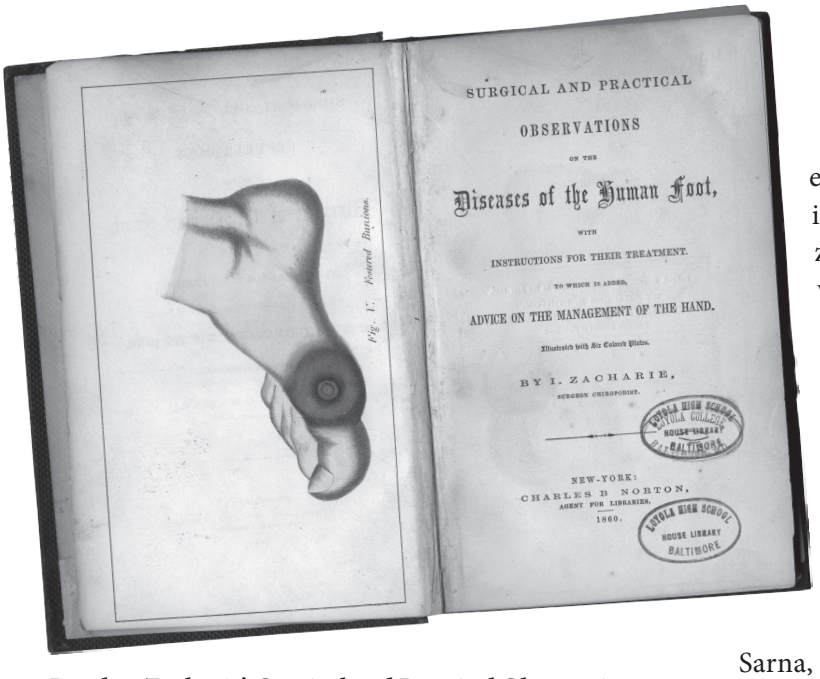
Lincoln's philo-Semitism is especially notable in contrast to his fellow politicians and his own generals. *Lincoln and the Jews* reproduces a number of letters in which such figures refer to Jews, almost always with a sneer—as when George McClellan, Lincoln's battle-shy general and later rival in the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

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

In one instance, Sarna shows, there was something more like real friendship. Abraham Jonas was, like Lincoln, a lawyer and politician who became an activist in the newly founded Republican Party. Jonas, it seems, was not especially religious—"on at least one occasion in 1854 he dined openly with Abraham Lincoln and others at an 'oyster saloon'"—but he was well known as a Jew in his small town of Quincy, Illinois. The two Abrahams probably met in 1843, at a Washington's Birthday event in the state capital, and soon Jonas became Lincoln's political ally. Jonas hosted Lincoln during his statewide tour in 1858 for the Lincoln-Douglas debates and later boosted his candidacy for president. After Lincoln was elected, Jonas reaped his reward in patronage, getting a job as postmaster in his hometown of Quincy. While the two men do not seem to have been especially close—surely Lincoln had many political friends like Jonas—the relationship did help to contribute to Lincoln's view of Jews as equal citizens and ordinary Americans.

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

Lincoln's personal friendships with Jews did not lead the majority of Jewish voters to support him in 1860. Some German-Jewish immigrants, who had fled their home country on account of their liberal politics, continued to fight on the side of progress and anti-slavery, becoming Republican stalwarts. But the majority of Jews lived in eastern cities that were Democratic strongholds, and the involvement of many Jews in the clothing trade led them to fear the disruption of cotton imports should the South secede. (There was also, perhaps,



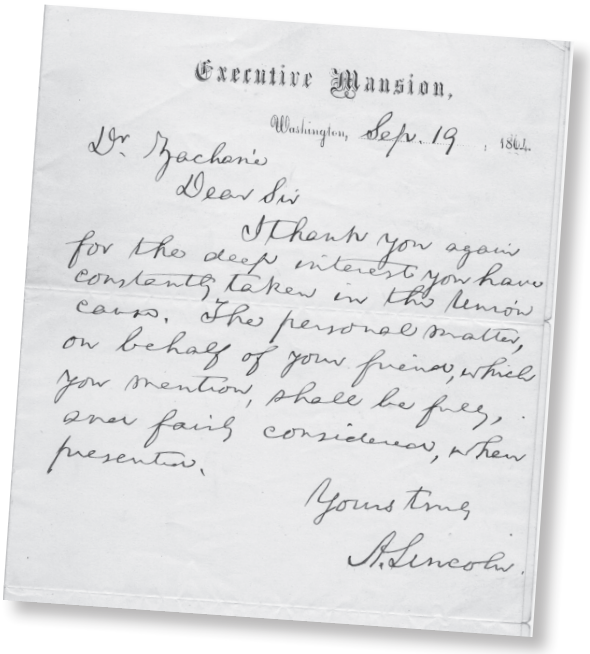
Issachar Zacharie's* Surgical and Practical Observations on the Diseases of the Human Foot, *1860. (Courtesy of the Shapell Manuscript Collection.)

though Sarna doesn't speculate on it, a certain inherited fear of social disruption: Historically, civil wars and ideological strife had boded ill for Jews in Europe.)

Nor, as Sarna points out, were American Jews necessarily opposed to slavery. Though the experience of slavery and emancipation stands at the heart of Jewish history, rabbis could be found who justified the institution—and not just in the South. Sarna introduces the reader to Rabbi Morris Raphall of New York's B'nai Jeshurun, who devoted his sermon on January 4, 1861—which had been declared a national day of fasting by President Buchanan—to a biblical defense of slaveholding. Isaac Mayer Wise was unimpressed by Lincoln and appalled by the crowds that gathered in Cincinnati to greet the president-elect on his way to Washington, comparing them to Philistines worshiping their god Dagon.

As president, Lincoln had to pass judgment on many issues involving Jews, from appointments and promotions to cases of desertion. Sarna and Shapell chronicle all of these, no matter how minor, and show that Lincoln always acted generously and without prejudice. While General Benjamin Butler was writing about Jewish smugglers, "They are Jews who betrayed their Savior; & have also betrayed us," Lincoln proclaimed to a visitor, "I myself have a regard for the Jews." He even extended this regard to a character like Issachar Zacharie, the most colorful figure to appear in *Lincoln and the Jews*. Zacharie, a chiropodist and con man, managed to use his foot-doctoring skills to win the president's confidence, whereupon he was entrusted with secret diplomatic missions to the South. Alas, Zacharie's dream of establishing an Army podiatric corps came to nothing, even though Lincoln took time out of his frenzied schedule to give him not one but three handwritten testimonials.

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


Executive Mansion,
Washington, Sept. 19, 1864.
Dr. Zacharie
Dear Sir
I thank you again for the deep interest you have constantly taken in the Union cause. The personal matter, on behalf of your friend, which you mention, shall be fully, and fairly considered, when presented.
Yours truly
A. Lincoln.

Note from Lincoln to Dr. Zacharie, thanking him for his deep interest in the Union cause, September 19, 1864. (Courtesy of Brown University.)

businessmen served the Union Army as sutlers and quartermasters.

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

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

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

Adam Kirsch is a columnist for Tablet *and the author of* Rocket and Lightship: Essays on Literature and Ideas *(W.W. Norton & Company).*

A Stone for His Slingshot

BY BEN HECHT WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY STUART SCHOFFMAN

Spring 2014

Tucked amid the Ben Hecht Papers at the Newberry Library in Chicago is an undated typescript of 21 pages, with a penciled heading: "Speech at dinner at Slapsy Maxie's, L.A., financed by Mickey Cohen." Hecht was, of course, a fabled writer for stage and screen, Mickey Cohen was the notorious Los Angeles gangland boss (recently portrayed by Sean Penn in the movie *Gangster Squad*), and the speech, which has never before been published, is one of the most riveting and remarkable Jewish fundraising speeches ever delivered. What gives?

The outrageously prolific Hecht—writer of reportage, novels and short stories, Broadway theater and Hollywood movies, and eventually Jewish propaganda—was always attracted to outlaws. The first of his six or seven dozen produced (though not always credited) screenplays was *Underworld*, a 1927 silent film directed by the Austrian-Jewish immigrant Josef von Sternberg. In his freewheeling autobiography, *A Child of the Century*, Hecht wrote:

> I made up a movie about a Chicago gunman and his moll called Feathers McCoy. As a newspaperman I had learned that nice people—the audience—love criminals . . . It was the first gangster movie to bedazzle the movie fans and there were no lies in it—except for a half-dozen sentimental touches introduced by its director.

Hecht won an Academy Award for *Underworld*, at the very first awards in 1929. (He was nominated five more times but never won another.) In 1932, he wrote *Scarface* for Howard Hawks, proudly claiming that "two Capone henchmen" showed up after midnight demanding assurance (which he disingenuously provided) that *Scarface* was not about "the great gangster."

Meanwhile, Hecht had established his own reputation as a literary outlaw, notably with his novel *A Jew in Love,* a rapier-sharp vivisection of a contemptible book publisher named Jo Boshere, né Abe Nussbaum. Published in 1931, it sold some 50,000 copies and was voted best novel of the year by the senior class at New York's City College, but influential Jews accused Hecht of self-hatred. *The New York Times* quoted Rabbi Louis I. Newman, of the Reform Congregation Rodeph Sholom, as saying that the book was "an atrocious malignment of the Jew."

In *A Child of the Century,* Hecht tossed off the fictional Boshere as "this worthless fellow, who cost me much

"I addressed a thousand bookies, ex-prize fighters, gamblers, jockeys, touts and all sorts of lawless and semi-lawless characters; and their womenfolk."

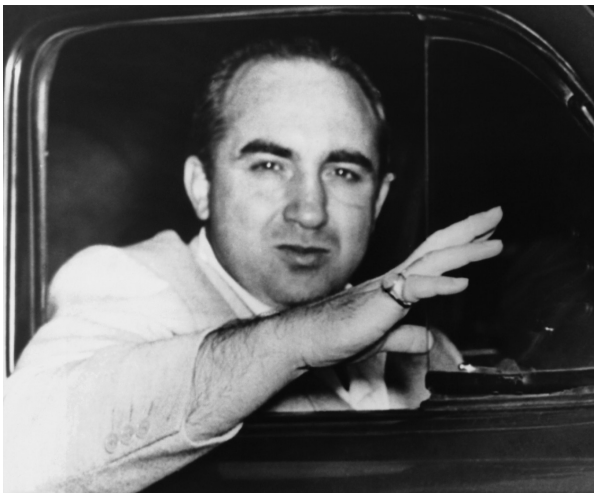
trouble with Jews who do not like the word 'Jew' used in a title." Not quite. Hecht described one character as having "a face stamped with the hieroglyphic curl of the Hebrew alphabet" and elsewhere wrote of "that glandular degeneration that produces the Jew with the sausage face." Writing for *The Sentinel*, a Chicago Jewish weekly, Bertha Loeb Lang wondered if Hecht was deliberately pandering to anti-Semites. Hecht, she wrote, "should seek something inspiring to wing his thoughts to higher realms."

Such inspiration hit him hard in 1939, when Hecht, as he put it, "turned into a Jew." As he recalled: "The German mass murder of the Jews, recently begun, had brought my Jewishness to the surface. I felt no grief or vicarious pain. I felt only a violence toward the German killers." He put his furious pen to work in a daily column for *P.M.,* the liberal New York newspaper, chastising "Americanized Jews" for their silence in the face of the growing massacre. In 1941 he wrote a column called "My Tribe Is Called Israel": "My angry critics all write that they are proud of being Americans and of wearing carnations, and that they are sick to death of such efforts as mine to Judaize them and increase generally the Jew-consciousness of the world."

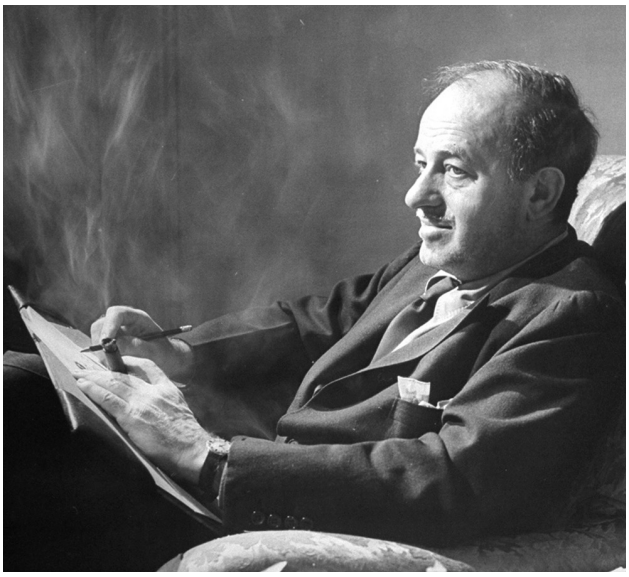
Hecht's two-fisted polemic caught the eye of a young Palestinian Jew living in America: Hillel Kook, a nephew of the great Rav Kook who went by the *nom de guerre* Peter Bergson, so as not to embarrass his family. Bergson was a disciple of the late Revisionist leader Vladimir Ze'ev Jabotinsky, who had died in New York exile in 1940. He enlisted Hecht in a

campaign to fight Hitler and promote militant Zionism in America. Hecht churned out caustic newspaper ads about American and British indifference to the plight of the European Jews. He crafted the 1946 Zionist stage play *A Flag Is Born*, which drew large crowds and made so much money for the right-wing Irgun that they named a ship for him. (While illegally transporting 600 Holocaust survivors to Palestine, the *S.S. Ben Hecht* was intercepted by the British in March 1947; the refugees were detained in Cyprus, and crew members were jailed in the Acre prison.)

Hecht's advocacy for the outlawed Irgun reached a brazen climax with a broadside that ran in the *New York Post* and elsewhere in May 1947, called "Letter to the Terrorists of Palestine." "My Brave Friends," he began, "the Jews of America are for you. You are their champions. You are the grin they wear. You are the feather in their hats . . . Every time you blow up a British arsenal, or wreck a British jail, or send a British railroad train sky high, or rob a British bank, or let go with your guns and bombs at the British betrayers and invaders of your homeland, the Jews of America make a little holiday in their hearts. Not all the Jews, of course." The dissenters, Hecht went on, "unfortunately" included "practically all the rich Jews of America, all the important and influential ones, all the heads of nearly all the Jewish organizations whom the American newspapers call 'The Jewish Leaders.' They're all against." Ben's big finish: "Hang on, brave friends, our money is on its way."



Gangster Mickey Cohen, Chicago, ca. 1950. (© Bettmann/CORBIS.)



Screenwriter Ben Hecht, ca. 1943. (© George Karger/ Pix Inc./Time Life Pictures/Getty Images.)

Hecht's fierce embrace of Zionism is a by-now familiar story of Jewish return, akin to the classic trajectories of Herzl, Heine, and Moses Hess. But it also suited Hecht, the perennial contrarian, to poke a stick in the eye of "Jewish respectables," as he called them. It seems almost inevitable that the next stage in his evolution as a Jew was a fundraising partnership with Mickey Cohen (1913–1976). Cohen "took to burglary and violence as a duckling takes to water," as Hecht wrote of him in the 1950s. He was a prizefighter, armed robber, occasional killer, extortionist, and bookmaking czar; he was also a germ-phobic dandy who shunned alcohol, hobnobbed with Hollywood stars, and craved publicity.

Mickey and Ben were both tough Jews, born in New York to immigrant families, but their commonality ran deeper: "Storytelling is the chief social activity of the underworld," wrote Hecht in his Cohen piece (published posthumously in 1970 as "The Incomplete Life of Mickey Cohen" in the short-lived *Scanlan's Magazine*). "Nearly every heister and gunman I have known was eager to play Scheherazade." As Cohen told the story in his autobiography, Hecht contacted him in 1947: "At first I thought the guy was conning me—playing on me being a Jew kid." The gangster and his bodyguard Mike Howard went for dinner at Hecht's house in Oceanside, north of San Diego. Also present, says Cohen, was a representative of the Irgun:

> This guy got me so goddamn excited. He started telling me how these guys actually fight like racket guys would . . . And then I threw a big affair to raise funds for the Irgun at Slapsy Maxie's, which I had a piece of. There were judges there, people from all walks of life—every top gambler that was in the city or nearby.

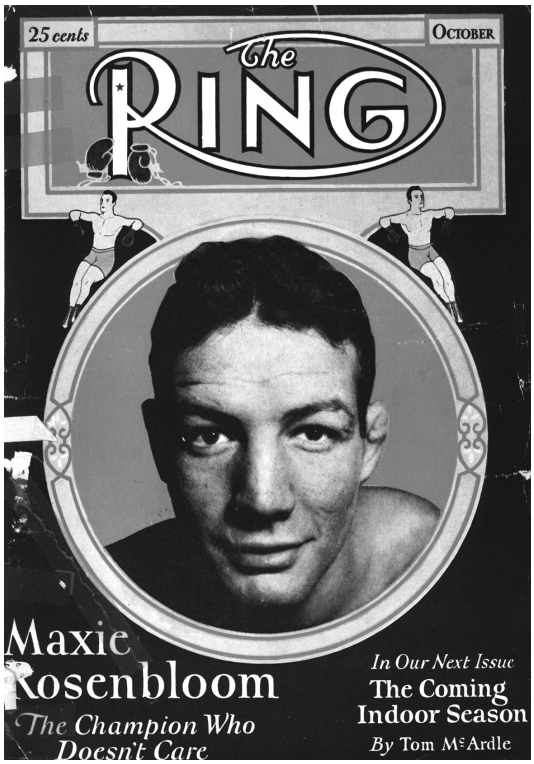


Slapsy Maxie's on Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, 1945. (Courtesy of hollywoodphotographs.com.)

Cut to Slapsy Maxie's Café, a popular nightspot on Wilshire Boulevard, east of Fairfax, operated by a Hollywood haberdasher called Sy Devore and his brother Charlie. It was at least partly backed by Cohen and fronted by the eponymous Maxie Rosenbloom, a onetime light heavyweight boxing champion and B-actor (he played himself in the 1941 comedy *Harvard, Here I Come!*). The date of the big Irgun affair is not to be found in Cohen's memoir, nor in Hecht's version in *A Child of the Century*. As Saul Bellow deadpanned in his *Times* review of the book: "Hecht is a rather difficult man to pin down." Cohen's biographer Brad Davis says it was "in June 1947, just prior to Bugsy's murder," but incorrectly places Menachem Begin in the room that night, "on the lam for the King David Hotel bombing." Elements of Hecht's speech clearly point to 1948, shortly after the establishment of Israel.

Hecht described the scene: "I addressed a thousand bookies, ex-prize fighters, gamblers, jockeys, touts and all sorts of lawless and semi-lawless characters; and their womenfolk." Imagine a huge smoky nightclub out of *Guys and Dolls* with Ben, still shaky after gall bladder surgery, reading out an impassioned 45-minute pitch for the soldiers of the Irgun. (He even has a good word for the rival Haganah.) Hecht is fast and loose with facts about the Warsaw ghetto, FDR, refugee ships, Lord Moyne, and more. He slides into hyperbole, soars over the heads of his audience, but also hammers home a core concept of classical Zionism: "A Jewish nation will remove our mystery and give us origins and permit us to thrive in the world—on an equal footing with other nationals." And his grand peroration still stirs the Jewish soul, if only as nostalgia: "A David stands against Goliath. I ask you Jews—buy him a stone for his slingshot."

The hat was passed. The Hollywood demimonde ponied up with cash and pledges. Cohen shoved Mike Howard to the stage, ordering him to demand that everybody give double. "Quit crabbin," Hecht reports Howard as replying, before he took the microphone, "We raised two hundred G's. Furthermore, we been here three hours and nobody's taken a shot at us." The take for the night, according to the journalist Sidney Zion in *Scanlan's*, was "$230,000 and no welshers." Cohen's rival mobster, Jimmy Fratianno, later said it was a scam and Mickey kept the money. Then again, Fratianno tried to kill Cohen in a shootout on Sunset Boulevard only a year later, and his nickname was "The Weasel." For his part, Cohen claimed in his memoir that it was he who urged the Irgun to hang British soldiers in Palestine in revenge for the hanging of Jews: "If you don't, that's going to be the end of my involvement . . . And they done it." (Indeed so: in Netanya, on Begin's orders, in July 1947, though whether he was



Maxie Rosenbloom on* The Ring*'s cover, ca. 1930s. (©The Ring Magazine/Getty Images.)

heeding Cohen's advice is another matter.)

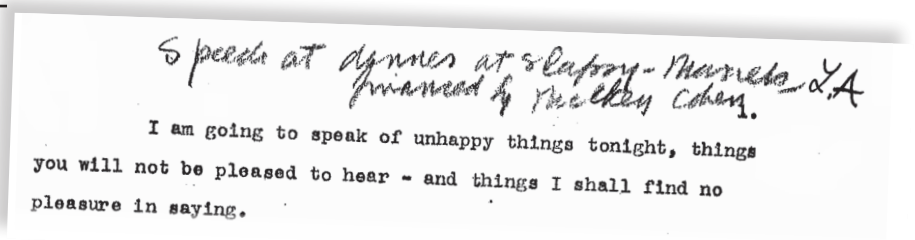
Hecht made another, much shorter speech in November 1948, at the Waldorf-Astoria in Manhattan, at a big banquet in honor of Menachem Begin. This speech, too, may be found at the Newberry: "For some of us who are present here tonight," Hecht began, "this fine scene is the ending of a story." The Irgun, by the fall of 1948, had ceased to exist, along with its American arm, the American League for a Free Palestine. "Tonight," said Hecht, "we scatter, we who rang doorbells, passed the hat, put on rallies, cheered the spectacle returned to Palestine of David standing against Goliath—we go back to smaller things."

For Hecht, who had recently written *Spellbound* and *Notorious,* "smaller things" included Hitchcock's *Rope* and the film adaptation of *Guys and Dolls,* both as an uncredited "script doctor." He published *A Child of the Century* in 1954, which, until now, together with Cohen's memoir, constituted the only published evidence of the night at Slapsy Maxie's. In 1961, he published *Perfidy,* a denunciation of Labor Zionist treachery that remains canonical in some right-wing circles.

Hecht's last, unfinished project was a book called *Shylock, My Brother*, whose manuscript I also examined at the Newberry. "I have felt sorry that so many Jews . . . fail to recognize Shylock as their brother, and turn their backs on him," he wrote. "I have never found Shylock to be the villain against whom Jews keep protesting as a libel of their kind. To the contrary, he is one of the few heroic Jews in classic literature, perhaps even the only one." Jabotinsky, Hecht reported, had argued "that Shylock was a valiant vindicator of Jewish grievances." But for the timid Jews who fear "unfrightened Jewish voices," Hecht scoffed, "the silent Ben-Gurion of Israel and not the cantankerous Shylock of Shakespeare is their idol." He would have approved of Al Pacino's recent aggressive portrayals of Shylock.

To the end, Hecht was out to provoke. Speculating on Shakespeare's motives, he concluded that the Bard was a crypto-Jew. Hecht died suddenly in April 1964, at the age of 70, in his apartment on West 67th Street in New York. Rabbi Louis I. Newman, his erstwhile antagonist, officiated at his funeral at Rodeph Sholom, and Menachem Begin flew in from Israel to deliver a eulogy.

Editorial Note: Ben Hecht's typed speech has been modified here only slightly in matters of punctuation and spacing to enhance its readability. Some idiosyncrasies have been left in order to retain the feel of the original document.


5 speech at dinner at Slapsy-Maxie's 24
Arranged by Nat Cohen.

I am going to speak of unhappy things tonight, things you will not be pleased to hear - and things I shall find no pleasure in saying.

I AM GOING TO SPEAK OF UNHAPPY THINGS TONIGHT, things you will not be pleased to hear—and things I shall find no pleasure in saying. But Menachim Beigen [sic], the Commander of the Irgun and military leader of the embattled Jews in Palestine, has cabled me from Tel Aviv asking of me a favor. He asks that I do what I can to arouse among the Jews who are not fighting in the Holy Land, the knowledge that without them the Holy Land will be lost. And with it will be lost forever the hope of the Jews taking their place as equals in the human family.

"We are fighting against great odds," the Irgun commander says. "The enemy outnumbers us and is better equipped. His resources are unlimited. Great Britain is supplying him with its millions, its munitions, and its manpower. We have only ourselves. No nation will come to our side as ally or give us aid. We have only our brave soldiers and the long-dreaming soul of the Jews of the world. Speak to that soul wherever you can. If it can be awakened, we shall win."

I shall speak to it tonight as well as I can. The soul of the Jew is an ancient and complicated business. It has been trained by disaster and calumny to live in caution, to hide itself cozily behind good deeds, to overlook insults, to charm its enemies, and to avoid getting its enemies angrier than they are. Thus hidden, thus full of cunning modesties and suicidal graces, it has remained nevertheless a brave soul—when destinies other than its own are at stake. It has fought and died valorously in defense of every cause but its own. Yes, it has the courage to fight and die for others. But it has hardly the guts even to *speak*

in its own behalf. I know this soul of the Jew because I am part of it. And when the Irgun commander asks that it be wakened, he asks for a miracle. Awaken Jews into espousing their own cause—into believing in themselves—into grasping the battles of Palestine as their own bid for freedom; awaken them to knowing that victory in Palestine is a victory over anti-Semitism in every corner of the world. Commander Beigen asks for this miracle because he is a part of this miracle himself. He is the leader of an army of liberation that all the military power and political bedevilments of Great Britain were unable to dislodge.

While all the other Jews of the world and all their various synods and agencies cooed and hobnobbed with the British betrayer and usurper of their homeland; while all the other small Jews of the world let themselves be hornswoggled out of their honor and their hopes, the fighting Jews of the Irgun and their brave youthful allies named the Stern Gang—stood undaunted and uncompromising and battling as heroically as the Jews of the Warsaw ghetto. With one difference. They did not lose—not yet. The British lost.

For twenty-five years the mighty nation of Great Britain sought to steal Palestine—and failed. Because of the Irgun. Because Irgun soldiers died in battle. Because Irgun soldiers went singing to the British gallows—to hang where all the world could see—and did see—not a terrorist punished for crime but the look and sight of a Jewish patriot dying for his country. Now the Irgun asks for more miracles. It asks for us.

Let me remind you—who we have been. A few years ago in the days when the Germans were burning six million Jews in their lime pits and incinerators—a great and historic thing came to our ears. Thirty thousand Jews waiting in the ghetto of Warsaw to be taken off in the cattle cars to the German furnaces cried out to the world and to us, the Jews of the world—that they were not going to yield like sheep to the German butcher. They proclaimed that they were going to die in battle rather than let themselves be taken naked and unresisting to join the garbage pile of the Jewish dead. News of this event came over the radios of the world. It appeared in all the headlines. Thirty thousand Jews armed with pike poles, old guns and bombs made out of tin cans were giving battle to the German army in Warsaw. The German army marched upon the Warsaw ghetto with tanks, cannon, and flame-throwers. Outnumbered as in a nightmare, the Jews of Warsaw fought for twenty days, fought with wondrous valor—and with one eye on the sky.

They were waiting for help, for planes to appear and parachute weapons and supplies to them. No planes appeared. No weapons or supplies came out of the sky. No nation, fighting those same Germans, sent even a token pat on the back to these doomed warrior Jews. And from all the Jews of the world—from all of *us*—came not a single plane, a single gun, or a single loaf of bread to the thirty thousand who were battling not for their own survival—there was never any hope of that—but who were battling to bring a glow of human dignity to the pitiful and humiliated name of the Jews; our name as well as theirs.

They were all killed—these men and women of Warsaw who fought for the honor of their kind. And the last of them who stood in the wrecked streets of their ghetto with their ammunition used up—and the German tanks and flame-throwers wiping them out—the last of them shook their fists at the sky; not at the Germans, but at the friendless sky.



The Alvin theater's marquee announcing Ben Hecht's* A Flag Is Born*, which promoted the establishment of a Jewish state, New York, 1946.

Let me tell you why the sky under which the thirty thousand Jews died remained empty—why there was not a single package to fall from a single plane. Let me tell you also why none of the nations fighting for democracy—not even our own country—spoke up as a government officially, spoke out officially as a nation to offer aid, hope, or even that recognition of valor for which the Jews of Warsaw fought and died. The reason is this. The Allies fighting for democracy had a policy toward the Jews, a very definite and strategic policy. This policy had one basic objective—a refusal to recognize the existence of the Jews of Europe whether they died

in the Warsaw ghetto fighting or were burned by the millions in the German lime pits and incinerators.

It is unpleasant to hear this. It is unpleasant to say this. But it is the truth.

We have only our brave soldiers and the long-dreaming soul of the Jews of the world.

I am going to name a date and a fact. Write it in your Jewish memories. This is the Moscow conference of the Allies in 1943. A great document is being drawn up by Great Britain, Russia, and the United States. This document is called officially "Statement on the German Atrocities." And it states that the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Soviet Union have received from many quarters evidence of atrocities and cold-blooded mass execution done by the Germans. And in this Statement the Allies pledge themselves to avenge these monstrous deeds. They list—in their Statement—the wholesale massacres of Polish, French, Dutch, Belgian, Norwegian hostages. They list the peasants of the island of Crete—as German victims. They list sixty-two different categories of German victims. Every name is listed but the name of Jew.

There is no reference in this Statement to the bloody fact that three million Jews have been murdered—for no other crime than that they were Jews—and that another three million are waiting to die in the German ovens. At the time this statement is being written—a genocide bloodier than any in history is taking place—a race of people is being exterminated. And this fact has been proclaimed by the German exterminators—who stand red-handed before the world boasting of their deed—that the Jews are being wiped out—because they are Jews.

This Statement ignoring the killing of three million unarmed Jews, and turning its back on the impending murder of three more million, was signed by Prime Minister Churchill, Premier Stalin, and President Roosevelt. I know of no political gesture in history as bold and inhuman as blissful silence. A silence that was like a door closing furtively and surreptitiously on the murderer and his victim—our Jewish people.

Let me tell you why this door was closed—why the word Jew was erased not only from the eyes of the world but from its own tomb. You will believe me when I tell you … because on my honor, I tell you the truth. And it is a truth you will recognize because it has always been in your mind—as well as my own—whether you spoke it or not. The truth was that Great Britain did not want any official recognition of the Jewish massacre to be put in the record. It did not want the desperate status of the Jews recognized officially. It did not want the conscience of the world stirred up by the foulest crime in history. It did not want this done because there was only one place for the doomed Jews of Europe to go—only one place eager to welcome them—Palestine.

Great Britain did not want the world's attention called to the spectacle of a good and noble race being exterminated. This might undermine their shabby little plan to steal Palestine for themselves. Official acknowledgement that Jews had been killed and their killing would continue until they were a race reduced to bones and ashes might startle even the befogged mind of the world of 1943 and set it crying out for a remedy. And what might this remedy be? Only this—to open the ports of Palestine given to the Jews twenty years before—and let in the Jews not yet slaughtered. The British were opposed to this remedy. British policy preferred that all the Jews of Europe be murdered—and that they die incognito in the German furnaces rather than that a single Jewish refugee enter Palestine.

Here is another fact to keep in your memories. During the height of the German massacres, two ships carrying several thousand such refugees arrived at the Palestinian port of Haifa. A man named Lord Moyne, the British governor of Palestine, looked on the thousands of men, women, and children who had come crawling out of the pogroms, blackened by the smoke of massacres; looked and refused to allow these two ships to land, and their passengers to disembark. Lord Moyne ordered the two battered refugee ships—called the *Struma* and the *Patria*—to sail off. They sailed away. He sent them back into the Mediterranean. They were blown up by English or German mines. Every human being aboard them was killed. Lord Moyne had stood at the breach. He had kept British policy intact.

And where was American policy during those wild days of a people's extermination? Let me tell you. It stood firmly, grimly, side by side with Great Britain. Mr. Roosevelt concurred in this British plot to lock the Jews away with their German murderers—and ignore the deed—and let them all be killed rather than let the ports of Palestine be opened. President Roosevelt concurred on the *Struma* and the *Patria*.

And here is another fact to hold in your Jewish memories. Let me tell you of another secret American agreement—of President Roosevelt's and his State Department's concurrence in the murder of three hundred thousand Jews of Roumania [sic]. This is also not a pleasant thing to hear, nor yet to say. For Great Britain and the United States are both honorable countries—dedicated to honorable aims. And so far as it is possible for human masses to be kind and good,

such kindness and goodness are to be found in the peoples of England and America. But—as always in history the Jews are the wrong yardstick with which to measure the virtues of nations, or of their leaders. But it is the only measure a Jew has—who kills him, who lets him live.

It was early in the war. Roumania was not yet overrun by German troops and officials. The Roumanian government sent out word that payment of fifty dollars a piece, it would release the Jews of Roumania before the Germans came in and started their extermination. The fifty dollars a head were to cover transportation expenses to Palestine. We published and advertised this fact, in a score of newspapers. The American State Department branded our information as a lie. Mr. Roosevelt branded the Roumanian government's offer as a myth. There were no such Jews to be saved. And we who tried to rouse the conscience of the world to save them—we were liars and sensation makers. Pressed to take action, our government informed us angrily that it was unaware of this Roumanian offer.

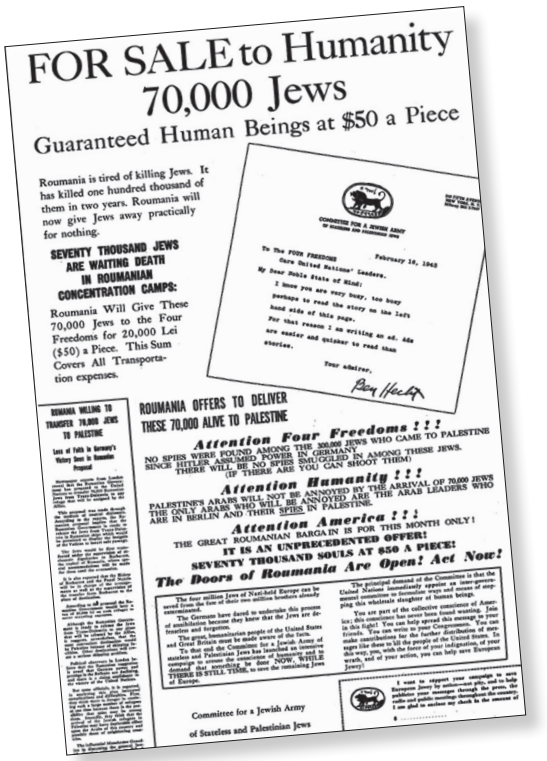
It was our government that lied—not we. The truth has come out in the published letters of the State Department. There was such an offer made by the Roumanians. And our State Department wrote secretly to Arab leaders—Ibn Saud among them—not to fear an influx of Roumanian Jewish refugees into Palestine. These letters assured the Arab leaders that the United States would secretly quash the rescue of the three hundred thousand Roumanian Jews—among them fifty thousand children.

And it did. It held the breach—with Lord Moyne. It stood firm for five months—till the Germans swarmed into Roumania. And then our State department relaxed. For the Germans took care of the rest of the job of keeping the Roumanian Jews—including their fifty thousand children—out of Palestine. They were all slaughtered.

All these unpleasant things I have said to you not to arouse futile angers against villainy past and gone. I have said them only to point out the danger in which the Jew stands today. In his hour of destruction the Jew of Europe was without friends. Today in his desperate hour of rebirth the plot is still the same. The Jew is still without friends.

He fights alone in Palestine—against great odds, against increasing odds. And if we Jews whose souls are being fed and strengthened by his courage—whose status in the eyes of the world—is being forged by his valor—if we dreaming Jews of the four winds believe that any nation will ride to his aid—we are fools.

There will be no help from governments. The governments will continue to play their immemorial and secret games of sabotage against the Jews. In Palestine the outnumbered Jews battle today against an enemy officered, armed, and financed by the British. And like the Jews of Warsaw these Palestinian heroes battle with one eye to the sky. They wait for us. We are their arsenal. Not the Four Freedoms, not the good old U.S.A.—but we, the Jews of the four winds. But this you know, or you would not be here. And it is not to awaken you that I speak. You are awake or you would not be here. It is to arm your wakefulness and help you to waken others that I speak.



FOR SALE to Humanity
70,000 Jews
Guaranteed Human Beings at $50 a Piece

Roumania is tired of killing Jews. It has killed one hundred thousand of them in two years. Roumania will now give Jews away practically for nothing.

SEVENTY THOUSAND JEWS ARE WAITING DEATH IN ROUMANIAN CONCENTRATION CAMPS:

Roumania Will Give These 70,000 Jews to the Four Freedoms for 20,000 Lei ($50) a Piece. This Sum Covers All Transportation expenses.

ROUMANIA OFFERS TO DELIVER THESE 70,000 ALIVE TO PALESTINE

Attention Four Freedoms !!!
NO SPIES WERE FOUND AMONG THE 300,000 JEWS WHO CAME TO PALESTINE SINCE HITLER BECAME POWER IN GERMANY
THERE WILL BE NO SPIES SMUGGLED IN AMONG THESE JEWS.
(IF THERE ARE YOU CAN SHOOT THEM!)

Attention Humanity !!!
PALESTINE'S ARABS WILL NOT BE ANNOYED BY THE ARRIVAL OF 70,000 JEWS
THE ONLY ARABS WHO WILL BE ANNOYED ARE THE ARAB LEADERS WHO ARE IN BERLIN AND THEIR SPIES IN PALESTINE.

Attention America !!!
THE GREAT ROUMANIAN BARGAIN IS FOR THIS MONTH ONLY!
IT IS AN UNPRECEDENTED OFFER!
SEVENTY THOUSAND SOULS AT $50 A PIECE!
The Doors of Roumania Are Open! Act Now!

Committee for a Jewish Army of Stateless and Palestinian Jews

Hecht and Peter Bergson placed this and similar ads in* The New York Times *and other U.S. papers, February 1943.

You will be asked—and you may even ask yourself—what is the stake of the American Jew in Palestine? What has he to gain by the birth and triumph of the new nation of Israel? I will answer this question, first, with another question. What did the American Jews lose in the mass murder of the six million Jews of Europe? That which he lost—he will never lose again if there is a nation in Palestine called Israel. For only a Jewish nation sitting among the other nations of the world will be able to prevent ever the mass executions of Jews that have been going on since the year Four Hundred.

In the fifteen hundred years of their wooing of Europe, the Jews have never been able to halt a pogrom. In fact, the more important, the more assimilated the Jews in a given country became, the more certain was their ultimate status

in that country—disfavor and destruction. Out of this one fact—that they were a people who could be slaughtered with impunity—that there was even honor to be won in their slaughtering—has risen much of the anti-Semitism that hangs likes an ever-darkening cloud over the world's Jewry. When the sky is clear above you, you may be sure the cloud is elsewhere. It shifts from nation to nation, from century to century. It does not go away. All the relationships made the Jews, all the honors won, all the medals hung on them have not been enough to move even our own most civilized of countries to raise a hand in their behalf—when the hour of doom struck in Europe.

Here is our record as American Jews—in that pogrom. We allowed ourselves to be bamboozled by the British policy in Palestine—which was also the American policy—of keeping the Jews out of the Holy Land. We went along with the delusion that the British and American governments were kindly governments and kindly friends of the Jews. We could not believe otherwise, being who we are and where we are, part of those governments.

We went along—cheering for those governments who with their mighty right hand were winning a war against the Germans—and with their sly left hand locking the Jews of Europe away with their exterminators—by closing the ports of their only refuge—Palestine. We cheered a war—and we cheered the extermination of six million Jews.

Behind the cloak of pretended military emergency, the British—and their American State Department concurrers—plotted the future of Palestine—a Palestine to be held by the British as a military base—a Palestine to be handed over to an Arabian puppet king—already established in Trans Jordan [sic] by the British. And as a sop to what was known as Jewish world opinion the British explained that they could not let the Jews into Palestine during the war—and during their extermination—because German spies might come in with them—and German sympathizers.

These are the same British who whistled the Grand Mufti and his colleagues back from their Hitler honeymoon—and spread a red carpet for their re-entrance into Palestine. They were Nazis, they had fought on the German side in the war. But this was a minor facet of their natures—a peccadillo to be forgotten and condoned in the light of the more important fact that they hated Jews and were willing to help the British drive the Jews out of Palestine.

Only one group of Jews in the world did not concur in these secret plottings and underminings of Jews. This was the Irgun Zwei Leumi—that fought and publicized with their blood each step of the robbery—whether it was robbery of honor, freedom, or land. And with their help, for they are now being forged into the fabric of the new Jewish state—the State of Israel will not, when the time comes again—be as daft and dizzy as we American Jews were. It will not be spun about by the fear of divided loyalties as we were. It will not be duped by the siren song of patriotisms that ignore the carnage of the Jews.

However muddled such a Jewish state of Israel may be, it will have a long memory—and a clear head toward Jews. And when the time of pogrom comes again—it will raise a clear voice, backed by a strong arm—for Jews. And this is the only weapon the Jews need to prevent another time of butchery. For the world is not a place of evil. The conscience of the world is a Godly and aspiring one. Its head is perpetually in a fog, but there is a light in its heart. A clarion voice such as will come from the nation of Israel—and such has never come from the scattered, duped, and bewildered Jews wooing their way in other lands—such a voice will halt the pogroms and mass executions of tomorrow.

Tonight the battle rages in the land of Israel. Let us also look on our record as American Jews toward this present war. We Jews made this war possible. We concurred in it. Not only we American Jews who think only of America, but the Jews who were already planning the future of Palestine. They, too, concurred in this war and abetted the enemy. They did worse. They blessed it—to win a smile of approval from the British, their good friends. I will explain: Twenty years ago when the British held Palestine under a League of Nations mandate—to prepare a Jewish homeland in Palestine—that was their assignment and their sworn task—twenty years ago the British in defiance of that mandate sliced off a major chunk of Palestine—called it Trans Jordan and handed it over to a puppet king named Abdullah.

There was an outcry from the Jewish patriots of Palestine—from the Irgun Zwei Leumi. But these were merely Palestinians. The great and important Jews who handled the future of Palestine were English citizens and American citizens. These accredited leaders of Jewry thought the rape of Palestine by the British and the lawless invention of an Arab state by the British—an unfortunate but an unpreventable thing. They protested—but never loudly enough to jeopardize their standing as British or American citizens. They protested—but they were good sports about it. And the warnings of the Irgun leaders that Great Britain was preparing a war against Palestine—the war that is going on now—were drowned in the polite concurrences of English and American Jews.

The British were able openly and lawlessly to finance this Arab state in Trans Jordan—on loans given them by the U.S.A. They proceeded openly to pour military equip-

ment into the Arab state, to send thousands of British officers and strategists to King Abdullah's side, to ship him planes, tanks, and all their latest military gadgets—and to pay the salaries of his army. This is the army—the Arab Legion—that fights the Jews today. Not the Palestinian Arabs who have lived in friendship with the Jews—but this British trumped up Legion—fattened by British gold and British propaganda for a generation.

And why did the British do this? Why this long and foresighted plan against the Jews? The answer is that the Arabs make better British Colonials than the Jews. The answer is that the Arabs, do they win Palestine, will not harass British trade and prestige in the east by building up a thriving industrial nation. The answer is that the Arabs will create a nation content to live off Great Britain, content to be its not too civilized vassal, cohort, and uncompetitive ally. And the Jews if they win—will not be that—despite the fact that an English citizen sits today as the first president of Israel. This is a hope for the British—but a small one. The Jews of Palestine—being shot down today by British guns, blasted by British planes, will be Jews when they win—a nation and not a vassal suburb of Downing Street, London.

And what have we American Jews to gain by the triumph of the Jewish nation now battling in Palestine? We are a happy people in the U.S.A. But we are happy as Americans, not as Jews. Not entirely happy—as Jews. The slaughter of our kind in Europe has left a wound in our spirits that our victory as Americans in the war has not entirely healed. It is a Jewish wound kept always open by the fear of the future. And despite the honors and positions we have won in America, we are no different as Jews than our fathers and grandfathers in Europe. We are like them, as Jews—uncertain, despairing, disenchanted, and always singing ourselves to sleep with the happy news that we have friends in court.

The Jews have always had friends in court—but they have never won a verdict. They have been always a noise without power, a talent without roots, a homelover without a doorstep of their own. They have worn fine clothes—and remained a fine nobody. They have always been going somewhere—but they have come from nowhere. And a man who comes from nowhere is a lesser man than one who comes from a place. There is always mystery and suspicion about such a man.

The nationalized soul of every nation, however civilized, abhors instinctively the nationalistic vacuum out of which the Jew is perpetually emerging. Having no land of his own, the Jew is looked on as a man who would—if given the chance—usurp the land of his host.

This has been true even of our own melting pot—a pot in which every immigrant has fused away his antecedents—except the Jew. A man from Sweden, Ireland, Luxemburg, Hungary, Italy—as soon as he loses the accents of those places—can become an American without suspicion or hyphen attached to him. The Jew, with or without accent—can become only an American Jew.

This is part of our stake in Palestine. A Jewish nation will remove our mystery and give us origins and permit us to thrive in the world—on an equal footing with other nationals. We can paradoxically become American then—for we will not be carrying around in our souls the confusion of what we are—and spreading this confusion among our always easily confused neighbors.

And we will not seem like the remnant of some stubborn religious sect given to weird and alien religious practices. Without losing our religion we will lose our two-thousand-year-old dangerous identity as religious fanatics—an absurd identity, but an identity ready made for the devilish schemes of bigots and rabble rousers; an identity that has brought intolerance and disaster down on us. We will lose that identity, for the land of Israel will have a flag, an army, and a congress to prove we are like other people—and that we stem from a normal state and not be black magic out of a hole in the past.

But there is a stake beyond these stakes of convenience and aggrandizement that we Jews have in the battle for Palestine. Is that battle lost—we Jews, all of us, are lost for another seven generations. We will have made our bid for human national status—whether we helped or hid our heads in a bag—and if this bid fails we will become a gabby and empty people, a gabby and defeated people—more so than ever in our history.

We will become losers. And this name will track us down in every city and village of America—and fasten itself to us. Not losers of a war—every nation has had that tag on it, but losers of the right to exist as anything but what we have been—the dubious guest in the house. If our bid for a flag and a homeland fails, we will all of us stand guilty before the world of an unworthiness. And this unworthiness we will, for a change, have deserved—if it comes to us. It is our duty to see that it does not come to us. It is in our power to prevent its coming. We will win—if the long dreaming soul of the Jew is wakened. Thus speaks the leader of the Irgun forces.

Let me remind you—once more—who this leader is and who these Irgun fighters are. Menachim Beigen and his troops are the Terrorists. That was what they were called when their stalwart hearts launched the battle against the British betrayers and invaders of their homeland. They are the same not-

to-be-vanquished and not-to-be-silenced soldiers whose underground fight wrenched the Jewish situation out of the sly British hands; whose unceasing attacks and demands swept away the political fogs behind which the British were silently maneuvering the Jewish state into limbo.

These men and women of the Irgun stood alone. They had no friends in any court—not even the Jewish court. The common people of Palestine loved them, hid them, glowed with pride over them. But the accredited leaders of the long Jewish negotiations for a homeland looked with terrified eyes on this heroic spearhead of Jewish freedom—the Irgun. These leaders joined with all the other nervous, flag-frightened Jews of the world—in denouncing them. And for years the soldiers of the Irgun who fought with a British noose around their necks were called gangsters and terrorists, pirates and lawbreakers—as were the handful of intrepid folk who once rallied to the new flag raised above Lexington and Bunker Hill.

But this is past. The denunciations are done with. The accredited leaders of the world's organized Jewry survive now or die forever behind the army that has come out of the Palestinian underground. And the Jews of the world who called names and were fearful, are proud today of these same Terrorists. For history has revealed them in their true guise—not that of Terrorists but of champions risen to restore the people of Israel to their lost estate as human beings. The Irgun is a dedicated army. It leads the fight. And beside it fights the brave army of the Haganah. They were political rivals of the Irgun. They are brothers in arms tonight.

Jewish money has poured into a thousand causes. But there was never any cause in Jewish history like this one. In Palestine, the ancient land of miracles—another miracle is happening; a miracle as sweet as any recorded in the Testament. A two-thousand-year-old dream of the Jews is coming true—a dream of manhood hidden away in the prayers and lamentations of two thousand years. [Two paragraphs in the original text crossed out by Ben Hecht.]

In these dark centuries that have never ended—the Jews carried the dream of Israel in their hearts. The Hebrew Nation of David and the Kings had been hammered to bits—but the bits refused to die. Every Jewish poet, every rabbi, and every worker at his bench kept alive this dream. In Spain after a thousand years of torment—the Jews still sang of their Jerusalem and their Holy Land. Jehuda Halevy [sic], the Hebrew poet of Spain, wrote of a homeland no Jew had seen for a thousand years:

> Jerusalem, oh City of Splendor, oh bright home of the Jews—our spirit flies to you from many lands. In the East—in the far land of the cedar and the lemon trees our hearts lie. And our souls dwell beside the sun gone down on Israel.

The sun is no longer down. A champion fights in Palestine. He will not surrender. But he calls on us. He needs us.

If he loses, he will lose because we did not put a gun in his hand.

He will lose because we—and not he—were too small for the hour of Jewish destiny.

He will lose because the Jews of the world dreamed away the days of battle.

But these are only words I speak—words to wake up Jews if there are any asleep. He will not lose. No cause that had behind it the sweet and powerful dream of freedom—has ever lost. This dream does not stand on the battlefields alone. It stands in us.

There are twenty-eight million Arabs. There are British wealth and British officers—and British military equipment. There are eight hundred thousand Jews—besieged and encircled by this Goliath tonight.

A David stands against Goliath. I ask you Jews—buy him a stone for his slingshot.

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Ben Hecht (1894–1970) was a noted journalist, playwright, novelist, and screenwriter. He worked extensively on behalf of Zionist causes and was the chairman of the American League for a Free Palestine.

Stuart Schoffman, a former Hollywood screenwriter, is a journalist and translator living in Jerusalem.

With Words We Govern Men

BY SUZANNE GARMENT

Winter 2013

Moynihan's Moment: America's Fight Against Zionism as Racism
by Gil Troy
Oxford University Press, 368 pp., $29.95

McGill University historian Gil Troy has just written an account of the moment in November, 1975 when the United Nations declared in General Assembly Resolution 3379 that Zionism was a form of racism and the United States, led by Ambassador Daniel P. Moynihan, mounted a loud and politically important protest. *Moynihan's Moment: America's Fight Against Zionism as Racism* deserves and will doubtless receive good reviews, but this piece will not be among them—because I was Moynihan's special assistant during the seven months of his service in the UN trenches, and my husband, Leonard Garment, and I are in Troy's book as both participants and sources. Nonetheless, there are some events to which there can never be too many witnesses.

It is hard to wrap one's arms around the breadth of Moynihan's career. He was born in 1927, abandoned by his father, and raised in Hell's Kitchen, where his mother ran a bar. During World War II he joined the Navy and saw a vastly expanded world. By the late 1940s he had gained a PhD from the Fletcher School at Tufts and a Fulbright Fellowship at the London School of Economics. Returning home, he began his intertwining careers in academia and Democratic politics.

In 1965, as an Assistant Secretary of Labor in the Johnson administration, he wrote a report, titled *The Negro Family*, which called attention to the role of absent fathers and out-of-wedlock births in America's African-American underclass. The fierce criticism of Moynihan's report began his estrangement from fellow liberals. He became counselor to a Republican president, Richard Nixon, and after that Nixon's ambassador to India. Following his return from India, he wrote an article in *Commentary*, "The United States in Opposition," which argued that liberal Western nations were outnumbered and outvoted in international forums and must start mounting a vigorous defense of their principles in those places. The article led to his 1975 appointment by another Republican president, Gerald Ford, as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.

At the time Moynihan received the appointment, the resolution declaring Zionism, alone among nationalisms, to be a form of "racism and racial discrimination" was making its way through UN conferences and committees to the floor of the General Assembly. Moynihan recognized the resolution for what it was, a means not just of delegitimating Israel and its allies in the West but of deflecting attention from Soviet abuses of human rights, not least those of Soviet Jews. His indignant reaction resonated with the American public. In 1976, after fighting the resolution at the UN, he became the Democratic U.S. Senator from New York, catapulted into the front ranks of the party from which he had been more or less alienated for a decade. As senator, Moynihan took many positions and received many honors, but Troy thinks the fight against Resolution 3379 was Moynihan's greatest moment, and it is hard to argue with him.

I was along for the ride. When I was a graduate student at Harvard, I had served as one of Pat's teaching assistants—we called them "section men"—in a course titled "Social Science and Social Policy." By the time he was appointed to the UN and looking for a special assistant, I had finished my doctorate and was teaching at Yale. I had obvious drawbacks as a candidate for the job. Among other things, I was—am—not just a Jew but a very short one. Moynihan, Irish, was 6'5" tall. I was not going to be able to do some of the defining jobs of a special assistant, which are to open the door for the boss and, if necessary, hold an umbrella over his head.

On the other hand, I had a knack for channeling Moynihan's prose style, and, as a student of Harvey Mansfield, I was just acquainted enough with Leo Strauss to be habitually looking for the secret threads that wind through politics. In those days no one had a surer sense than Moynihan about which of those threads, properly pulled, could rip open the curtains and expose the reality behind them. I was not the first or last Moynihan aide to have such skills. But, in the fall of 1975, there I was, and Moynihan, as he did for years after-

ward, knew what he needed. When I agreed to go to the UN with him and asked Yale's political science department for a leave, my chairman said, "If you go, you'll never come back." I thought he was being overly dramatic.

When I arrived at my office in the U.S. Mission to the UN in July, the newly appointed Moynihan was in Geneva at a meeting of the UN Economic and Social Council. My first task came in an urgent message from Pat's secretary: "The Ambassador wants you to get that Disraeli quote from Bea Kristol." I had exactly no idea why Pat was in Geneva or what Disraeli had to do with it. But, with help from Bea—Gertrude Himmelfarb, the distinguished historian of Victorian ideas, who, like her husband Irving, was Pat's close friend—I pieced it together.



Illustration by Mark Anderson.

On July 9, a reporting cable had arrived in Geneva from Barbara White, a Foreign Service officer with ambassadorial rank, who had been the chief U.S. representative to the UN's International Women's Year Conference in Mexico City. The final declaration of the conference had called for the elimination of evils including "Zionism," "apartheid," and "racial discrimination." The United States, along with Israel, had voted against the declaration. Ambassador White's cable called it "regrettable that the 'no' vote was necessary, and particularly unfortunate that we were isolated in company only with Israel." But, she continued, "I do not consider it of great importance to the outcome of the conference." The United States, she said, "achieved its principal objective."

Ambassador White's cable had raised the literary (and moral and political) hairs on the back of Pat's neck and sent him hunting for the quote—it turned out to be from Disraeli's novel *Sybil*—that he put in his answering cable: "Few ideas are correct ones, and which they are none can tell, but with words we govern men."

Ambassador White's chirpily oblivious cable had perfectly illustrated the State Department's determination to ignore words, true or false, if they threatened to throw a wrench into the diplomatic gears. Moynihan saw the lie coming and began to mobilize.

The mobilization took different forms, some of which were political. Soon after Pat arrived back in New York, he instructed me to get in touch with Carl Gershman and begin making arrangements for a reception at the U.S. Mission in honor of the Social Democrats, U.S.A. Again I was clueless. Gershman? The Social Democrats, a marginal political group—a splinter of a splinter? Well, not exactly. During the years when Vietnam tore American liberalism to shreds, the anti-communist left—including the Social Democrats, civil rights leaders like Bayard Rustin, and the American labor movement under the leadership of Lane Kirkland—preserved a sense of the stakes in the struggle and the means by which that struggle would be waged.

Moynihan's mobilizing also involved, as was usual with him, data. As he waged his campaign against the Zionism resolution, we often heard from our State Department colleagues that we should not lean too hard on other nations to support us in multilateral forums like the UN because we had a countervailing interest in maintaining good bilateral relations with them. It was not worth antagonizing Brazil over a UN vote, the argument went, when our trade and security relations with Brazil were so much more important.

Pat set me to investigating the question of which UN member nations really had significant bilateral relations with the United States and which did not—in terms of investments, exports, imports of oil and other critical materials, and strategic considerations. This was not a trivial exercise: At that time, in order to find out how much we imported from Gabon, one actually had to fly to Washington, sit down in the bowels of the Commerce Department, and tally figures by hand. It turned out that with half the member nations of the UN, there wasn't much reason for us *not* to lean on them to get them to vote with us.

When the report was done, I was sent to Washington once

more, to hand it personally to Richard Cheney, then second-in-command to Donald Rumsfeld in the Ford White House. Again I was behind the curve. Why not send the report by ordinary diplomatic pouch? Why fly me to Washington for a personal White House meeting? I did not know the answers when I got on the plane at LaGuardia. But by the time I left the White House, after a conversation with Cheney of surprising seriousness about what Moynihan's new "multilateral" policy sought to accomplish, I had learned a lesson in how to deliver a message.

The weeks that followed were a time of perfect clarity for me—as the Zionism resolution progressed toward a vote in the Third Committee, the United States tried unavailingly to stop it, and the country erupted. Thousands of Americans, Jewish and non-Jewish, began sending pro-Moynihan, anti-resolution letters to the U.S. Mission to the UN. Columnists voiced support in major newspapers. With the patriotism of a first-generation American, the Zionism of a little girl whose mother worshipped Golda Meir, and the pro-labor sentiments of a child forbidden to cross the picket line at a rest stop on the New York Thruway, I could not imagine, politically speaking, being anywhere else.

In Troy's book I come across as a tiny Madame Defarge, knitting the names of our enemies into my memos. That was more or less the way it was. Looking back, I see that Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, by whom Pat so often felt misused, was himself blindsided and even hurt by what he saw as Moynihan's pursuit of his own foreign policy. I understand that people in the State Department, habituated to make the best of bad situations, may not have deserved the excoriations we heaped on them for doing what they had, after all, been trained to do. But Moynihan was pulling on a central thread of history, and there is no denying the excitement that came with helping him do it.

The famous speech that Moynihan made after the General Assembly's passage of the "Zionism is racism" resolution grew out of a memo to us by political theorist Charles Fairbanks, who argued that the UN resolution, by perverting the meaning of the word "racism," an offense against the idea of human rights, degraded the language of human rights. We did not always have this language: It arose from the view of certain 17th-century philosophers that individuals exist independent of their governments and, therefore, can legitimately assert claims and demands against these governments. That is, they have rights. Later political philosophies like Marxism have no concepts that justify and protect these rights, no new words to replace the old ones.

No one could have grasped this reasoning more quickly than Moynihan. On the night before his speech, he—and his wife, Liz, and Norman Podhoretz, and I—were in the UN Ambassador's apartment on the 42nd floor of the Waldorf-Astoria working on the draft. When he delivered the speech on the General Assembly floor, he put the case thus:

> When the old language is worn out and destroyed, no new Jefferson or Woodrow Wilson will arise to renew it . . . What we are witnessing . . . unless we can stand in its way, is the most crippling blow yet dealt in the irreversible decline of the concern with human rights as we know it.

He concluded as he had begun, with a peroration that was—well, Moynihanesque:

> The United States rises to declare before the General Assembly of the United Nations that it does not acknowledge, it will not abide by, it will never acquiesce in this infamous act.

The applause throughout the country was loud and long; the criticism in the diplomatic corps and the State Department was quiet and ominous. Isolated within the State Department, Moynihan left his UN post to return to teaching at Harvard. But there was a second chapter to the excitement: his 1976 campaign for U.S. senator from New York. Troy's book says the idea of running for the Senate didn't enter Moynihan's mind until after the furor erupted over his fight against the Zionism resolution. In truth it is hard to say what entered Pat's mind and when it entered; there was hardly a brain more capable of entertaining more ideas simultaneously. But Moynihan's narrow primary victory over Representative Bella Abzug, supported by the same liberal-conservative coalition that had sustained Pat at the UN, did for the state's Democratic Party what his UN performance had done for the country as a whole, providing it with a reminder of certain shared values that a decade of America's internecine political warfare had not torn loose.

As later years showed, neither coalitions nor clarity have much staying power in politics. But I was there when the issue was self-evident, the energy was abundant, and the loyalties were unclouded. I was lucky.

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Neither Friend nor Enemy: Israel in the EU

BY LEONIDAS DONSKIS

Fall 2014

This summer I finished a five-year term as a member of the European Parliament (EP), so I was not as shocked as I might have been when, in July, Italian celebrity philosopher and fellow Member of Parliament Gianni Vattimo said that he "would like to shoot those bastard Zionists" and suggested that we Europeans ought to raise money "to buy more rockets for Hamas." This was extreme even by the standards of the European political and academic elites, and Vattimo has since said that he regretted the remarks, which he made on a controversial Italian talk-radio show—then he went on to compare Israel to Nazi Germany.

I was elected to the EU Parliament on behalf of Lithuanian liberals and joined the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), which is the third largest group in the EP, and, as it happens, also Vattimo's party. As a child of the Soviet Union, I have had a lifelong interest in human rights and soon found myself on the EP subcommittee dealing with these issues. This brought me to the center of debate with such non-EU countries as China, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia—and Israel.

Of course, I had known about the idiosyncrasies and obsessions of the European left (which are not entirely unrelated to the Soviet ideology of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s under which I lived). Even so, I was struck by the degree of bias, hostility, and willful disinclination to actually engage with the complexities of the Middle East.

Along with others (especially representatives of Great Britain, Germany, and the other Eastern European countries), I often found myself defending Israel in formal and informal parliamentary settings. Even when, in my judgment, a defense was not necessary or appropriate, I tried to bring a sense of historical context and comparative perspective that were too often missing from these discussions. However, what I did not do was reply to every prejudiced remark made by members of the European political elite. As a relative outsider—an Eastern European and a Jewish one at that—I felt that it was not for me to maintain the decency of political discourse among the legislating (and chattering) classes of Brussels and Strasbourg. Nonetheless, it may be the unguarded remarks, visible grimaces, and Pavlovian acts of rhetorical legislation in which the EU's Israel problem shows up most clearly.

A couple of years ago, there was an effort in the Israeli Knesset to restrict, in various ways, the actions and influence of Israeli non-governmental organizations (NGOs). I regarded this effort (which eventually failed) as deeply misguided and inappropriate for a democratic country. Still, it was shocking for me to hear Annemie Neyts-Uyttebroeck, a noted Belgian politician and my fellow liberal in the ALDE



Israeli President Shimon Peres addresses the European Parliament, March 12, 2013, in Strasbourg, France. (Photo by Moshe Milner/GPO via Getty Images.)

group, compare the Israeli legislative proposal to the overtly totalitarian anti-NGO law adopted in Russia, which regards all NGOs as foreign agents. Vladimir Putin's Russia is, to say no more, a rogue state that openly supports terrorism, disrupts economic and political life in neighboring countries, and increasingly bears a family resemblance to prewar European fascist states.

Of course, I had already known about the idiosyncrasies and obsessions of the European left, which are not entirely unrelated to the Soviet ideology of the Brezhnev era ideology under which I was raised.

Neyts-Uyttebroeck's comment seems tame indeed compared to the memorable words of a socialist member of the EP—also from Belgium—Véronique de Keyser, who said that she would like to "strangle" Israel's ambassador if he discussed Israel's security with her. When famously dovish then-President of Israel Shimon Peres addressed the European Parliament in Strasbourg on March 12, 2013, she refused to rise in his honor, as did many center-left and left-wing MEPs. Would they have done the same, I wondered, if Putin had been the guest? One somehow doubts it.

Then there was Ivo Vajgl, another ALDE colleague of mine, a professed liberal from Slovenia famous for his predictable anti-Israel tirades. Vajgl reached the heights of absurdity when he described Israel as an irrational partner in comparison with the rationality of Egypt—on the eve of the Arab Spring.

The real irrationality in all of these remarks is, of course, distinctively European, and it has multiple sources. It would be easy—and not entirely wrong—to trace this irrationality, not to say hatred, to the enduring legacy of Christian anti-Judaism, the racial anti-Semitism of the 19th and 20th centuries, and the distinctive anti-Semitic heritage of the European left—that is, as the 21st-century incarnation of Europe's "Jewish Problem." But there may be other less venerable factors at play as well.

The legendary Russian singer-songwriter, poet, and actor Vladimir Vysotsky wrote a song for the 1967 film *Vertical* called "Song of a Friend," which became *the* song for soulful young Soviets who could strum a few chords on an acoustic guitar (imagine a Russian "Blowin' in the Wind"). The opening lyrics, in my rough translation, go something like this:

If your friend turned out not to be one
Neither friend nor enemy but something in between
If you are unable to determine if he is a good man or a bad man
Take a risk, bring the man to the mountains and you will see who he is

These lyrics often came back to me as I sat in the EP when Israel was being discussed. For despite all the parliamentary invective quoted here (and I could give many more examples), the EU is certainly not Israel's enemy, but it would be hard to call it a friend.

Although I have noted (and for present purposes bracketed) the histories of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism in Europe, the legacies of World War II and the Holocaust are unavoidable in understanding European attitudes toward Israel (the seemingly irrepressible comparison of Zionists to Nazis by Vattimo and his ideological compatriots is a kind of symptom of this). Eastern and Central Europe still have difficulty in handling the history of the Holocaust, especially when it comes to local collaborators with the Nazis. A silent refusal to regard the Jews as their own citizens rather than people from some historical parallel reality has led quite a few



Vladimir Vysotsky in an undated photograph.

Eastern and Central European politicians to whitewash their complicated history, thereby trivializing the Holocaust, distorting the facts, relativizing war crimes, and desecrating the memory of the dead. Of course, the Hungarian fascist party Jobbik goes a great deal farther than that. In November 2012, Márton Gyöngyösi, the party's deputy parliamentary leader, posted a video in which he stated that it is time to count people of Jewish ancestry living in Hungary, especially those who work in the Hungarian Parliament and the Hungarian government,

Israel is, then, everything Western Europe is not: a successful latecomer to the modern world of nation-states endowed with the whole package of modern experiences, anxieties, passions, sensibilities, and forms of solidarity.

because they pose a national security risk to the country. Still, on the whole, it cannot be denied that the European center-right—especially in Eastern and Central Europe—is far friendlier to Israel than the Western European left.

On the other hand, Western European politicians are far more attentive than their counterparts from Eastern and Central Europe to the necessity of Holocaust education, the importance of acknowledging difficult truths of history, and the political and moral imperatives of collective memory. This is to say that Western European politics with regard to Israel and the Jewish people fail exactly where Eastern and Central Europe succeed and vice versa.

The Western European left has never understood Israel and Zionism as a framework for the Jews' political self-determination. This failure turns, in part, on a conceptual myopia of European leftists that has nothing to do with Israel and everything to do with Europe and the EU project: a failure to recognize the difference between liberal patriotism and radical nationalist chauvinism.

The EU itself would have been and continues to be unthinkable without the sort of liberal consensus that leaves little room for patriotic and nationalistic sensitivities. Any form of nationalism stands as a threat to the EU's benevolent neutrality and a still-nebulous European solidarity. It likewise regards religion, no doubt correctly, as something that must be kept away from politics. But there is a cost to this, for such an attitude occludes a deeper and broader perspective on Europe, which is itself unimaginable without Christianity and its sociocultural incarnations.

Europe's forgetfulness, or repression, of its religious history has two consequences with regard to Israel. First, it allows the European elite to forget or ignore Europe's long



Gianni Vattimo, 2010.

history of anti-Judaism and regard anti-Semitism as merely a form of modern racism. Second, it engenders hostility toward a modern state, such as Israel, that acknowledges its religious roots. Another way to put this is that Israel and Zionism are the two mirror images of Europe and its history that it dislikes the most.

Israel is, then, everything Western Europe is not: a successful latecomer to the modern world of nation-states endowed with the whole package of modern experiences, anxieties, passions, sensibilities, and forms of solidarity.

The nation-state in Europe, by contrast, seems to have been a short-lived and passing phenomenon. Until the 20th century, Europe knew of no such entity; France, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Spain, and the Habsburg Empire were all continental or overseas empires. It was not until the demise of such empires after World War I that nation-states came into existence, including the Eastern and Central European countries. From this perspective, the nation-state in Europe seems a mere passing phenomenon, a short stop on the way from monarchies and empires to the EU in its present (if rather loose) form.

These, then, are the outlines of the cognitive, moral, and

political map of the EU. On that map, Israel stands out as a disturbing anomaly, and consequently, as neither friend nor enemy, but something in between.

I have written of the subterranean role that the memory and repression of the history of the Holocaust have in determining the place of Israel in European political discourse, but I have not yet mentioned the role it plays in my own life and perceptions. When I was growing up, my father refused to tell me anything of our family's experience in the Holocaust. Although he was a native and fluent speaker of Yiddish who knew a great deal about the history of Jewish life in Lithuania, he withdrew completely from the Jewish community after World War II and brought me up as a Lithuanian. As he later put it, he had seen hell on earth only because he was a Jew, and he did not want his sons to undergo that experience.

In 1989, as the Soviet Union was crumbling and Lithuania began to move toward independence, my father and I were able to visit America and reestablish a connection with a branch of our family that had immigrated there in the 1930s. It was only then, in America, and when I was already an adult, that my father was able to tell me about his experience in the Holocaust. On September 9, 1941, in the small town of Butrimonys, not far from Kovno (Kaunas), where my family lived, Nazi *Einsatzgruppen* together with local Lithuanian perpetrators rounded up the Jews of the town and massacred all but 11. Among the survivors were my father, uncle, and grandparents.

I never mentioned this family history to my parliamentary colleagues, not even when hearing Israel casually compared to the Third Reich. There are many reasons for this, one of which is that I do not choose to discuss deeply sensitive matters with those who cloak European narcissism or a cynical pragmatism (or both) in moral indignation. Nor do I think that my family history gives me unique moral and political insight. Nonetheless, it does help to inform my perspective—one that is just as uniquely European as that of my colleagues—on the rhetoric and reasoning behind the EU's friendship, or lack thereof, with Israel.

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The Poet from Vilna

BY RUTH R. WISSE

Summer 2010

On the 6th of June, 1959, I arranged a rendezvous for the Yiddish poet Avrom Sutzkever, who was then on his maiden visit to North America. Unable to get a visa for the United States, he had come on a speaking tour of several Canadian cities, spending most of his time in Montreal, where I was living at the time. Quite a number of his friends who had known him before the war and writers who wanted to meet him for the first time made the trip across the border, swelling the audiences for his public lectures and readings. But the meeting I set up for him was to be secret and private. On the agreed morning, my husband Len and I drove Sutzkever to the Montreal airport where we picked up his visitor and then took them both to a cottage we had booked at La Chaumière, a secluded lodge in the foothills of the Laurentian Mountains. Once we saw them settled, we drove back to the city, returning the following afternoon to execute the plan in reverse.

Sutzkever's clandestine visitor was Max Weinreich, linguist and historian of the Yiddish language, who had been his mentor in Vilna before 1939. The two men had not seen one another in twenty years. When the Germans invaded Poland, Weinreich happened to be attending a conference in Denmark with his elder son, Uriel. Father and son left for the United States, where Max took time off from his Yiddish scholarship to write *Hitler's Professors,* documenting the participation of some of Germany's most distinguished thinkers in the Final Solution. Meanwhile, Sutzkever and his new bride Freydke had been incarcerated with some 80,000 fellow Jews in the double ghetto that the Germans set up soon after they occupied Vilna in the summer of 1941. They were among the few who survived the massacres and deportations, reaching Moscow in March 1944, Paris (via Vilna and Lodz) in 1946, and Tel Aviv in 1947.

"It is true that we deal in words, each of us in his fashion," Weinreich wrote to Sutzkever when they established a correspondence after the war, "but it doesn't require words to express what we feel for one another." It was Weinreich who had asked that their meeting be private so that they could spend their short time together without fanfare or interruption.

Len and I had met Sutzkever two years earlier, during our honeymoon in Israel, and I was now shepherding him around Montreal, but I had not met Max Weinreich before. The three of us waited in the reception area, and when Weinreich emerged from the swinging doors, Len and I hung back as the two men greeted each other.

Their reunion was the most dramatic I was ever to witness. No more than a long hug betrayed their nervous joy, but I knew from the eagerness of some of the letters and phone calls leading up to this moment how badly they wanted to be face to face. Lithuanian Jews—as compared with their reputedly more warm-blooded and earthier Ukrainian, Galician, and Polish kinfolk—are known for their passionate reserve. Weinreich and Sutzkever never switched from the formal to the intimate second-person form of address. As Weinreich wrote in one of his letters, they would always have "weightier subjects" to talk about than their feelings.

Weinreich, nineteen years the elder, had founded in Vilna the Jewish scouting movement *Bin* (Bee), in whose magazine the nineteen-year-old Abrashe—as he was then known to his intimates—published his first poem, in 1932. Weinreich was also co-founding director of Vilna's Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut (YIVO Institute for Jewish Research), where Sutzkever came in the late 1930s to pursue his interest in Old Yiddish literature. When they had last seen one another, Sutzkever was transposing the early epic, *Bove Bukh,* into modern Yiddish, and Weinreich was touting Vilna's talented emerging poet as one of the YIVO's best fellowship students.

Now, the seniority appeared to be reversed. For one thing, Sutzkever had *been there*. Among my parents' friends I had noticed how those who had survived the war in Europe were treated as valued messengers from the beyond. "I saw Nadushka right before the February roundup." "Berl was still alive the day the SS came to pick up Wittenberg." "The child was already skin and bones." "Their farmer betrayed them." In general, refugees occupy a lower social status than settled immi-

grants, but in this case the testimony of those who came to be known as *survivors* often lent them authority that far exceeded that of earlier arrivals. And Sutzkever was more than such a witness. The young poet, who had continued writing and reading his poems in the Vilna ghetto, had become a symbol of its creative resistance.

On the strength of his reputation, he and his wife had been airlifted from occupied Poland to Moscow, where he wrote *In vilner geto*, an itemized account of the horrors of the Final Solution in Vilna. The Soviet writer Ilya Ehrenburg convinced the Kremlin to have Sutzkever testify on behalf of Russian Jewry at the Nuremberg

The young poet, who had continued writing and reading his poems in the Vilna ghetto, had become a symbol of its creative resistance.

Trials. A clip of him refusing the court's invitation to be seated is available on YouTube. He delivers his testimony standing at attention like the soldier he could not be during the massacres he is describing. Of the aftermath of one roundup he says, "It looked as if a red rain had fallen."

As part of his work in the ghetto, Sutzkever had organized the concealment of the most precious materials in the YIVO archives. After the war, he defied Soviet prohibitions and arranged for their transfer to Weinreich in New York. The student was now more experienced than his instructor in what the world had to teach.

I was twenty-three at the time of their meeting, two years married, two years out of college, working as Press Officer for the Canadian Jewish Congress, under whose auspices I had arranged Sutzkever's Canadian visit. I had no idea what I "wanted to do with my life," though that weekend I wished for nothing more than to act as go-between for these two men. *Vilne* was my ancestry no less than theirs. My maternal grandmother, Fradl Matz Welczer, had run a publishing house in Vilna when it was still part of the tsarist empire. My mother was raised in Vilna's modern Yiddish and Hebrew culture when the city was Polish between the World Wars, and my father was class of 1929 in chemical engineering from Vilna's Stefan Batory University. When my grandmother contracted tuberculosis, her doctor was Tsemakh Szabad, about to become Max Weinreich's father-in-law. On one of his last visits, the doctor said, "You can't patch up silk." This intended compliment to my grandmother's refinement my then-fifteen-year-old mother correctly heard as a death sentence. She never forgave the good doctor his diagnosis. I myself had never been to Vilna, yet thanks to stories I had been hearing since childhood, I felt I knew the "green bridge" across the River Viliye as well as I did the one across the St. Lawrence seaway.

Shortly after that day spent ferrying my betters, Sutzkever asked me what I was planning to do in the future, implying that my job at the Canadian Jewish Congress was not commensurate with my abilities. Flattered by an assessment I fully shared, I said I would probably pursue a graduate degree in English literature. "Why don't you study Yiddish literature?" he asked. I laughed, "And what would I do? Teach Sholem Aleichem?" Those words were no sooner blurted out than I realized how I had insulted Sutzkever and the culture in which I had been raised. I had been making arrangements with a local impresario, Sam Gesser, for a Folkways recording of Sutzkever reading his poems: why, then, should I have questioned the status of Yiddish literature? I had been reading Sholem Aleichem since I was in grade school, so why doubt that he could be taught—or taught by me? When I tried to explain to Sutzkever that universities did not include Yiddish in their curricula, he informed me that Max Weinreich was in fact teaching Yiddish at City College and that his son, Uriel, ran a graduate program in Yiddish at Columbia University where one could study both literature and linguistics.

The next day, I called Columbia to see how soon I could begin. Uriel arranged for my admission to the doctoral program in English and Comparative Literature, with Yiddish as my main secondary field. My husband supported my decision, and for pocket money I got a job teaching Jewish Sunday school in a suburban synagogue. I fancied myself independent, like those young men in 19th-century novels who go to the big city to seek their fortunes. It never occurred to me that during the two men's time together, Weinreich might have shared his concerns about the lack of students, or that Sutzkever might have been serving as his recruiter.

As it turned out, Uriel was on leave in Israel the semester I came to Columbia, so he arranged for his father to conduct a private weekly tutorial for me, his only graduate student in Yiddish literature. "Ruth Wisse has arrived," Max Weinreich wrote to Sutzkever in January 1960; "we will be devoting a semester to Mendele (the Yiddish and Hebrew writer, Mendele Mocher Sforim). "She is the kind of student *vos* '*bagert*' and she has a feeling for literature and good common sense." *Bagern*, like the German *begehren*—a word Weinreich placed

in quotation marks—means to desire, to crave. Students are sometimes said to crave learning, but used as it is here, without an object, the verb suggests that I must have seemed hungry for more than literature.

He was probably right. There was more erotic adventurism in my decision than the common sense for which he gave me credit. These two men were tested in a way that my coddled cohort of friends could never be. Giving not a thought to the practical outcome of my decision, I wanted to prove myself at least as daring as they were.

Weinreich and Sutzkever exuded potency—the quality that I had always associated with Yiddish. It was maddening in the years that followed to hear people say, upon learning what I studied, something like, "Oh, I spoke it with my grandmother," or, "Isn't Yiddish a dead language?" I never took the trouble to explain that I was attracted by the virility of Yiddish, whose exemplars were so much grittier than Shelley, a writer I was studying simultaneously, and livelier even than Samuel Johnson, then my favorite British author. It was the *youthfulness* of Yiddish that appealed to me. At Columbia, I worked on the literary group *Yung Vilne*, of which Sutzkever had been a member, and my first book on Yiddish literature was on the group's New York counterpart, *Di Yunge*.

Reading about the Second World War, I concentrated not on Jews who were led "like sheep to the slaughter" but on the songs of Leah Rudnitski, the heroic feats of Abba Kovner, the soup kitchen Rochel Auerbach ran in the Warsaw ghetto, and Yitzhak "Antek" Zuckerman's exploits on the Aryan side. These people had all been under the age of thirty.

Grittier than Shelley: When speaking of the war, Weinreich insisted we say not *Nazis*, but *Germans*. "One does not refer to international conflicts by political parties, but by the countries that fought them: This war was prosecuted by *Germany*." As a graduate of the University of Marburg, Weinreich was sometimes consulted by post-war German scholars. He told me he never entered into correspondence with anyone from Germany without first asking for a full account of the person's actions during the war.

We would have these conversations after our weekly tutorial over dinner at a Chinese restaurant on Broadway near 125th Street, where he and the waiter discussed distinctions between dumplings and *kreplakh*. After dinner, in the late wintry hours, I accompanied him to his subway stop at Lenox Avenue; we were usually the only white people on the bustling street. Only later did I realize that my teacher was blind in one eye, courtesy of anti-Semitic students who had attacked him in Vilna—and that this builder of institutions and author of the 1937 social science study, *Der veg tsu undzer yugnt* (The Way to Our Youth), was undertaking this weekly effort for the sake of a single student.

As for Sutzkever's own nerve, the first book of his poems he gave me, *Ode to the Dove*, contained this "Song of the Lepers," from a cycle inspired by a visit he had made to South Africa:

Warrior, dip your arrows in our blood,
The enemy will lose his feet.

Our blood is not from father-mother
But God's spit in crippled limbs.

When we die, the earth will boil like sulfur
Our blood can set water afire.

Warrior, dip your arrows in our blood
Whoever is struck—will not live.

Merely touched by its shadow—he will not live. If the arrow misses its target—the fire endures.

Lightning birds in high nests of thunder
Singing, fall dead into the abyss.

We ourselves, we have no fingers,
We cannot rush the enemy—

Warrior, dip your arrows in our blood.

The leper-pariahs who turn their disfiguration into the deadliest of weapons are taking aim at an enemy otherwise beyond their reach. Accursed, they curse. Condemned, they condemn. Despised and feared, they deliver their sentence of death. The song reminded me of the closing lines of the 137th psalm, where the captive Jews of Babylonia charge others to wreak the vengeance they cannot exact on their own. The leper colony Sutzkever visited in Africa had obviously reminded him of the ghetto, but where was the poet in relation to this poem? Was he the avenging warrior whom the lepers urge to dip his arrows in their blood, or was he one of the powerless, inciting others to wreak vengeance on their behalf?

Because both Weinreich and Sutzkever godfathered my Yiddish studies, I became aware of how differently they assessed the future of our common project. Weinreich's confidence waned over the next decade, or more precisely, until his death in 1969, as Sutzkever's grew. This was cer-

tainly not due to any competition between them. In fact, what drew my attention to the asymmetry of their expectations was the intensity of their mutual regard. One often spoke to me of the other with the same ardor they had displayed in Montreal. Nor did the difference in age seem decisive. In many respects, Weinreich was exceptionally youthful; I might have said about him, *er bagert*. He headed an apparently thriving institution in opulent America and was engaged in the culmination of his life's work—the definitive history of Yiddish from its origins in Western Europe, a subject independent of the fate that befell the speakers of the language. By contrast, Sutzkever occupied a small office in a Tel Aviv government building, working under a daily burden of grief—as one of his poems puts it—to keep the dead from dying.

During my years at Columbia, the YIVO in New York appeared to be the thriving successor of its destroyed Vilna branch. My favorite haunt was the reading room on the second floor of its building at 1048 Fifth Avenue (now the Neue Galerie, which I have never had the heart to visit). I enjoyed the heavy traffic inside the building, the permanently harried state of Dina Abramowitz who oversaw the library, and the steady rise and fall of its dumb waiter bringing documents to and from the archives below. In 1960–61, the annual conferences drew standing-room-only crowds. But Sutzkever saw things differently, or perhaps Weinreich took him into his confidence. He regretted that Max had not accepted the chair in Yiddish that the Hebrew University of Jerusalem offered him in 1952. When I asked Weinreich about this, he said that not having contributed to the building of Israel, he was not entitled to accept its bounty, but he may also have preferred to head his own institution in New York, where his wife and sons had already been resettled and where he now belonged as he had once belonged in Vilna.

But as the time approached for publication of the *History of the Yiddish Language*, I began to share Sutzkever's doubts about whether Weinreich had truly succeeded in grafting a strong branch of Jewish Vilna in New York, and about his own assessment of what he had achieved. The complete *History* came to four volumes—two of text and two of footnotes. When the YIVO's Board of Directors tried to persuade the author to publish only the text, as a cost-saving measure, Weinreich was as bitter as I ever heard him. He said that in any case his work would have only ten readers—who would, however, be precisely the ones to want the notes.

Sutzkever happened to be in New York during the negotiations. Infuriated by this snub to the world's leading Yiddish scholar, he accompanied Weinreich to the board meeting, ostensibly as a guest, and berated the members for basking in the glory of their office while nickel-and-diming the man who earned it for them. I had no way of knowing if Sutzkever was reporting on how things really happened at the meeting, but both men credited *him* with securing the funding for all four volumes. Weinreich thenceforth spoke of his champion as a *mentshn-kener*, someone more adept than he was at dealing with people.



Avrom Sutzkever and Ruth R. Wisse in Montreal, 1959. (Photo by Hertz Grossbard, courtesy of Ruth R. Wisse.)

I don't think that Sutzkever understood people any better than Weinreich did. Any attentive reader of Sutzkever will recognize how little insight he even *attempts* to offer into any soul but his own. He seemed rather to know his own strength, certain that he could set wrongs right. The preeminence he ascribed to poetry persuaded him that he had supernatural powers, and no doubt this confidence gave him more than ordinary influence over others.

He, Freydke, and their infant daughter, Rina, arrived in Tel

Aviv in 1947, shortly before Israel's independence. Food was rationed, Arab armies were poised to invade, the provisional Jewish government had its hands full, dealing with the British blockade of arriving refugees on one and resettling those who made it through on the other. Exigencies of absorption and defense ratcheted up the importance of consolidating Hebrew as the common language of incoming Jews from east and west. Sutzkever, however, was bent on founding a Yiddish literary journal. He was warned that the odds against getting financial support were greater than they had been against his survival in the ghetto, but took that as proof that he would prevail. With the help of Zalman Shazar, who would later become the third President of Israel, he secured the financing he needed from the Histadrut, the Federation of Labor, and in 1949 started up the journal *Di goldene keyt*, named for the golden—unbroken—chain of Jewish tradition.

For the next fifty years, Sutzkever's Yiddish quarterly was the central meeting point for a dispersed and depleted literary community. Around him there gathered a new group of poets and writers, *Yung Yisroel*—Young Israel. The American modernist Yiddish poet I.L. (Judd) Teller, who had stopped writing verse at the start of the Second World War, credited Sutzkever for his return to it. *Di goldene keyt* helped to defuse the conflict between two Jewish languages, enticing some Hebrew writers into Yiddish and raising the profile of Israeli culture in Yiddish. With the help of the Tel Aviv municipality, Sutzkever established a prize for Yiddish named for the poet Itzik Manger, who settled in Israel before his death.

Sutzkever liked to tell the story (which has been claimed by others) of being stopped on a stroll through the ultra-Orthodox neighborhood of Meah Shearim by a small boy who asked him why he wasn't wearing a hat. "The sky is my hat," he answered smartly. "Too small a head for such a large hat," the child replied. Actually, Sutzkever shared the child's sense of proportion in national as well as metaphysical terms. From the moment he arrived in the country, Sutzkever drew inspiration from the land, by which I mean not only its people, and not only the idea of "a third Jewish commonwealth," but also its wadis and animals and stones.

I had come to know something of this first-hand, before the rendezvous in Montreal, back in the summer of 1957, which Len and I spent in Israel. We had married in March of our graduating year—I from McGill University, he from the Université de Montréal Law School—and decided to go to Israel for what Yiddish calls the "kissing weeks." We were mostly in Tel Aviv, rooming (on Sholem Aleichem Street!) with a family my parents had known in Europe, but we explored as much of the country as we could. The poet Melekh Ravitch, with whom I had read Yiddish literature in Montreal, had provided an introduction to the well-known Avrom Sutzkever.

I dutifully called him shortly after we arrived. He was correcting proofs, and suggested we join him at the publishing house. Emerging to greet us, he looked just like the person in the photograph Ravitch had shown me, a trim man with a neat moustache, in white short-sleeves, wearing a cap against the sun. From behind glasses, the blue eyes gripped us, seeing and taking note. Apparently satisfied, he invited us to attend a wedding with him and his wife the next night. Len and I were incredulous. We had spent anxious weeks before our wedding paring down lists of relatives and friends, yet here was an almost-stranger inviting us on the spot to a wedding of children of friends who were "certain," he assured us, to welcome us. His wishes, it seemed, were everyone's command, and soon became ours as well.

Shortly afterward, on a visit to the Sutzkevers' apartment, Len and I described what we had already seen of the country and mentioned a planned road trip to Eilat. Sutzkever proposed a slightly different route: Why not drive to Ein Gedi—the oasis near the Dead Sea where David had hidden from an irate King Saul? He and his daughter Rina, by now a teenager, were eager to see the area and could join us on our expedition. Before we knew it, we were discussing dates for the upcoming trip. When we later ran this by Didi, the son of the family with whom we were staying and our companion-guide on these travels, he was less enthusiastic. Having been through the army, he knew the terrain and was worried. The secondary roads past Beersheva were poorer than the highway to Eilat. One needed military permission to drive to Sodom. Civilian vehicles were probably not allowed near Ein Gedi, which was virtually at the border with Jordan. Five people in a car (this was before air conditioning) might not be comfortable driving through the desert in the middle of summer. Where would we stay in Beersheva or in Sodom or in Ein Gedi? There were no hotels.

But if Didi had served in the army, Sutzkever had survived the Vilna ghetto. All obstacles swept away by his enthusiasm, we rented a car and set out, with Len driving, Sutzkever riding shotgun, Rina and Didi in back with me in the middle. There being no hotel rooms in Beersheva, the five of us shared a huge room in a sheikh's house with beds along the walls, dormitory style. Long after the others were asleep or pretended to be, Sutzkever asked me to go on telling him all I knew about the Yiddish writers of Montreal. The next morning, we consulted the police about the route before ignoring their warning not to proceed without military escort.

The sight of Sodom when we reached it at midday called to mind the punishment heaped upon it in Genesis 19. A soft-drink and sandwich stand squatted at what looked like the end of the earth.

In sum, all of Didi's qualms had proved justified. But, thankfully, Sutzkever's nerve prevailed. At the solitary gas pump a young man introduced himself as a member of the kibbutz at Ein Gedi, offering to act as our guide in exchange for a lift. The road? No problem. Accommodations? The kibbutz would be glad to have us. We could swim in the fabled oasis pool and visit King David's cave. Long before we reached our destination, our guide confessed his deceit. The "road" was only a jeep path over rough terrain. He had missed yesterday's scheduled transportation and had we not come along, he would have had to wait another two days for the next van. But he did know the route, and once we reached our destination we were indeed given a short tour of the kibbutz, including a swim in the fabled pool and visit to the cave, supper in the common dining hall, and five outdoor cots for the night. As we lay down under the stars our hitchhiker came to advise us that it would be best for the tires if we started out before sunrise the next morning.

I have not been back to Ein Gedi since then, except in Sutzkever's poems recalling the trip. Naturally, he had felt a kinship with the psalmist "behind the waterfall in David's cave," inspired to write his own song, "A *Mizmer* in Ein Gedi," about the place where

> I walk inside your veins.
> My heart beats in yours.
> I am a prayer dressed in wounds
> Like a tree
> arrayed with birds in a storm.

But the best of that trip was yet to come. Though we missed breakfast, we were rewarded by wondrous sights—clusters of cranes at the edge of the water and young deer prancing across a still and empty landscape. There was nothing manmade on the horizon. We drove as slowly as we could, so as to be less intrusive than we already were, and because we knew ourselves uncommonly blessed.

When I began studying Sutzkever's poetry, I realized that he had actually already visited the shore of the Dead Sea once before. One of my favorite poems, "Deer at the Red Sea," was composed in 1949. It also dawned on me that since he did not drive, Sutzkever always had to arrange such trips more or less like the kibbutz member who needed a ride. He could not see the land without transport, and it was imperative that he grow intimate with the land.

Sutzkever's translators, even Benjamin and Barbara Harshav, who have supplied what is so far the largest selection of Sutzkever in English, and his biographers, even the incomparable Abraham Novershtern, who has produced the most reliable overview of Sutzkever's life and writing—indeed, all who have written about the poet to date—inadvertently slight his poems of Israel. This is understandable given the more obvious drama of his pre-Israel life and the greater rhetorical force of his earlier verse. But Sutzkever started out as a poet by finding the signature of the Eternal in nature, and the discovery of nature in Israel was the corollary of that intuition. When he accompanied the army into the Sinai in 1956, he was also getting to know the landscape. He even navigated the cafés of Tel Aviv like an explorer of suns and shades. He drew much strength from the land—in this sense most differently from Max Weinreich who had been imbued in his Vilna youth a love of his physical surroundings but formed no similar attachment to New York. Sutzkever is one of Israel's modern psalmists. Were I choosing a thesis topic today, I would start with the Dead Sea poems and trace his discovery of the land.

For my Master's thesis at Columbia in 1961, I translated and wrote a commentary on a series of Sutzkever's prose poems, *Green Aquarium*, that recalled the final days of the ghetto and the kinds of courage that Jews manifested in its aftermath: A partisan and Polish Catholic nun bring a dead boy to burial in the middle of a rain-soaked night; a partisan and his lover are separated and reunited in the swampy forest; two lovers conduct a romance from neighboring chimneys. These works are all about beating back death. Several years before I was to hear Theodor Adorno's pronouncement that "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," or to read the essay in which he contends that our whole world is becoming "an open-air prison," I was persuaded by Sutzkever's contrary definition of poetry as the only credible alternative to barbarism. Governed by an autonomous standard, impervious to the Germans' depravity or any corruption, poetry was for Sutzkever not another casualty, but rather the *antidote* to Auschwitz.

Teaching Yiddish literature over a lifetime, I have Sutzkever and Weinreich to thank for my profession, though nothing thereafter ever went quite as smoothly as my admission to Columbia. For a number of reasons, I returned to Montreal without completing a doctorate, and eventually began graduate work afresh in McGill's fledgling

program in English Literature. Meanwhile, I stayed in touch with Max Weinreich and visited New York periodically to be guided by him on the Yiddish study that I was pursuing on my own. His death on January 29, 1969 hit me much harder than his son Uriel's even less timely death had two years earlier.

When I learned the news, I took the night train to get to New York for the funeral. I was in a rage, as though Weinreich had died to spite me. Our next meeting had been scheduled—I had his postcard in my purse—but he had followed his son to the grave instead of remaining my tutor and friend. And the funeral *was* spiteful: Max had given orders that there was to be no prayer, no Yiddish *hesped* or English eulogy, no words or music. We mourners sat in the silence to which the deceased had condemned us. I suddenly understood something I had read in a story by Isaac Bashevis Singer. The expression *opshrayen a mes* is used to describe a woman who screams a corpse back to life. This expression had made no sense to me when I read it, but leaning over the casket I said aloud, "*Ikh vel aykh opshrayen fun toyt!*"—I will scream you back from death! For a moment I was convinced that my fury could overpower his too great willingness to die. Yet as he did not rise from his coffin, I joined one of the buses taking us to the cemetery and even shoveled some obligatory earth into his grave.

Sutzkever fought his despair to a better end. A recurring highlight of my visits to Israel was the prospect of one or more rendezvous with him at one of his favorite hangouts. When he could no longer navigate even the short distance from his apartment building to the nearest café, we would be served tea in his living room by a part-time housekeeper. Our last visits were at Beit Shalom, a supervised residence just a few blocks from a café on Dizengoff that we once frequented. At the home he joked with attendants as he once had with the waitresses who used to reserve his favorite table. The staff respected and helped him maintain the fastidiousness of his dress. He suffered the indignities of a failing body with dignity, but he had not wanted to age, and did not reconcile himself to the process.

No official representatives of Israel's government attended Sutzkever's funeral on January 24 of this year. The poet would have been hurt by the slight. But President Shimon Peres was among dozens of notables at a large public commemoration held at the end of the month of mourning, and Dan Miron, a professor of Hebrew literature who has written splendidly about Sutzkever, informs me that the mayor of Tel Aviv intends to name a street after him. In one of his early poems, Sutzkever asks to be permanently "enfaced" in the radiance of Sirius, the morning star. I am sure he has been, but he may also soon be wryly pleased by his humbler enfacement in Tel Aviv.

I doubt that New York will name a street for Max Weinreich. Is it too much to hope that their two names might grace intersecting streets in their beloved Vilna, a city whose fame they will carry into history? Neither of them would have sought the honor, but should it come about, the city's fame will grow on their account.

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The Rebbe and the Yak

BY ALAN MINTZ

Fall 2011

El makom sheha-ruah holekh (Back from Heavenly Lake)
by Haim Be'er
Am Oved, 452 pp., 90 NIS

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

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

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

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

Born in 1945, Be'er used his own childhood on the outskirts of the old Orthodox neighborhoods of Jerusalem as the scaffolding for his early novels, while characteristically deflecting the focus from himself in favor of a gallery of colorful and eccentric characters whose lives could not be imagined in the pages of any other Israeli writer. Thus, at the center of Be'er's first novel *Notsot* (published in 1979 and translated as *Feathers* by Hillel Halkin in 2004), stands Mordecai, a childhood friend who is obsessed with creating a Nutrition Army that would establish a vegetarian state honoring the principles of Josef Popper-Lynkeus, a 19th-century Austrian Jewish utopian thinker. *Havalim* (published in 1998 and translated by Barbara Harshav as *The Pure Element of Time* in 2003), Be'er's most richly realized work, is a nuanced account of the author's family, including a pious, storytelling grandmother; a smart and independent mother who descended from the rationalist, anti-Hasidic stock of the Old Yishuv community in Jerusalem; and a passive father, a refugee from Russian pogroms, who loved synagogue life and cantorial music. Be'er's account of how he found his way to becoming a writer amidst

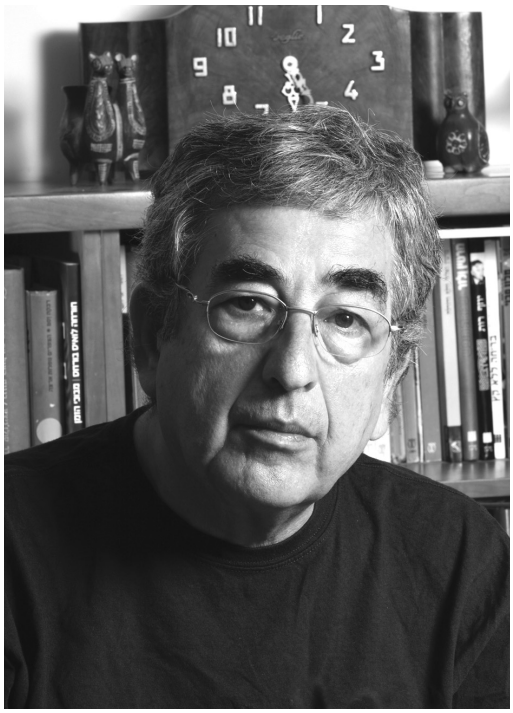
these strong influences bears comparison to Amos Oz's more famous account of his parents' tangled lives in *A Tale of Love and Darkness*. Amos Klausner (later Oz) and Haim Rachlevsky (later Be'er) in fact grew up in nearly the same neighborhood in Jerusalem. As it happens, years later Be'er succeeded Oz as a professor of literature and creative writing at Ben-Gurion University.

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The novel's most dazzling and credible creation is Simcha Danziger. Be'er has a sharp eye for the curious but real way in which fawning, abject piety can be combined with business savvy in the ultra-Orthodox world. Danziger holds his Rebbe's wisdom in high regard and readily submits to his moral instruction. Yet the lessons his Rebbe teaches almost invariably contain a humanistic twist beneath their holy garb. While the two men are observing a religious procession in Tibet, for example, one of the marchers stumbles and the religious figurine he is holding aloft almost crashes to the ground. Danziger, who is repulsed by such "idol worship," hastens to quote a famous verse in Psalms: "They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes but cannot see . . . they have hands, but cannot touch, feet but cannot walk." But the Ustiler fires back with Proverbs: "If your enemy falls, do not exult; if he trips, let your heart not rejoice." Behind his scriptural rebuke is more than good manners; he is genuinely open to the world in the way that the worldly businessman's piety cannot allow.

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

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

The Ustiler Rebbe is seeking not only an elusive yak, but to extricate himself from his soul-crushing predicament in the contemporary world of Israeli Hasidism, and to find a purer path. As a place of genuine if sometimes frightening spirituality, Tibet serves as a foil for Israeli society, where a majority of

the population has tragically alienated itself from the resources of its religious tradition, while a minority has turned religion into a prideful hieratic cult. But the contrast is, unfortunately, not really explored. There is a failure of nerve, or at the very least, a conceptual fuzziness, when it comes to parsing the religious moments of the novel. The Ustiler does finally succeed in finding the holy Golden Yak by the "heavenly lake" of the book's title, but whatever Gnostic enlightenment he may have received in the encounter is lost in the fatal breakdown or injury —it's never clear—he incurs at that very moment. The yak itself, and the captive soul it contains, remain a mystery.

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

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

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

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A Tale of Two Synagogues

BY DAVID GELERNTER

Winter 2012

Beth Sholom Synagogue: Frank Lloyd Wright and Modern Religious Architecture
by Joseph Siry
University of Chicago Press, 736 pp., $65

Resplendent Synagogue: Architecture and Worship In an Eighteenth-Century Polish Community
by Thomas C. Hubka
Brandeis University Press, 226 pp., $35

In December 1953, Rabbi Mortimer Cohen led a small delegation from his Conservative synagogue in Philadelphia to meet with Frank Lloyd Wright in his suite at the Plaza Hotel in Manhattan. Wright was in his eighties; he was a celebrity and the greatest architect alive—a fact of which he and the rabbi were both well aware.

Rabbi Cohen approached Wright with due reverence, and Wright graciously hearkened to him. Cohen wanted a building that looked like a mountain, a kind of "portable Mount Sinai," brought to suburban Philadelphia. Wright liked the idea. As it happened, he already had the pyramid shape in his repertoire. His drawings for his unbuilt "Steel Cathedral" of the late 1920s foreshadow Beth Sholom.

Rabbi Cohen was a student and follower of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, who hoped for the development of a distinctly American Judaism. For his part, Wright preached and practiced a distinctively American architecture. (In fact, he invented and relentlessly promoted the word "Usonian" to mean United States-ian.) When he mailed the preliminary drawings for Beth Sholom to Rabbi Cohen, he described the new synagogue as "truly a religious tribute to the living God. Judaism needs one in America. To do it for you has pleased me . . . Here you have a coherent statement of worship. I hope it pleases you and your people." (Wright was a genius, but did sometimes sound like a pompous windbag.)

Their correspondence continued through the next five years of design and building, which were also the last five years of Wright's life. Eventually, Wright came to describe Cohen as the co-designer of the building. "You provided me with the ideas," Wright wrote generously to Cohen, "and I tried to put them into architectural form."

In most respects, Cohen got the building he wanted. But as Joseph Siry, a professor of art history and American studies at Wesleyan, tells us in his massive and absorbing new account of the building of Beth Sholom, there was one persistent client desire that Wright never got around to satisfying. Rabbi Cohen's status as "co-designer" notwithstanding, Wright was famous for his indifference to the architectural preferences of his clients, and he did not give in. Unfortunately, just that feature might have made Wright's majestic building feel like a synagogue.

Siry shows how the building of Beth Sholom emerged from Wright's earliest work as a young man at the celebrated architectural firm of Adler and Sullivan. Adler and Sullivan played a central role in the creation of the world's first steel-framed skyscrapers and did much to give Chicago its distinctively plain-spoken, assertive yet beautifully detailed architectural character.

They also built synagogues. Dankmar Adler was a rabbi's son who came with his father from Germany as a child in 1854, served in the Union Army during the Civil War, then set up as an architect. Adler's Isaiah Temple of 1898 was the last building of his career. Siry notes that Wright's Unitarian Unity Temple in Oak Park, Illinois shows the clear influence of Adler's last building.

Wright was a visionary on the largest scale, an engineer of native brilliance, a magnificent draftsman, and a complete artist, with a lovely and original color sense, who designed furniture, rugs, lamps, and decorative panels. In fact, if he got his way, every last fabric and fixture and stick of furniture in every last corner of his buildings. To find anything like the sheer productivity of Wright's

imagination, we must search backward till we reach Gian Lorenzo Bernini in the 17th century. Wright is easily the greatest architect in American history and—less easily but (in the end, I think) decisively—the greatest of the prodigious 20th century, greater even than Edwin Lutyens or Louis Kahn, greater than Mies or Corbu or Bunshaft or Barragán at their very best.

Wright's Beth Sholom rears up like a faceted abstract mountain. It is a soaring pyramid of translucent glass panels set atop a large concrete platform.

Wright's Beth Sholom rears up like a faceted abstract mountain. It is a soaring pyramid of translucent glass panels set atop a large concrete platform, on which it rests like a pointed hat nearly covering a concrete sailing ship from prow to stern. The congregants sit within this pyramid, in a great hall suffused with light. Daylight enters through the sloping sides. (The building's sides are ribbed wire glass on the outside, with translucent plastic panels inside.) At night the pyramid glows gold, and spotlights pick out the cast-aluminum ornaments—supposed to recall menorahs—along the seams between the pyramid's faces. With his incomparable dramatic flair, Wright arranged the entrance so that one walks up a broad, low flight of stairs catching hints of the great space hovering above. At the top you turn around and behold the huge, magnificent room.

The room holds three large groups of seats, one in the middle that slopes down toward the *bimah* (the table where the Torah is read) in front and one on each side, where the seats face the *bimah* from the left and right. It is a handsome room, with the suave elegance of a posh concert hall, plus the incomparably inventive panache that only Wright could bestow.

Wright's Beth Sholom is a tour de force—as a building, but not as a synagogue. His widow Olgivanna unwittingly explained the problem when she described the great hall. "A soft silver light permeates the whole interior with a meditative quality that asks for peaceful silence." Her description is just right. Peaceful silence *is* perfect for a hushed audience preparing to focus its whole attention on the performers onstage. But a synagogue is designed for praise and song and chanted Torah, not silence. The great elegant room has the generic, rootless feeling of so many other monuments of liberal religion in mid-century America.

One of Beth Sholom's most striking features is the remarkable lighting fixture that hangs from the tall ceiling in the great hall. Naturally, Wright designed it himself. Siry describes it as a "triangular light basket or chandelier of translucent sandblasted glass in panels of red, blue, green, and yellow, set in an aluminum frame and lighted mainly from above." It is one of the most beautiful things Wright ever did. And beneath this chandelier, at the exact center of the great hall beneath the soaring glass pyramid is—nothing.

Rabbi Cohen had imagined a synagogue with an exterior modeled on Mount Sinai and an interior that would have the *bimah* as its central focus, and yet it was precisely here that Wright refused to follow instructions. Cohen had wanted the Torah to be read, as it used to be in most pre-modern synagogues, "deep in the heart of the congregation," at the center of Wright's soaring room and right beneath the dramatic chandelier. In one of his first letters to Wright, Cohen had said, "to place the Bimah in such wise



Frank Lloyd Wright, center, with Rabbi Mortimer J. Cohen, right of architect, and members of the Building Committee on site, February 1958. (Courtesy of Beth Sholom Archives.)

would carry out what I blushingly call 'my philosophy' of the interior seating plan of the Synagogue."

When Wright sent his first design in March 1954, ignoring Cohen's "philosophy of the interior," Cohen carefully traced it on tissue paper and indicated where the *bimah* could be placed:

> [It] need not necessarily be rectangular in form. It could very well be made in the form of a triangle to conform with the beautiful variation of triangles in which the main building is composed . . . We could sacrifice the extra 14 seats.

And beneath this chandelier, at the exact center of the great hall beneath the soaring glass pyramid is—nothing.

As Siry writes in his meticulous reconstruction of the design process, "Cohen kept after Wright about this issue more than any other." In 1957, when construction had already been underway for almost a year, he was still working on Wright to implement his idea of the *bimah* as "a little island set in the midst of the congregation" that was distinct from the pulpit. It would, he wrote Wright "fulfill an old traditional form of the Synagogue which I have long dreamt of restoring, especially in so modern a building as the one you have designed for us."

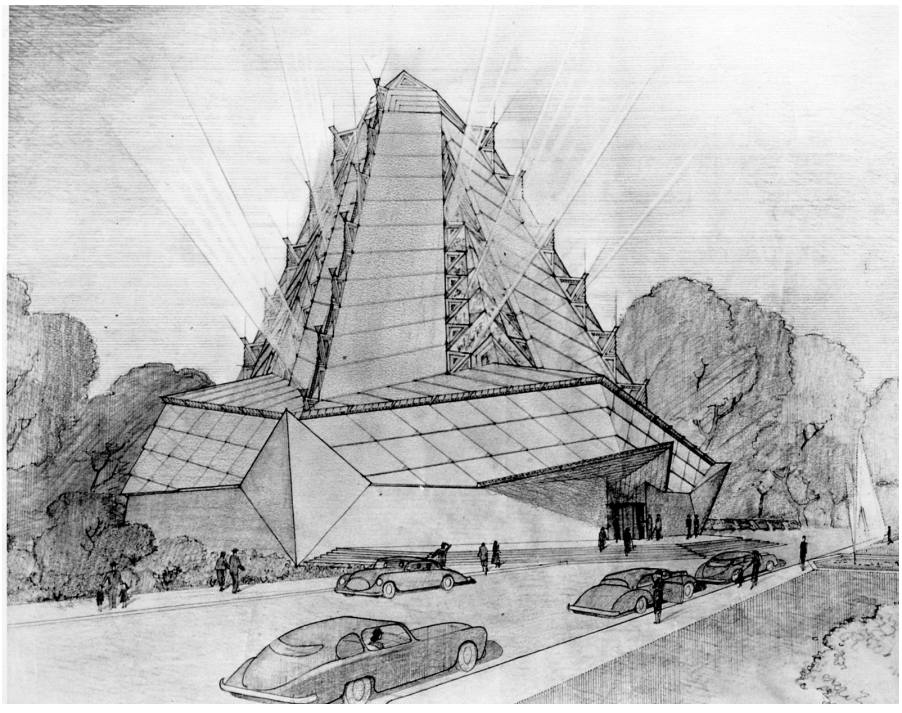
Although Wright briefly considered a central *bimah* made of concrete, nothing ever came of it. Cohen kept telling Wright that a central *bimah* would "influence Synagogue Architecture for years to come," but Wright would not be swayed:

> Concerning the controversial Bimah! The more I think of so emphatic-emphasis on (or at) the center of the Synagogue, the less I like the reiteration of the chandelier . . . why not let it come along after we see the auditorium all together—you and I?"

In his casual use of the word "auditorium," Wright showed his failure to understand Cohen. In the end, Cohen was opposed not only by the great architect but by a synagogue board intent on maximizing paid seats. He had to be satisfied with a portable *bimah* that was sometimes moved to the center.

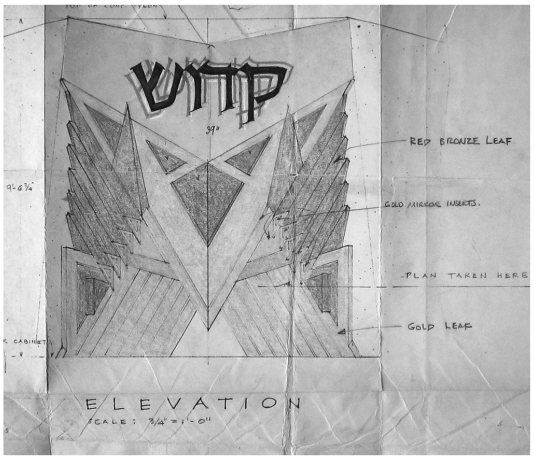
Cohen's wasn't the only voice arguing for a central *bimah*. In 1954, the synagogue historian Rachel Wischnitzer read about the Beth Sholom project in *TIME* magazine. She was impressed, and wrote to both Rabbi Cohen and Frank Lloyd Wright that Beth Sholom's design "was anticipated by those obscure Jewish carpenters in Poland and the Ukraine who built village synagogues on a square plan with stepped pyramidal roofs and the *bimah*, of course, in the center." It seems that Cohen himself underscored the resemblance between Wright's project and these synagogues by showing "Wright a photograph of the synagogue in Gwoździec, Galicia (Poland) which was in the shape of a mountain."

The external resemblance between these Polish synagogues and Wright's Beth Sholom *is* striking, and it returns us to the deep question underlying the negotiations between Cohen and Wright. Not a single Polish wooden synagogue still stands, but a few years ago the architectural historian Thomas Hubka published a brilliant book on the very synagogue that Rachel Wischnitzer and Rabbi Cohen tried to bring to Wright's attention. His *Resplendent Synagogue: Architecture and Worship in an*



Frank Lloyd Wright's preliminary drawing of Beth Sholom, March 1954. (© 2011 Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, Scottsdale, AZ / Artists Rights Society, NY, Art Resource, NY.)





Above: View into the main upper sanctuary with glass chandelier and* bimah *with Ark. (Courtesy of Balthazar Korab and the Library of Congress.)

Right: Hand-colored blueprint for Ner Tamid (Eternal Flame lamp) over the Ark of the Main Sanctuary, September 1957. (Courtesy of Beth Sholom Archives.)

Eighteenth-Century Polish Community tells the story of the Gwoździec (pronounced *Gov-vosz-djets*, if that helps) synagogue, or shul.

The synagogue was built somewhere between 1640 and 1700. Many public buildings, especially in the villages and countryside, were made of wood in the Poland of that era. In 1729, the roof was rebuilt and a towering cupola was added. The cupola reached its greatest height directly over the bimah. The building was small, 36 feet square. Outside, the roof reached much higher than 36 feet, but the cupola inside stopped at exactly 36 feet above the floor. Hubka speculates that the 36-foot cube defined by floor and cupola was meant to recall the cube of the Holy of Holies in the Temple.

Were the craftsmen who designed and built this new roof (and the old one, for that matter) Jews? Maybe yes; probably no. The answer is unimportant. The Gwoździec synagogue was shaped by the texture of Jewish time and the laws, customs, liturgy, and ceremonial functions of the synagogue. It was an embodiment of the Judaism of that time and place: molded by halakha and longstanding Ashkenazic custom; deeply influenced by the symbolism of the Zohar.

The artists who painted the remodeled synagogue, with its towering new cupola, were Jewish. They left stylized signatures inscribed in medallions that were integrated into the intricate design of the walls, one of which reads:

> See all this was made by my hands [Isaiah 66:2], for the glory of the place and the glory of the community, the artist Isaac son of Rabbi Judah Leib haCohen from the holy community of Jarychow, in the year 1729.

"The visual intensity of the synagogue's wall-paintings can be overwhelming," writes Hubka, projecting himself into the past. The paintings included the text of Hebrew prayers and blessings in large, beautifully-made letters, and many animals: camels and elephants, turkeys and squirrels and lions, griffins and unicorns. Intricate foliage filled the gaps. Old color sketches of this synagogue (miraculously preserved) suggest that the paintings relied on a bright, brownish red and dark blue—the vivid colors of public ceremony. The Hebrew words are black on white.

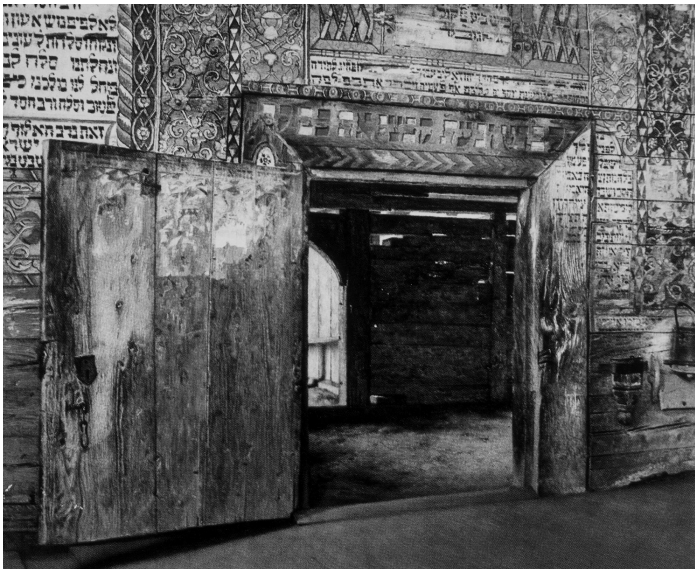
In a fascinating discovery, Hubka notes that the North, South, and East walls respectively have images of a showbread table, a menorah, and Tablets of the Law—reflecting the position of these sacred objects in the desert Tabernacle. In effect, the painters put the congregation *inside* the Tabernacle.

Hubka's discovery recalls Paul Binski's reading of the poorly-preserved wall paintings in the chapter house at Westminster Abbey, where the monks met as a group. The medieval paintings, Binski found, reflect Isaiah's vision of the Lord amidst the seraphim (celestial angels) and the Ark

of the Covenant in the desert Tabernacle: "The monks of Westminster, as the Children of Israel, are gathered in the presence of God."

Another fascinating architectural feature Hubka discusses is a latticed window above the door on the west wall, opening on nothing—merely dark, unused attic space. Other Polish wooden synagogues have the same sort of latticed window in the same position. Why?

Hubka speculates that the latticed window became a standard fixture in the wooden synagogues of Poland during the period the new liturgy of *Kabbalat Shabbat (*Welcoming the Sabbath), a kabbalistic innovation of the 16th century, became an accepted part of the Friday evening service in Poland. As they finished singing the hymn *Lecha Dodi*, the congregants,



Entrance to the Prayer Hall, West Wall, Gwoździec Synagogue*, by Isidor Kaufmann. (Courtesy of University Press of New England and the Hungarian National Gallery.)*

then as now, would turn west to face the synagogue's entrance and symbolically welcome the *Shekhina* (Divine Presence) as the Sabbath Bride. But in facing the door, the congregants also faced the latticed window—which evidently represented the Gate of Heaven mentioned by Jacob after his dream. This is described in the Zohar as a two-way gate through which Israel looks towards the Lord and the Lord looks hopefully (longingly?) back at Israel.

The latticed window of Gwoździec is an instance of the veil imagery that is so important to Judaism. The Lord is transcendent, wholly outside the human cosmos, yet He can be approached intimately. A Jew can go to the very brink of transcendent divinity—up to the veil that separates man and God. The veil symbol is embodied in many forms. The curtain (*parokhet*) before the Ark, the two curtains that screened the Holy of Holies, the veil Moses wore to hide the frightening luminance of his face after meeting God are all, I believe, instances of this symbol.

Hubka, who descends from Polish Catholics, writes meticulously, finely, sometimes lovingly about this remarkable synagogue. His text is illustrated throughout with beautifully clear and precise architectural drawings, which are also, it seems, his work. By careful research, by marshalling detail upon detail, he conjures this extraordinary building out of the ashes of Jewish Poland. His book is academic research at its noblest.

(Hubka's work, together with that of other scholars, has inspired a group of artists and students at Handshouse Studio in Western Massachusetts to create a model of the Gwoździec synagogue and its interiors. You can see a slideshow of their beautiful work at the Handshouse website.)

The influence of Hebrew literature on western art was, of course, gigantic. But Jewish architecture is another story. Because its achievement is largely unknown, its influence has been virtually non-existent. Even when he was building a synagogue, Frank Lloyd Wright ignored it.

Historically, the external architecture of the synagogue never had a chance to develop its own proper shapes and gestures. Until the modern period and sometimes even later, anti-Jewish laws and customs limited the extent to which synagogues could outshine nearby churches and mosques. In the meantime, Jewish architecture was inward-looking. And the art of the synagogue interior, exemplified in Gwoździec and ignored in Wright's Beth Sholom answers one of the hardest questions in western architecture: What goes under the dome?

The Dome Question has plagued architecture since the Pantheon in 2nd-century Rome—progenitor of nearly every centralized building of the West. These centralized buildings (often domed, usually with ground plans that are squares or regular polygons, always with a soaring roof) have always been exciting because they build (like a good story) to a climax. They create a thrill of anticipation as you approach. (What is that huge space going to be like inside?) They are lenses focusing the thought and anticipation of the surrounding populace onto a single point or shaft of space: the vertical shaft at the exact center of the building, the point at ground level beneath the dome.

And the outcome is nearly always frustrating. The whole building conspires to make you expect something important

at the center, something extraordinary. But architects have rarely come up with anything to put there. Thus the domed building, one of architecture's grandest gestures, is a thriller without a finish.

The Pantheon is prototypical: At the center under the open sun-window or oculus on top is—nothing. Empty floor. Beneath the soaring octagon over the crossing at Ely Cathedral: again, nothing. Beneath the central dome of San Marco in Venice: once more, nothing. The same holds for Brunelleschi's epochal dome at the cathedral of Florence and Bramante's tiny but gigantically influential Tempietto in Rome; at the Salute, the baroque masterpiece at the head of the Grand Canal in Venice; at St. Paul's in London, the Pantheon in Paris, and the Capitol Dome in Washington. At dead center, nothing.



Night-time view of Beth Sholom from the northwest. (Courtesy of Balthazar Korab and the Library of Congress.)

There is one species of exception. Some churches follow the example of St. Peter's in the Vatican and put the altar beneath the dome. But this response to the great Dome Question is a half-answer at best. The altar is a sacred zone where priests officiate and laymen are out of place. Bernini's great canopy over the altar at St. Peter's is awe-inspiring, not inviting. It says "Keep your distance! Stand back!"

The traditional synagogue has a very different solution. It puts the *bimah* at the center, reflecting the fact that the congregation is part of any public Torah reading. Representative priests, Levites, and plain Jewish citizens join the Torah reader and linger. The congregation surrounds the *bimah*; congregants who are helping or merely listening stand nearby. Often they surround the table on all sides. The surge of the crowd reaches right to the center of the building, and at the exact center is the unrolled Torah scroll itself. In a synagogue with a soaring roof and a central *bimah*, the story has a climax after all. The unfinished cadence resolves.

In a crowded synagogue (especially a large one) with its *bimah* at the center, you sit or stand amidst a powerful, inward-surging tide of attention and emotion. My wife and I happened to spend a recent Rosh Hashanah in Frankfurt. To our surprise, the large synagogue was mobbed. The movement of human energy towards the center of that huge, tall room was vivid and palpable and unforgettable.

The unique power of synagogue architecture is human-scaled. The building responds to its users. The finest synagogues stand with the very best achievements of western architecture. Their great art is deep instead of dazzling—unlike Wright's brilliant Beth Sholom, just like the lost and (now) recovered shul of Gwoździec, they come alive when they are filled with people.

The two synagogues have a surprising relation: Wright's sprawling, towering, wholly distinctive celebration of suburban Judaism echoes the shape of that small, long-ago building in Poland. And the echo tells us something important about the remarkable and largely unknown achievement of synagogue architecture over the centuries.

David Gelernter is a painter and a professor of computer science at Yale University. He is the author of Judaism: A Way of Being *(Yale University Press).*

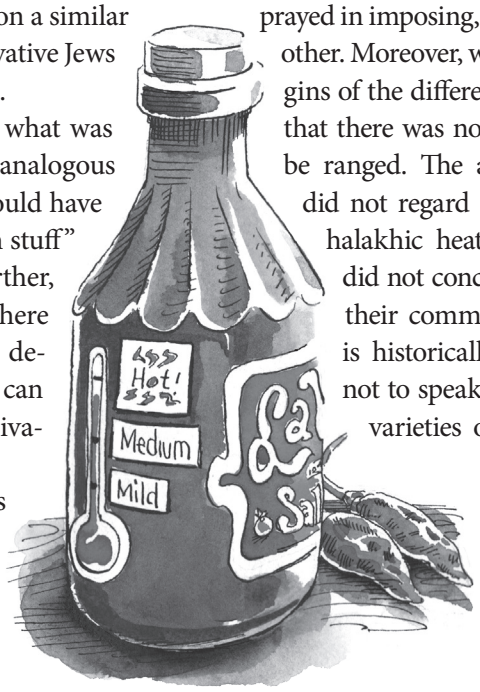
Salsa and Sociology

BY ABRAHAM SOCHER

Winter 2014

When I was a child, eight or nine maybe, I evolved a theory about different kinds of Jews, based, more or less, on the hot sauce we kept on our table. The brand of salsa my mother always bought featured a picture of a thermometer on the side. The mercury in this particular thermometer rose from Mild to Medium to Hot, and it occurred to me, for I thought as a child, that the three basic kinds of Jews—or more precisely synagogues to which the Jews I knew belonged—could be placed on a similar continuum. Reform Jews were Mild, Conservative Jews were Medium, and Orthodox Jews were Hot.

If pressed to say what exactly I thought what was being measured that was supposed to be analogous to the heat of chili peppers, I guess that I would have said something about the amount of "Jewish stuff" one did or was required to do. If pressed further, I probably would have put my family somewhere between Medium and Hot. The theory was descriptive, not prescriptive; I had, as far as I can remember, no desire to be the religious equivalent of tongue-scaldingly habanero-hot.



Around this time, my mother drove us across the Bay Bridge to participate in a rally for Soviet Jews at Emanu-El, the big, old Reform Temple in San Francisco, which was founded in 1850. By American Jewish standards it's practically a medieval cathedral. Certainly that's what it felt like to me. You could fit half a dozen of our little East Bay *shuls* inside it, and the pillars stretching up to a magnificently vaulted ceiling seemed as tall to me as the redwoods of Tilden Park, if not the cedars of Lebanon. This, together with other experiences, spurred me to add a corollary to my theory: The wealth of synagogues was inversely proportional to their religious "heat."

My childish religious heat map fit the folk taxonomy implicit in the everyday speech of American Jews pretty well. Thus, when I heard someone describing themselves or others as "very Reform," it never meant that prophetic ideals of justice were discussed at the dinner table, or that the works of Abraham Geiger were on the bookshelf. It meant that they did not lead markedly Jewish lives. There is even a whole class of predictable Jewish jokes based on this: "How Reform are they? So Reform that . . . "

At some point, however, I put away my childish theories. I met learned and serious liberal Jews on the one hand and prayed in imposing, wealthy Orthodox synagogues on the other. Moreover, when I later studied the ideological origins of the different movements, I came to understand that there was no single scale on which they all could be ranged. The architects of the Reform movement did not regard themselves as "Very Mild" on some halakhic heat scale; the Conservative movement did not concede that they were any less devout in their commitment to Jewish law, properly—that is historically—understood, than the Orthodox, not to speak of Reconstructionism and the many varieties of Jewish secularism, including classical Zionism. (I knew a woman in Los Angeles who dropped a guy because he confused Jewish Bundists with Buddhists at the Shabbos table.)

And yet. In some respects, the salsa sociology explained parts of my particular American Jewish experience better than the ideological self-understandings of the movements. For instance, I've known many *ba'alei teshuvah*, who have "returned" to traditional religious practice, sometimes moving from Reform through Conservative Judaism before arriving at Orthodoxy. Rarely, even among intellectuals, is such a move best characterized as one in which the *ba'al teshuvah* first thinks that halakha is no longer the best way to express Jewish social and spiritual ideals in the modern world, then decides that it is but that halakha must be understood as a dynamic historical process, and,

finally, comes to believe in an eternal law revealed at Sinai.

A better description of the process is that such people increasingly wanted their everyday lives to be determined by their Judaism, and they found this in Orthodox communities of one kind or another. I think this is also true of the many people I've known who grew up in the Conservative movement (Solomon Schechter schools, Camp Ramah etc.) and now find themselves identifying as Orthodox. The great sociologist Émile Durkheim spoke of "social facts," beliefs, norms, and practices with the power to structure individual lives. One way to describe what the *ba'al teshuvah* is looking for is a way to make his or her Judaism into a real, brute social fact.

I was talking about this with a prominent American-Israeli journalist the other day, who said "Sure, if you want to be totally Jewish, you've got three choices: You can become a Reform or Conservative *rabbi*, you can become Orthodox—or you can make *aliyah*." One could object that one can also become a professor of Jewish studies, but that's not really a counter-example. The best counter-example comes from the world of independent *minyanim*, in which many participants live intensely Jewish lives of ritual, study, and prayer while retaining a non-Orthodox approach to belief and practice. Whether the *minyanim*, and allied institutions such as *Mechon Hadar* and *Limmud*, can alter the social dynamics of American Jewry remains to be seen.

Two realizations dawned on me in reading the Pew Research Center's recent report, "A Portrait of Jewish Americans." The first was just how small a Jewish bubble I have been living in. While I've been praying in Orthodox *shuls* with *ba'alei teshuvah* and Ramah campers, the American Jewish world has been swiftly moving in the opposite direction. As the report states:

> Within all three denominational movements, most of the switching is in the direction of less-traditional Judaism . . . one-quarter of people who were raised Orthodox have since become Conservative or Reform Jews, and 28% of those raised Reform have left the ranks of Jews by religion entirely.

One feels the sheer gravitational force of American Jewish life in such sentences. By contrast, the move in the other direction begins to look insignificant, a counter-cultural trickle.

My other realization was, of course, that my childish theory was closer to the truth than my later, sophisticated adult view of American Jewish life. The religious ideologies that I had taken so seriously look epiphenomenal, like froth on the waves. Take, for instance, the following question posed by the Pew researchers: "How important is religion in your life?" Eighty-three percent of Orthodox Jews answered very important, less than half of Conservative Jews (43 percent) agreed, and only 16 percent of Reform Jews responded that religion was very important to them. Of Jews with no denominational affiliation the number was 8 percent.

Since the Pew researchers were certainly not defining the religion in question as Orthodoxy, it is hard not to conclude that some like it Hot and we call those Jews Orthodox, and some like it Mild, and we call those Jews Reform. Conservative Jews, as Daniel Gordis argues in these pages, find themselves in the rapidly shrinking middle. As for the Jews of "no religion," these would appear to be not Jewish secularists (as the Pew researchers sometimes sort of imply) but mostly Jews "looking for the exit door." Upon reflection, I find the implications of the hot sauce model of American Judaism chilling.

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