



A PASSOVER COMPANION

Leon Wieseltier • Hillel Halkin • Abraham Socher
Marc Michael Epstein • Vanessa L. Ochs • Yehudah Mirsky
and more

JEWISH REVIEW of BOOKS

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Introduction

Dear Readers,

Aside from the sweeping, scrubbing, buying, and cooking, preparing for Passover often involves the rediscovery of old treasures: family china, a wobbly cup of Elijah someone made in first grade, a second-generation Seder plate, favorite *haggadot* and commentaries, and, perhaps, some plastic frogs to illustrate the second plague.

Here at the *Jewish Review of Books*, we too have been rummaging through the attic (archive) as we prepare for Passover, and we too have rediscovered favorite old treasures, 12 of them in fact. All of the pieces collected in this e-book (which you can also print out to lay next to your haggadah) address the coming holiday and its themes in brilliant, deep, and surprising ways, from David Stern's review of the haggadah of the Chinese Jews of Kaifeng to Dan Ben-Amos's translation of a 1940s Nathan Alterman poem inspired by *Had Gadya*, and a great deal in between from some of our favorite writers.

Rereading these pieces has enriched our preparations for the coming Seders, and we think that you will enjoy (and re-enjoy) them too both before and during the holiday.

With best wishes for a sweet Pesach,

The Editors

Why Is This Haggadah Different?

BY DAVID STERN

The Haggadah of the Kaifeng Jews of China

by Fook-Kong Wong and Dalia Yasharpour

Brill, 216 pp., \$132

Few Jewish communities of the past have attracted more attention than the fabled, now vanished, community of Chinese Jews that existed for more than six hundred years in the city of Kaifeng. Today little remains of that community—a few families who claim to be descendants of its last Jews; several accounts about the community written by Chris-

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

tian missionaries in the 17th through 19th centuries; a few stone stellae or columns with inscriptions that the Kaifeng Jews themselves wrote about their history and beliefs; a number of Torah scrolls whose Hebrew letters remarkably resemble Chinese characters as written with an ink brush, and a scattering of other books. Of these, their Passover Haggadah is probably the most fascinating—if only because the idea of a family of medieval or early-modern Chinese Jews sitting through a Seder is such an irresistibly intriguing image to contemplate.

The Haggadah of the Kaifeng Jews of China is the first scholarly monograph devoted to this haggadah. The study's authors—Fook-Kong Wong, a Harvard-educated scholar of the Old Testament in Hong Kong, and Dalia Yasharpour, a preceptor in Persian language and literature at Harvard—have mined the text for all the information it contains about the Jews of Kaifeng in the 17th and 18th centuries, the time that the two surviving manuscripts of the haggadah were written. Most of the book

is devoted to a detailed study of the haggadah's Hebrew text and its accompanying Judeo-Persian instructions, and what the language of the text can tell us about the Hebraic literacy of the Kaifeng Jews. These chapters will appeal mainly to scholars. But the larger story the haggadah tells about the Chinese Jews is of far wider interest, and the sight alone of the haggadah—one of the manu-



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

scripts is reproduced in full in the book, along with a transcription of the Hebrew text and an annotated English translation—is worth more than a fleeting look.

The Kaifeng Jewish community probably first took shape sometime in the early Middle Ages—around the year 1000—when Jewish traders on the Silk Route, most likely from Persia or Yemen, reached China. Of the several cities in which these traders settled, Kaifeng, then the capital city of the Song Dynasty, was the most prominent, and for all practical purposes, the only Jewish community in medieval China about which we know anything. From all appearances, the Jewish community flourished from the outset. By 1163, the Kaifeng Jews had built an imposing synagogue, which, over the subsequent five centuries, was repaired and rebuilt several times, often after being destroyed by the floods that regularly washed over the city.

So far as we know, Jews in China were never persecuted. Quite the opposite: The Chinese seem to have embraced the Jews, who, in turn, underwent rapid acculturation, or Sinification, the same process through which most other ethnic minorities amid the vast populace of China inevitably passed as well. The process can be seen most clearly in the material remains of Kaifeng Jewry—in their Chinese-looking Hebrew script or in the architecture of their (now destroyed) synagogue. Like the neighboring mosque, the synagogue looked almost exactly like a Confucian shrine, with dedicatory tablets at the front alongside incense-bowls for ancestor worship—albeit with a few distinctively Jewish features like an ark for Torah scrolls, stone inscriptions with prayers like the Shema, and a monumental “Chair of Moses” upon which they sat while they read the Torah.

While the Chinese recognized the religious differences between themselves and the Jews—referred to as “the sinew-plucking” sect (after the injunction in Gen. 32:32 not to eat the tendon) or “the scripture-teaching/respecting” sect—the Chinese Jews faced no obstacles in rising quickly in the civil bureaucracy and attaining high and powerful positions in the imperial court and other sectors of government. Chinese Jews appear to have felt comfortable enough in their host-culture to have found no trouble intermarrying with native Chinese even as they continued to observe the Sabbath and holidays, to keep kosher in some fashion, and to hold traditional worship services in the synagogue. Nonetheless, acculturation inevitably exacted a price. Whether

it was due primarily to their astounding success in assimilating to Chinese culture, or to their near-complete isolation from Jews everywhere else in the world, or to their gradual loss over the centuries of Hebraic and Judaic literacy, by the 17th century the Jewish community had begun to decline precipitously as more and more members were simply swallowed up into the enormous body of the Chinese population.

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

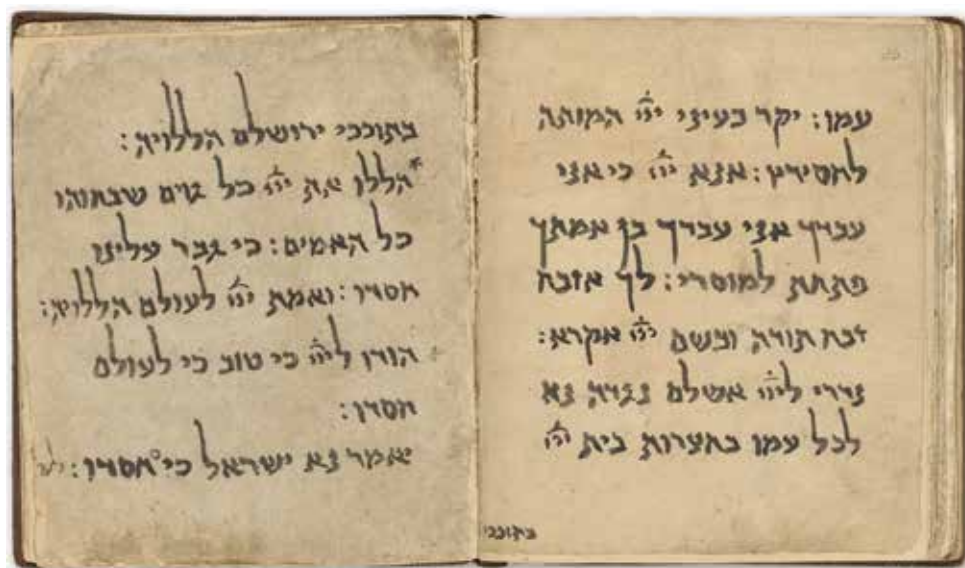
The existence of Chinese Jews first came to the notice of the West in 1605, after the arrival in China of Jesuit missionaries led by the Italian Matteo Ricci. When the Kaifeng Jews heard that a Western “priest” who believed in one God and was knowledgeable in the Bible had arrived in Beijing, they simply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

The two surviving haggadah manuscripts that are the subjects of Wong and Yasharpour’s study are owned today by the Klau Library of Hebrew Union College (which purchased them in 1851 from the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews). Both are modest books, one written in Jewish-Persian hand, the other in Chinese Hebrew square script (like that of the Torah scrolls). While the two

haggadahs were written by different scribes about a century apart, both preserve essentially the same text. That text primarily follows the Persian Jewish rite but from one of that rite's early stages, before the haggadah had undergone many of the expansions with which contemporary users of the text are familiar. As a result, the Kaifeng Haggadah doesn't have *Dayyenu*, *Shefokh Chamatekha* ("Pour Out Your Wrath," which probably did not appear in the Ashkenazic haggadah until after the Crusader massacres), or folk songs

such as *Chad Gadya* (which did not become a regular feature until the printed Italian editions of the 17th century). However, the most startling omission is the absence of the blessing over the matzah (that follows the standard *ha-motzi*). The editors suggest that the blessing may have been so well-known that the copyists did not feel the need to record it, but it seems to me even more likely that the copyist either forgot to write the blessing or that it was already missing from their tradition by the 17th century. Bread, leavened or unleavened, must have been a very unusual sight in China.

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



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



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

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

There is more than a little irony in the fact that this indication should come in the form of a haggadah. Of all the classical texts of Judaism, the Passover haggadah is the Jewish book of redemption par excellence. It remembers the story of the Exodus from Egypt in order to re-experience the salvatory power of redemption in the present, and so as to anticipate the final redemption of the messianic age. Exactly how the haggadah imagines redemption has varied from one community to another, and from one period to the next, but invariably, every Jewish community has imagined redemption in the haggadah—sometimes with the addition of new passages or through the insertion of illustrations and pictures—in the image of its own diasporic experience.

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

The *Haggadah of the Kaifeng Jews of China* is one of a spate of books about the Jews of China, some of them scholarly, others more popular, which have appeared in the last several decades, mainly in the English-speaking world, especially in Ameri-

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

The contemporary fascination in America with the Chinese Jews is different. Obviously, it has something to do with the unique exoticism of the community. But there may be more to it. The extent of the success of Kaifeng Jews in assimilating to Chinese society without resistance and achieving cultural acceptance along with great wealth, power, and status is almost unparalleled in Jewish history. The great exception is, of course, American Jewry, which has also prospered in, and been embraced by, its host culture with a success that has been said by some to be unparalleled. And no other diaspora communities in Jewish history have experienced equivalent rates of assimilation or suffered from the same degree of Hebraic and Judaic illiteracy. American Jewry is in no danger of vanishing as precipitously as did the Kaifeng Jews, but as we sit down to our Seders and raise our glasses to drink the four cups, it may be worth remembering the haggadah of the Kaifeng Jews along with the Exodus from Egypt.

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

Comes the Comer

BY LEON WIESELTIER

New American Haggadah

edited by Jonathan Safran Foer

with a new translation by Nathan Englander

Little, Brown and Company, 160 pp., \$29.99

A history of Jewish literacy remains to be written. It will be a colorful and complicated work, as befits the variegated linguistic history of the Jews, and for American Jewish readers of our day, I mean the honest ones, it will be a disturbing work. Whereas the Jews have always used many languages, Jewish and non-Jewish ones, and whereas complaints about the faltering level of competence in Hebrew appear in many medieval and modern sources, the awful fact is that Jewry of the United States has decided—it was a decision, even if it was never formally made—that the Jewish tradition may be adequately received, developed, and transmitted not in a Jewish language. Judaism’s language, after all, is not English. Owing to the magnitude of their illiteracy, American Jews have broken new ground in Jewish incompetence. Translation is an ancient Jewish activity, of course—the sanctity of the Hebrew language notwithstanding, the rabbis always insisted that Jews understand the sacred words that they read and hear and utter. Meaningfulness sometimes demands accommodations and adjustments, and we are the enemies of meaninglessness. But no Jewry has ever been as pathetically dependent upon translation as American Jewry.

The comprehensibility of the liturgy—and the Haggadah is the most extensive liturgical text for use outside the synagogue—was always a premise of Jewish prayer. In the case of the Haggadah, the imperative of translation was no doubt enhanced by the pedagogical character of the commemoration of the Exodus at the Passover meal: It was designed as an education for the children. But in the cultural eddies of the diaspora the “children” often included the adults, who also had

a need for a vernacular version of what was being read and sung. The first translations of the Haggadah into Jewish languages—Judeo-Italian, Judeo-German, and Judeo-Spanish—were published in 1609, and the first translations into a non-Jewish language—Spanish—appeared in 1620. (A translation into Latin was made in 1512, but not by Jews and not for Jews.) In 1770,

Englander has taken it upon himself to eliminate the mystery, as if this is an improvement. He destroys the surprise and the stimulation of the original.

the first Haggadah published in London included its first translation into English. The first American Haggadah, produced in 1837, also had an accompanying translation into English. There have been many English translations since, most of them mediocre or worse.

Now the *New American Haggadah* has appeared, in a translation by Nathan Englander that takes its place, alas, in that sad line. Englander, who is one of the very few American Jewish writers who knows our people’s language, has some fine solutions—“from grief to good days” for *me-evel le-yom tov*, or the Tetragrammaton rendered as “the One Who Brings Being into Being,” which is genuinely thoughtful—but generally he strains too much, and frequently ends up with versions that are awkward, ugly, or wrong.

The trouble begins almost at the beginning, with his rendering of the *She-hecheyanu* blessing: “You are blessed, Lord God-of-Us, King of the Cosmos, who breathed life, and sustained life, and shepherded us through to the current season.” What is this “God-of-Us”? Why torture one of the most common and comprehensible words in Jewish worship? Englander retains this infelicitous locution for all the blessings in the Haggadah. But *eloheimu* is a limpidly clear word: it



Title page of the Hamburg Haggadah, Hamburg, 1731.

means “our God.” And “our God” is more intimate, and therefore more provocative, than Englander’s hyphenate version—it is a possessive, grammatically and theologically. “Cosmos” is fine for *olam*, I guess, though the Greekness of the term jars in this context. But there are no sheep anywhere in the *She-hecheyanu*, so nobody could have been shepherded. As for “the current season”: it sounds like the hackwork of a music critic or a sports writer, and misrepresents the nature of the *birkat ha-zeman*, or “the blessing over time.” The time that the *She-hecheyanu* hallows is not a mere now. It is cyclical time. The blessing is prescribed for a moment that has come round again, an appointed hour that regularly arrives. We give gratitude for witnessing another turn in the turning without end, and therefore perhaps for catching a glimpse of eternity. This moment is not current; this moment is recurrent.

Or consider Englander’s version of “*Barukh ha-makom, barukh hu.*” *Ha-makom* means “the place”: It is the canonical Jewish name for God that suggests His ubiquity, His nearness. The divine omnipresence is established, somewhat paradoxically, by localizing it: He is here because He is everywhere. This appellation is of great antiquity. The Mishnah reports that when the Sanhedrin certified the suitability of priests to serve in the Temple, it opened its benediction with the formula that appears in the Haggadah: “*Barukh ha-makom barukh hu.*” Englander translates it as, “Blessed is the One that is Space and the Source of Space, the One that is the World but Whom the World Cannot Contain, blessed is He.” This is ridiculously cumbersome, and could not be more unlike the original. What is striking about the Hebrew is its simplicity and its opacity: It says only “Blessed is The Place.” Englander has elected to do away with the simplicity by doing away with the opacity. To arrive at “The One that is the World but Whom the World Cannot Contain,” he may have consulted the midrash in which Jacob’s arrival at “the place” where he would dream of his ladder broaches the issue of such a spatialization of God, and it is concluded that “He is the place of the world but the world is not His place.” *Ha-makom* is a mysterious expression for the universal incorporeal atemporal deity in whom Jews believe: Even Rav Ami, at the end of the 3rd century, was moved to ask, “Why is God called by a name that describes Him as a place?” Englander has taken it upon himself to eliminate the mystery, as if this is an improvement. The result is a pretentious upper-case mouthful that destroys the surprise and the stimulation of the original.

All translation is interpretation, since it is a choice among meanings; but translation is not the same activity as interpretation. A good translation of a troubling text will preserve the reason for the trouble, and thereby leave open the gates of interpretation. The great Thomist historian of philosophy Etienne Gilson, who served on the French delegation to the San Francisco Conference in 1945, rejected a French translation of the United Nations Charter because it erased certain cunning ambiguities in the original, observing that “*il faut traduire le texte dans tout son obscurité.*” One must translate the text in all its obscurity: The fidelity of the translator must include a commitment to honoring the density and the alienness of the original. The translator must not preempt the mental toil of the reader. But

Englander has a different approach. He wishes to leave no darkness behind. (Except in his translation of the list of the plagues, where he swells *choshekh*, or “darkness,” into “a clotted darkness—too thick too pass,” which nicely describes this procedure of translation.) Thus he offers the standard opening formula for the blessing that precedes the performance of all ordained ritual or liturgical actions—*Barukh ata adonai eloheinu melekh ha-olam asher kidshanu be-mitzvotav*—as “You are blessed, Lord God-of-Us, who has set us apart with his mitzvot.” Again Englander has taken the straightforward Hebrew and distorted it with a hermeneutical intrusion. “*Asher kidshanu be-mitzvotav*” means, quite uncontroversially, “who has sanctified us with His commandments.” There is nothing in it about being set apart. But Englander knows that the Jewish method of sanctification consists in differentiation, separation, the establishment of boundaries—in setting apart. It is good that he knows this. But what is gained by using this knowledge to expunge the plain meaning, the grand meaning, of the words? Sanctification is a big and magnificent concept, which provokes many ideas and feelings. Being set apart is a somewhat smaller idea, a more technical idea, an idea with implications that are not always elevating.

And why not translate *mitzvot*? It is hardly an esoteric term. A translation into English should be a translation into English: the whole text transposed into the new language, with no exceptions for hard or familiar words. The dignity of English must be respected. Later Englander leaves a reference to circumcision as *brit* (though he should have left it as *brit milah*, since in Hebrew usage *brit* alone does not refer to circumcision), and to God as “Hashem.” (Is it just me, or does that make God seem like an Arab?) This preservation of a few Hebrew words in English discourses on Jewish subjects is an American Jewish characteristic, the compromise of a community that is delinquent about its linguistic patrimony. Perhaps these stray survivals of the abandoned tongue mitigate the feeling of a fall, except that I do not detect any feeling of a fall. They certainly result in an argot that is neither English nor Hebrew, and is perennially ripe for parody. Englander’s reliance upon these traces of Hebrew vouches for the Americanness of his Haggadah. (In his ethnography of Jewish rites and manners, which he wrote in Italian, Leon Modena reported in the 17th-century that “the common people everywhere conform themselves to the language of the nations where they inhabit, only mixing now and

then a broken Hebrew word or two in their discourse with another.” But for his fellow Jews Modena still wrote in Hebrew.)



Nathan Englander. (Photo courtesy of Juliana Sohn.)

“Matzah” means—unproblematically, I thought—unleavened bread, but Englander prefers it to be “the poor man’s bread,” once again importing an explanation into a translation. The association of matzah with indigence is of course inaugurated a few moments later, in the stirring proclamation *Ha lachma anya*, “This is the bread of the poor”; but the Israelites who departed Egypt did not eat matzah because they were poor, they ate matzah because they were rushed. (They were not poor: they left the house of bondage laden with Egyptian gold and silver, the great wealth that God had promised Abraham for his liberated descendants.) *Peri ha-adamah* means emphatically not “the earth’s harvest,” but only “the fruit of the earth,” which is why the blessing is recited over vegetables and fruits. It is misleading to render *Ba-avur zeh* as “for this purpose,” because *zeh* is what philosophers call an ostensive definition: The reader who says “this” points to the matzah and the maror, the symbolic objects on the table, not abstractions but things, and defines them by showing them. It is preposterous to translate “*Mi-techilah ovdei avodah zarah hayu avoteinu*” as “At first our fathers were beholden to idols,” because the

point of the passage—the point of the religion!—is that our ancestors were never beholden to idols, since idols are false and accomplish nothing.

When the text says that God, in his revelation to Abraham about the eventual emancipation of his descendants from Egyptian slavery, *hishev et ha-ketz*, determined the end, it refers to something larger than Engländer's trite "the end of an era." It announces a trajectory of redemption so primary that the phrase was later adopted to describe the trajectory of the messiah.

"Matzah" means—unproblematically, I thought—unleavened bread, but Engländer prefers "the poor man's bread," importing an explanation into a translation.

And what on earth does "The Aramean disappeared my father" mean? Was Laban a Latin American caudillo? Engländer translates *perishut derekh erez*, one of the torments that the Egyptians inflicted upon their Israelite slaves, as "a break with the natural order," which is a clever reading of the literal sense of the words, except that the phrase has always denoted an abstention from sexual relations. This Egyptian cruelty was to work the Israelites so harshly that their erotic life was destroyed. And if slavery was the natural order in Egypt, why would the Israelites not have welcomed a break from it? *Pakdeinu vo li-vracha* cannot be "reminisce about us, during it, blessedly," because it makes God's remembrance of us, which is what we implore of Him, sound like an activity of celestial leisure. The affirmation *yachid hu* is not anything as banal as "unrivalled is He." The term *yachid* expresses the radical conception of God's unity, a singularity that precludes all comparison and competition, which is metaphysically fundamental to all the schools of Jewish theism.

When Engländer ventures into the translation of the Seder's Psalms—one ought to do so meekly, since the Englishing of the Psalms over the centuries is one of the great accomplishments of literature—he begins, in the preface to the Hallel, by having the worshippers "beautify" God, for *le-hader*, which is something of a theological insult. (I have a hunch that the verb reminded him of

hidur mitzvah, the attention that the rabbis demand for the aesthetic dimension of ritual.) Then, in Psalm 113, he has God "poised above all other nations" when He is merely *ram al kol goyim*, or "sits high above" as Robert Alter lucidly has it, with no anxiety about the deity's elegance and no fear that at any moment He may strike; and he has *gevaot* as "heights" when the dancing moun-



"Receiving Moses" from the Charlotte von Rothschild Haggadah, 1842. (Courtesy of the Braginsky Collection, Zurich. Photography by Ardon Bar-Hama, Ra'anana, Israel.)

tains, *heharim*, are the heights, and these lesser dancers are only the hills. It is absurd and anachronistic, in Psalm 126, to translate *afikim* as "wadis," even if the backpacking was fun; and in the same passage to mangle the verse that the King James splendidly delivers as "He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubt-

less come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him,” as “Walks on the walker crying, bearing the sack of seed; then comes the comer, rejoicing, carrying his sheaves.” This is Englander’s most amateurish touch. “Comes the comer”—mercifully without that sack of seed!—is a ludicrous manner of suggesting the duplication of the root in *bo yavo*, a doubling that is designed to convey the psalmist’s confidence in the inevitability of joy, which the King James translators accomplish finely with their “doubtless.”

A similarly foolish extension of literalism to grammar occurs in Englander’s version of Psalm 115, where *peh lahem*, or “they have a mouth,” appears as “a mouth to them,” and gets increasingly clumsy as the mockery of the idols proceeds to “eyes to them,” “ears to them,” and “nose to them”: a translation must not be stranger than the original. In Psalm 118, *ki amilam* is a notoriously obscure phrase, which denotes some kind of destruction that the psalmist will visit upon his enemies, but Englander has “I will crush them like dried leaves” when there are no leaves to crush. Maybe Englander is recalling Rashi’s and Ibn Ezra’s association of the phrase *amilam* with *yemollel ve-yavesh* in Psalm 90, “cut down and withereth” in King James, which suggests the extinction of a plant; but maybe not.

Dayenu.

It was inevitable, given the unparalleled popularity of the Haggadah in Jewish life, and the historical and philosophical primacy of its themes, that commentaries upon it would be composed. The Haggadah is itself an exercise in commentary: its long central narrative is a collection of ancient rabbinical exegeses of the biblical verses that recount the Israelite experience of slavery and redemption. In 1975, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi recorded that 437 commentaries on the Haggadah have been produced, noting mordantly that a Haggadah published in Galicia in 1905 advertised “238 commentaries and additions” on its title page. Some of the commentaries have become classics, such as Isaac Abravanel’s *Zevach Pesach* (Passover Sacrifice), which has been my steady Paschal companion for decades, and the Maharal’s *Gevurot Hashem* (The Mighty Deeds of God), a book-length interpretation of the Haggadah that is a significant contribution to the Jewish philosophy of history. (The richness of this body of commentary can be encountered in Rabbi

Menachem Kasher’s *Haggadah Sheleimah* (Complete Haggadah), which appeared in 1967 and draws upon the full range of Jewish intellectual history from the 11th to the 18th century.)

The *New American Haggadah* comes with four commentaries, which interpret ten passages of the text. They are sermonettes of varying quality, most of them keener



“Preparing for Passover,” from the Washington Haggadah, by Joel ben Simeon, 1478. (Courtesy of the Hebrew Section, Library of Congress.)

on questions than answers. This is appropriate, I guess, for the night of the Four Questions; but those questions, remember, are for the children to ask. The adults are supposed to be less interrogative than instructive—to be unembarrassed by the claim that they are in possession of answers. Contrary to its contemporary reputation, the Haggadah is more about the prestige of an-

swers than the prestige of questions. There is nothing tentative about its account of God, history, and freedom. The tradition that it describes does not shrink from certainties. It is an argumentative tradition, to be sure, but not because certainty is impossible or illegitimate. (And there are limits to its admiration of argument: the son

One comes away with a new respect for the son who does not know how to ask. All this upspeak has the effect of turning Bnai Brak into Aspen.

who asks the most challenging question of all is called wicked. His question is not answered, it is scorned.) The grandeur of the Seder is owed not least to the intellectual confidence of its text. But such confidence is not to our liking anymore. We believe that truth is a form of hegemony. We suspect that pluralism may require perspectivism, or at least a denial of the possibility of objectivity. We wish to be right without anybody else being wrong. We prefer questions. And we like commentaries to be comments. Yet riffing is hardly an adequate response to God, history, and freedom. There are some subjects that cannot be blogged. (Brevity has nothing to do with it: Once upon a time a philosophy could be delivered in a few words. But who any longer has a philosophy?)

“Are there times when we should have resisted an unjust man-made law, and did not?” Jeffrey Goldberg asks at the end of his first commentary. And then, “How do we balance our faith’s demand to care especially for our fellow Jews, and care especially for the entire world?” And then, “Is the Haggadah telling us to get up right now from this table and find a hungry person to feed?” And then, “It is impossible to love the stranger as much as we love our own, but aren’t we still commanded to bring everyone out of Egypt?” And then, “Can we ever trust our emotions? Or is that why we have law—because we can’t?” And then, most bathetically, “Until that [messianic] day arrives, we will continue to gather around the Passover table, to remind ourselves, and each other of the work we must do. So, what are you going to do?” All excellent questions, all old questions. Some of the other commentators also choose to con-

clude their observations quizzically. One comes away with a new respect for the son who does not know how to ask. All this upspeak has the effect of turning Bnai Brak into Aspen. The *New American Haggadah* left me yearning for the assertiveness of interpretation, for the arrogance of a view, which is the excitement of exegesis.

Goldberg’s subject is the politics of Passover. Never mind that talk of politics will hardly make this night different from all other nights, especially in a commu-



“The Seder Table” from the Szyk Haggadah by Arthur Szyk, 1934-1936. (Courtesy of The Arthur Szyk Society.)

nity whose Jewish identity is madly over-politicized. Goldberg comes to the Seder with the war in Iraq and the disproportionate representation of Jews in the Senate and the Arab Spring, as if our unleavened conversations should merely continue our leavened conversations. His comments are delivered in the tone of noisy worldliness, of tough-guy sentimentality, that marks all his writing. His reliance on cliché is considerable.

“Dissatisfaction is a particularly Jewish characteristic.” “One of the joys in being Jewish is membership in a group that is eternally dissatisfied with the way things are.” “Is there something embedded in the Jewish cultural DNA—the memory of Moses’ calling, per-



“The Four Sons” from the Szyk Haggadah by Arthur Szyk, 1934-1936. (Courtesy of The Arthur Szyk Society.)

haps—that sparks a desire to change the world?” These observations are not only provincial, they are also imprecise. I do not see many American Jews waking every morning to the memory of Moses’ calling. We are living in a golden age of Jewish self-satisfaction. And the world is being changed by many people who are not Jews. “Passover is the most politically radical of all holidays,” Goldberg instructs, “in part because, as the scholar Nahum Sarna has noted, the book of Exodus contains the first known example in ancient lit-

erature of civil disobedience” in the Jewish midwives who defied Pharaoh’s order to kill the boys born to the Israelites. Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr., he declares that the heroism of Shifrah and Puah illustrates a glorious fact about Judaism: that even though it is “a law-and-order religion” it insists that “the laws of man must be subjected to a vigorous test: whether or not they conform to moral law as set forth by God.” This is not quite true of Jewish law, which famously disregards the voice of Heaven in favor of the deliberation of men. And has Goldberg looked lately at some of the implementations in the Hebrew Bible of “the moral law as set forth by God”? For a modern liberal (what other kind is there?) they would justify civil disobedience against Moses, too.

Goldberg is an exemplary American Jew in the contentment that accompanies his practice of introspection. He knows more about politics than he knows about Judaism. What can it possibly mean to claim that “feeding the hungry is in some ways the mother of all mitzvot”? When he worries about Jewish anger management, in the tenebrous moment when the Haggadah asks God to pour out His wrath against the unbelievers and the enemies of the Jews, he shows no awareness of the remarkable paucity of Jewish anger in Jewish liturgy (the prayer in the Haggadah that provokes Goldberg’s anxiety is a very abbreviated version of the one that appears in the medieval *Machzor Vitry*) or of the ferocious discussion of this issue among Jewish historians in recent years. And the relationship of observance to belief, of the performance of the commandments to the reasons for the commandments, is much more tangled than the conventional (and unwittingly Pauline) remark that “in Judaism, it is not the thought that counts, but the deed.”

Nathaniel Deutsch is the only one of the commentators who grounds his remarks—an inoffensive offering of kabbalistic and Hasidic ruminations—in rabbinical texts. The *New American Haggadah* is not exactly laden with Jewish learning. There are small deviations from the standard text, which dates back to Saadia Gaon’s siddur in the 10th century, but they are not explained; and a few midrashim are added, but with no word as to why or what for. The timeline by Mia Sara Bruch is a lively collection of literary and historical references to Passover, but it has too many fun facts and is not altogether reliable. The entry about Maimonides manages

to err about his vocation, the date of his birth, and the spelling of his name. But not even this degree of intellectual lightness can justify the lame improv called “Playground” by the American Jewish writer who calls himself Lemony Snicket. If there is anything innovative about the *New American Haggadah*, it is the introduction into the Passover literature of this voice—puerile, trivializing, supercilious, calculatingly quirky, painfully unhilarious—a punk in a yarmulke. Here, for example, is his tiresome gloss on the Four Sons:

Some scholars believe there are four kinds of parents as well.

The Wise Parent is an utter bore. “Listen closely, because you are younger than I am,” says the Wise Parent, “and I will go on and on about Jewish history, based on some foggy memories of my own religious upbringing, as well as an article in a Jewish journal I have recently skimmed.” The Wise Parent must be faced with a small smile of dim interest.

The Wicked Parent tries to cram the story of our liberation into a set of narrow opinions about the world. “The Lord led us out of Egypt,” the Wicked Parent says, “which is why I support a bloodthirsty foreign policy and am tired of certain types of people causing problems.” The Wicked Parent should be told in a firm voice, “With a strong hand God rescued the Jews from bondage, but it was my own clumsy hand that spilled hot soup in your lap.”

The Simple Parent does not grasp the concept of freedom. “There will be no macaroons until you eat all your brisket,” says the Simple Parent, at a dinner honoring the liberation of oppressed peoples. “Also, stop slouching at the table.” In answer to such statements, the Wise Child will roll his eyes in the direction of the ceiling and declare, “Let my people go!”

The Parent Who Is Unable to Inquire has had too much wine, and should be excused from the table.

Is this the cry of a generation? A pitch for Zach Galifianakis? There is something sad about such a fear of adulthood. It is an Egypt of its own.

Respite finally comes in the commentary by Rebecca Newberger Goldstein. Her thoughts give evidence of a long wrestling with the text and its implications. She deftly brings Kafka and Proust to the table, and her meditation on the wailing of the oppressed is worthy of Levinas. Her speculation on the psychological undoing of the Egyptians by the plagues is acute and deeply moving. When Goldstein remarks about Spinoza, a wicked son if ever there was one, that “the people who disowned him have lived to flourish thanks to [his] changes,” she nicely captures the irony of religion after liberalism. About “next year in Jerusalem” she sharply observes that “we are slaves without our longings.” (I would add: and with our longings, too.) In her discussion of the *ke’ilu*, the transfiguring principle of the “as if” that enables us to regard ourselves as if we ourselves came out of Egypt, she grasps the centrality of the imagination to collective memory and, in the form of empathy, to moral life, and so her assertion that at the Seder “we sanctify storytelling” is more than the usual piety about narrativity.

But respites always pass. “This Haggadah makes no attempt to redefine what a Haggadah is,” writes Jonathan Safran Foer, the volume’s editor, in his brief preface. Why not? I would have thought that a redefining, a rethinking, a retelling, a reimagining, would have been the greatest adventure of all. “Like all Haggadahs before it,” he adds, “this one hopes to be replaced.” But some of the Haggadahs that preceded this one have not been replaced. They were works of spiritual and intellectual ambition. It is not immodest to aspire to imperishability; that is how tradition grows and why writers write. Anyway, there is immodesty in the notion that newness, and one’s own signature, will suffice. “It is not enough to speak Yiddish,” I. L. Peretz warned. “You must have something to say.” Those words should be blazoned above every Jewish writer’s desk. The *New American Haggadah* is abundantly a labor of love, but love is not enough.

Leon Wieseltier is the literary editor of The New Republic and the author of Kaddish (Vintage).

Passover on the Potomac

BY VANESSA L. OCHS

Our Haggadah: Uniting Traditions for Interfaith Families

by Cokie and Steve Roberts
Harper, 192 pp., \$19.99

The Washington Haggadah

by Joel ben Simeon, translated by David Stern
Harvard University Press, 248 pp., \$39.95

If the Obamas conduct a seder again this Passover, the haggadah in the hands of family members and guests—Jewish and non-Jewish—will probably be the one they have used for the past two years, that most American of haggadot, the “traditional Maxwell House.” Maxwell House was not the first company to use a complimentary haggadah to sell groceries, but it has been the most prolific, publishing more than 50 million copies since 1934. It is no surprise, then, to see it become a fixture of “our nation’s seder.”

Just across the Potomac in Bethesda, Washington insiders Cokie and Steve Roberts, bestselling authors, celebrities of TV, radio and print journalism, have been holding a Maxwell House-free seder for nearly four decades. The Robertses—he’s a cultural Jew and she’s a religious Catholic—will use their homemade text, just published as *Our Haggadah: Uniting Traditions for Interfaith Families* and so will their kin and guests. Their roster of seder regulars recalls Adam Sandler’s “Chanukah Song”: there’s “Lesley Stahl, a Jew from Massachusetts, and her husband, Aaron Latham, a Protestant from Texas”; there’s “Linda Wertheimer (Protestant, New Mexico) and her husband, Fred (Jewish, Brooklyn), and Nina Totenberg (Jewish, Massachusetts) and her husband, Floyd Haskell (Protestant, Colorado).”

The Robertses’ initiative is a lineal descendant of the once famous and singularly high-powered seder presided

over by former Secretary of Labor, Supreme Court Justice, and Ambassador to the UN Arthur J. Goldberg and his wife, Dorothy. In 1961, the Goldbergs’ guest list included President and Mrs. John F. Kennedy, the Speaker of the House, two Supreme Court justices, two senators, and the president of the AFL-CIO. In 1967, it included the newlywed Robertses, at whose wedding Goldberg

Unlike the White House seder, which culminates with the traditional call of “Next year in Jerusalem,” the Robertses and their guests express their hope for “Next year in Bethesda.”

had given a speech. The Goldbergs’ homemade haggadah presented Passover’s theme of freedom in American language: “The Festival of Pesach calls upon us to put an end to all slavery . . . Pesach calls us to the eternal pursuit of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Mrs. Goldberg, in her marginal notes, reminded herself to mention that “one of the best descriptions of the exodus is the great Negro spiritual ‘Go Down Moses.’” Cokie Roberts remembers participating “with gusto” when “the crowd started singing freedom songs from the civil rights and labor movements, held over from the days when Goldberg had been a leading labor lawyer.”

In 1968, the Robertses were on their own and tried the Maxwell House haggadah, but they ditched it the following year for their own stitched-together, pick-and-choose haggadah, modeled after the Goldbergs’ but tailored to their interfaith marriage. It is but one exemplar of the many “homemade haggadahs” that have been created ever since it was discovered that you didn’t have to be a rabbi to cut and paste (first literally, later digitally) to arrive at a ceremony that felt theologically or politically relevant, and temporally realistic, given the length of your group’s attention span.

The Robertses began with “The New Haggadah” published by the Reconstructionist movement. Its first edition in 1941 got Mordecai Kaplan into trouble with his Jewish Theological Seminary colleagues, to whom he referred in his diary as “the great do-nothings who command positions of spiritual influence in Jewish life.” They assailed him for such sins ranging from his “unscientific” translation of *karpas* as “parsley” to the much more weighty offense of eliminating any reference in the text to the chosenness of the Jews. Responding liturgically to the many American Jews for whom the seder ritual had become “meaningless and uninspiring,” Kaplan intended to provide a haggadah that “could make of that service a living religious experience.” To their selections from Kaplan, the Robertses added prayers that he had omitted but to which their guests remained attached. They also added more narrative parts from Exodus and deleted anything that had a xenophobic ring to it (in the early 1990s, they made the requisite gender tweaks). The book they have published is a haggadah for interfaith families such as their own who have decided, as they did, to create a home in which the rituals of more than one religion are practiced.

Unlike the White House seder, which culminates, interestingly enough, with the traditional call of “Next year in Jerusalem,” the Robertses and their guests express their hope for “Next year in Bethesda,” and they do not mean the biblical healing pool in Jerusalem. Rather, the Robertses explain what they consider to be a truism: “For many American Jews, especially Jews in interfaith relationships, celebrating Passover in Israel is not a deeply held desire.” Wishing to hold more seders in Bethesda is the “more honest hope.” But there seems to be some confusion here. Whatever one’s politics, the haggadah’s aspiration to be in Jerusalem is not about booking tickets on El Al for a Passover at the King David Hotel nor even about settling in Israel. It’s about the “audacious hope” of a particular people, once saved, only to find itself in exile again and again. It’s about having the fortitude to overcome despair; it’s about homeland, nationhood. For some, it’s a heavenly Jerusalem that will descend to earth in messianic times; for others, it’s a dream of perfection towards which one can work. However it is understood, the idea of Jerusalem is a lot to give up in favor of, well, remaining where one is.

The Roberts seder is most hospitable to the Jew who

likes the idea of a few traditional practices, but isn’t much interested in Jewish law or theology. If God is not absent from the Robertses’ haggadah text, it is because Cokie is a Christian who believes in a loving God who experiences Passover and Easter as completely compatible with one another. If in Jewish practice a blessing is said *over* bread, at the Roberts seder the matzah itself is blessed, made holy through the uttered name of God, as in communion. And Jesus is there too: He is beckoned at the singing of all verses of “We Shall Overcome,” originally a Christian spiritual before it became the anthem of the civil rights movement. One verse, which the Robertses include, begins, “We shall be like Him, we shall be like Him . . .” The source for it is, of course, John 3:2: “But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.”



Steve and Cokie Roberts. (Photo courtesy of Felicia Evans.)

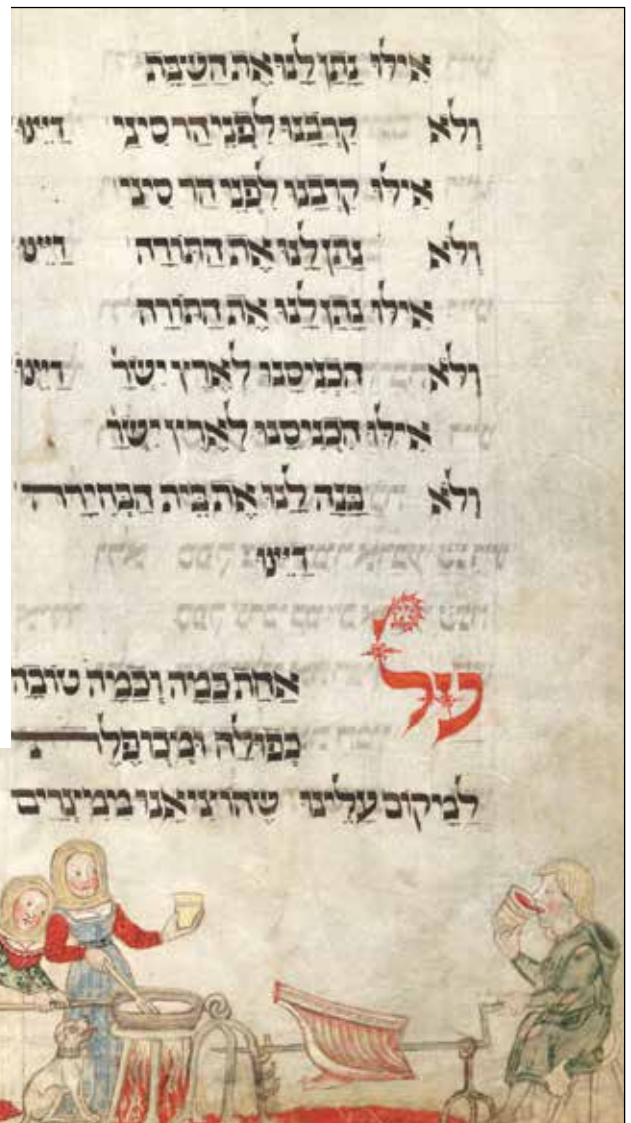
I myself have witnessed the often intense and sometimes heartbreaking negotiations on the part of interfaith couples who seek to discern how and if sacred celebrations can be conjoined. Jewish culture layered with Easter Sunday works for the Robertses, but is not the right recipe for the many religiously educated, committed, Passover-experienced, and God-directed Jews who have no need to rely upon the non-Jews with whom they have linked lives to be what Mrs. Roberts’ husband jokingly calls “the better Jew.”

Serenely removed from such questions, back on the DC side of the Potomac, in the Library of Congress,

sits the 15th-century haggadah known, on account of its nine-decade sojourn in our nation's capital, as "the Washington Haggadah." Harvard University Press has

just issued a sumptuous facsimile edition, along with a translation of the Hebrew text and commentary by David Stern, a distinguished scholar of rabbinic texts at the University of Pennsylvania, and art historian Katrin Kogman-Appel, who teaches at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.

Stern frames his introduction as a biography of the haggadah. "The life of any haggadah," he writes, "begins much earlier than the moment of its production." It commences "with the formulation of its text, a process that took at least ten centuries; and that text itself derives from a ceremony, a ritual, that goes back to the earliest



Pages from "the Washington Haggadah," clockwise from left: A man stuffs bitter herbs into his wife's mouth. The "Dayenu" page. The matzah-holding monkey. (Images courtesy of the Hebraic Section, Library of Congress.)

beginnings of the Israelite nation.” The roots of that ritual, the seder, have both pre-biblical and biblical origins and reflect a melding, over time, of practices marking



The Messiah rides in on a donkey during the seder. (Image courtesy of the Hebraic Section, Library of Congress.)

the spring harvest of wheat and sacred national memories that would be “turned into watershed moments in the sacred history of Israel, the one commemorating the divine salvation of the first-born sons from death, the other the miraculous Exodus of the Israelites from Egyptian servitude.” But how did we get from the pilgrim’s family meal of matzah, bitter herbs, and lamb sacrificed at the Temple in Jerusalem to the symbolic “surrogate” meal and haggadah text that came in its stead when the Temple was destroyed? Although the Tosefta, Mishna, and Talmud give us glimpses of seder practices, we possess no written text older than the 9th or 10th century. The fragments we do have indicate that

the earliest liturgy was not freestanding, but part of a prayer book. Stern apprises us of the different kinds of haggadah manuscripts that would emerge from the 13th century onward, when it became a book of its own, and takes us just to the cusp of the first printed haggadot.

The Washington Haggadah in particular “exemplifies the lives of Jewish books more generally.” Produced in Germany, it traveled to Italy, and then, before its arrival in America, “wandered across continents and through the lands of the Diaspora.” Its creator, scribe and illustrator Joel Feibush ben Simeon, was responsible for eighteen or so manuscripts that are still extant, half of which are haggadot. When the Jews were expelled from his native Cologne, he moved to Bonn, where he received his training. Exiled once again, he went to northern Italy. In this period, when he returned periodically to Germany, he created haggadot, siddurim, and machzorim. In Katrin Kogman-Appel’s assessment, Joel was a cultural agent, melding the “flatness and two-dimensionality of the spared-ground technique typical of German illustration” and the “Italian feeling for depth and detail . . .” The Washington Haggadah was not commissioned. Joel, confident in his artistic powers, knew a customer would come along, and left the end pages empty for personalization.

Joel is a very funny artist—imagine a 15th-century Roz Chast making haggadot. He loves visual puns, doodles with hide-and-seek gargoyles, and throws in a matzah-holding monkey (why? who knows?), all the while gently satirizing the denizens of his social world. My favorite three images are ones I see as a triptych on the battle of the sexes. The first is an image of a food preparation scene. On the right, there is a miserable fellow in a scruffy tunic turning the spit of a roasting rack of lamb. He is swilling a cup of wine, and there is an ample flask nearby for refills. On the left, there are two upstanding women (with their dog, why not?) stirring a pot of soup, one of whom offers a sobering cup to the man, as if to say in frustration, “Enough!”—it is, after all, on the “Dayenu” page—“Why must women do all the hard work?” The second image illustrates the passage on *maror*, the bitter herb, with a haggadah convention of textbook misogyny: An enormous husband attempts to stuff a bouquet of bitter herbs into his wife’s mouth, for she, as the joke goes, is his bitterness. His tiny wife holds her own, looking away and holding on to her double-edged sword for steadiness, even though that sword in Proverbs depicts the nasty sharpness that is woman. In

the third image Joel whimsically resolves these images of marital strife with a goofy-happy, even eschatological ending: Giddyapping into a door of a medieval home comes a donkey, and on it the Messiah himself, and the

The roots of the seder have both pre-biblical and biblical origins and reflect a melding of practices marking the spring harvest of wheat and sacred national memories.

whole happy and now harmonious family: dad, mom (this time, she's the tippler), all the kids, and even granny (or a servant), hanging on to the tail for dear life.

Stern traces the “afterlife” of this haggadah as well. I wish I could say it was as colorful a story as that of the Sarajevo Haggadah, which Geraldine Brooks fictionalized in *The People of the Book* a few years ago, but it's not. Joel's haggadah was purchased by a Jew in Germany and probably stayed there for quite a while, before moving to Italy. By the 19th century, it had come into the hands of a distinguished Provençali family in Mantua, who left wine drops and marginalia that suggest it was still being used at their family seders. In 1902, the haggadah was bought by Ephraim Deinard, the flamboyant book dealer, bibliographer, parodist, and polemicist (he despised both Hasidism and Reform Judaism and questioned the existence of Jesus).

This brings us back to Washington. Deinard's dream was to establish “a major Judaica collection in America's national library,” the Library of Congress. The philanthropist Jacob H. Schiff financed the purchase of several batches of Deinard's collection of almost 20,000 Hebrew manuscripts. Joel's haggadah, called “Hebrew

Manuscript #1,” arrived around 1916. Now enshrined as “a treasure,” it ceased its life as a functioning haggadah. However, a few years ago, Sharmila Sen, a Harvard University Press editor, was shown the Washington Haggadah while visiting the Library of Congress. Sen, a Bengali Hindi born in India who had never seen a haggadah or attended a seder, fell in love with the book:

At first with the material object itself—the parchment is exquisite, the illuminations so quirky and charming, the calligraphy is beautiful. As the curator told me the story of the book, I wanted to bring it back to the table . . . I found out that the last (and only) facsimile of this book was made almost 20 years ago and cost over \$1000. I wanted this to be a book which would be . . . something real people bring to the Passover table and not be afraid of a little wine spill or food stain . . .

That's not likely to happen. The book Sen has produced is simply too gorgeous. The reproductions reflect the feel of parchment and the shine of the golden initial illuminations; the design by Annamarie McMahon is pristine, with the variations in color of the English type mirroring Joel's varied palette, and even the binding, embossed in gold and copper hues, reflect Joel's marginal decorative elements. Besides, after flipping back and forth between the facsimile pages and the English translation that follows it, struggling to keep the assembled guests on track, and longing for “Chad Gadya,” (a song not included until after Joel's day), one might end up missing the Maxwell House. Where will we be seeing the *The Washington Haggadah* this Passover? Where else, but on our nation's coffee table?

Vanessa L. Ochs is an associate professor of religious studies at the University of Virginia and is writing a “biography” of the Passover haggadah for Princeton University Press.

Pour Out Your Fury

BY PHILIP GETZ

The Monk's Haggadah: A Fifteenth-Century Illuminated Codex from the Monastery of Tegernsee, with a Prologue by Friar Erhard von Pappenheim

edited by David Stern, Christoph Marksches, and Sarit Shalev-Eyni

The Pennsylvania State University Press, 296 pp., \$79.95

In 1803, at the outset of the vast state-building secularization process known as “mediatization” (*deutsche Mediatisierung*), the Bavarian government confiscated thousands of volumes from monasteries and transferred them to the State Library in Munich. The man in charge of this operation, the German historian and librarian Baron Johann Christoph von Aretin, discovered innumerable curiosities in the process. The most famous of these was the hitherto unknown Carmina Burana manuscript, a medieval collection of sometimes bawdy poems, tales, and songs. Far less well-known but, as it turns out, equally intriguing was a volume that he described simply as a “Hebrew prayer book with precious illustrations.” In fact, it was a Passover haggadah, but he was right about the illustrations, even if it was for reasons he appears to have missed.

Although its illuminations are exquisite, what makes this haggadah utterly unique is that some of them are also aggressively Christian. For instance, the quotation from Chronicles 21:16 “with a drawn sword in his hand directed against Jerusalem” is accompanied by a Jesus-like figure raising a cross-like sword with one hand and folding two fingers and his thumb into the palm of his other hand to symbolize the Trinity. The same Jesus appears again several pages later when the haggadah beseeches God to “Pour out Your fury on the nations that do not know You.” This time he is capped with a *Judenhat* and galloping in as the Messiah on a white horse.

The Latin Prologue that precedes the manuscript contains something darker: a detailed outline of the Seder, its laws and traditions, together with several classic (and innovative) versions of Christian anti-

The “Christianizing” of Jewish iconography in *The Monk's Haggadah* remains something of a mystery.

Semitism. Almost unbelievably, this and other fascinating elements of the manuscript went unnoticed until nearly 200 years after Aretin jotted his little catalog note.

In his moving and surprisingly gripping introduction to *The Monk's Haggadah*, Harvard scholar David Stern describes the journey that he and his talented co-editors, Christoph Marksches and Sarit Shalev-Eyni, took in uncovering the mysteries of the manuscript and creating this handsome critical version. (It is the inaugural volume of the Dimyonot series by The Pennsylvania State University Press.) Together with transcriptions and translations of the Prologue, text, and marginalia, the new book contains marvelous essays that make it a comprehensive account of the 500-year life of this mysterious manuscript.

As it turns out, the haggadah had gone through several hands before Aretin's time. It arrived at the monastery of Saint Quirinus at Tegernsee in southern Germany sometime around 1489, as part of a bequest from the library of Paulus Wann, a priest who preached at the cathedral in Passau. Like all haggadah manuscripts of the time, this one shows every sign of having been written by a Jew, and it is unclear when and under what circumstances it came into Wann's possession. It may have occurred around 1478, when several Jews in Passau were accused of host desecration (a 16th-century painting by Wolfgang Sauber of the alleged incident shows a group of Jewish men

methodically stabbing coin-like Communion wafers bearing the image of Jesus). This led to the forced conversion of 46 Jews to Christianity and the expulsion of the rest from the city. Whether this terrible (but far from unique) episode is what brought the haggadah into Wann's hands is impossible to know for certain.

In any event, upon Wann's death, the manuscript arrived at the monastery before being sent by its abbot to Erhard von Pappenheim, one of the many Christian Hebraists of the era, men who saw Jewish texts not merely as targets but as sources of insight. A colleague of the great scholar Johannes Reuchlin and an impressive Christian Hebraist in his own right, Erhard (I will follow the editors in referring to him by his first name) wrote the haggadah's unique and fascinating Latin prologue before sending it back to the monastery. Here is where things get very interesting and very ugly.

Nearly every element of Erhard's prologue contributes to its meticulous depiction of a contemporary Ashkenazi Seder. I say nearly because, written in as matter of fact a manner as the recipe for "herosses," we find the following:

If there is fresh blood, the head of the household sprinkles some drops—more or fewer, depending on how much he has—into the prepared batter, even though, they say, a single drop will suffice. If there is no fresh blood, he grinds dried blood into powder, and then hydrates and sprinkles it as explained previously.

This is, of course, a version of the classic European blood libel, here delivered in what reads like a grisly parody of talmudic legalism, including the distinction between the alleged *lekhatchila*, or de jure, preference for fresh Christian blood and the *bedi'aved*, or de facto, acceptance of dried blood in its stead. However, this calumny is soon followed by a much more surprising one:

Once they have set the table with the individual items mentioned previously, the leader of the household sits at the head of the table with his chalice filled with wine before him. Then . . . he takes a single drop from another chalice full of

Christian blood, and putting it in his wine, he says: "This is the blood of a Christian child." Once his own wine is mixed with the blood, he pours a drop into every other chalice.



*Illumination
from The Monk's
Haggadah.
(Courtesy of The
Pennsylvania State
University Press.)*

As David Stern informs us, this second fabrication has no precedent in the history of anti-Judaism. No precedent, that is, unless you consider Erhard's source for both descriptions: the forced confessions of the Jews of Trent following the infamous Simon of Trent blood libel case of 1475. And who is credited with having translated the Latin protocols of the trial into German? None other than our monk, Erhard von Pappenheim, who was likely present at the show trial.

The fact that Erhard's Prologue is attached to the manuscript raises interesting questions. In the study of medieval and early modern books, the concept of "authorship" has come to encompass the combined forces that sponsored and conceptualized a given manuscript. In his wonderful study of four illuminated haggadahs from the medieval period, Marc Michael Epstein notes that:

The authorship of each haggadah transmitted a particular ideological, theological, philosophical, historiosophical, political, and social agenda, a way of telling the tale of the relationship of Jews with God, their neighbors, and each other through their exegesis of the narratives of sacred scripture.

What makes *The Monk's Haggadah* so fascinating is that different ideological, philosophical, and historical factors were presumably at play at each stage of its production, before it took on its final form.

In order to address the intricacies of all of these factors, each of the co-editors has contributed a chapter or chapters. Sarit Shalev-Eyni, a brilliant scholar of Jewish and Christian art at The Hebrew University, provides a remarkable codicological analysis of the scribal text, marginalia, and illustrations, placing them in their hybrid Italo-Ashkenazi and Christian contexts. Shalev-Eyni concludes that there were at least four pairs of hands involved in the production of the haggadah in its early stages: a talented Jewish scribe; two vocalizers and proof-readers, also Jews by birth, one of whom signs the end of the manuscript as "Joseph, the son of R. Ephraim of blessed memory"; and at least one artist, possibly more.

Shalev-Eyni's painstaking analysis is as illuminating as the illuminations themselves, and her pointed notes about the uniqueness of the manuscript in the tradition it follows is a crash course in the iconography of the genre. She jumps back and forth from our haggadah to the Murphy, Schocken, London Ashkenazi, and Floersheim haggadah manuscripts, noting similarities and differences effortlessly (or so it reads). The greatest difference of all, the "Christianizing" of Jewish iconography noted above, remains something of a mystery. Were the illustrators Christian? Converts? And who was the patron who commissioned them? Shalev-Eyni simply cannot say for sure, but isn't it tempting to imagine Wann seizing an unfinished manuscript during the expulsion of 1478 and then subverting its Jewishness

with those illustrations? A real haggadah desecration, as it were, in response to the imagined host desecration.

It was Christoph Marksches, a renowned scholar of ancient Christianity at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, who discovered that Erhard von Pappenheim was the author of the Prologue. His essay is a lucid history of Wann, Pappenheim, and the other figures through whose hands the manuscript passed, namely, Ambrosius Schwerzenbeck (the acquiring librarian of the Tegernsee Monastery) and Konrad von Ayrinschmalz (the monastery's abbot). What he does most brilliantly is describe the Viennese intellectual and theological tradition in which all of these men were trained.

Marksches' deep knowledge of Christianity and his extraordinary command of 15th-century German humanism give him a precise contextual sense of Erhard's thought. Thus, where another scholar might be tempted to see something clever in Erhard's reference to First Corinthians 5:7, "clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened," Marksches is quick to note that "Erhard is not original . . . Rather, he is influenced by entirely basic beliefs of the Christian allegories of the Jewish Passover feast, as formulated in the first generation of Christian theologizing."

Early Christianity is of course central to understanding the Christian Hebraists' interest in Passover and the haggadah. The synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John connect Jesus' final days on Earth with Passover, and as Anthony Grafton and Joanna Weinberg have pointed out, Protestant scholars would later "claim that the study of Hebrew could be justified by the light it shed on the problems connected with the dating of the Crucifixion." But Erhard's interest in the Passover Seder was slightly different. He was most focused on mapping the ritual and liturgy of the Seder onto the dynamics of the Eucharist. Marksches stresses, quite rightly, "The central theological thesis advocated by Erhard in his commentary on Paul Wann's Haggadah . . . [is] 'that both Christ at the Last Supper and the Holy Church in the Office of the Mass imitate the aforementioned ritual.'" The paradoxical desire of Christian Hebraists to deride Judaism while at the same time seeking within it the truths of Christianity is displayed more clearly in this haggadah than perhaps in any other document.

For this reason, David Stern calls Erhard's Prologue "the ultimate Christian Hebraist fantasy," and his eye-opening

essay is a careful reading that places it in the context both of Christian Hebraism and Jewish tradition. Stern leaves not a single intriguing word unaddressed, sometimes with unexpected, even uncomfortable results. For instance, in Erhard's telling, the sprinkling of the blood at the Seder is accompanied by the enumeration of the plagues and a supplication that "God bring all these plagues and curses upon his enemies, and especially upon the great populace of Christians." This, of course, will strike many as ironic, even perverse, since the custom of dripping wine at the enumeration of the 10 plagues is generally described in light of God's lament at seeing any of His creatures drown described in the Talmud (Megillah 10b). In this interpretation, the drops of wine are a symbolic diminishment of our joy. However, Stern quotes the late 14th-, early 15th-century rabbinic authority Rabbi Yaakov ben Moshe Levi Moellin, known as the Maharil, as saying, "It seems to me

that the reason [for sprinkling drops of wine] is to say: May He save us from all these [plagues], and may they befall our enemies." According to Stern this means that "Erhard's understanding is, then, an authentic reflection of contemporary Jewish belief."

In his classic *Haggadah and History*, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi described the haggadah as "a book for philosophers and for the folk, it has been reprinted more often and in more places than any other Jewish classic, and has been the most frequently illustrated." Writing in 1973, he counted at least 3,500 editions of the Passover haggadah as having been produced. *The Monk's Haggadah* is certainly different from all the others.

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The Fifth Question

BY CHAIM SAIMAN

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



Passover Seder by Malcah Zeldis, 1999. (Art Resource, New York, © 2015 Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.)

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

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

One begins by recalling that we were slaves in Egypt and recounting all the hardships Pharaoh wrought.

But he should conclude with the miracles and wonders that were done for us, and with our freedom. That is, he should expound on the verse “my father was a wandering Aramean” until he concludes that paragraph. *And anyone who adds and elaborates is surely praised.*

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

Arukh, disagrees:

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

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

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

Neither the *Shulchan Arukh* nor the *Tur* even cites the haggadah's statement that "whoever elaborates in the retelling of the story of the exodus is surely praised." This is particularly unusual, because the *Shulchan Arukh* tends to follow Maimonides' lead—often verbatim—unless a line of competing authorities rule to the contrary. In this case, however, no such authorities are to be found, and yet the prescriptions of both the haggadah and Maimonides are not merely ignored but actually reversed.

The authority for this "hurry-up-and-eat" view appears to come from an early rabbinic text, included in the Tosefta (a collection of texts that parallels and to some extent supplements the Mishnah) and later cited in the Babylonian Talmud:

Rabbi Eliezer states: We *grab the matzot* so that the children will not fall asleep. Rabbi Yehuda related in his name: Even if he has only eaten one appetizer, and even if he has not dipped in relish, we *grab the matzot* so that the children will not fall asleep.

What does "grab the *matzot*" mean? For Maimonides this is the source for common practice of the parents *hiding* the matza from the children. The *Shulchan Arukh* and the *Tur* plausibly take it as a mandate to "grab the *matzot*" and eat them early in the evening, before the children fall asleep. But this does not mean that the *Shulchan Arukh* imagines the parents following their children to bed after the meal, at least not ideally:

A person is required to delve into the laws of the Pesach sacrifice and the exodus from Egypt and to recount the miracles God performed for our forefathers until he is overtaken by exhaustion.

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

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

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

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

Maimonides never mentions the Tosefta's story, nor any requirement to stay up all night studying the laws of Pesach. To the contrary, he ends his laws of the Seder with a discussion of what happens when someone falls asleep at the Seder (which will occasionally happen

during all that praiseworthy discussion and elaboration). Further, he offers a very different reason for not drinking after the fourth cup: so that the last taste of the matza (the *afikoman*) remains the final memory of the Seder. For Maimonides, the work of the Seder is done before and during the meal, not after.

I have already noted that, unlike Maimonides, the *Shulchan Arukh* does not cite the most famous line of the haggadah that “anyone who elaborates in the retelling of the exodus story is praiseworthy,” but, tellingly, it also doesn’t cite what might be its second most famous line, that “everyone must see himself as if he personally participated in the exodus from Egypt.” Why not?

In short, two distinct conceptions of the Seder emerge from the classical rabbinic sources and are codified, respectively, by Maimonides and the *Shulchan Arukh*. The view of the Mishnah, Maimonides, and the haggadah itself is that what the Seder is about is the retelling and discussion of the story of the exodus from Egypt to the point where one sees oneself as having been personally redeemed. Here, the entire family uses story, study, and song to relive the birth of Jewish nationhood. When successful, this is surely close to the Seder’s ideal. There is, however, also a cost to setting ambitions so high: The kids might fall asleep and the adults may tune out.

The conception of the Seder in the Tosefta and the *Shulchan Arukh* is more modest. The Seder starts promptly and is (relatively) short so that no one misses out on the essential, legally mandated, ritual elements. Then, once the Seder is over, those with the ability to follow Rabban Gamliel’s lead can stay awake all night discussing the laws of the Pesach. Perhaps it’s no wonder, then, that in the haggadah itself it is Rabban Gamliel who reminds us that “whoever does not mention the Pesach sacrifice, the matza, and the *maror* has not fulfilled his obligation.” His statement immediately follows the elaborate expositions of the biblical verses, and we can almost hear Rabban Gamliel reminding us to keep the focus on the accessible, tactile experiences of the Seder: the ritual foods and their symbolism. (Incidentally this approach is probably closer to what happened during Temple times, when the food came first and the discussion followed.)

The difference between these two views of the Seder

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

A similar distinction runs through another of the Seder’s well-known passages, the discussion of the four sons. In our version of the haggadah, the wise son is taught the laws of the Pesach sacrifice, whereas the simple son is told the basic Pesach story. The Jerusalem Talmud, however, reverses the priorities: The wise son is taught the story of the exodus, whereas the simple son is taught the laws of the Seder. The first view sees in halakha not just a series of rules, but a complex religious world view developed from fundamental legal principles. Law is not only to be observed, but is to be studied, analyzed, and its meaning absorbed. By contrast, the story told to the simple son is just that—a story, for those who can’t handle more. Arguably, the Jerusalem Talmud teaches the exact opposite. In assigning the story of the exodus to the wise son, story comes to mean the theology of Jewish chosenness, the service of God, and the corresponding complexities of freedom, slavery, choice, and destiny. The laws taught to the simple son are, on this account, just ritual directions: eat this, drink that, and so on.

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

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Frogs, Griffins, and Jews Without Hats: How My Children Illuminated the Haggadah



BY MARC MICHAEL EPSTEIN

About a decade ago, just before Passover, I found myself in a Conservative synagogue in Riverdale, New York, discussing the way that the magnificent 14th-century illuminated Spanish “Golden Haggadah” illustrated the plague of frogs. I was pointing out the fact that the image—which shows Aaron striking a large frog and many other, smaller frogs emerging from it—depicted not only scripture, but also a midrash found in *Tanchuma* and mentioned by Rashi. Since Exodus 8:2 uses the singular “the frog emerged” when describing the plague, this interpretive tradition suggested that only one frog initially came out of the Nile.

The illustration thus demonstrates a point made by Bezalel Narkiss and his students at the Center for Jewish Art in Jerusalem. Whereas previous scholars tended to view medieval Jewish art as simply illustrating scripture, Narkiss and others showed that illuminated Jewish manuscripts illustrated not only the literal biblical text, but midrash as well. This demonstrated that, regardless of whether the artists were Jewish or Gentile, their patrons were commissioning art that was not only stunningly beautiful but distinctively Jewish.

“Some versions of this midrash describe the single frog as monstrous in size and imagine the swarm of frogs as emerging from its mouth, as we see here,” I was saying, when out of the corner of my eye, I saw my then 8-year-old daughter Elisheva bouncing up and down. “Not now, Shevi!” I stage-whispered. “But, Abba,” she replied, “I noticed something in the picture!” Swallowing my annoyance, I decided to use this as ‘a teachable moment.’”

“Yes, Shevi?” “Abba, you just said that the frogs are coming out of the big frog’s mouth. But Aaron is hitting the big frog’s head, and all the little frogs are coming out of his tushy!”—at which point she collapsed in a paroxysm of laughter, and I turned beet-red. My cheeks still burn at the memory. But Shevi was absolutely right. This peculiar

detail is unique among medieval haggadot, which generally show Aaron striking the Nile or striking one (not particularly big) frog on the head (as for instance, in the so-called “Brother Haggadah,” also from 14th-century Spain), without depicting the emergence of the other frogs from

The Golden Haggadah moved beyond the biblical text and its rabbinic commentary to an angry, hilarious, and entirely contemporary bit of visual commentary.

any of its orifices. The Passover Haggadah is based on the idea that “you shall tell your children,” (Ex. 13:8) but, with their unprejudiced eyes, my children have often ended up telling me.

Manuscripts such as the Golden Haggadah did not come cheap. They could only be dreamt of by the “one percent” of 14th-century Jewish Barcelona. Every application of pen and brush to parchment represented a considerable expenditure. Consequently, the artists were, almost certainly, very closely supervised, and the inclusion of specifics such as the precise origin of the swarm of frogs must have been considered carefully. Such pictorial details, especially the apparently odd or surprising ones, are windows into the social, intellectual, religious, and political universe of the Jews who commissioned these treasures.

What, then, do we learn from the case of the miraculous farting frog of Barcelona? The men and women who planned and executed this manuscript moved beyond the biblical text and its rabbinic commentary to articulate an angry, hilarious, and entirely contemporary bit of

commentary. That commentary, much like the spraying frogs in the illustration, flies in several directions at once. It is directed, in the first place, at the historical Egyptians of the Exodus narrative. But it is also directed at contemporary oppressors of Jews. (The horrified Pharaoh looks, of course, like a medieval Christian king.) Moreover, the picture also gently mocks the elegance of the manuscript itself, where in general, nary a hair is out of place on the stately figures playing out the drama of the plague scenes.

Bezalel Narkiss once described the artistic style of the Golden Haggadah as barely distinguishable from

visual commentaries—this grotesque little detail. Hidden in plain sight, it is certainly playful, but it was also a scatological revenge fantasy.

The Golden Haggadah’s miraculous frog is a small detail, liable to be glossed over in a manuscript that contains many treasures. But no one could fail to notice the animal-headed figures in the first, and most famous, illuminated Haggadah, the so-called “Birds’ Head Haggadah.” Within the rather modest field of Jewish art history, the Birds’ Head Haggadah, produced in Southern Germany around the turn of the 14th century, is as much of an enigma as the Pyramids of Giza or Mona Lisa’s smile. It mysteriously depicts all of the Jews in its pages as having the heads of birds. However, their beaks are supplemented with mammalian ears and beards so that they look like griffins (hybrids of lions and eagles). With their human bodies, these lion-eagle-human hybrids recall the *kruvim*, the “cherubs,” on the Ark of the Covenant.

As Meyer Schapiro and others have noted, these figures are clearly an attempt to comply with the halakhic prohibition against complete pictorial representations of humans. But this can’t be the whole answer, for the Birds’ Head Haggadah complies with this prohibition in the case of Pharaoh and his soldiers by representing them (originally) with blank, human-shaped faces. This may be a case of artistic aggression (as enemies of the Jews, the Egyptians are literally effaced) but it also shows that one can avoid depicting the human face without resorting to birds’ heads.

One could read the artistic choice of the Birds’ Head Haggadah as deliberate and political. Following this interpretation, these griffin-like figures combine the Lion of Judah with the Imperial eagle, since the Jews were regarded as *servi camerae regis* (servants of the royal chamber) in the Holy Roman Empire. One could also understand the figures mystically: Lions, eagles, and humans recall three of the four creatures Ezekiel describes as bearing the Divine Chariot (the fourth creature, the ox, being excluded since it recalls the sin of the Golden Calf). However, since it is impossible to know the political inclinations, or mystical sophistication, of the artists and



“The plague of frogs” in the Golden Haggadah, 14th-century Spain. (Courtesy of the British Library, London.)

that of contemporary Christian books of Psalms. In fact, however, what my daughter’s observation shows is that—in spite of their relative wealth and power—the patrons of this Spanish Haggadah felt vulnerable to the Pharaohs of their day and somewhat angry about their political situation. So they commissioned a manuscript containing—among many learned and sophisticated

patrons of the manuscript, my own speculation is that these figures may derive in part from the much more widely known and accessible saying of *Pirkei Avot*:

Judah ben Tema used to say “be strong as the leopard, swift as the eagle, fleet as the gazelle, and brave as the lion to the will of your Father in heaven.”

One can see this formula reduced to just lions and eagles in the memorial prayer *Av Ha-rachamim*, perhaps the most famous supplication of medieval German Jewry, which describes the Jewish martyrs of the First Crusade as having been “swifter than eagles and bolder than lions” to do the will of God. Thus, the griffin-headed Jews of the Birds’ Head Haggadah seem to reveal something of the spiritual self-perception and aspirations of medieval Ashkenazic Jews.

However, what is most interesting to me in the Birds’ Head Haggadah is what we can learn from the distinctions made among the various griffin-headed Jewish figures in the manuscript. Most of the Jewish adult male figures in the manuscript wear the peculiar, pointed *Judenhut*. This “Jewish hat”—of which not a single physical example survived the Middle Ages—always signifies a Jew in medieval Christian art, whether that person is a prophet, or patriarch, or an enemy of Jesus. Occasionally, it even appears on the head of Jesus himself, as in the depiction of the Supper at Emmaus in the so-called Psalter of St. Louis.

In the Birds’ Head Haggadah, almost all adult male Jews, including Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, the Israelite elders, and the leader of the Seder, are depicted as wearing the *Judenhut*. But there are three instances in which individuals with griffin heads are shown bare-headed. The first two are pictures of Joseph and the Israelite slaves. Rabbinic tradition is very careful to represent Joseph as remaining a *tzaddik*—a Jewish saint—even while working for Pharaoh. Similarly, the Israelites are understood to have remained uncompromisingly traditional, even while enslaved in Egypt—refusing to change their language, their clothing, or their Hebrew names.

Given that the midrash explicitly affirms that the Jews continued to wear their distinctive clothing, the denial of the Jewish hat to these figures seems strange.

In fact, I believe this depiction to be a deliberate critique of the rabbinic tradition growing out of the actual experience of medieval Jews in Ashkenaz. One figure



“The plague of frogs” in the *Brother Haggadah*, 14th-century Spain. (Courtesy of the British Library, London.)

of medieval Jewish life was the Jew who worked in the royal court, or for local princelings, in some capacity. Although these individuals often played a key role in the safety and well being of their communities, their everyday lives at court placed inevitable strains on religious observance, as well as raising suspicions among fellow Jews regarding their true loyalties. I suspect that the image of Joseph and the slaves as Jews without hats is evidence of a real-world skepticism that, rabbinic assurances notwithstanding, Jews could ever have remained fully observant at court.

The third instance of hatless griffin-headed Jews is one I would have missed if it weren’t for another one of my children. When he was about 10, my son Misha and I were looking at the elegant 1965 facsimile of the Birds’ Head Haggadah. Seeing that Pharaoh and his soldiers, who are shown pursuing the departing Israelites, are depicted with blank human heads, he remarked that “all the *mitzrim* (Egyptians) have normal faces, and all the *Bnei Yisrael* (Jews) have birds’ faces.”



“The restored Passover sacrifice” in the Birds’ Head Haggadah, 14th-century Germany. (Courtesy of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.)



“Datan and Aviram” in the Birds’ Head Haggadah, 14th-century Germany. (Courtesy of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.)

Smug, in what I supposed was my superior art-historical expertise, I replied, “Look again, Misha—and this time more carefully—do all the *mitzrim* really have normal faces? Can you spot the two who don’t?” The child did not miss a beat. “Abba,” he burst out, “anybody can tell that those guys are Datan and Aviram!” In response to my puzzled look, he explained, “The *nogshim* (Jewish taskmasters)! See? One of them has a whip and the other has a club, so they have to be Datan and Aviram!”

Nogshim indeed. To paraphrase Psalms, out of the mouths of day school children wisdom is established. No previous scholar, to my knowledge, had distin-

guished between the figures in question and the Egyptians around them. They had assumed that, because these figures ride alongside Pharaoh and the Egyptians they must *be* Egyptians, and thus that the artists of the Birds’ Head Haggadah were not completely consistent. But Misha was clearly on to something.

By placing obviously Jewish figures in the Egyptian camp, the Haggadah raised a very real question for medieval Jewry: If a Jew deliberately “goes over to the other side,” is he still a Jew? The illumination, which shows Datan and Aviram as figures with bird-like “Jewish” features but without the *Judenhut*, answers the question: Jewish identity is inescapable.

Datan and Aviram were not captives like Joseph, nor were they enslaved against their will like their fellow Israelites. Rather, they willingly went over to the enemy side. They represent another category in the social world of medieval Jewry, the convert, *mumar* or *meshumad*. It is obvious that these figures are not part of the Jewish community. Nonetheless, they are Jews, in accordance with the principle that though a Jew may sin, he remains a Jew.

What we are witnessing here is a recognition on the part of Ashkenazic patrons and their artists that rabbinic tradition might have “protested too much” about the piety of some biblical figures. Medieval Ashkenazic Jews were familiar with Jews who worked for the government, Jews who were impoverished, and Jews who left the community, and they adjusted their depiction of the Exodus story accordingly. In doing so, they were creatively fulfilling their obligation to regard themselves as if they had personally come out of Egypt.

The biblical commandment concerning the eve of the Seder is that “you shall tell your child [of the Exodus],” to which the rabbis added “anyone who expands upon the telling of the Exodus from Egypt, is indeed praiseworthy.” The illustrations of the Haggadah are indispensable expansions, welcome windows into the lives of the people who commissioned, and in some cases created, them. And when I study them with my children, when I gain insight from their fresh and unjaded eyes, I understand the paraphrase of the rabbis’ mandate inscribed by Abraham of Ihringen, Germany in the Haggadah he illuminated in 1732: “Everyone who expands upon the scribal illumination and the illustration of the Exodus from Egypt is indeed both praiseworthy and superb!”

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Chopped Herring and the Making of the American Kosher Certification System

BY TIMOTHY D. LYTTON

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

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

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

Sofecia's marc alcohol had been erroneously certified as kosher by the OK kosher certification agency, under the direction of Rabbi Berel Levy, who prided himself on his meticulousness in verifying the kosher status of ingredients. "My father was a pioneer in *kashrus* in that he was the first one who insisted on going back to the

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

source of any ingredient," recalls his son, Rabbi Don Yoel Levy, who today directs OK. Berel Levy occasionally discovered problems that other agencies had missed, and when he did, he was frequently very public about it.

Upon discovering that vinegar produced with Sofecia's marc alcohol was not kosher, Star-K officials wondered what other kosher-certified products, beyond Acme Chopped Herring, might contain it. They immediately contacted Levy and alerted the other major certification agencies that might have relied on his certification. Star-K, Kof-K, and the Orthodox Union (OU)—the nation's largest certification agency—published consumer alerts, issued a ban on the use of OK-certified vinegar, and ordered their food company clients to recall products containing vinegar. The list of suspect products was extraordinarily long because the agencies had no way of determining which particular batches of vinegar or consumer products contained the erroneously certified marc alcohol. To be safe, the agencies ordered the destruction of products even suspected of containing it. "Millions and millions of dollars of product was thrown out," recalls Rabbi Zushe Blech, who worked for the OU at the time.

that it certified, symbols that kosher consumers learned to recognize and came to trust. (The Orthodox Union's is the oldest and most widely recognized.) The agencies backed their brands with concrete measures that helped them avoid mistakes and prevent misconduct. They instituted multiple levels of management oversight to supervise kosher inspectors and provided professional training in Jewish dietary laws, food technology, and ethics.

By the 1980s, thanks to the rise of brand competition among the OU, OK, Kof-K, and Star-K—known collectively as the “Big Four”—kosher certification had become much more reliable, or so it seemed until the vinegar scandal. Giving voice to widespread concern among consumers, the president of the National Council of Young Israel, Harold Jacobs, denounced not merely OK but all the agencies:

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

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

In a fit of hyperbole, Jacobs compared the vinegar scandal to the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster. Although the contamination of pickles and mustard hardly seems comparable to the radioactive fallout from Chernobyl, the juxtaposition highlights an important feature of the kosher certification industry. Political scientist Joseph Rees

describes nuclear utilities as “hostages of each other” because “a single catastrophic accident . . . at any one U.S. nuclear plant would have ruinous consequences for the entire industry.” According to Rees, the 1979 nuclear accident at Three Mile Island demonstrated to nuclear utilities that “the insufficiency and failure of one of them has a potential for destroying the credibility of all the others.”

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



Vats for the industrial production of ethyl alcohol.

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

Shortly before the scandal, the director of the Chicago Rabbinical Council (CRC) kosher certification agen-

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

In the wake of the vinegar scandal, AKO also established an information-sharing system to rapidly alert agencies about kosher certification problems, and it developed guidelines to deter agencies from actively soliciting companies currently under the supervision of another agency. Although AKO has no enforcement powers—the biggest agencies insist on maintaining their autonomy—it has provided a forum for the development of voluntary standards that are widely accepted. Equally important, AKO meetings, as well as informal conversations among agency personnel, have helped to temper the brand competition that characterizes the kosher certification industry and keep it from descending into acrimony. According to Star-K president Dr. Avrom Pollak, "relationships amongst the largest organizations have gotten better simply because people are more familiar with one another. It's easier to meet face to face and to talk to people. And inevitably when you do that, you find that a lot of your preconceptions about somebody else probably were not even true in the first place."

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

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

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

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

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

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Law in the Desert

BY HILLEL HALKIN

Talk of failed New Year's resolutions! Three or four times over the years, come Rosh Hashanah, I've promised myself that this year, *this* year, I'll study at home each week, with its standard commentaries, the *parshat ha-shavu'a*, the weekly Torah reading recited in synagogue on the Sabbath. Three or four times, I've started out a few weeks later with high hopes. Three or four times, I've worked my way through the ten weekly readings of Genesis and the first five of Exodus. Three or four times, I've stopped there.

Studying the weekly Torah reading with its commentaries is an old Jewish custom, and many Jews—most, unlike myself, regular synagogue goers—repeat the entire 52-week cycle of the Chumash, the Five Books of Moses, year after year. Although different annotated editions of the Chumash have different commentaries, the more complete sets include, at a minimum, the 2nd-century Aramaic translation of the Bible known as Targum Onkelos; the 11th-century commentary of Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki or Rashi; the 12th-century commentary of Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra, and the 13th-century commentary of Rabbi Moses ben Nachman, also known

as Nachmanides or “the Raban.” Together with the voluminous corpus of the Midrash upon which they frequently draw, these are the main pillars of Jewish biblical exegesis, on which all subsequent commentators have built.

Each has its distinctive traits. The Targum, though on the whole highly literal, occasionally introduces free rabbinic interpretations into the text. Rashi, a meticulous Hebraist, is pietistic in outlook and a faithful transmitter of rabbinic tradition. Ibn Ezra, no less scrupulous a grammarian, is a rationalist with a preference for naturalistic and sometimes philosophical explanations. The Ramban likes to rely on his predecessors for the plain meanings of verses while focusing on broader contextual issues.

They complement one another. Their interplay isn't always explicit. “Your brother has come in deceit and taken your blessing,” says Isaac to Esau in the sixth weekly reading of Genesis upon realizing that he has been tricked by Jacob. Onkelos, like the ancient rabbis, is disturbed by this—how can one revered Patriarch call another a deceiver?—and translates the Hebrew *be-mirma*, “in deceit,” as the Aramaic *be-chukhma*, “with wisdom.”



“Isaac and Jacob” by Jusepe de Ribera (Lo Spagnoletto), 1637. (Image © Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.)

Rashi echoes Onkelos without citing him. Ibn Ezra demurs without mentioning either man. “He told a lie,” he says tersely of Jacob, tacitly rebuking Rashi and Onkelos for whitewashing the text. The Ramban seeks to adjudicate. Yes, he says, Isaac does call Jacob a deceiver—but Isaac realizes the deceit is justifiable, having had the insight that Jacob, though not his own choice, is God’s, thus making Jacob a *wise* deceiver.

The Patriarchs! Often I have thought of them as great, lawless spirits taken captive by moralistic minds. Of course Jacob lies. He has to, precisely because his father does not have the insight the Ramban attributes to him. If anyone has it, it’s Jacob’s mother Rebecca, who masterminds the deceit. Jacob goes along with her willingly. He knows that the stakes—the legacy of the blessing first given by God to Abraham—are too high to allow for the rules of fairness. He grasps the magnitude of this legacy better than does Esau and so is worthier of it. In Genesis, the worthiest strive to fulfill a destiny of whose grandeur they are conscious even if they, too, do not fully comprehend it.

But Esau is himself a wonderful character—wonderful in grief when he cries out, “Bless me, Father, too,” and wonderful in forbearance when he and Jacob meet again years later. The rabbis, painting him in dark colors to highlight Jacob’s virtue, begrudge him any acknowledgment of this. Does the Bible tell us he was a capable fellow, “a man skilled in hunting”? “Hunting,” writes Rashi, conveys Esau’s shameless stalking of his father’s favors. Did he sell his birthright because he came home one day “weary” and desperate for refreshment? He was weary of all the murders he had committed. Drawn with great sympathy by the biblical text, he gets none from the classical commentators.

They flatten the text, these commentators, so as to re-elevate it on their own terms. I preferred my Patriarchs to theirs: lawless, unbridled, freely camping and decamping, putting up and taking down their tents; always on the move with their wives, their children, their concubines, their flocks and camels, their bitter family quarrels passed down from generation to generation; always restlessly seeking, carrying with them the destiny not fully understood. Abraham, the reckless gambler; timid yet tenacious Isaac; wily Jacob, tricking and being tricked; suave, diplomatic Joseph, lowering the curtain on Genesis with a happy ending just when it has come to seem the most tragic of books; Joseph, the divine impresario!

The curtain stays down for hundreds of years. When it rises again, the Patriarchs’ descendants are slaves in Egypt, ignorant of the legacy over which their ancestors fought. Moses appears—impetuous, self-doubting, unyielding, long-suffering Moses! He encounters the God of his forefathers. He and his brother Aaron confront Pharaoh. They inflict ten plagues on the Egyptians. They lead the Israelites to a mountain in the desert.

The Patriarchs! Often I have thought of them as great, lawless spirits taken captive by moralistic minds.

Moses ascends it to receive the Law. “And Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the Lord came down on it in fire, and its smoke went up like the smoke from a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly.” Onkelos, anxious as always to avoid physicalizing God, translates “came down on it” as “was revealed on it.” Rashi, having no such compunctions, tells us that God spread the sky over the mountain “as though covering a bed with a sheet” and lowered His throne onto it. Ibn Ezra remarks that Mount Sinai only trembled metaphorically. The Ramban explains that the Israelites did not *see* God descend in the fire but heard His voice saying, “I am the Lord your God . . . You shall have no other God beside me . . . You shall make no graven image of what is in the heavens above or on the earth below . . .”

It’s a page-turner, the *parshat ha-shavua*. I can’t wait for the next installment.

It comes. It’s called Mishpatim, “Laws.” It begins:

These are the laws you shall set before them. Should you buy a Hebrew slave, six years he shall serve and in the seventh he shall go free . . . And should an ox gore a man or a woman and they die, the ox shall surely be stoned and its flesh shall not be eaten, and the ox’s owner is clear . . . And should a man open a pit, or should a man dig a pit and not cover it and an ox or donkey fall in, the owner of the pit shall pay silver, and the carcass shall be his . . .

Next comes Terumah, “Donation.” It concerns the construction of the Tabernacle. It begins:

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: “Speak to the

Israelites, that they take me a donation from every man . . . And this is the donation you shall take from them: gold and silver and bronze and indigo and purple and crimson and linen and goat hair and reddened ram skins and ocher-dyed skins and acacia wood . . .”

After Terumah comes Tetzaveh, “You Shall Command.” It’s about the garments and sacrifices of the priests serving in the Tabernacle. It begins:

And you shall command the Israelites . . . and these are the garments they shall make: breastplate and ephod and robe and checkwork tunic, turban, and sash.

So this is the legacy! The grand narrative flow of Genesis and the first half of Exodus is over, though it still will burst forth in trickles here and there. It couldn’t have happened soon enough for Rashi. In his first comment on the first verse of Genesis he approvingly quotes



Chromolithograph of Moses with the Tablets overlooking the corrupted Jews, c. 1885. (Image © Bettmann/Corbis.)

the 4th-century Rabbi Yitzhak as saying that little would have been lost had the Bible started in the middle of Exodus, since “the crux of the Torah is only its commandments.”

Three or four times over the years, I reached the commandments. Three or four times, I got no further.

Last Rosh Hashanah, I resolved, after a long hiatus, to try again. I’m now at the end of Exodus and going strong. What made this year different? In part, my deciding to read the biblical text not in Hebrew but in the Latin Vulgate of the Christian church father Jerome. This added the stimulation of novelty.

Jerome translated the Bible while living in Palestine in the late 4th and early 5th centuries. An accomplished author in his own right, he studied Hebrew and Aramaic and regularly consulted Onkelos’ Targum; the Greek Septuagint (a Jewish translation of the Bible, the world’s first, done in Alexandria in the 3rd and 2nd centuries B.C.E.), and diverse rabbinic sources. Even more faithful than the Targum to the literal meaning of the biblical text, he was far freer with its form and took frequent liberties with its Hebrew syntax, whose extreme simplicity, with its repetitive reliance on short, independent clauses linked by paratactic “and’s,” fell short of his standards of Latin elegance. Often he subordinated clause to clause, as we do in English with all our “when’s,” “while’s,” “before’s,” and “during’s” that biblical Hebrew commonly eschews.

Jerome translated the legal and ritual sections of the Chumash out of a sense of duty; he could not but have been, I suspect, rather bored by them. While they, too, were a part of God’s word, they were the part that God had abrogated. Both Jerome’s Christian faith and his taste in prose would have inclined him more to the structured rhetoric of a Pauline epistle like Romans that declares:

Now we know that whatsoever things the Law says, it says to those who are under the Law, that every mouth may be stopped and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the Law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight, for by the Law is the knowledge of sin.

Dutiful Jerome, laboring faithfully through the laws of goring oxen, the measurements of the Tabernacle, and the vestments of its priests when they only led to

the knowledge of sin!

Not that Paul was against laws. His epistles counsel adherence to those of Rome. But those were the laws of secular authority. Breaking them made one a criminal in the eyes of the state, not a sinner in the eyes of God. God had not promulgated them. He *had* promulgated the Law given at Sinai—and He had done so, paradoxically, knowing that its statutes were too numerous and complicated to be obeyed, so that anyone seeking to do so would be ultimately reduced to a helpless sense of his inability to perform God's will. This, as Paul saw it, was the Law's whole purpose: to produce in its adherents an overwhelming consciousness of sin, alien to the pagan world, that would compel them, followed by the rest of humanity, to throw themselves on the mercy of God's grace as manifested through the son sent to atone for them.

I've always sympathized with Paul. He was raised, as I was, in the world of Jewish observance, and while he felt too cramped by it to remain in it, he was too attached to it to let go of it. He longed to link up with the rest of humanity while remaining the Jew that he was, and by repudiating the Law in the name of the Law he found a brilliant if tortured way of doing so. Long before Spinoza, he was the prototype of a certain kind of modern Jewish intellectual.

As a child, I, too, knew the difference between the laws of Rome and the laws of God. When I was 6 or 7 years old, sent by my mother to buy a newspaper, I took two papers from a pile at the stand by mistake, while paying only for one; but although I lived for a while in great fear of being arrested, I got over it as soon as I realized that my crime had gone unnoticed. It was different when I unwittingly placed a meat fork in the dairy silverware drawer in our kitchen. Then I had a consciousness of sin, which lasted longer. God was no kiosk owner.

All around me were sins waiting to be committed. If I forgot to say my bedtime prayers, I had sinned. If I unthinkingly switched on a light on the Sabbath, I had sinned. I envied the Patriarchs who lived before the Law. Hadn't Abraham served his guests milk and butter with their meat? That was why Rashi was in such a hurry to get past him to the commandments. Yet three or four times over the years, I groaned when I reached them. So must have Jerome. *Haec sunt iudicia quae propones eis*, these are the laws you shall set before them. I did not want them set before me.

The second half of Exodus can be read as a study in the institutionalization of religion. No longer a small roaming band to whom God can appear anywhere and at any time, the Israelites leave Egypt as twelve tribes. They need what any large group needs if it is not to degenerate

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into a mob: clear rules of conduct, recognized penalties for breaking them, established forms and places of worship, trained specialists to mediate between them and the divine. Mishpatim, Terumah, Tetzaveh: these lay the foundations for a code of civil behavior, a centralized cultus, a priestly class. They mark, in the biblical narrative, a transition from an era of spontaneity between man and man, and between man and God, to one of regulated order. This is necessary. It is part of God's plan. But as with all institutionalizations of originally spontaneous relationships, one feels nostalgic for what has been lost.

It is part of God's *second* plan. His first is to create in six days a world that is all good and let human beings made in His image run it independently. This works out badly. The first humans disobey Him and are driven from Eden. By the tenth generation, the generation of Noah, "God saw the earth and it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted its ways on the earth."

God wipes out everything with a great flood and starts anew. This time He will do it differently. He will ignore most of the human race; it is too large, too unruly, for Him to work with. He will proceed slowly, methodically. And so He begins with a single individual, Abraham. Again and again He tests him to make sure He has chosen correctly, satisfied only by the last, pitiless trial of the sacrifice of Isaac. From there He moves on to a family, carefully winnowing it as it grows until it consists of twelve brothers. Taking time out to let their offspring multiply and be enslaved in Egypt, He is now ready for the next stage: He will take the descendants of these brothers out of bondage and make them a model people—"a kingdom of priests and a holy nation," as He

tells them when they are assembled before Him at Sinai. They will be His pilot project on earth. Once it succeeds, He can extend it to the rest of humanity.

A model people needs model laws. God goes about it pedagogically, starting with the laws that He knows will be of greatest interest. As the Ramban puts it: “God began with the laws of the Hebrew slave because freeing him in the seventh year was a reminder of the exodus from Egypt.” More than a reminder: a promise to an anxious people that it will not be reenslaved by the more powerful of its own brothers. One imagines the stir in the desert. Six years of servitude and no more! So this is law! Real slaves have no laws but the whims of their masters.

Knowing you’re a sinner in the eyes of the Law means believing the Law—all of it—is God’s.

There follow laws of property, laws of damages and restitution, laws of theft and murder, laws of sexual relationships: the basic norms that a functional society must have. All else is in abeyance. Moses is on the mountain receiving the Law, and we, the Bible’s readers, are given a preview of it while the worried Israelites camped below await Moses’ return. We know the Law’s contents before they do.

The narrative only resumes with the weekly reading of Ki Tisa. Afraid that Moses has abandoned them and left them leaderless in the desert, the Israelites say to Aaron, “Rise up, make us gods that will go before us, for this man Moses who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him.” And so Aaron collects their gold jewelry and fashions from it a calf—a graven image—and the people worship it and revel around it. High on the mountain, Moses is told by God, “Go, go down, for your people, which you have brought out of Egypt, has been corrupted.” Moses descends after first persuading God not to exterminate the Israelites as He threatens to; sees them dancing around the calf; angrily smashes the tablets of the Law that he is carrying, and commands the Levites to commit a punitive massacre in which thirty thousand people are killed.

“For your people has been corrupted,” *ki shichet amkha*: Rashi’s comment on the cutting “your”—that of a father who comes home to find his son misbehaving and tells his wife it’s her child, not his—is to assure us that

God is not disassociating Himself from the Israelites, but scolding Moses for having permitted idolatrous heathen to join them and lead them astray. Well, that’s Rashi for you: always sticking up for the Jews. But why does neither he nor any of the other commentators in my Chumash point out that the verb *shachet*, to act corruptly, is the very same verb used in Genesis to describe the human race on the eve of the flood? Why does no one dwell on the obvious parallel between the two stories? In both, God sets out to create or recreate the world. In both, all goes well for a while. In both, the illusion of success soon collapses. In both, God resolves to destroy what He has done and begin again, the second time with Moses as a second Noah or Abraham. (“And now leave me be,” God tells Moses, “that my wrath may flare against them, and I will put an end to them, and I will make you a great nation.”) In both, God repents of His fury and offers its survivors an eternal pact—a promise not to repeat the flood, a reaffirmation of His covenant with Israel.

There must be commentators who have noticed this. The Zohar, itself a mystical commentary on the Chumash written shortly after the time of the Ramban, does notice it. When the Israelites sinned with the golden calf, it says, they fell from the heights of Sinai to the lower depths, for the same serpent that poisoned Adam poisoned them, so that *gerimu mota le-khol alma*, they brought, like Adam and Eve, death upon the whole world. The debacle at Sinai is a cosmic catastrophe, comparable only to the sin in Eden and its aftermath in reflecting as much on the incorrigibility of God’s optimism as on that of man’s waywardness.

I was wrong to think that the narrative flow of Exodus had ever stopped. Mishpatim, Terumah, and Tetzaveh were a continuation of it. They were needed, not only as a contrempts to create a sense of lapsed time, the forty days spent by Moses on the mountain, between two contiguous events, but because the drama lost much of its intensity without them. Their detail was necessary to illustrate the effort God had put into designing a Law flouted by His chosen people as soon as Moses turned his back on them—to illustrate the extent of His failure. His second attempt at forging order out of chaos, it is even more galling than the first, since the lesson learned from the first has not kept it from being repeated.

This realization—*parshat ha-shavu’a* students would call it a *chidush*, a new way of looking at things—carried me excitedly through the last six Torah readings of Exo-

dus that had always stymied me before. Suddenly, God's effort needed to be understood. It was an integral part of the story. "And should a man open a pit, or should a man dig a pit and not cover it, and an ox or donkey fall in, the owner of the pit shall pay silver, and the carcass shall be his . . ." Did that mean that if an ox wandered onto my property and fell into a pit and was killed, I, the pit's owner, was responsible?

No, said Rashi. My property was my property. The Torah was referring to a pit dug in the public domain.

But if I dig a pit in the public domain, how am I its owner?

By "owner," Ibn Ezra explains, the Torah designates the pit's user, since it must have been dug for some use.

Then I have no liability at all for a pit dug on my own property?

My *parshat ha-shavua* commentators weren't clear about this. I looked at the 3rd-century-C.E. Mishnah, the earliest systematic explication of biblical law. Yes, said the first chapter of Bava Kama, the opening part of the treatise of Nezikin or "Damages": if in digging a pit on my own property I cross the line separating it from the public domain, or from someone else's property, anyone falling into it from the other side is my responsibility, too.

But it was more complicated than that. The 6th-century Gemara, the systematic explication of the Mishnah, stated that according to Rabbi Akiva, even if the pit was entirely on my property, I was still liable if I hadn't made clear that trespassing was forbidden. Rabbi Ishmael disagreed. The Gemara's discussion of their disagreement was long and intricate, and I had trouble following it.

Nor would following it in the Gemara have been enough to know the outcome. For that, I would have had to consult the Ge'onim, the 7th to 11th-century Talmudic scholars of Babylonia; and after them, the Rishonim, the 11th-to-16th century scholars of North Africa and Europe; and after them the Acharonim, the scholars who came later—in short, the whole vast edifice of Jewish law. It suddenly towered above me, this edifice, in all its architectural immensity, dizzyingly tall—explication upon explication, disagreement upon disagreement, complication upon complication—and for the first time, though I had never gotten beyond its bottom floors, I felt that I grasped its full grandeur, the indomitable scope of its determination to make up for the golden calf. Century after century, the Jews had labored to convince God that He was right not to

have given up on them at Sinai—that His pilot project could still work—that they would devote themselves to it endlessly, tirelessly, even if it took thousands of years—even if the rest of humanity went its own way in the meantime—even if the rest of humanity agreed that the Law only led to the knowledge of sin.

I've been thinking about the knowledge of sin.

Over the years I've been involved, sometimes alone and sometimes with others, in more court cases than I'd have liked to be. Nothing major. A case involving my father, then ill with Alzheimer's, who was defrauded by his neighborhood grocer. A case involving a mobile phone antenna erected illegally opposite our home. A running battle with the town in which we live about building rights on our land. A consequent suit for damages filed by us. A fight with the local planning commission over a road it wanted to run through our and our neighbors' property. Another fight to stop a nearby restaurant from blasting loud music into the night. All trivial stuff.

On the whole, the courts have performed creditably. I can't complain too much about the judges. The depressing thing has been the deceit with which they've had to deal. Corrupt authorities. Secret, illicit deals. Law enforcers looking the other way. Manipulation of evidence. Lies on the witness stand. Suborning of witnesses.

I suppose it's that way everywhere. Why wouldn't it be? It's only the laws of Rome. If you think you can get away with it, you break them. I've broken my share of them myself.

Wouldn't we be better off with the Law of God? If every bribe taker and perjurer knew he was sinning?

Not that you can't know you're a sinner and still sin. And the laws of Mishpatim say not only "You shall take no bribe" and "You shall not bear false witness," but also "Should a man sell his daughter as a slave girl, she shall not go free as the male slaves go free," and "Whoever speaks profanely of his father and mother shall be put to death." For all practical purposes, the rabbis abolished the death penalty even for murder, let alone for swearing at one's parents, but that isn't the point. The point is that knowing you're a sinner in the eyes of the Law means believing the Law—all of it—is God's. There may be nothing to keep you from obeying just those parts of it that you like, but if that's your attitude, you won't feel sinful when you disobey them. The laws of God and the laws of Rome are then two versions of the same thing.

I don't say I believe the Law is God's. I only say I've

come to believe that if God had a plan for humanity, He would give it a Law, and he would not abrogate it as Paul thought He did.

I haven't always been of that opinion. But neither was God. The first time around, He thought men could manage on their own and waited ten generations before deciding He was wrong.

A generation for Methusaleh was longer than it is for us, and even by our own paltry standards I haven't lived through three. Still—so I found myself thinking this year while studying the *parshat ha-shavu'a*—I already am where God was after ten.

I'm not happy with that. I have an anarchistic streak. I've never liked being told what to do. I've always wanted to do the right thing because I wanted to, not because I had to. I've wanted to do it Paul's way, without the Law, "for when the Gentiles, which have not the Law, do by nature the things contained in the Law, these, having not the Law, are a law unto themselves."

Like the Patriarchs.

It's a nice idea. It was clever of Paul to have thought of it. It just doesn't work. It didn't work in the days of Noah and it won't work now. There isn't enough of mankind that, having no Law, will do by nature the things contained in the Law. We need a sense of sin to bridle us. If it's taken me most of a lifetime to realize that, then that's what lifetimes must be for.

This week was Pekudei, the last Torah reading of Exodus. Before it came Vayakhel. Together they are two of the most tedious *parshot ha-shavu'a* in the Chumash. Vayakhel relates how the Israelites built the Tabernacle according to the instructions in Terumah; Pekudei, how they made the priests' vestments according to the instructions in Tetzaveh. Both repeat the language of Terumah and Tetzaveh almost to a word. "And they shall make an Ark of acacia wood, two and a half cubits its length, and a cubit and a half its width, and a cubit and a half its height," says Terumah. "And Bezalel made an Ark of acacia wood, two and a half cubits its length, and a cubit and a half its width, and a cubit and a half its height," says Vayakhel. The commentators fall silent. What's there to add?

But a *chidush* is a *chidush*—and now I read even Vayakhel and Pekudei with fresh eyes, starting with the former's opening verses, which describe how the Israelites, called upon to donate "gold and silver and bronze and indigo and purple and crimson and linen and goat hair and reddened ram skins and ocher-dyed skins and acacia wood," respond with such enthusiasm that Mo-

ses has to tell them to stop, there being already more than enough. If it occurred to any of the commentators in my Chumash that behind this outpouring of public-spiritedness was a consciousness of sin, they kept it to themselves. I can't say it didn't occur to me.

There is a cheerfulness in Vayakhel and Pekudei that would hardly have seemed possible a short time before when Moses dashed the Law to the ground. Everyone is bringing gifts to the Tabernacle; everyone is measuring, making, fitting. Bezalel runs around giving orders. We hear the sounds of saws and hammers; there is a smell of freshly cut lumber, the crisp colors of newly died fabrics.

And they made the boards for the Tabernacle, twenty boards for the southern end . . . And they made the curtain of indigo and purple and crimson, designer's work they made it . . . And they made tunics of twisted linen, weaver's work, for Aaron and his sons . . .

It's like a huge stage set on which a multitude of workers is racing to get things done in time for the premiere.

The date arrives. It's the anniversary of the exodus, the first day of the first month of its second year. Miraculously, everything is ready. The Tabernacle is standing. The Ark of the Covenant is in place. The showbread is on the table. The lamp in the Tent of Meeting is lit. The golden altar is ready for its offerings. Moses enters and offers up the burnt offering and the meal offering as commanded. The audience holds its breath.

And then it happens:

"And cloud covered the Tent of Meeting and the glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle."

It's a mini-Sinai, God's glory in a cloud like fire in smoke. All that light and dark mixed together, the brightest sunshine and the blackest gloom!

"And the cloud went up from over the Tabernacle, the Israelites would journey onward in all their journeyings. And if the cloud did not go up, they would not journey onward until the day it went up. For the Lord's cloud was over the Tabernacle by day, and fire by night was in it, before the eyes of all the house of Israel in all their journeyings."

Explicit, says Jerome, *liber Ellesmoth id est Exodus*.

Bring on Leviticus.

Hillel Halkin is a translator, essayist, and author of four books, the most recent of which is *Yehuda Halevi (Schocken/Nextbook)*.

Desert Wild

BY SHAI SECUNDA

Bewilderments: Reflections on the Book of Numbers

by Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg

Schocken Books, 400 pp., \$28.95

Numbers, or *Bamidbar* (In the Wilderness) as it is commonly known in Hebrew, is not the most enthralling book of the Bible. It begins with a detailed census and description of the Israelites' desert encampment, laboriously recounts 12 identical sacrifices offered by the tribal chieftains, and dwells on the people's fear and loathing as they make their way from one outpost to the next. Its meticulous account of the desert wanderings conveys a sense of tedium and lurking danger. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg's latest book, *Bewilderments: Reflections on the Book of Numbers*, guides the reader across this unforgiving terrain with the help of the midrashic tradition, novelists such as Fyodor Dostoyevsky, George Eliot (on whom Zornberg wrote her Cambridge doctoral dissertation), Franz Kafka, and Marcel Proust, and contemporary thinkers including Stanley Cavell, Shoshana Felman, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and Julia Kristeva. The first surprise of Zornberg's characteristically deft book is that this large and difficult cast does help.

Zornberg's first career was as a scholar and teacher of English literature. In the 1980s, she began teaching the weekly Torah portions in Jerusalem. Not long after the publication of her first book, based on these classes, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis*, she was invited to participate in Bill Moyers' popular PBS series on Genesis, where she offered elaborate psychoanalytical readings of the lives of the patriarchs, and her new career was well-launched. *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus* followed in 2001 and, some years later, *The Murmuring*

Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious, which also focused on rabbinic interpretations of Genesis and Exodus. But one wondered whether her method of convening biblical characters for intense and revealing conversations with English poets, continental philosophers, and American psychoanalysts would work for the less dramatic parts of the Bible.

Several years ago, a Purim spoof entitled *The Particulars of Bovine Rupture: Rejections from Leviticus* offered a comic answer. With projected chapters such as "Mummim: Remembering the Dismembered" and "Shemitta: Trembling Before Gourds," the caricature suggested that a Zornbergesque collection on the later books of



Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg. (Courtesy of Debbi Cooper.)

the Torah could only be imagined as satire. If Zornberg was at all provoked by such a challenge in writing *Bewilderments* she responded not by focusing on Numbers' sporadic stories but by staring down the ennui of the Zin desert and uncovering, beneath its shifting sands, her persistent concerns with human psychology and the nature of desire.

Thus, in Zornberg's view the Israelite complaint about

the manna is not a matter of culinary boredom, but a drama of divine and debased pleasures: “The manna, which is in general celebrated precisely for its plenitude . . . and for its regularity . . . is at the same time a figure of continual suspense: will it fall again tomorrow?” The heavenly bread comes to represent “a constant reminder that desire can never be finally appeased, so that the object of desire carries with it intimations of dependency, possible frustration, endless yearning and resentment . . . Like the

The Israelites pine for delectable meat, but what they really want is to escape the easy gratification of physical and spiritual needs met by the manna’s and God’s constant presence.

gift of love, desire must be encountered anew each day.” Yes, the Israelites pine for delectable meat, but what they really want is to escape the easy gratification of physical and spiritual needs met by the manna’s and God’s constant presence—just as infants ultimately reject the predictable availability of mother’s milk.

In another essay, Zornberg takes on the blueprint of the Israelite camp in the second chapter of Numbers. Inspired by the midrashic idea that the tribal blazons were part of an elaborate tribal flag dance, Zornberg suggests that this display of patriotism carries with it a longing for belonging and a yearning for clear signs, or flags, of God’s presence in their midst.

There is a melancholy that runs through the verses of the book of Numbers that affords Zornberg’s prose a sense of urgency: “[I]n this very wilderness, they shall die to the last man.” Such knowledge casts a shadow over misjudgments made early in the book, such as the sending of scouts ahead to the land of Canaan, and it even colors apparent trivialities, like the double census, with a cloud of foreboding:

The people are counted twice, once at the beginning of the book and once toward the end . . . Between these two moments, a whole generation dies . . . The book of Numbers is a narrative of great sadness, in which the *midbar*, the wilderness, swallows up all the aspirations of a generation . . .

Bewilderments’ course of treatment for this terminal verdict is therapeutic. But Zornberg’s sessions are deeply informed by traditional Jewish sources, especially the interpretations of classic rabbinic midrash and the homilies of Hasidic masters. Zornberg appreciates and appropriates their relentless attempts to take language to its limits as a form of talk-therapy—which she then puts in conversation with modern masters, especially difficult Europeans, such as the ones mentioned.

The chapter on the *sotah*—the wayward wife of Numbers 5—is a good illustration of Zornberg’s working method. She begins with a somewhat novel midrashic reading of two passages in light of one another: the account of the ordeal to which the *sotah* is subjected and the question as to whether the daughters of Zelophehad could be his heirs (he had no sons). Both passages concern women and are animated by doubt. And both uncertainties receive a direct, divine resolution, but in diametrically opposed ways: God instructs Moses that the women “have spoken fittingly” about their inheritance rights, and He brings about the adulteress’s miraculous and violent demise in the tabernacle courtyard.

The key for Zornberg is the maddening doubts provoked by adultery. Here she is on good rabbinic, as well as psychoanalytic, ground: The midrash revocalizes the word *sotah* as *shotah*, madwoman, and the rabbis remark that “adulterers never sin until a spirit of madness enters into them.” For Zornberg, the threat of madness comes after the affair, in the silence and stifling of awareness. As the medieval Spanish Bible commentator Abraham ibn Ezra puts it, quoting a proverb, the adulteress “eats and wipes her mouth” (Proverbs 30:20), so that even she does not know whether she has sinned. Zornberg diagnoses adultery as a kind of dissociative act or state.

Zornberg also considers the implications of all this for society. She sees the *sotah* as representing the madness that lies on civilization’s borders. Foucault’s classic study of insane asylums in early modern France (as interpreted by literary scholar Shoshana Felman) is invoked to read the prescribed ordeal as society’s attempt to maintain the fiction of sanity. In a characteristic flourish, Zornberg quotes Dostoyevsky, who wrote, “It is not by locking up one’s neighbor that one can convince oneself of one’s own soundness of mind.”

Here, and in her other books, Zornberg’s interpretations imply a strong, if never explicitly stated,

critique of traditional patriarchal religion, which has often been ignored by both her readers and her critics. Part of this, no doubt, is because of Zornberg's impeccable lineage (she comes from a long line of rabbis) and her Orthodoxy, even *frumkeit*. More substantively, the reading of *sotah* is firmly grounded in a classic rabbinic approach that shifts the interpretive focus of the ordeal away from grisly punishments towards one in which doubts are miraculously dispelled and reconciliation is effected. According to rabbinic tradition, even if adultery was committed, the woman can achieve closure by admitting to the crime. Zornberg cites a meditation by the 19th-century Hasidic master, Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, in order to highlight the psychological force of such a confession:

For R. Nahman, then, the fantasy life of human beings, their delusions, their sense of omnipotence—all can be re-spoken, in a different language, a better organization of letters. Like Freud's "talking cure," this confession transforms reality.

Besides the *sotah* and Moses, the main analysand is the lost generation of the wilderness. The Israelites' desert wandering is a punishment for the sin of the spies, arguably, Judaism's original sin. As Zornberg writes it is "the critical point, the great failure, that radically changes the future history of the people." What troubles Zornberg most is the sheer perversity of the Israelites' rebelliousness. This is a people that was brought out of back-breaking slavery in a miraculous display of divine might, yet from



The Israelites gathering manna, from a Bible engraving by Gabriel Bodenehr, ca. early 1700s.

the beginning of their journey to the Promised Land there is concern that they will return to Egypt at the first sign of resistance. While anxiety about impending battles

Zornberg appreciates and appropriates the Jewish sources' relentless attempts to take language to its limits as a form of talk-therapy.

against the “giants” of Canaan is understandable, why prefer potential risk to certain death? Why the recurring death wish? “If only we had died in the land of Egypt, or in this wilderness, if only we had died!” (Num. 14:2)

Zornberg's dauntingly erudite exploration of this and other troubling moments is not aimed at discerning the rationality of the Israelites' actions. Just the opposite. She analyzes, she diagnoses, and she gradually brings the reader to greater awareness of the human unconscious, where irrational yet compelling desires churn. Her reading of *Bamidbar* is dark, but it is also reassuringly, perhaps even redemptively, human.

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Let My People Go

BY YEHUDAH MIRSKY

When They Come for Us, We'll be Gone: The Epic Struggle to Save Soviet Jewry

by Gal Beckerman

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 608 pp., \$30.00

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

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

Behind the scenes, the Israeli government played a crucial role in setting things in motion: its opaquely-

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

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

At roughly the same time, in the US, a Cleveland-based NASA scientist named Lou Rosenblum and his friend Herb Caron, a young assistant professor of psychology, were electrified by their reading of a different book, Ben Hecht's *Perfidy*, with its fierce denunciation of world Jewry's passivity in the face of Nazism. Reading Dexter's articles spurred them to action and in 1963 they created the first grass-roots organization to press both the Jewish establishment and the US government on the issue: the Cleveland Committee on Soviet Anti-Semitism. In New York, a restless British intellectual named Yaakov Birnbaum began to agitate and organize among Orthodox students at Yeshiva University, and then at Columbia, arguing that Soviet Jewry could be

haunted by his own narrow prewar escape to America and the placidity he found there, began to exercise his prophetic rhetoric on Soviet Jewry's behalf.

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



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

their way to channel the gathering revolutionary spirit of the times. He also asked the Hasidic troubadour Shlomo Carlebach, then at the beginning of his musical career, to compose an anthem for the movement, which he did, writing *Am Yisrael Chai* in a Prague hotel room, wrapped in his tefillin on the morning-after of an ecstatic Purim concert in 1965. Meanwhile, on another plane altogether, Jewish Senators Jacob Javits and Abraham Ribicoff and Justice Arthur Goldberg began to take up the issue, while Abraham Joshua Heschel,

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

this attack deprived him of all credibility and, in Beckerman's words, "the power to dictate the direction of the Soviet Jewry movement in America."

This power was exercised, for a crucial few years, by Senator Henry Jackson, the standard-bearer of American liberal anti-Communism, for whom the Soviet Jewish cause exemplified the moral heart of the Cold War—a struggle for basic civil and cultural freedom. At times he promoted the issue more strongly than did the Jewish organizations themselves. In opposition to the wishes of

the Nixon Administration, he successfully tied human rights to something that mattered deeply to the Soviets: trade. The passage in 1974 of the bill that he pushed through Congress did not in the end have the desired impact on immigration but it did succeed in putting Soviet Jewry foursquare in the middle of superpower politics.

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

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

In the 1980s the Soviet regime, increasingly defensive at home and aggressive abroad, and resentful of be-

ing nagged about Soviet Jewry by the US government and the court of world public opinion, brutally cracked down on the movement, arresting nearly all of its leaders, and practically halted emigration. “Throughout the second half of 1984, Jewish activists and Hebrew teachers were arrested on all kinds of trumped-up charges—pushing someone, sexual assault, illegal drug



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

possession.” Demoralized and scared, a group of forty refuseniks in Leningrad issued a desperate plea to “the Jews of the West:

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

American Jews, above all, kept up the pressure, to which the Reagan administration was highly respon-

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

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

The Soviet Jewry movement was a successful example of the transnational humanitarian advocacy on behalf of persecuted Jews that began in the nineteenth century. It played a substantial role in creating the global

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

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

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

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The Kid from the Haggadah

BY NATHAN ALTERMAN

He stood in the market
Among rams and some goats,
Waving his tail, pinky long.
A kid from the poor-house,
A kid for two-pence
No make-up, not a bell, nothing at all.

No one paid any attention,
Because no one knew,
Not the gold-smiths, the weavers
Not even you,
That this little kid,
In the Haggadah will be for long
The hero of a popular song.

But father came with a smile on his face,
And bought the small kid, patting his head,
And so began one of the songs,
We will sing for ever, my friend.

With his tongue, the kid licked father's hand
And touched him with his moist nose.
And so it was, verse one, who would have thought,
That begins: "Father bought."
It was a breezy spring day, sunny and nice,
And girls laughed with a wink in their eyes.
And both father and kid entered the song,
Waiting their turn, waiting there long.

And that Haggadah was already full
With stories and songs to the brim.
And this is the reason
They are back on last page
Embraced, and pushed to the edge.

And that Haggadah then quietly said:
"Be it so, stand here father and kid,
Through my pages cross the smoke and the blood,
And I tell of events as great as the flood,

But I know that a sea would not split in vain
And a reason there is for walls to collapse,
If at the end of the story
Stand a kid and a father
Expecting their turn to be seen in the light."

—translated by Dan Ben-Amos



Cover from Had Gadya Suite (*Tale of a Goat*) by El Lissitzky, 1919. (The Jewish Museum, New York/ Art Resource, NY; 2016 Artists Rights Society, NY.)

It's Spring Again

BY ABRAHAM SOCHER

As everyone knows, April is the cruelest month, though even English majors sometimes forget why the poet said so. What's wrong with lilacs coming out of the dead land? Something to do with a then-repressed Christianity and a bad marriage (or vice versa), a disinclination to have the spring rain stir dull roots, or anything else. Although, like Joseph Epstein in these pages, and Edward Mendelson in some others, I am inclined to think that after the Holocaust, T. S. Eliot mostly repented of his anti-Semitism, I still prefer Cole Porter ("I love you/Hums an April breeze").

Of course, the specifically Christian backdrop of Eliot's lines is the New Testament account of Jesus' resurrection in springtime. Curiously, when, 50 or so lines later, Eliot gets to the famous tarot card stanza, "the hanged man" card is supposed to represent Jesus, along with Frazer's pagan man-god, who must be slain and replaced so that the world can be renewed. I suppose that it is just a coincidence that the rabbis' old polemical description of Jesus was "the hanged one."

The backdrop, in turn, of the Christian belief in resurrection is not merely, or mainly, pagan. It is a central, and unsettling, dogma of rabbinic Judaism that, as the second blessing of the *Shemoneh Esrei* states, God "sustains the living with kindness and revives the dead with great mercy." At the end of this blessing, there is even a whiff of spring: "Who is like you, lord of power, and who is similar to you, O King, who brings death and revives life, and causes salvation to sprout," which sounds a little like the return of those lilacs that Eliot dreaded.

The connection between springtime and the messianic resurrection of the dead is even clearer in the *haftarah* for the Sabbath that falls in the middle of Passover. The prophetic reading the rabbis chose is Ezekiel's vision of the revival of the dry bones:

I prophesied as I had been commanded. And while I was prophesying, suddenly there was a sound of rattling, and the bones came together, bone matching bone. I looked and there were sinews on them, and flesh had grown, and skin had formed over them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me,



The Vision of Ezekiel from the synagogue at Dura Europos. (National Museum, Damascus, SEF/Art Resource, NY.)

“Prophesy, O mortal! Say to the breath: thus said the LORD God: Come, O breath, from the four winds, and breathe into these slain, that they may live again.” I prophesied as He commanded me. The breath entered them, and they came to life and stood up on their feet, a vast multitude. (Ezekiel 37: 7–10)

A startling painting on the walls of the ancient synagogue at Dura Europos depicts this scene. There one finds some 2nd-century Jews who have, until recently, been dead and who look very surprised to have been reconstituted and revived. Alongside them are various body parts—heads, arms, legs—that have yet to be remembered, as it were. (ISIS has apparently looted the original archaeological site of Dura Europos near the Euphrates, but the paintings remain, at least for now, in the National Museum of Damascus.)

Of course, the plain meaning of Ezekiel’s vision is that it is an allegory, indeed one that God himself interprets:

And He said to me, “O mortal, these bones are the whole House of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone; we are doomed.’ Prophesy, therefore, and say to them: Thus said the LORD God: I am going to open your graves and lift you out of the graves, O My people, and bring you to the land of Israel.” (Ezekiel 37: 11–13)

This prophecy of national renewal is, of course, why Chapter 37 of Ezekiel was chosen to read on Passover. And yet, as Jon D. Levenson showed in his *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel*, the promise of Israel’s revival was not held entirely distinct from the promise of an actual revival of the dead at the end of times.

Certainly, by the early rabbinic period, when the Dura Europos synagogue was built, resurrection of the dead was a literal belief. Rabbi Yochanan, who lived in the 3rd century, requested that he be buried in clothes that were neither black nor white, since he didn’t know whether he would be standing with the righteous or the wicked at the final judgment after his resurrection. When the Talmud speaks of “the world to come” (*olam ha-ba*) it is an interesting question as to whether it was generally referring to the eschatological world Rabbi Yochanan anticipated or the kind of disembodied after-life with whose conception we are now more familiar.

Reading bound proofs of Don DeLillo’s *Zero K*, forthcoming this spring, got me thinking about resurrection. The novel is about a damaged, diffident middle-aged man named Jeffrey whose father, Ross Lockhart, is a world-bestriving billionaire. Lockhart funds a secret compound where, to quote Scribner’s copy, “death is exquisitely controlled and bodies are preserved until a future time when biomedical advances and new technologies can return them to a life of transcendent promise.”

The compound, with its “blind buildings, hushed and somber, invisibly windowed,” in an undisclosed desert location is somewhere between Google headquarters and the secret desert lair of a Bond villain. Its inhabitants (who include a depressed monk and a philosophical Jew named Ben Ezra, though this is really an allusion to the famous Browning poem) are somewhere between fellows of a think tank, say the Santa Fe Rand-Hartman Institute, and New Age cultists. Lockhart’s younger second wife Artis has terminal cancer and is preparing to die, or rather to enter a technologically controlled limbo between life and death while awaiting revival. Ross has brought a skeptical Jeffrey here to say goodbye to his stepmother, and perhaps to him as well.

“The body will be frozen. Cryonic suspension,” he said.

“Then at some future time.”

“Yes. The time will come when there are ways to counteract the circumstances that led to the end. Mind and body are restored, returned to life.”

“This is not a new idea. Am I right?”

“This is not a new idea. It is an idea,” he said, “that is now approaching full realization.”

Jeffrey’s question is about earlier crackpot versions of cryonics (“‘People enroll their pets,’ I said.”), but DeLillo is well aware of the ancient resonance of this idea. His father says:

“Faith-based technology. That’s what it is. Another god. Not so different, it turns out, from some of the earlier ones. Except that it’s real, it’s true, it delivers.”

“Life after death.”

“Eventually, yes.”

“The Convergence.”

“Yes.”

“The Convergence” sounds like DeLillo’s version of futurologist Ray Kurzweil’s “Singularity,” when, in the very near future, we will transcend “our version 1.0 biological bodies.”

DeLillo has always had an apocalyptic streak (“*Everybody wants to own the end of the world*” are the italicized first words of the novel), but what interests me more is his attempt to think through what it would really mean for a person to imagine, hope, and plan for an actual bodily resurrection. One of the compound’s philosophico-scientific gurus is speaking:

“The dormants in their capsules, their pods. Those now and those to come.”

“Are they actually dead? Can we call them dead?”

“Death is a cultural artifact, not a strict determination of what is humanly inevitable.”

... “We will colonize their bodies with nanobots.”

“Refresh their organs, regenerate their systems.”

It is to believe that one—at least if one is a billionaire—need never succumb to that final winter, that it will be possible for memory, technology, and desire to stir those dull human roots (“Enzymes, proteins, nucleotides”) with spring rain and revive the dead.

On the whole, the life after death of *Zero K* is a real resurrection, a promise that revived bodies will emerge from their capsules; it is an Ezekiel-Kurzweilian vision. However, like the actual futurologists, whom DeLillo has apparently studied closely, his characters sometimes offer a different vision of

human life 2.0. This is a vision of a disembodied mind that can be downloaded and preserved in any number of substrates; as long as the software and content are preserved, the hard—or wet—ware is a matter of indifference. The tension between these ideas, the world to come in which we have and need our bodies and the world to come in which we don’t, is also not new.

It was, in fact, the distinction between an embodied and a disembodied afterlife that animated one of the greatest theological controversies of medieval Judaism. In his *Commentary to the Mishnah*, Maimonides included the resurrection of the dead as one of the 13 principles of faith. But his purely spiritual account of the world to come, where, to quote one of his favorite talmudic passages, “there is no eating and no drinking . . . and the righteous . . . bask in the radiance of the *Shekhina*,” seemed to make such a resurrection pointless. If one is already a bodiless spirit communing with the divine intellect in an endless seminar on physics and metaphysics, and this is the summit of human attainment, why would one want to be re-encumbered with a body? And how could one’s body be revived anyway, given Maimonides’ scientific assertion that decay and decomposition are natural and inevitable processes?

Maimonides had an answer for this, albeit one that was unsatisfying and arguably insincere (at least his opponents thought so). An omnipotent God, who can perform miracles, can and will revive the dead in the messianic era, because He promised that He would do so. But then they will die again and return to their superior bodiless existence. In short, spring will return one final glorious time, and then disappear forever. If Maimonides had walked into the Dura Europos synagogue, he probably would have walked right back out again.

Of course, such an austere vision of the afterlife would be wintry comfort for Ross and Artis Lockhart, who, for all their hubris, simply do not want to lose—and can’t really imagine losing—their bodies, and hence their selves.

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