Michael Wyschogrod's Bold Challenge by Leora Batnitzky

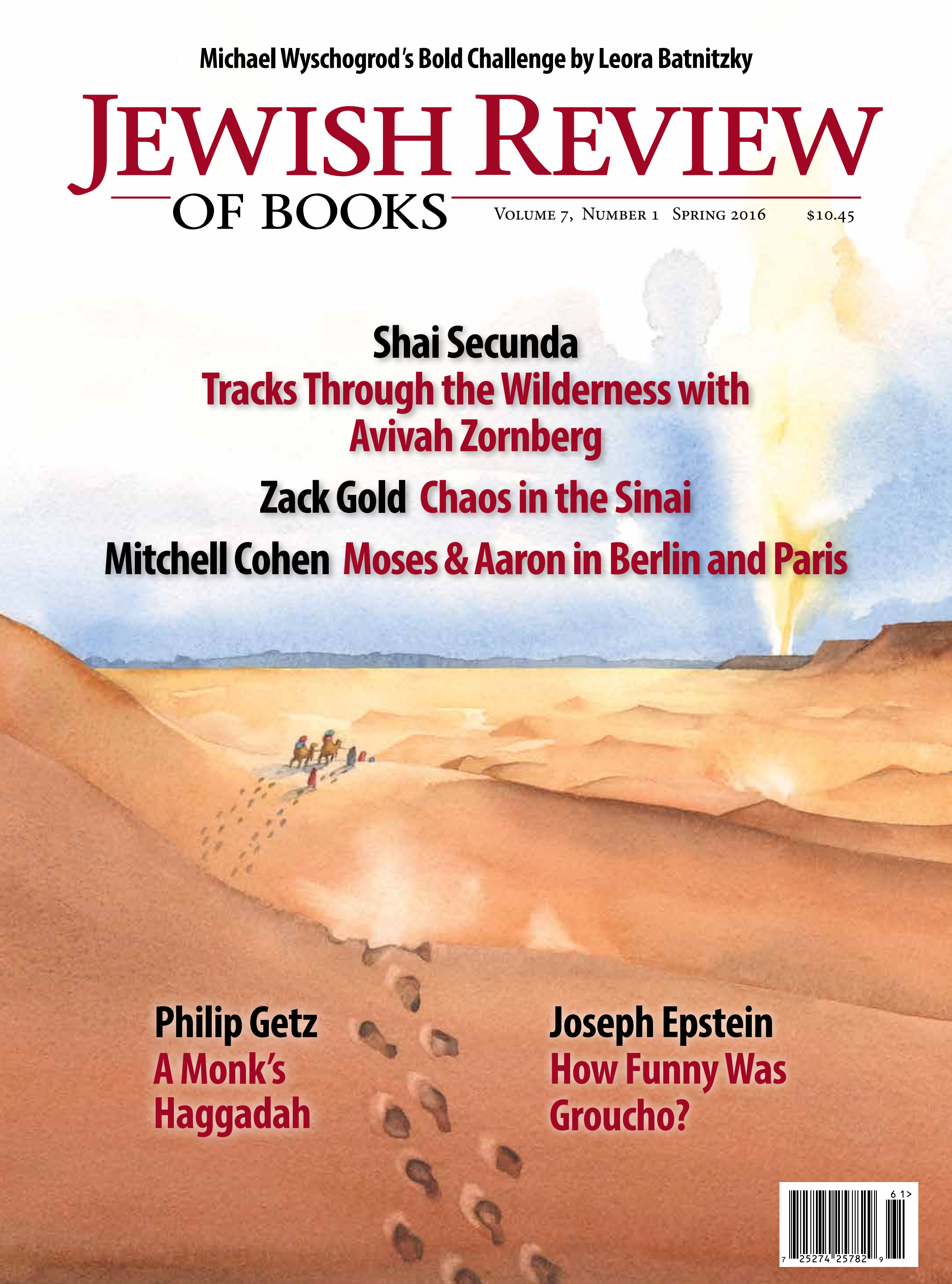
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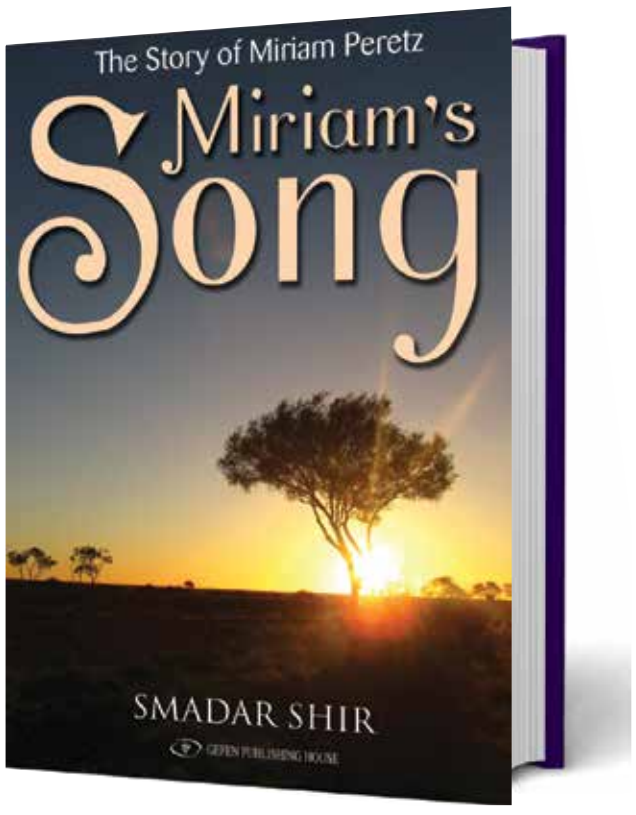
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1st Lieutenant Uriel Peretz, Golani Brigade Special Forces unit commander, dreamed of becoming the first Moroccan chief of staff of the IDF.

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In November 1998, Uriel was fatally wounded by an explosive device planted by Hezbollah terrorists. He was 22 years old.

Tragically, in March 2010 Miriam was forced to face another test. Her second son, Major Eliraz Peretz, was killed in an exchange of fire in the Gaza Strip.



Miriam transformed the pain over their deaths into education and volunteer service. She began to visit schools and military bases, talking about her sons' leadership vision.

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On the cover: *Nomads* by Mark Anderson.

Reform from Within

In his article on the failings of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate and what ought to come next, Elli Fischer goes too far ("Why I Defy the Israeli Chief Rabbinate," Winter 2016). All government bodies, including law enforcement, judiciary, and so on, have bureaucratic and political issues. However, an Israel without rabbinic power would be an Israel that was no longer a Jewish state. The Law of Return, for example, requires that someone decide who is Jewish—and this is so fundamental to the Jewish future that it cannot be left up to politicians. Having said that, the Chief Rabbinate could become a regulatory agency and license rabbinic courts, kashrut agencies, etc. However, the way to bring about reform is by working *within* the system. This, according to *Megillat Taanit*, is precisely what Shimon ben Shetach did when the Sadducees took over the Sanhedrin.

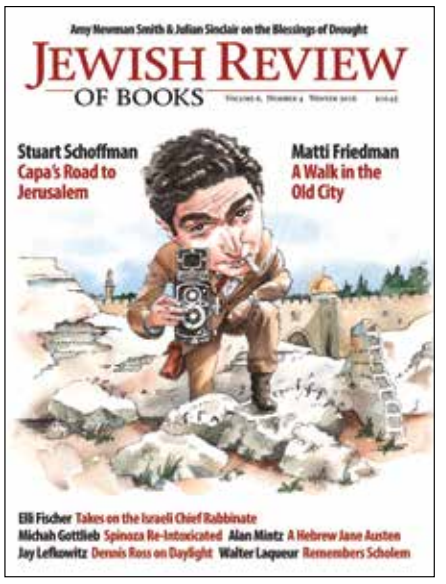
Avi Keslinger
via jewishreviewofbooks.com

Elli Fischer Responds:

Suffice it to say that I disagree with Mr. Keslinger that the Chief Rabbinate merely has a few predictable "bureaucratic and political issues," or that an Israel without a politically empowered rabbinic apparatus would no longer be a Jewish state. For more on this topic, see my exchange with four critics, later in this issue.

God-Intoxicated Plenitude

When I read the headline "Re-Intoxicated by God" (Winter 2016), my heart leapt up. And yet it still seems to me that Melamed (and Gottlieb) are missing something. We may have been given intellect to help us find God, but that very intellect can turn



into an obstacle to our seeing God. David Ives's play *New Jerusalem: The Interrogation of Baruch de Spinoza at Talmud Torah Congregation: Amsterdam, July 27, 1656,* which some might dismiss as too unphilosophical, conveys some of Spinoza's vision.

Melamed is certainly correct when he writes, "The price we pay for making Spinoza like us is that it is no longer clear why we should have an interest in Spinoza." But then how should we approach him? I believe that Spinoza had profound experiences of God, and he tried to *evoke* that experience in his readers. The *Ethics* is structured to allow those entering into his system not merely to agree with him but to have the experience themselves. I tell my students to read the *Ethics* Book I Axiom 1: "Everything that is, is either in itself or in another." I tell them to live with that axiom in their hearts and minds for a week. Let it germinate and then *experience* what it blossoms into. As Goethe and other poets recognized, Spinoza bequeathed us a magnificent gift.

Carol Ochs
Professor Emerita of Philosophy
Simmons College, Boston

In his review of Yitzhak Melamed's new book on Spinoza, Micah Gottlieb writes that "Every scholar, it seems, must strike a balance between textual evidence, conceptual clarity, and logical consistency. These will always, and necessarily, be matters of judgment." As is well known, both Spinoza and Leibniz endorsed what A.O. Lovejoy called the "principle of plenitude"—that reality has no gaps, and thus a kind of fullness that is tantamount to its perfection. Perhaps we can appropriate this principle in assessing the traditions of philosophical commentary. Over time, the richness and variety of interpretations that flesh out a great philosopher's thought bring to light the issues it addresses in ways that show its fullness and depth.

Not all interpretations are equally well-justified, of course, but embracing the "plenitude" of interpretive possibilities implies an admission of the inherent complexity of reality, and of the manifold ways there are to grasp it. The tradition of commentary a philosopher inspires ought not to be primarily seen as a series of mutually exclusive efforts, with each interpretation supplanting all previous contributions.

Zachary Gartenberg
via jewishreviewofbooks.com

A *Bukh* Missing in Boisk

Thank you for Abraham Socher's wonderful little essay "A Party in Boisk" about the joys of the aggada (Winter 2016). However, I wish that Socher had mentioned one more great collection of aggada between the *Ein Ya'akov* and the compilations of Bialik and Berdichevsky: the wonderful, profuse *Mayse Bukh* (or Ma'aseh Book), the collection of 250+ aggada and later legends published in Yiddish in the early 1600s. It is a shame that this book is so sadly neglected. It was translated into English by Moses Gaster in the 1930s for The Jewish Publication Society but is long out of print. On a recent Shabbos at my conservative synagogue in suburban Philadelphia, I saw a copy of the original JPS hardcover edition of Gaster's translation being given away in a bin of unwanted books from the shul's old library. I was happy to save it from oblivion.

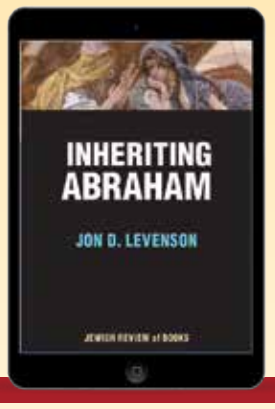
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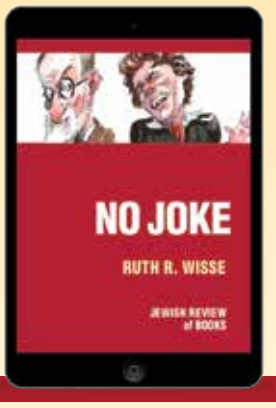
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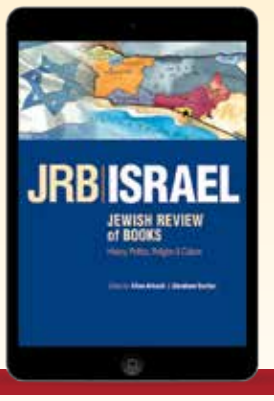
Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam
Jon D. Levenson finds the conventional notion of the three "Abrahamic" religions stems from a dangerous misunderstanding of biblical and Qur'anic texts, fails to do justice to the traditions, and is biased against Judaism in subtle and pernicious ways.



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Michael Wyschogrod and the Challenge of God's Scandalous Love

BY LEORA BATNITZKY

Michael Wyschogrod, perhaps the boldest Jewish theologian of 20th-century America, died at the age of 87 this past December. More than any other 20th-century Jewish theologian, Wyschogrod went against the grain of the dominant trends of modern Jewish thought that emphasized Judaism's rationality and fundamental confluence with ethical universalism. In doing so, he also rejected the entire tradition of Jewish philosophical rationalism, running from Maimonides to his own teacher Joseph B. Soloveitchik.

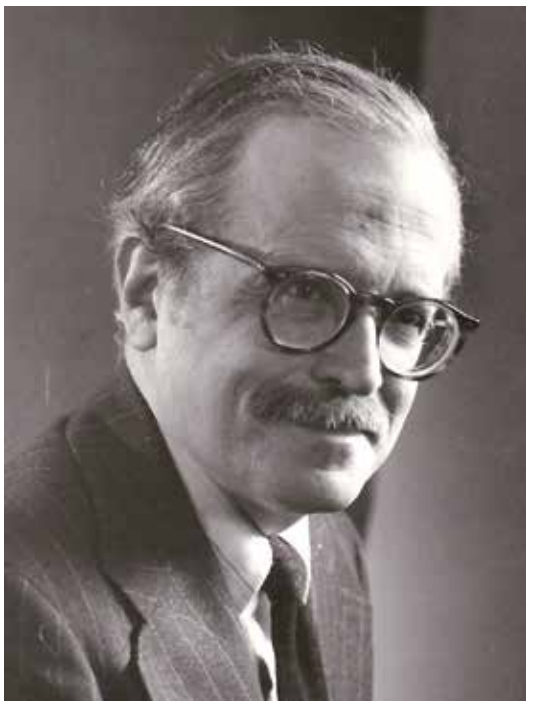
Much like his older contemporary Martin Buber, though for different reasons, Wyschogrod has, at least so far, had his profoundest influence not on Jews but on Christians. Whereas liberal Protestants found in Buber an important and moving account of Christian grace, post-liberal Protestant theologians have found in Wyschogrod a deep articulation of the idea of incarnation and its relevance for rethinking Christianity's claim to have superseded Judaism. The respective Christian receptions of Buber and Wyschogrod may also reveal what many, though certainly not all, Jews have found less appealing about the two theologians: Buber's well-known rejection of the authority of Jewish law and Wyschogrod's almost exclusive focus on the Bible as opposed to rabbinic literature. Yet while Buber self-consciously rejected not just Jewish observance but also traditional Judaism as it came to be practiced in the modern world, Wyschogrod understood himself as a traditional Jew. This apparent disconnect is part of what makes Wyschogrod's thought so interesting and challenging for our present moment.

Born in Berlin, Wyschogrod escaped Nazi Germany as a young boy in 1939 and immigrated to the United States. He studied at City College, Yeshiva University, and Columbia and went on to a long career as a professor of philosophy, first in the City University of New York system and then at the University of Houston. From the beginning of his intellectual life, Wyschogrod never shied away from intellectual controversy. In 1954, he published the first book-length study of Martin Heidegger's philosophy in English, *Kierkegaard and Heidegger: The Ontology of Existence*. In a 2010 essay published in *First Things*, he continued to insist on Heidegger's philosophical greatness, despite the fact that, as he put it, Heidegger was "a committed Nazi and a liar." Strikingly, Wyschogrod contended that aspects of Heidegger's thought could be saved because, despite a traditional Catholic upbringing in which the Bible was not central, Heidegger was "a thinker whose spiritual life was largely determined by Hölderlin and Rilke [and therefore] could not break with the religious power of the Hebrew Bible." Despite Wyschogrod's own philosophical training and acumen, it was an engagement with what he regarded as the anti-philosophical essence of the Hebrew Bible that stands at the center of his Jewish thought.

Wyschogrod announced his central theological claim and its reliance on a kind of biblical literalism in his now classic book of 1983, *The Body of Faith*.

The philosopher in Wyschogrod was not after consistency but rather, like Heidegger, provocation.

The motivating impulse of the book was his contention that God, Judaism, and the Jewish people are "not grounded in some alleged eternal verities of reason or on some noble and profound religious



Michael Wyschogrod in an undated photo. (Courtesy of the Wyschogrod family.)

sensibility that is shared by all people or by a spiritual elite, but on a movement of God toward man as witnessed in scripture." For Wyschogrod, the Jewish people are the body of faith because God literally dwells within the bodies of Jewish people:

> It is of course necessary to mumble a formula of philosophic correction. No space can contain God, he is above space, etc., etc. But this mumbled formula, while required, must not be overdone. It must not transform the God of Israel into a spatial and meta-temporal Absolute . . . With all the philosophic difficulties duly noted, the God of Israel is a God who enters space and time . . . God dwells not only in the spirit of Israel . . . he also dwells in their bodies.

The philosopher in Wyschogrod was not after consistency but rather, like Heidegger, provocation. Just as Heidegger lamented the forgetfulness of being, Wyschogrod bemoaned the forgetfulness of faith in God, which he regarded as the root of Jewish being. In this, Wyschogrod, once again, finds company in Buber, who also sought to revive Jewish faith, albeit through a humanistic interpretation of the Bible and Hasidism. Faith, for Buber and Wyschogrod, is existential, not cognitive. As Buber points out, the Hebrew word most often translated as faith, "*emuna*," refers to a trusting relationship with God and not propositional knowledge about God. Buber and Franz Rosenzweig's translation of Exodus 3:14 is relevant here for appreciating what Wyschogrod means by the body of faith. While a number of Greek, Latin, German, and French translations of the Bible (such as Luther's and Calvin's) render "I am that I am" (*eheye asher eheye*) as a statement about God's being and God's eternity, Buber and Rosenzweig insist that this misunderstands the Hebrew, which is not about God's essence but about God's presence. Buber and Rosenzweig translate Exodus 3:14 as *Ich werde dasein, als der ich dasein werde* (I will be there, howsoever I will be there). Like Heidegger, Buber and Wyschogrod prioritize existential presence, or being-there (*Dasein*), over ontological essence (*Sein*).

Put another way, God's presentation of God's self to Moses is not, as Maimonides and Hermann Cohen thought, for the sake of clarifying philosophically what kind of being God is or is not. Instead, God presents God's self to Moses to let him know that God is literally there with him and the children of Israel. Wyschogrod parts with Buber in making the perhaps astonishing claim that God is not just present *with* the people of Israel but that God is literally present, incarnated, *in* the people of Israel.

The Jewish God, for Wyschogrod, is a personal God who loves his chosen people passionately and, indeed, erotically. In describing God's special love of the Jewish people, Wyschogrod is at great pains to distinguish between what he calls Jewish *eros* and Christian *agape*, that is between a joyful, romantic love and one that is selfless and sacrificial. In doing so, Wyschogrod inverts centuries of Christian criticisms of Jewish particularism and carnality by arguing that Christian agape is not ultimately love:

> Undifferentiated love, love that is dispensed equally to all, must be love that does not meet the individual in his individuality but sees him as a member of a species, whether that species be the working class, the poor, those created in the image of God, or what not.

To be sure, a God who loves some people more than others is a difficult concept for modern people to swallow. Yet Wyschogrod insists that far from limiting God's love for all of humanity, God's special love for the people of Israel actually makes it possible for God truly to love all people: "When we grasp that the election of Israel flows from the fatherhood that extends to all created in God's image, we find ourselves tied to all men in brotherhood, as Joseph, favored by his human father, ultimately found himself tied to his brothers."

Despite Wyschogrod's sharp contrast between Judaism and Christianity, the connection between "the body of faith" and a Christian conception of incarnation is obvious, and Wyschogrod acknowledges as much:

> [T]he Christian proclamation that God became flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth is but a development of the basic thrust of the Hebrew Bible, God's movement toward humankind . . . [A]t least in this respect, the difference between Judaism and Christianity is one of degree rather than kind.

The similarity and the difference between Judaism and Christianity, then, come down to their respective commitments to scripture. For Jews, the Hebrew Bible alone is scripture. For Christians, the Hebrew Bible (or as they call it, the Old Testament) and the New Testament together are scripture. Jews do not reject Christ, according to Wyschogrod, for philosophical or theological reasons. Rather, Jews reject Jesus because no such story appears in the Hebrew Bible. In Wyschogrod's words, Judaism "does not hear this [Christian] story, because the Word of God as it hears it does not tell it and because Jewish faith does not testify to it."

The connection between Wyschogrod's claims and what Jews today often think of as a Christian notion of incarnation is not incidental. As Wyschogrod tells his readers, *The Body of Faith* is a testament to what he learned from Karl Barth, the most important Protestant theologian of the 20th century. Following Barth, Wyschogrod declares that faith consists in "obedient listening to the Word of God," which is found in scripture. This theological starting point makes sense of Wyschogrod's rejection of the Jewish philosophical tradition. As Barth insisted, revelation ought never be confused with, and cannot be mediated by, human reason. Yet as a number of Wyschogrod's critics have rightly noted, "obedient listening to the Word of God" is not an especially Jewish view.

In fact, as Barth emphasized, "obedient listening to the Word of God" is nothing other than Luther's notion of *sola scriptura* (by scripture alone). The irony of an Orthodox Jewish theologian approaching the Bible in this way should be clear. Even if we leave aside any defense of Jewish philosophical rationalism, traditional Jews have never read the scripture "alone" but always as mediated by the history of rabbinic exegesis. It is simply a truism that for Judaism the written Torah (scripture) always stands alongside the oral Torah; indeed, it is clear that, for rabbinic Judaism, written Torah is only authoritative through the medium of the oral interpretive tradition. In following Barth (and Luther) in his approach to scripture, Wyschogrod would seem to be rejecting rabbinic Judaism. Yet, again, the fascinating and indeed important thing about Wyschogrod's theology is that he claims not to be.

There can be no doubt that Wyschogrod was well aware of this tension, if not contradiction, in his thought. After all, he obviously knew that his Orthodox biblicism was anomalous, and, in many ways, closer to non-traditionalist Jewish thinkers, such as Buber, with whom he was otherwise at odds. But before trying to figure out what Wyschogrod was after in making these claims as a self-consciously traditionalist Jew, it is necessary to appreciate the inherent tension between his theology and his traditionalism in his conception of Jewish election as well. For Wyschogrod, "the body of faith," that is to say the Jewish people, is not only a testament to God's revelation but God's revelation itself. As such, the people is the source of its own salvation. In a striking formulation, he writes that, "Separated from the Jewish people, nothing is Judaism. If anything, it is the Jewish people that is Judaism."

Jewish faith is, at least in crucial part, the Jewish people's belief in the very being of the Jewish people.

In understanding this extraordinary claim, it is helpful to consider briefly Barth's extension of John Calvin's notion of election. For Barth and Calvin, Christ remains separate from the believer. This is the basis of faith: To have faith in Jesus is precisely not to believe in oneself. Here Wyschogrod parts from Barth and Calvin: The body of faith believes in itself. Jewish faith is, at least in crucial part, the Jewish people's belief in the very being of the Jewish people. This is where Wyschogrod's Protestant hermeneutic, i.e., his implicit affirmation of *sola scriptura*, converges with his definition of the body of faith. The biblical narrative, in Wyschogrod's reading, allows only one meaning: A personal God with human qualities and human emotions falls in love with Abraham, who (literally) fathers the body of faith.

According to Wyschogrod, there is simply no room for any other interpretation—rabbinic, mystical, philosophical, or otherwise. Ironically, by equating the Jewish people with Judaism, Wyschogrod's theology, which aims to fully acknowledge God's scandalous love, ends up removing both God and Torah (oral as well as written) from the conversation. Such theological reductions are not new. We may be reminded here of the *Zohar's* famous statement that "Israel, the Torah, and God are one," a seemingly pantheistic claim that in the 20th century would be turned around and adopted by humanists and nationalists. Yet such a conception would seem to be almost self-refuting for Wyschogrod, given that the central impetus for his claims is refusal to trade the real presence of the biblical God for any form of pantheism or humanism.

As Wyschogrod himself acknowledges, Barth, rather than rabbinic, kabbalistic, or medieval rationalist theology, is his primary influence. I mention this again not to suggest that this influence is, in and of itself, by definition not authentically Jewish but instead to point out the contradiction that it produces: a theology of election premised on God's absolute sovereignty that makes the Jewish people, and not the Torah, into Judaism. While Wyschogrod is at pains to avoid these implications, it is difficult not to conclude that he has cut God out of the conversation either by presenting a kind of Jewish humanism in the vein of Mordecai Kaplan's Reconstructionism or Ahad Ha-Am's Cultural Zionism or, far more problematically, that he has divinized the Jewish people.

We might be tempted to attribute Wyschogrod's single-minded focus on Jewish election to the influence of Barth's hyper-Calvinism. But there are Jewish precedents for Wyschogrod's contentions. Most obviously, the medieval Jewish philosopher and poet Judah Halevi along with Franz Rosenzweig—who considered himself Halevi's 20th-century incarnation—made such claims about Jewish election. In light of God's election of the Jewish people, Halevi famously (or infamously) declared Jews biologically and spiritually superior to non-Jews, even going so far as to claim that "Any gentile who joins us [as proselytes] unconditionally shares our good fortune, without, however, being quite equal to us." (*Kuzari* 1:27) And Rosenzweig came pretty close to describing the Jewish people and Judaism as "the body of faith" in maintaining that:

> While every other community that lays claim to eternity must take measures to pass the torch of the present on to the future, the blood-community [i.e., the Jewish people] does not have to resort to such measures. It does not have to hire the services of the spirit; the natural propagation of the body guarantees it eternity.

Yet for all of his resonance with Halevi and Rosenzweig, the context and timing of Wyschogrod's arguments are deeply puzzling. Whatever one makes of Halevi and Rosenzweig, it is necessary to recognize that they made their hyperbolic claims about Jewish election in contexts in which Jews were deeply hated and often persecuted. We need but note the subtitle of Halevi's *Kuzari*, "In Defense of the Despised Faith" as well as Rosenzweig's repeated musings on Christian anti-Semitism to see this:

> This existence of the Jew constantly subjects Christianity to the idea that it is not attaining the goal, the truth, that it ever remains—on the way. That is the profoundest reason for the Christian hatred of the Jew.

In contrast to Halevi and Rosenzweig's historical circumstances, Wyschogrod made his arguments about Jewish election in late 20th–century America, when, arguably, Jews had never had it better. To be sure, Wyschogrod's claims about the body of faith are a response to the Holocaust. Indeed, Wyschogrod implies that far from repudiating Jewish faith, the attempted Nazi genocide of the Jewish people only confirms the Jews' special status:

> [S]in does not drive Hashem [God] out of the world completely. Only the destruction of the Jewish people does. Hitler understood that. He knew that it was insufficient to cancel the teachings of the Jewish morality and to substitute for it the new moral order of the superman. It

was not only Jewish values that needed to be eradicated but Jews had to be murdered.

Yet Wyschogrod's Jewish triumphalism still seems especially jarring in a time in which Jews, as one recent Pew survey has it, are the most popular religious group in America.

But perhaps it is precisely the timing of Wyschogrod's theology that offers us a clue to what he was largely after, as well as to his enduring relevance. Toward the end of *The Body of Faith*, he mournfully observes, "That Orthodox Judaism is more easily compatible with a career in nuclear physics, medicine, or law than with being a novelist, composer, or poet is an alarming development." This, he writes, "bespeaks an ossification in its spirituality of the most serious sort." Wyschogrod was a traditionalist, but he was also deeply disturbed by the lack of theological, indeed spiritual, engagement within modern Jewish Orthodoxy. His provocative theological claims were, in part, attempts to awaken Jews, and especially traditional Jews, from their spiritual slumber to the joy of their unique relationship with God. Wyschogrod's contemporary, Abraham Joshua Heschel, similarly sought to awaken traditional Jews from what he called "pan-halachism," which he described as "a tendency toward legalism…which regards halacha as the only authentic source of Jewish thinking and living." Heschel, like Wyschogrod, never denied the centrality of Jewish law for traditional Jewish life, but he also, like Wyschogrod, despaired over its myopic effects on the Jewish spirit. Heschel, like Buber, believed that the universalism he associated with Hasidism offered the best chance for reawakening the Jewish people, and the rest of the world, to the joyful love of God. In contrast, Wyschogrod insisted that the vitality of Judaism depends upon God's special love for the Jewish people and the continued proclamation to the world of God's scandalous love for them. But is theological triumphalism the best means for reawakening the Jewish spirit?

It is important to reiterate that Wyschogrod's theological triumphalism has been more appreciated by Christian theologians than by his Jewish contemporaries. Wyschogrod may, in fact, have engaged in deeper theological dialogue with Christians than any other major 20th-century Jewish thinker. He sought out Barth personally, and his work seems to have been important both to John Paul II and Pope Benedict. Perhaps this is precisely because he returned Jewish-Christian dialogue to its most classical and most primitive terms: Which child does God love more? The question that has to be asked, however, is whether this is the right question—not for Christians but for Jews and Judaism today.

In my own view, developments in the Jewish world, especially in Israel, since Wyschogrod published *The Body of Faith* in the early 1980s strongly suggest that Halevi-like claims about Jewish election are not only theologically disturbing but politically dangerous. Such rhetoric may have made historical sense in contexts in which Jews were politically weak and continually beleaguered, but it is hard to see what good such claims can do for Judaism today, as well as for the relation between Jews and non-Jews. This doesn't mean that election is not an important theme of Jewish theology, but it is not the only theme.

It also doesn't mean that Wyschogrod's theology has nothing to teach us today. Judaism and Jewishness *are* particularist and collectivist. And it is a deep point that human love, as we actually know it, is particular and directed at unique individuals. Moreover, as Wyschogrod emphasizes, it is only through such particular loves that justice and love for all of humanity can emerge. God's promise to Abraham encapsulates the complex dialectic between the particular and the universal that is found throughout the Jewish tradition and of course in the Hebrew Bible as well: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing." (Gen. 12:2)

Michael Wyschogrod's theology is a testament to the tension between the particular and the universal in Judaism. Finding the right balance, or perhaps even simply recognizing that such a balance is necessary, remains the challenge facing all Jews today, religious and non-religious alike, as well as much of the rest of the world. In challenging, even provoking, us to rethink this balance Wyschogrod was, and remains, a thinker for our times.

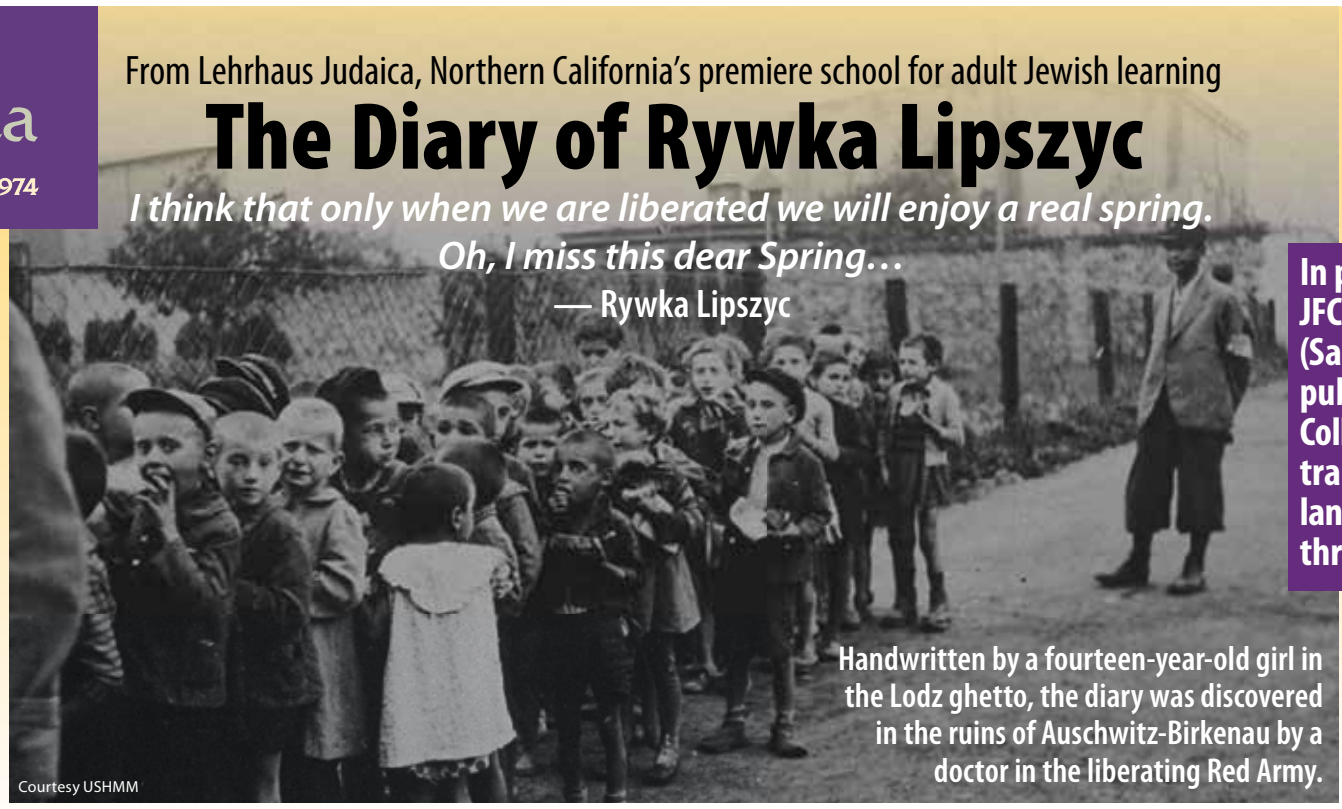
Leora Batnitzky is the Ronald O. Perelman Professor of Jewish Studies at Princeton University and the author, most recently, of How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought *(Princeton University Press).*

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Special thanks to **Alexandra Zapruder**, National Jewish Book Award winner, for masterfully editing and introducing the diary.

Anastasia Berezovskaya, for bringing the diary to the Holocaust Center of Northern California (now the JFCS Holocaust Center) in 2008

Esther Burstein and **Hadassa Halamish** for poignant articles about Rywka's family

Vikki Cooper, who copyedited the entire book and managed the publication

Dr. Anita Friedman, for her leadership and extraordinary efforts in promoting the work

Judy Janec, for her coordination of the publication, tireless research abroad, and compelling articles on the provenance of the diary and the mystery of Rywka's fate

Malgorzata Markoff, for her outstanding translation

Fred Rosenbaum, for co-leading the project, and for his well-researched essay on Lodz

Ewa Wiatr, who identified Rywka, transcribed and annotated the diary, and accessed for us the vast Lodz State Archives

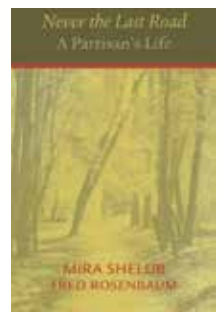
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Lost in Translation

BY SARAH RINDNER

The Grammar of God: A Journey into the Words and Worlds of the Bible
by Aviya Kushner
Spiegel & Grau, 272 pp., $27

One day, while visiting a friend's house, it dawned on the young Aviya Kushner that most children do not spend dinnertime arguing with their parents in Hebrew about the idiosyncrasies of Biblical grammar or the meaning of the first three words of Genesis. She registered further shock when she realized that most families do not discuss the grammar of ancient languages at all.

Kushner's Israeli mother was a would-be Bible scholar turned yeshiva day school teacher who, after her children went to sleep each evening, studied Akkadian late into the night in order to make sense of Biblical Hebrew. Her father had fallen in love with Hebrew as an adult (he was also a mathematician, after whom a theorem was named). Modern Orthodox Jews by affiliation, Kushner's family lived in the dense Hasidic heart of Monsey, New York, where their neighbors viewed them with a sort of benign curiosity.

Although the Kushners were set apart from their neighbors in many respects, they shared a reverence for the language of the Torah. On Tuesday nights, while the Kushner family was parsing biblical grammar, the ultra-Orthodox wedding halls near their home were filled to capacity due to a peculiarity in the biblical verse that describes the third day of creation as "good" twice rather than once. In the environment in which Kushner was raised, both inside and outside the home, linguistic features of the Hebrew Bible were more than a subject of scholarly inquiry, they were the foundation of a world view and a way of life.

Years later, Kushner became a journalist living in and covering Israel during the Second Intifada. Seeking an escape, she enrolled in the famous University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, where she studied with Marilynne Robinson. Robinson is no stranger to the Bible. Her work is shot through with biblical language and themes. Her spare and direct prose evokes the cadences of the Bible itself, and her recurring character Reverend John Ames models what it means to live a life devoted to reading and reflecting upon the Bible. So when Robinson taught a Bible class for the Writers' Workshop, Kushner was not surprisingly an eager participant.

Yet, while Kushner was "stunned and moved" by the poetic beauty and majestic scope of the King James Bible, she was also disappointed. As a native Hebrew speaker, Kushner had not spent much time reading the Bible in translation, and she was shocked at how different it was, both in form and in substance, when translated into English. "Sometimes," Kushner felt, "the choices were beautiful, sometimes slightly inaccurate, and sometimes just plain wrong." She could not shield her dissatisfaction from Robinson, who took Kushner's criticisms in stride. "This will be a book," Robinson said.

Kushner was shocked at how different the Bible was, both in form and in substance, when translated into English.

Kushner's book, *The Grammar of God: A Journey into the Words and Worlds of the Bible*, is a unique fusion of memoir and literary criticism in which Kushner attempts to recreate the conversations at her parents' table for readers who may not know Hebrew and are not likely to be familiar with traditional Jewish approaches to reading the Bible. As the title indicates, Kushner has inherited her mother's interest in the ways in which ancient Hebrew's syntax, word structure, and lack of vowels and punctuations render it so challenging. Looming in the background is Robert Frost's famous dictum that "poetry is that which is lost in translation." Frost may have been thinking mostly of the sounds and associations of particular words, but Kushner adds that grammar, too, is also lost, and this is part of what is missing from even the most exquisite Bible translations.



Aviya Kushner. (Photo by Gur Salomon, courtesy of Spiegel & Grau.)

For example, the Bible's frequent phrase "and God said" is actually "and said God." Thus any Bible translation project will necessarily begin with re-ordering sentences and end up re-ordering meaning. Kushner also discusses how the gendered nature of the Hebrew language is difficult to render in gender-neutral English. In Hebrew, on the third day of creation, a feminine earth sprouts forth her grass, "*va-totzeh ha-aretz desheh*," alongside with the masculine seed that yields another form of grass, "*eisev mazria zera*." This delicate balance between feminine and masculine is ignored in most translations, or, in the case of the King James Bible, depicted as exclusively male. Such observations are interesting on aesthetic grounds, but they also demonstrate the way in which the specific words employed by the Bible are inextricably linked to its world view.

While Kushner's analysis is creative and intelligent, not all of her biblical interpretations would withstand the test of scholarly inquiry or even the probing gaze of her own mother. But even if her biblical readings do not always hold muster, her book is far from sloppy or imprecise. Her memories of her family and community in particular are carefully rendered and beautifully wrought. They are a powerful tribute to the ways in which observant Jews live with, and by, the words of the Bible.

Reading and interpreting the Bible has always been linked with family, from the biblical rejoinder to pass down the account of the exodus from Egypt within one's family, "and you shall tell your children," to the Anglo-Protestant tradition of the "family Bible," a Bible that is passed through one's family and records births, marriages, and deaths. While her family is certainly unique, Kushner seeks to capture what it can look like for cultural literacy to be passed down from generation to generation in any family. Kushner's own legacy includes a story about her father's powerful first encounter with the words "*lech lecha*," which Kushner translates as "go, go"; a tiny book of Psalms her maternal grandfather gave her before she left for Iowa; and biblically influenced aphorisms passed down from European relatives who perished in the Holocaust.

Interwoven with these personal memories are studies of certain core themes in the Bible as they manifest themselves in linguistic quirks that are visible only in Hebrew. One chapter that has been widely excerpted and quoted involves a discussion of the biblical matriarch Sarah's laughter upon learning that she is going to give birth to a son in her old age. Kushner is very taken with the Hebrew phrasing of "*va-titzchak Sarah bikirba*," "and Sarah laughed inside her," or "in her gut." The 1st-century Jewish commentator Onkelos translates this into Aramaic as "and Sarah laughed in her intestines," and this tickles Kushner as well. She be-

lieves that she and the rabbinic commentaries are particularly attuned to the peculiar "interiority" of Sarah's laughter, while English translations fail to pick it up. Yet the translations cited by Kushner in this case, "Sarah laughed within her selfe" in the original King James Bible, and "Sarah laughed to herself" in the New Standard Version, are not all that bad. Even Kushner's mother dismisses her preoccupation with the phrasing of Onkelos here and reminds her that Biblical Hebrew, by its own standards, should not always be read absolutely literally. This does not detract from the charm of the chapter, which is also about the tension between silence and speech, and how didactic readings of the Bible in translation sometimes obscure the literary pleasures it contains.

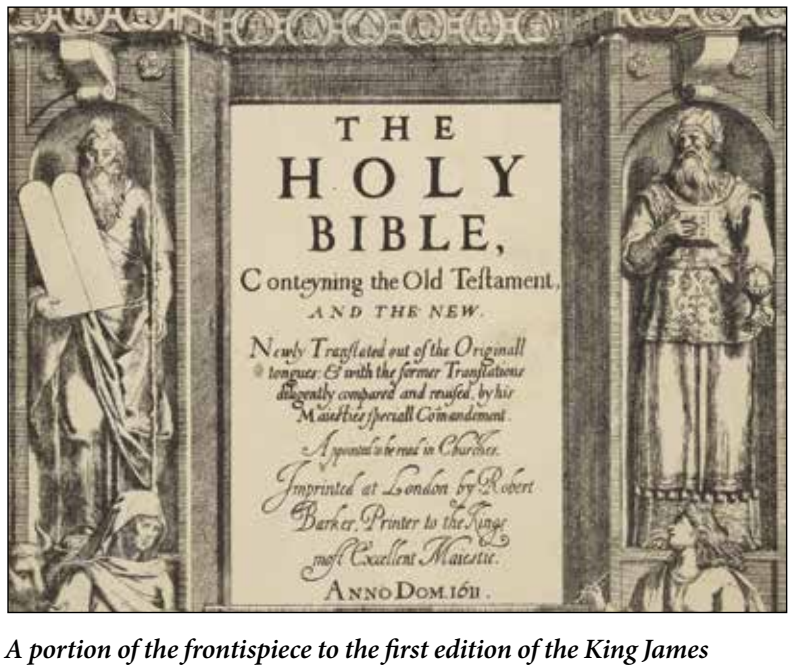
Kushner is more convincing when she discusses the way even the best translations obscure the crucial role of names and naming in the Bible. Lines such as "And Adam called his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living" or "and she called his name Moses . . . because I drew him out of the water" are technically incoherent in English, as Hebrew names are nearly always transliterated in a modified form rather than translated. In Hebrew, every time we hear the name of the first woman, "Chava," we also hear "chayim," or "life." In English, the name Eve is essentially meaningless. In the case of Adam, he is named in the verse "And the Lord formed man [*adam*] from the dust of the earth [*adamah*]." Translating "*adam*," as "man," or even "Adam the man," necessarily obscures the way this biblical passage should sound to the listener: "And the Lord formed [a variation of] earth, from the dust of the earth." As Kushner says:

> Adam the man—that first human on the stage of the world—is bizarrely earthless in English, and so is mankind. The essential connection between man and the earth is missing . . . Adam is *adama*—the ground he walks on, labors in, and will eventually return to …

Here and elsewhere, Kushner implies that paradigms for translation set by Christian translators have distorted the ways in which modern Jews read the Bible as well. What is earthy in the original Hebrew becomes abstract and "spiritualized." What Kushner wants to give her readers is "a glimpse of the deep water of ancient Hebrew." In this sense, she shares an affinity with recent Jewish Bible translators such as Robert Alter (and, far more radically, Everett Fox) who have been willing to make sacrifices in English to convey a sense of the original Hebrew.

Translation does not only silence the nuances of Biblical Hebrew, however. The vibrancy of traditional Jewish exegesis is also muted when one encounters the "lone voice" of the Bible in translation. For Kushner, the hermeneutical methods of commentators such as Rashi, Nachmanides, and Ibn Ezra, when encountered individually or as a collective, are more sensitive to the multivalent nature of the Bible than any translation can be:

> In school, as a child, I read the Torah from books called *mikraot gedolot*—"great scriptures," also called the Rabbinic Bible in English—volumes in which each page is crammed with commentary surrounding the text of the Bible in different languages, scripts, and fonts. To the side sat the words of Onkelos, a Roman convert to Judaism, whose great first-century translation into Aramaic can be read as a commentary. Beneath the text of the Bible lay Rashi's commentary . . . Around Rashi lay other commentators, rabbis chiming in from their perches in Spain, France, Germany, the Arab world, and Israel, spanning at least twelve centuries . . . The Hebrew text I grew up with is beautifully unruly, often ambiguous, multiple in meaning, and hard to pin down; many of the English translations are, above all, certain.


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ANNO DOM. 1611.

A portion of the frontispiece to the first edition of the King James Bible by Cornelius Boel, 1611. Moses and Aaron flank the central text.

Just as this sort of Bible study is hampered in translation, it would also be out of place in an academic Bible department, even a Hebrew-literate one. But Kushner, with her loose, expansive readings, believes that the rabbinic commentators are actually allies of anyone who cares about the textual features of the Bible, a group that could presumably include all academics.

In this regard, her intellectual forbearer is Nechama Leibowitz, the legendary 20th-century Israeli Bible teacher whose weekly Torah portion worksheets were disseminated to thousands of students worldwide. For Leibowitz, Jewish Bible commentary emerged organically from careful listening to the original Hebrew. In fact, Leibowitz is one of the few secondary sources quoted in Kushner's refreshingly short—if, perhaps, a bit too short—source index at the back of her book. *The Grammar of God* is at heart more an artistically crafted ode to Bible reading than it is a work of scholarship. It is a little surprising, but in the end not terribly damaging, that she does not cite any of the many excellent books that have been written


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Boczkowska reciting "Shoes from Majdanek"

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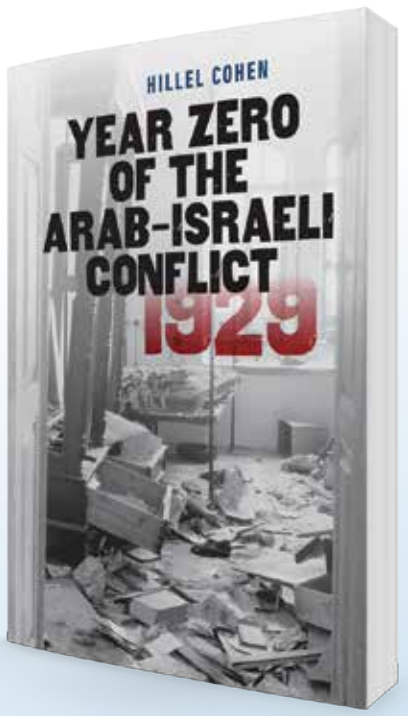
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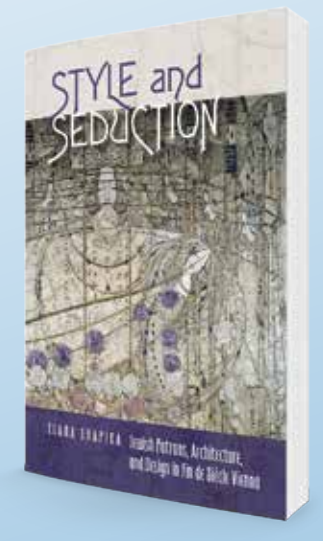


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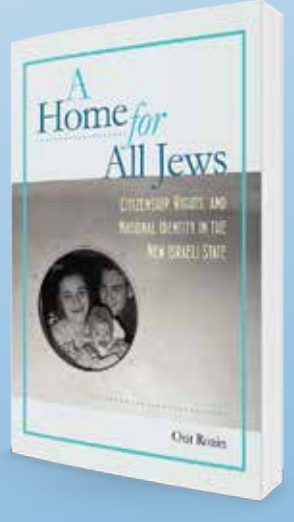
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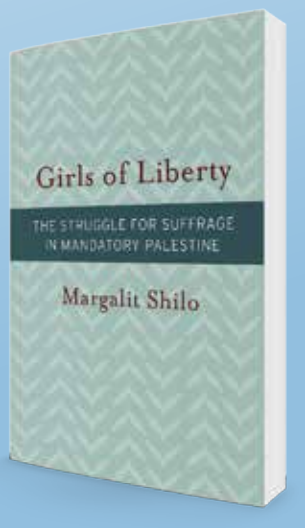


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about the history or influence of the King James Bible.

Along these lines, when Kushner describes her family, as well as the surrounding community in Monsey, her portraits are nuanced without being particularly critical. She depicts her aloof Hasidic neighbors with tenderness and sympathy, while admiring the way in which they live their lives according to biblical rhythms as interpreted by the

What Kushner wants to give her readers is "a glimpse of the deep water of ancient Hebrew."

Jewish tradition. In this regard she may have taken notes from Robinson, whose literary style and religious outlook are informed by what she has called an "ethics of non-judgmental, non-exclusive generosity." This generosity of spirit characterizes the memoir-like passages of *The Grammar of God* as well. Several popular memoirs have been published about traumatic upbringings in ultra-Orthodox Jewish enclaves in recent years. Kushner takes another path—she explores the sweetness that she finds at the intersection of family, community, and sacred text.

This generosity extends not only to her family and their surrounding community, but to the Bible as well. *The Grammar of God* eschews any mention of academic Bible criticism, problematic sections of the Bible that seem to throw its unity, morality, or divinity into question. Given the fact that Kushner is interested in the disconnect between the way she was trained to read the Bible as an Orthodox Jew and how it is read in the broader world, this is a little surprising, even disappointing. Then again, her celebration of the Bible does not emerge from an apologetic glossing over of its inadequacies, but rather from an intimate knowledge and understanding of the text as a world unto itself.

Kushner makes a compelling case for the untranslatable nature of the Hebrew Bible, and she also shows some of the ways in which family and community are crucial in allowing it to become an integral part of one's life. But does an audience interested in considering these points still exist? Very few people nowadays read the Bible with the persistence and devotion of Marilynne Robinson's Reverend John Ames. It is, of course, important to distinguish Jewish ways of reading the Hebrew Bible from Christian readings of translations. However, in a cultural climate marked by the decline of Bible reading as a whole, these two sets of readers may find themselves to be very much aligned, even if the texts they are reading are radically different. Indeed, this may be what brought Kushner and Robinson together in the first place. Their readings of the Bible are different, but they do continue to read it, frequently, intently, and with generosity.

Sarah Rindner teaches English literature at Lander College for Women in New York City. She writes about the intersection of Judaism and literature for The Book of Books *blog.*

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 "*Mumim*: Remembering the Dismembered" and "*Shemitta*: Trembling Before Gourds," the caricature suggested that a Zornbergesque collection on the later books of 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 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.

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.



Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg. (Courtesy of Debbi Cooper.)

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

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

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."

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

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 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 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.

Shai Secunda is the author of The Iranian Talmud: Reading the Bavli in Its Sasanian Context *(University of Pennsylvania Press) and currently a Martin Buber Society Fellow at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where he teaches comparative religion and rabbinic literature.*

Inconceivable

BY ERICA BROWN

Reconceiving Infertility: Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness
by Candida R. Moss and Joel S. Baden
Princeton University Press, 328 pp., $35

The Pater: My Father, My Judaism, My Childlessness
by Elliot Jager
The Toby Press, 206 pp., $24.95

"Why were the matriarchs barren?" the authors of Midrash Tanchuma ponder, "Because the Holy One desires their prayers and desires their words." In the rabbinic imagination, God wanted to know a matriarch's capacity to surrender to a destiny beyond her control. Theologically, not to speak of physically and emotionally, this seems harsh, unfair.

Beyond the biblical page, infertility has continued to torture the Jewish imagination. In the medieval and early modern *tekhines* of women who ache with a sense of personal inadequacy we find supplications such as the following prayer (in Aliza Levine's translation):

> You formed me from dust and suffused me with a holy soul, giving me life in this world—all through Your great kindness and mercy. But to my great sorrow and grief, I have but little good in this world, for You have granted me no progeny. Woe to me! My life is bitter! I am a withered tree that bears no fruit.

Without children, this aggrieved woman sees little purpose in her life—she is a tree that bears no fruit.

In *Reconceiving Infertility: Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness*, academic Bible scholars Candida R. Moss and Joel S. Baden are determined, as their clever title suggests, to "give new voice to ancient ideas about infertility, ideas that challenge . . . conventional views," including those so painfully expressed by the *tekhine* writer:

> [W]e have written this book in the hope that it might be of use to those who suffer from infertility themselves, and seek ways to understand their experience within the context of a biblical and religious framework.

This is a difficult task, since as Moss and Baden note, childlessness in the Bible tends to be a temporary state. In the stories on which they focus, biblical infertility is created by God and (eventually) fixed by God, even if it takes decades; it is either a test of faith or a curse. The authors subtly but effectively show us how the Bible depicts the pain of being unable to conceive:

Rachel, in naming Joseph, makes clear what infertility feels like: "God has taken away my disgrace" (Gen 30:23), she says, using a Hebrew word *herpa*, that is used elsewhere in the Bible to denote uncircumcised men (Gen 34:14), men with their eyes gouged out (1 Sam 11:2), cowardice (1 Sam 17:26), a rape victim (2 Sam 13:13), and the collapsed walls of Jerusalem (Neh 2:17). The experience of infertility in ancient Israel was utterly crushing.

Most biblical birth narratives use the formula "*va-tahar va-taled*"—and she conceived and she gave birth—as if there were not 40 hard weeks in between.

Yet, Moss and Baden ask, did all the biblical matriarchs truly want children? Rachel howls at Jacob "Give me children, or I shall die!" (Gen. 30:1); Hannah cries silently to God, but, as Moss and Baden point out, "Sarah, Rebekah, and Samson's mother never express such a desire in any explicit fashion." One can be barren, contend the authors, only if one's childlessness is not desired.

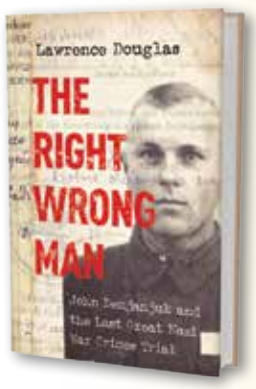
> [D]espite the claims of Proverbs, which attributes to the womb of the barren woman a metaphorical insatiable hunger (Prov 30:15–16), the desire for children, common though it may be, is not a universal biological imperative. It is not enough to simply say that these Israelite women wanted children. It is not enough to say that the Bible valorizes procreation. The attitudes of ancient Israelite women and the literature produced by ancient Israelite men emerged from a common cultural matrix, and it is that which much be interrogated.



Jacob Encountering Rachel with Her Father's Herds ***by Joseph von Führich, 1836. (Courtesy of the Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, Vienna.)***

The biblical protagonists themselves offer no such interrogation, with one exception that the authors, somewhat surprisingly, do not really address. Isaac prays for his wife to conceive and his prayer is granted. The result is that Rebekah struggles not with infertility but with motherhood; she challenges God about her pregnancy: "The babies fought within her, and she said, 'Why is this happening to me?' so she went to inquire of the Lord." (Gen. 25:22) A less elegant but perhaps more accurate translation would be "Why am I?" Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg makes the striking observation that Rebekah's pregnancy is, in a sense, really the "only biblical pregnancy." Most biblical birth narratives use the formula "*va-tahar va-taled*"—and she conceived and she gave birth—as if there were not 40 hard weeks in between.

In pursuing their interrogation of the Israelite cultural matrix, Moss and Baden assume that because there are other biblical women about whose domestic details we know nothing—such as Miriam or Deborah—having children may not have been a desideratum for every biblical woman. But this is a bit far-fetched. As we move from the intricate family politics of Genesis to the larger nation-building stories in Exodus and beyond, personal details are simply no longer the narrative focus. Indeed, while infertility is a constant problem in Genesis, stymying women who cannot fulfill its mandate to be "fruitful and multiply," the book of Exodus begins with the suggestion that fertility can also be a problem, at least from the Egyptian perspective. The two added verbs suggest growth of reptilian-like excess:



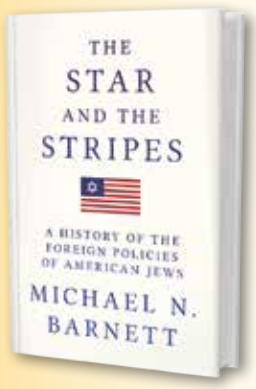
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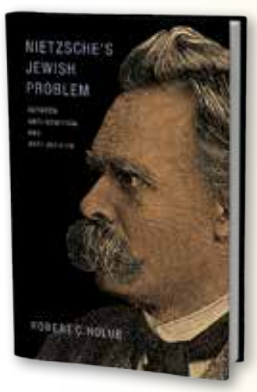
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> And the Children of Israel were fruitful and swarmed and multiplied and became strong so that the land was filled with them. (Ex. 1:7)

Moss and Baden do demonstrate how perspectives of childlessness seem to change in the New Testament (and perhaps even earlier in Deutero-Isaiah). Celebrating the barren woman, virgin birth, and celibacy may have shifted the way infertility was viewed, lessening the stigma and even elevating barrenness to a form of holiness. In some early Christian groups refusing to have children became "an expression of heightened religiosity and embodying the resurrection," since they believed that resurrected bodies would be sexless.

In Elliot Jager's haunting book, *The Pater*, he confronts his own "childlessness and its spiritual consequences" with a frank pain that equals that of the anonymous *tekhine* writer who saw herself as "a withered tree that bears no fruit." A private person by nature, Jager had to overcome his own inhibitions for the sake of "cathartic dialogue with other childless men." He shares a great deal with his readers but not in the irritating, overly confessional style of many contemporary memoirists.

Jager and his wife Lisa tried to have a child, and he describes the pain caused by the seemingly innocent encounters of everyday life which remind them of their inability to do so:

> I can't help but think what-might-have-been thoughts as I observe children around us throwing age-appropriate tantrums, taking on likeable personas, cracking jokes, and gradually reaching bar or bat mitzva age. On such occasions, even as I take joy in the happiness of my friends and relatives, I would be dishonest to deny a sense of melancholy that Lisa and I can only be spectators to such milestones.

The "pater" of Jager's title is his own father, who abandoned him and his mother when he was a child. In the awkward but poignant attempt Jager made at reconciliation 30 years later, his father, an Orthodox Jew, presses Jager about his infertility: "My father's compulsive preoccupation with my childlessness," he writes, "is all the more ironic because when I was a child he abandoned me—twice." Jager's desperation to be a father is driven in part to be the father he never had.

Jager is moved by his country's commitment to in vitro fertilization (IVF). At a Knesset hearing in the early 2000s, Israel's finance ministry wanted to eliminate IVF from the list of procedures covered by the national health system. The opposition cut across the entire spectrum of Israel's parliament, from Palestinian nationalists to Zionist hawks. Israelis believe, according to Jager, that they have an "intrinsic 'right' to parenthood, viewing infertility as a treatable ailment and IVF not only as a cure, but as a citizen's entitlement." So Jager and his wife Lisa were in the right country, but after five or six rounds of IVF—a difficult and "grueling" protocol—they decided to call it quits. The family they had imagined did not materialize. They considered adoption and surrogacy, but neither option felt right for them. They went to therapy and worked through much of their pain, but, as Jager makes clear, this is not something one simply gets over:

> After our failed IVF experience, I made a (for me) monumental decision—though at the time I didn't admit a connection because, really, it was the culmination of a number of factors. I took off my *kipa*.

The Jewish promise of a happy, nuclear family to carry his line forward in a country that actively promotes rising birth rates was not to be his lot,



Elliot Jager and his parents, Yvette and Alan, on the Lower East Side, 1956. (Courtesy of the author.)

and though he remains a religious Jew (and even reached a kind of reconciliation with his aging pater), he is, to some extent, estranged. His childlessness hits him hardest in synagogue, when he attends a *brit mila*, or a bar or bat mitzvah. Purim, with all its frolicking children, is hard. So are weddings. "May you merit building a home of faith in Israel"—recited under the wedding canopy—reminds him that the home intended in this blessing is one with children, a home he and his wife will not have.

Jager takes solace in famous and influential Jewish men who were childless but left a different type of legacy, from the British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli to Talmud professor Saul Lieberman. If Jager wonders about his own legacy, let it be, in part, this: He has given a tender voice of understanding to the male experience of infertility that is so often ignored or tucked away in the corner of an OB/GYN's office. As one man he meets says, "…it feels like a failure. I believe in propagation of the tribe. I just haven't managed to do it."

Erica Brown serves as the community scholar for The Jewish Center in Manhattan and the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston. She is the author of 10 books, including Seder Talk: The Conversational Haggada *(Koren) and, most recently,* Take Your Soul to Work: 365 Meditations on Every Day Leadership *(Simon & Schuster).*

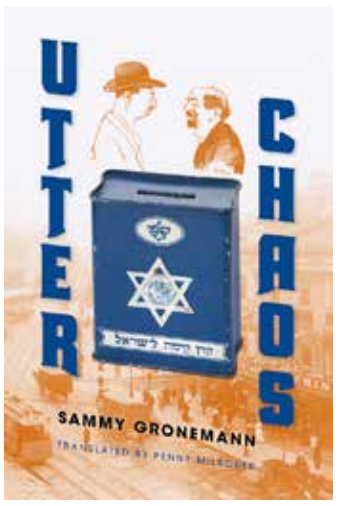
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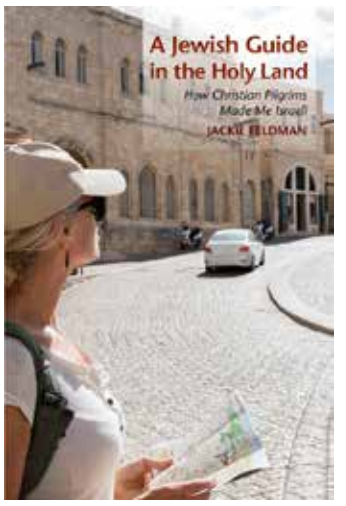
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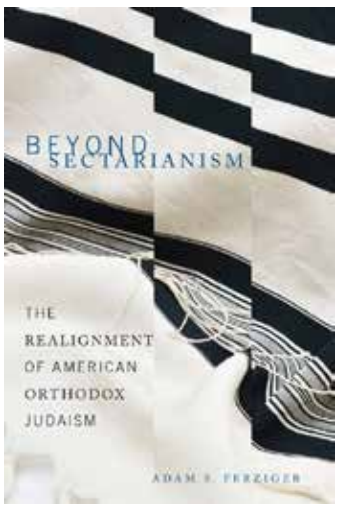
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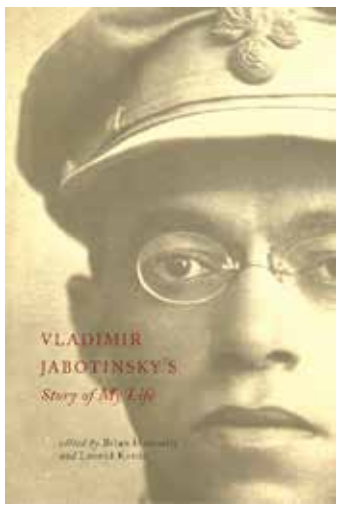
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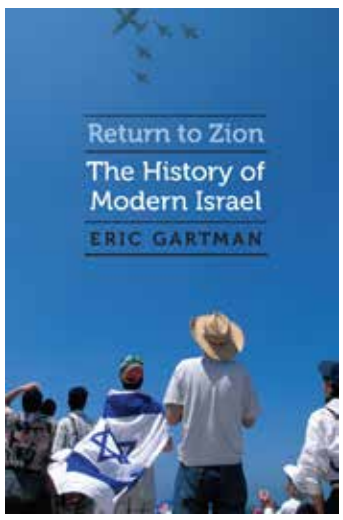
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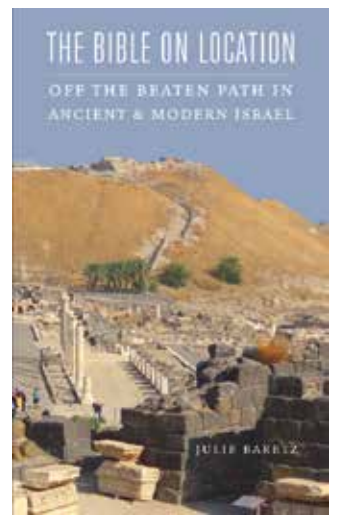
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PRESS

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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 Markschies, 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-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 Markschies 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



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

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'eved*, 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.

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.

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

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 proofreaders, 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 Markschies, 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.

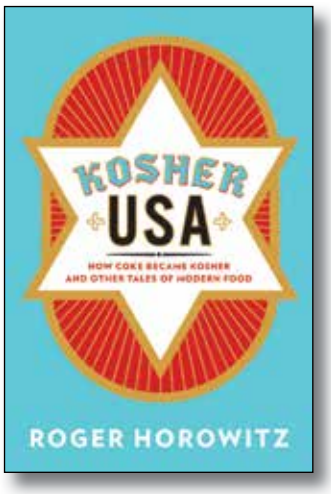
Markschies' deep knowledge of Christianity and his extraordinary command of 15th-century German humanism give him a precise contextual sense of Erhard's thought. Thus, where another scholar might be tempted to see something clever in Erhard's reference to First Corinthians 5:7, "clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened," Markschies 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. Markschies 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.

Philip Getz is philosophy and religion editor for Palgrave Macmillan and the former associate editor of the Jewish Review of Books.



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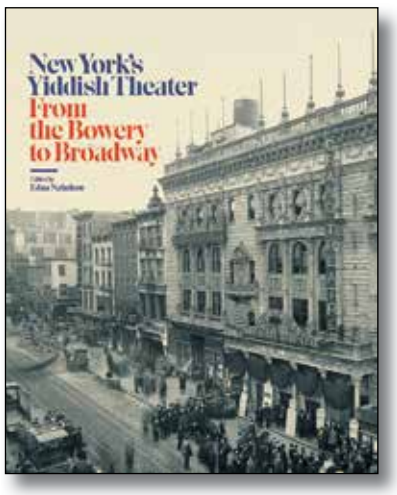
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One Nation, Two Disraelis

BY ABIGAIL GREEN

Disraeli: The Novel Politician
by David Cesarani
Yale University Press, 304 pp., $25

Benjamin Disraeli's legendary rival, William Gladstone, may have been the transformative genius of Victorian liberalism, but in death the legacy of the British prime minister who Bismarck famously called "the old Jew" has proved more lasting. Within six years of Disraeli's passing in 1881, over half a million British men and women had enrolled in the Primrose League, an imperialist vehicle for popular conservatism that took its name from his favorite flower and whose members wore a primrose on the anniversary of his death. By 1910 its membership was approaching two million, nearly a quarter of the national electorate.

The Primrose League eventually faded in importance (though it was intermittently active up through the 1990s), but Disraeli's memory has remained evergreen. In 1924, the future Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin invoked Disraeli's 1845 novel *Sybil, or The Two Nations* when he argued for a "One Nation Conservatism," which emphasized the bonds of responsibility between the social classes. As Baldwin later commented: "[A]ll those who look back, as every Tory must look back, to Disraeli for inspiration will never be afraid to go forward." This is as true today as it was in the 1930s. The current prime minister, David Cameron, has repeatedly invoked Disraeli when elaborating his Conservative vision of social responsibility. So resonant is Disraeli's place in national memory, that even Labour Party leader Ed Miliband felt no compunction about making a case for "One Nation Labour" in 2012.

This Disraeli—symbol of a nation, architect of modern Conservatism—has little place in the distinguished (and recently deceased) historian David Cesarani's arresting new study of the great Victorian Tory. For Cesarani is interested not in Disraeli's politics but in his Jewishness. He is, of course, by no means the first to examine the Jewish roots of a man whose entire political career was predicated on his childhood conversion to Christianity. In locating Disraeli within modern Jewish history, Cesarani engages with a tradition that he traces back to Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin, who placed Disraeli's Jewishness at the heart of his private life, his novels, his political thought, and his career as a politician. Nonetheless, Cesarani questions the idea that Jewishness is the biographical key to understanding who or what Disraeli was.

Cesarani undercuts assumptions about Disraeli's Jewishness from the first. Historians have traditionally attributed his conversion to his father's quarrel with the London Sephardic community over an unpaid fine. Cesarani emphasizes instead the key role played by Disraeli's godfather Sharon Turner in persuading the elder D'Israeli, a cosmopolitan man of letters, to go ahead. Turner was both a zealous Christian and an early apostle of racial thinking. The D'Israeli circle also included well-known opponents of Whig politics such as the Romantic poet Robert Southey and the publisher John Murray. Cesarani sees both father and son as deeply embedded in a reactionary, Tory milieu and fundamentally divorced from traditional Judaism. On his reading, they were converts who saw Christianity not as a passport to social success but rather as the ultimate fulfilment of Jewish revelation.

Cesarani questions the idea that Jewishness is the biographical key to understanding who or what Disraeli was.





Benjamin Disraeli as a young man and literary figure during his dandy phase by Daniel Maclise, 1833. (Universal History Archive/UIG via Getty Images.) Right: The pin of the Primrose League.

Everything about Disraeli's career was extraordinary. After flirting with the law, he threw himself into the speculative frenzy of the London stock market, investing in and promoting South American mining stocks; he lost a fortune in the 1825 crash. The young Disraeli and his two partners were left with debts of £7,000, and he escaped a debtor's prison only by virtue of being underage. Desperate to restore his finances, Disraeli set out to become a best-selling novelist, an expedient he embraced repeatedly in a life of financial brinksmanship. His first novel, *Vivian Grey* (1826), is the tale of an ambitious young man who sees politics as a vehicle for social advancement because in England "to enter high society, a man must either have blood, a million, or a genius." Historians have—quite understandably—tended to read it as disguised autobiography. The novel was a commercial success but a critical disaster that did little in the end for Disraeli's prospects.

In 1830, he then took the unusual step of setting out for Jerusalem. Stopping for a month in Constantinople, he "'went native,' dressing like a Turk, smoking Turkish pipes, and indulging the sort of pleasures that were forbidden in London or usually inaccessible to a young man of his station." While Disraeli noted the exotic diversity of the population, Cesarani comments wryly that "Jews were merely one element of the backdrop to his personal odyssey"—and an element he largely chose to ignore.

While other historians have ransacked Disraeli's early novels for insights into their author's Jewish identity, Cesarani cites evidence that he was sublimely indifferent to it. This was a young man who passed through Frankfurt without noticing its *Judengasse*; spent five months in Egypt without reflecting on the Exodus; and, perhaps most remarkably, made a famous tour of Jerusalem without visiting either the Jewish quarter or the Western Wall. He was not only indifferent, in fact, but also ignorant: The Jews in *Vivian Grey*, *Contarini Fleming* (1832), and even *The Wondrous Tale of Alroy* (1833), a historical fiction about a messiah in medieval Baghdad, are all stock characters, whose author has only the haziest grasp of Jewish ritual.

On his return from the East, Disraeli plunged into politics and dallied in London society, where he cut an arresting figure: "He is satirical, contemptuous, pathetic, humorous, everything in a moment," an American journalist wrote of him, "the most intellectual face in England—pale, regular, and overshadowed with the most luxuriant mass of raven black hair." Talented and consumed by ambition, Disraeli branded himself confusingly as a "Tory-radical" when he tried (and failed) to

win a seat in parliament. He did rather better as a Conservative polemicist. At the behest of the former Tory lord chancellor, Disraeli wrote a series of influential articles challenging the Whig-Radical claim to represent the people. The Tories, who stood for the interests of the Crown, Church, peerage, university, and judiciary, he argued, had a stronger claim to the role. His *Vindication of the English Constitution in a Letter to a Noble and Learned Lord* (1835) was a profoundly reactionary text that defended prescription, precedence, and antiquity against the tests of utility, popularity, and modernity. Disraeli's Tory contemporaries found it an essential resource. And so this raffish young man more at home in the demi-monde than the Tory shires won the backing of the Carlton Club and made it into Parliament just as Queen Victoria ascended the throne. Hecklers at public meetings had taunted him with cries of "old clothes" and "Shylock," but, Cesarani writes, "His Jewish origins had not been a significant barrier and were, therefore, barely worth reflecting on."

Cesarani suggests that Disraeli's rhetoric about Jews acquired such importance precisely because his *actions* as a Jew were so sparse.

The 1830s and 1840s were not a good time for Conservatives. The party split decisively in 1846 when Tory Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel chose to repeal the Corn Laws with the support of his opponents. Disraeli had tried and failed to obtain office under Peel. He emerged fleetingly as the leader of a group called Young England, a label that hinted misleadingly at the flowering of romantic nationalism inspired by the radical Italian democrat Giuseppe Mazzini. But there was nothing radical or democratic about Disraeli's ideas. In his Young England trilogy, he sympathized with the plight of the poor but looked to the Crown, Church, and aristocracy to heal the social dislocations of the modern age. These novels have had an extraordinary staying power. Overwritten and melodramatic, *Coningsby, or The New Generation* (1844), *Sybil*, and *Tancred, or The New Crusade* (1847) provided British Conservatism with a seemingly inexhaustible resource. As the future Tory Prime Minister Harold Macmillan commented in 1943: "Disraeli left a great mark on England . . . the young men in the Tory Party now read his novels . . . with the same enthusiasm as we did thirty years ago."

These novels contain what Cesarani describes as "an unprecedented assertion of Jewish superiority" embodied in the figure of Sidonia, a cosmopolitan and sophisticated financier of noble Sephardic stock. Sidonia, who features in all three novels, is remarkable both for his contempt for representative democracy and for his explicit embrace of racial theory. For instance, he explains to the hero of *Coningsby* that the world is divided into five races, and Jews stand, with the Arabs, at the apex of the Caucasian race, followed by Saxons and Greeks. But the Jews are superior because they have remained pure, and, despite their outcast status, have exercised "a vast influence on the affairs of Europe." Similar ideas are developed in *Tancred*. This time, however, Disraeli combines racialized language with an emphasis on the Jewish origins of Christianity—a theme he later developed in his famous Commons intervention in defense of Jewish political rights.

Cesarani is at pains to emphasize both the pernicious influence of Disraeli's rhetoric of Jewish superiority and its curiously incidental quality. The creator of Sidonia had no interest in Jewish causes: The Damascus blood libel passed him by in 1840, as did the kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara in 1858. Disraeli may have spoken out in the great debate of 1847 prompted by Lionel de Rothschild's election as member of Parliament for the city of London, but he did so on religious grounds and "as a Christian." His willingness to do even this reflected a growing intimacy with the Rothschilds, who eventually became something of a surrogate family. Indeed, Sidonia was partly written as a compliment to Lionel. According to Cesarani, Disraeli played up his own Jewishness to get closer to the Rothschilds, stressing racial affinity in the absence of religious common ground. It was a stance he adopted rather carelessly, but later found impossible to disavow. Even as he advised Rothschild on parliamentary tactics, he commented on an early version of the Jews Relief Act of 1858, designed to eliminate the barriers to Jews serving in Parliament, saying that he wished it were "at the bottom of the Red Sea."



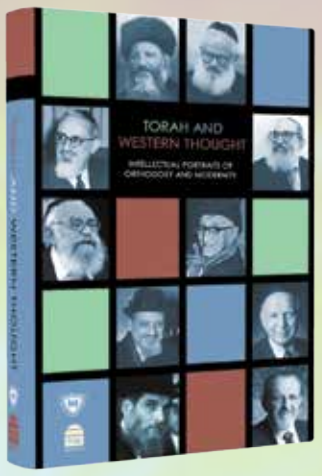
The Impenetrable, *by Jack Butler Yeats, June 1875, depicts Benjamin Disraeli remaining calm while attacked by domestic opposition and Irish Home Rule issues. (Photo by Hulton Archive/Getty Images.)*

Since Disraeli was the only Tory of any real political talent, his party had no alternative but to accept him as its leader in the House of Commons. In this role, he served three times as chancellor of the exchequer under Lord Derby: in 1852, 1858–1859, and 1866–1868. These brief spells were not insignificant. In 1858–1859, for instance, the Derby government made it possible for Lionel de Rothschild finally to enter Parliament, ended the rule of the East India Company through the Government of India Act, and introduced an unsuccessful Reform Bill. Only the first of these developments is of any interest to Cesarani, who emphasizes Disraeli's very lukewarm commitment to Jewish emancipation. Instead, Cesarani focuses on the interplay between Disraeli's political success and his Jewishness: "[T]he higher he rose, the greater the power he accumulated, the more intense the antipathy he aroused." Detecting a coarsening of discourse both about Jews and about Disraeli in the 1850s, Cesarani argues that the two phenomena were connected. If people began to talk about Disraeli and Jews in racial terms, associating them with revolution and power, then this was partly a reflection of Disraeli's own rhetoric. Cesarani even suggests that Disraeli's rhetoric about Jews acquired such importance precisely because his actions as a Jew were so sparse.

Cesarani devotes the third part of the book to the evening of Disraeli's life, when he served both as a legendary leader of the opposition and as a great, reforming prime minister. Sidestepping the achievements that have led Conservatives to claim him as the father of Tory Democracy and the architect of socially responsible "One Nation Conservatism," Cesarani focuses instead on Disraeli's friendship with the Rothschilds, his purchase of the Suez Canal in 1875, and his controversial defense of the Ottoman Empire, which prompted claims that he was pursuing a Jewish foreign policy. Cesarani writes that "the construction of Disraeli as a 'Jew' carrying out a 'Hebrew policy' was the enduring legacy of his last period in office, at least insofar as his image and his place in history are concerned."

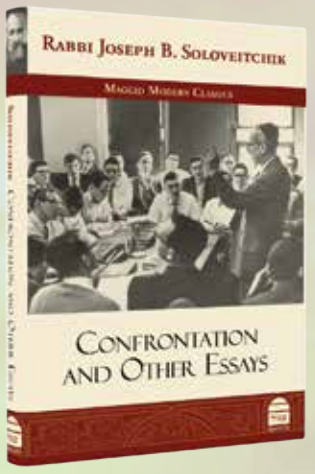
British historians and Conservative politicians alike will object to such a conclusion. Of course, Cesarani is right to emphasize the persistence and

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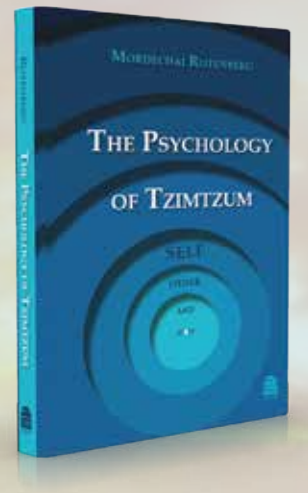
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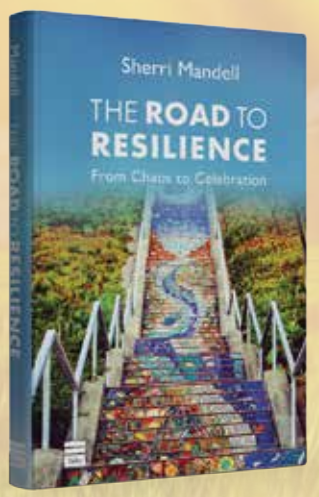


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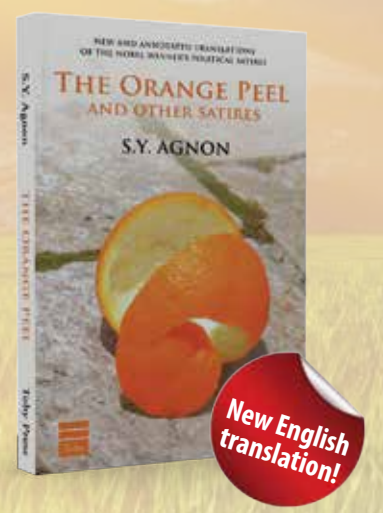
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sheer volume of prejudice Disraeli encountered. Few of his contemporaries were immune from this sentiment: not Edward Stanley, his political disciple, nor Gladstone, who actively stoked it. Yet Cesarani oversimplifies when he claims that Disraeli "played a formative part in the construction of anti-Semitic discourse" because his racial rhetoric succeeded "in his lifetime, and for decades afterwards, in convincing people that he was a Jewish genius at the centre of a web of Jewish influence." This overstates Disraeli's importance as a European thinker, and understates his influence as a model of Jewish respectability.

Anti-Semites like Bruno Bauer, Wilhelm Marr, and Édouard Drumont may have taken their cue in part from Disraeli's ideas, but for the German historian Heinrich von Treitschke he was proof that Jews *could* assimilate: He was "an Englishman through and through." In emphasizing Disraeli's pivotal role in the emergence of modern Jew-hatred in Britain, Cesarani fails to account for his place in national memory. In doing so, he overestimates the significance of British anti-Semites like Hilaire Belloc and Lord Sydenham at the expense of infinitely more significant figures like Stanley Baldwin and Harold Macmillan. Of the Primrose League, there is no mention.

Interpreting Disraeli from the vantage point of a Jewish historian, Cesarani sometimes falls into the same trap as earlier biographers whose accounts he has otherwise revised with such panache. Cesarani may question the extent to which Disraeli's early novels can be read as a guide to his identity, but he still draws extensively upon them, even if he is more skeptical about their Jewish dimension. He maintains that Disraeli cared relatively little about his Jewishness, and yet by interrogating this issue at the expense of other concerns he ignores large swathes of his subject's career.

David Cesarani had become the public face of Jewish history in Britain when he died recently at the age of 58. He was known above all as the biographer of Eichmann and an expert on the Holocaust, who played a leading role in establishing its place in public memory. But Cesarani made his name as one of a generation of young historians who challenged the complacency of Anglo-Jewry by underscoring the persistence of anti-Semitism in Britain, and the challenges of migration and integration. In *Disraeli*, which, tragically, turns out to have been his last book, Cesarani came full circle. Yet Disraeli transcended the narrow confines of Anglo-Jewish history. His Jewishness and his political influence deserve to be thought about together in ways that take into account the more positive dimensions of his legacy.

As Conservative politician Douglas Hurd noted in his 2013 biography of Disraeli, no British prime minister except perhaps Winston Churchill has become the focus of such posthumous mythology. Cesarani's clever, beautifully written book will change the way we understand Disraeli's Jewishness, but it does less to explain the vitality and longevity of his legacy.

Abigail Green is professor of modern European history at Oxford University and tutorial fellow in history at Brasenose College, Oxford. Her most recent book is Moses Montefiore: Jewish Liberator, Imperial Hero *(Harvard University Press), which won the Sami Rohr Choice Award and was a* New Republic *Best Book of 2010. She is currently working on an international history of Jewish liberal activism.*

A *Mechitza*, the Mufti, and the Beginnings of the Arab-Israeli Conflict

BY ALLAN ARKUSH

Year Zero of the Arab-Israeli Conflict 1929
by Hillel Cohen
Brandeis University Press, 312 pp., $29.95

In one of the more chilling testimonies cited in Hillel Cohen's account of the 1929 riots in Palestine, an elderly Jewish survivor recalls how his mother had tried to shelter him when he was five years old from a rampaging Arab mob in what looked like the safety of a friend's home in Safed. But then:

> The Arabs threw hundreds of stones at the house, at the windows and shutters. They beat on the doors and shutters with huge clubs and cast blazing torches through the windows. The house began to burn. The shutters, curtains, and even my mother's and sister's nightgowns began to go up in flames.

The teller of this tale, Yisrael Tal, narrowly escaped the siege (together with the other members of his family) and grew up to become first a British soldier and then a very distinguished Israeli general. He was also, as Cohen points out, "the father of the Merkava tank."

"Talik" was by no means the only leading figure in the Israeli Army who had such a boyhood experience, or a worse one, in August of 1929. The future general Rehavam ("Ghandi") Ze'evi, living in Jerusalem, saw his first corpse that year, one of the victims of an attack in Bayit VeGan. And Cohen relates in detail the story of Mordechai Maklef, the IDF's third chief of staff, whose parents and siblings were brutally murdered by Arabs in Motza, and who himself was rescued from a similar death only at the last minute—perhaps by an elderly rabbi who was soon slaughtered himself, and perhaps by an Arab whose piety prevented him from killing small children, and perhaps by both. We have, as Cohen tells us, two different and not necessarily mutually exclusive accounts of what happened.

In another book, these episodes might have served as unsettling reminders that the Jews were once at the mercy of anti-Semitic mobs not only in the diaspora but in the Land of Israel itself. They might have supplied evidence of the necessity of a Jewish state as well as an explanation of the emergence of Palestinian-born men capable of leading the struggle to establish and preserve it. In Hillel Cohen's account, however, they represent the deplorable but inevitable consequences of the intrusion of the Zionist movement into an area where it was unwelcome and where it had no clear right to be: "As the Arabs saw it, in the summer of 1929 they killed not their Jewish neighbors, but rather enemies who were seeking to conquer their land."

Cohen's analysis of the situation in 1929 goes very much against the grain of the usual Zionist narrative and even the non-partisan historical research concerning this period. There, the emphasis is usually on the way in which the riots at the very end of the 1920s constituted a rather abrupt departure from the peaceful conditions that had prevailed in Palestine since 1921. They came at a time when the Zionist enclave in Palestine was enmeshed in economic crisis, when Jewish emigration from Palestine exceeded immigration, and when the Zionist project, as the historian Bernard Wasserstein put it in his *The British in Palestine: The Mandatory Government and Arab-Jewish Conflict, 1917–1929*, looked like "a sinking ship."

Cohen's penchant for highlighting the Jews' major—if shared—culpability for what took place in 1929 raises questions about his underlying convictions.

Nobody contends, of course, that the riots were bolts from the blue. Most historians trace them back to a dispute over a *mechitza*, of all things, that began on Yom Kippur in 1928, when British constables forcibly removed a makeshift partition between male and female worshippers. What the Jews were and weren't allowed to do in the then-narrow space adjacent to the Muslim-owned Western Wall wasn't quite clear, and disagreements had led to altercations between Jews and Arabs in the past, but only in 1928 did the problem mushroom into a lengthy and eventually bloody struggle. Both Jews and Arabs ramped up their rhetoric and engaged in provocative actions but "there can be little doubt," according to Wasserstein, "that the key to what occurred in Palestine in 1929 was the . . . year-long campaign" on the part of the Muslim leader Hajj Ammin al-Husseini, the mufti of Jerusalem, "rousing the Arabs of Palestine to stand against the alleged threat to the Muslim holy places in Jerusalem," alleging, for instance, that the Yom Kippur *mechitza* was proof of a Zionist plot to take over the Temple Mount. Wasserstein provides a detailed overview of what he labels the mufti's "vast campaign of propaganda and action" and the incensed and bitter Jewish reaction to it before describing the intercommunal violence that ultimately ensued in August of 1929, resulting in the death of hundreds of Jews and Arabs.

In Cohen's revisionist narrative there is no hint that the Zionist movement in the late 1920s was a sinking or even a foundering ship. There is no mention of anything that might have induced the Arabs of Palestine to doubt that the Jews would



Hajj Ammin al-Husseini (second from left), the mufti of Jerusalem, at a meeting in 1929. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.)

have the power to take control of their land. And there is less discussion of the mufti and his "year-long campaign" than there ought to be. Between his Introduction and the main body of his text Cohen has placed a "Chronological Overview of the Events," commencing with Yom Kippur 1928 and concluding with the return of a few members of the devastated Jewish community of Hebron to the city in May 1931. This list, he notes, "includes events that are not discussed in the book." One of these events is an "Islamic conference chaired by Grand Mufti of Jerusalem Hajj Amin al-Hussayni and attended by clerics from throughout the Muslim world" that "demands restrictions on Jewish activity at the Western Wall."

Cohen never quotes the speeches of the mufti or any of his acolytes at length, and he allows us only fleeting, indirect glimpses of the vast campaign Wasserstein described, through brief quotations from the work of other scholars and, in one case, an eyewitness. He briefly refers to Rana Barakat's description in her 2007 University of Chicago PhD dissertation of the way in which the mufti "fanned the flames in the conflict over al-Buraq" (the Muslim name for the Western Wall, where Muhammad's steed, al-Buraq, was legendarily tethered). Cohen also quotes Eitan Wijler's 2005 University of Haifa master's thesis in which he asserts that al-Husseini's efforts to export the conflict from Jerusalem and his policies in general (like those of the Zionist Revisionists) "led to growing extremism and the deterioration of the situation" in the months leading up to the riots. And he describes how an eyewitness (at the age of five) to the events in Safed in 1929 recalled (at the age of 80) the Arab crowd being stirred by the call "*Seif al-din Hajj Amin* [Hajj Amin (al-Hussayni) is the sword of the faith]." But this does not give the reader anything like a full picture of the mufti's conduct during the year to which Cohen's book is devoted.



Synagogue in Hebron desecrated by Arab rioters, August 1929. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.)

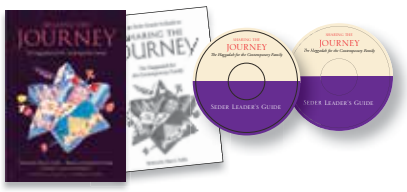
Another item appearing in Cohen's chronological overview is a Hebrew newspaper's interview with the Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Palestine, Abraham Isaac Kook, on August 15, 1929. As Cohen puts it, Rabbi Kook called at this time, just before the riots, "for the evacuation of the Maghrebi quarter, the Arab neighborhood adjacent to the Western Wall." Rav Kook's passionate and combative statement is discussed and quoted extensively in the main text of *Year Zero*, as is his expression of regret three months later for, in Cohen's words, "his involvement in fanning the flames of the Western Wall controversy." But what Cohen refrains from making entirely clear is to what, exactly, Kook was responding.

Cohen clearly wishes to undermine the Jews' longstanding conviction that they were the victims in 1929. Rejecting the common attribution of the anti-Jewish riots of that year to the Palestinian Arabs' shocking penchant for violence, he attempts to provide an unbiased view of the situation that produced them. At bottom, he insists, despite their deplorable excesses, the Palestinians who murdered more than a hundred Jews in Jerusalem, Hebron, Safed, and elsewhere were manifesting their understandable frustration with the Zionists' attempt to usurp their homeland—even when

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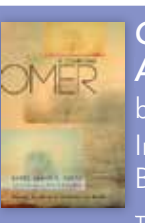
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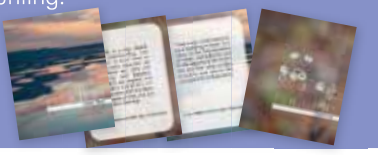


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they were massacring non-Zionist Jews from the Old Yishuv. For the Zionist movement had created a situation in which "all Jews now looked the same to them."

Cohen does indeed convey to his readers the sense of outrage felt by many Palestinian Arabs at the privileges accorded to the Zionists by the Balfour Declaration and the British Mandate. He makes a reasonably strong case that, from the Arab point of view, there was a consensus among Jews that Palestine belonged to them and that this was:

> the major ideological factor that motivated the attackers and murderers, their justification for indiscriminate attacks on Jewish settlements and communities, no matter what their political and religious affiliations.

Cohen notes that some of the ultra-Orthodox victims of the riots of 1929, in Hebron for instance, had substantial ties to the Zionist movement, links that were strong enough for their assailants to conclude that the lines separating Zionist and *haredi* were fuzzy. Where Cohen does not succeed, however—in part because of his tendentious omissions—is in convincing the reader that the riots of 1929 were the outcome of the collision of two inevitably opposed forces rather than primarily the result of the machinations of a religious demagogue.

Cohen follows up his chronology of the events of 1929 with an enumeration of the "Casualties in the 1929 Riots." It shows that the numbers of Jews and Arabs killed and wounded were roughly equal, but also includes a note that clarifies the very different ways in which the Jews and the Arabs met their deaths:

> A large majority of the Jews slain were unarmed and were murdered in their homes by Arabs. Most of the Arab dead were killed as they attacked Jewish settlements or neighborhoods. Most of the Arabs were felled by bullets fired by the British armed forces; some were shot by members of the Haganah. As will be shown, about twenty of the Arabs killed were not involved in attacks on Jews. They were killed in lynchings and revenge attacks carried out by Jews, or by indiscriminate British gunfire.

It would have been helpful if Cohen had broken down these numbers a little further and told us how many Arabs were unjustifiably killed by Jews, but if my count is correct, the number is fewer than 10, and of these five were the victims of a revenge attack by a single enraged Jewish policeman, Simha Hinkis, in Abu Kabir, near Tel Aviv. Cohen gives Hinkis an extraordinary amount of attention. Indeed, no other Jew—or Arab or Englishman, for that matter—has an entry in the index to *Year Zero* that comes close to being as long as the one devoted to him.

Cohen's penchant for highlighting the Jews' major—if shared—culpability for what took place in 1929 raises questions about his underlying convictions, questions that are not improper to raise with respect to the author of a book like his. For as Cohen himself observes, "it is impossible to address the events of 1929 without addressing moral issues," including, above all, the following question: "did the Zionist aspiration of founding a Jewish state that could cure the Jews of the malady of living as a humbled minority justify injury to the Arab inhabitants of Palestine?" But this, Cohen goes on to say, leads ineluctably to another question: "did the Arabs have a right to oppose Zionist settlement?" And if so, how far could they legitimately go?

Cohen tosses these questions around in the main body of his text, but he offers an answer of his own only in the book's Afterword:

> [T]he Jews, as a persecuted people whose property and lives were in constant danger, had a right to take refuge in the Land of Israel. But this right did not strip the Arabs of their own rights in Palestine, nor can it justify every action and policy pursued by the Zionist movement to achieve its larger goal.

But what about that larger goal itself, the establishment of a Jewish state? Was that justified? Cohen doesn't say yes and he doesn't say no. He is under no obligation to do so, of course, in a historical study. But his evasiveness with respect to the question that he himself has posed justifies Benny Morris's description of his stance, in a review in the Israeli online journal *Mida* of the original Hebrew edition of this work, as "nebulous post-Zionism," if not his further deduction that Cohen apparently wishes to deny the legitimacy of a Jewish state altogether. And it should put supporters of the Jewish state on guard against the distortions that even an author who strives to rise above nationalist bias can introduce into his historical narrative.

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Saving the World

BY ELIAS SACKS

Franz Rosenzweig's Conversions: World Denial and World Redemption
by Benjamin Pollock
Indiana University Press, 282 pp., $60

In 1913, a young, acculturated German Jew named Franz Rosenzweig underwent two faith experiences that eventually transformed modern Jewish intellectual life. Rosenzweig was a postdoctoral student in his mid-20s; writing a book on "Hegel and the State"; and committed to the relativism fashionable among his academic peers. On the evening of July 7, however, Rosenzweig had what he would later call his "Leipzig night-conversation" with two close Christian friends, Rudolf Ehrenberg and Eugen Rosenstock, both of whom came from Jewish backgrounds and would go on to become prominent intellectuals. Moved by their blend of intellectual rigor and simple Christian belief, Rosenzweig grasped the emptiness of contemporary intellectual life and turned to faith. Three months later, after a personal crisis that nearly resulted in suicide—he confessed in one of his letters that after the night-conversation, "I . . . took my Browning 6.35 out of my desk drawer"—Rosenzweig was preparing for baptism. Convinced that he should follow in the footsteps of early Christians and accept Christ as a Jew, he attended Yom Kippur services at a small synagogue in Berlin. And there Rosenzweig encountered a faith so vibrant that he decided to recommit himself to Judaism.

Rosenzweig suggests that our fear of death leaves us uncertain about how to understand our status as beings distinct from, yet rooted in, the world we inhabit.

He was soon studying Jewish texts and thought with leading scholars. After the outbreak of World War I, while stationed with an anti-aircraft unit on the Balkan front, he wrote parts of the first draft of his magnum opus, *The Star of Redemption*, on the backs of military postcards to his mother. When he returned, he abandoned his promising academic career to devote himself to Jewish life and education, eventually establishing a center for adult Jewish education in Frankfurt, the famous Lehrhaus. He continued to produce important work—including a Bible translation with Martin Buber—even as he suffered progressive paralysis brought on by amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). And while Rosenzweig's life was tragically cut short (he died at 42), his writings would eventually gain a wide readership among Jews, Christians, and contemporary philosophers. Two faith experiences in 1913, then, led Rosenzweig from academic relativism to religious faith and ultimately back to Jewish life, and thereby provided modern Judaism with one its most influential—and personally inspiring—thinkers.

The first scholar to tell the story I've just recounted seems to have been Nahum Glatzer, who

had studied with Rosenzweig at the Lehrhaus and later introduced his writings to American readers in a 1952 essay and 1953 hagiographical anthology assigned and read by generations of teachers and students. In the six decades since then, the story has received nearly universal acceptance. It's a tale about modernity's limits: a promising scholar committed to fashionable relativism discovers an anchor in religious faith. It's also a story about Jewish identity: a brilliant philosopher who has all but embraced Christianity returns to Judaism. It's a story laden with personal drama: Rosenzweig contemplates suicide after that "Leipzig night-conversation" (and would eventually conduct a love affair with Rosenstock's wife, though Glatzer certainly never mentioned that). Finally, it's a story about religious experience: Encounters with believing friends, as well as with communal prayer, redirect the life of an individual and, along with him, the course of modern Jewish thought. No wonder, then, that this tale has achieved such popularity, becoming a staple of High Holiday sermons and Jewish studies lectures (including, I should admit, my own). Nevertheless, Benjamin Pollock shows in his excellent new book, *Franz Rosenzweig's Conversions: World Denial and World Redemption,* that there are at least two problems with this widely accepted and frequently repeated narrative: It's historically false and philosophically pernicious.

Pollock does not deny that something important took place on July 7, 1913 (and during the following months) that eventually led Rosenzweig to commit himself to Judaism. But Pollock dismantles the central aspects of this cherished narrative. It isn't the case that the events of 1913 involved abandoning relativism for faith; by the time of the night-conversation, we learn, Rosenzweig already believed in a God who reveals Himself. What Rosenzweig came to embrace in 1913 was not religion but the world, and what led him to do so was not faith experience but rigorous reflection.

Prior to the July 7 conversation, Pollock shows, Rosenzweig was already committed to a form of faith so extreme that it involved "a denial of the spiritual status of the world." By 1913, he had come to believe that worldly life is opposed to the pursuit of salvation—that the world is something from which God frees us, rather than something God created. On this view, realizing our spiritual potential (and safeguarding God from perils such as idolatry) involves removing ourselves from worldly affairs.

Rosenzweig came to flirt, that is, with a position that he would later describe as Marcionism. Marcion was a 2nd-century Christian thinker—sometimes described as a Gnostic—who held that the world was created not by a benevolent deity but rather by a lesser, evil divinity and who saw faith in Christ as a means of allowing individuals to escape this world and enter the true Kingdom of God. Indeed, Pollock shows, so radical was Rosenzweig's neo-Marcionite denial of the world that his writings prior to the night-conversation experiment with the notion of dying for God and with the idea of suicide as a spiritual obligation.

What could possibly have attracted a young, philosophically inclined German Jew to such world denial? Part of the answer is historical: Many of Rosenzweig's contemporaries were captivated by Marcion. Part of the answer, though, is conceptual. For close to a decade, Pollock shows, Rosenzweig had been plagued by perplexity about the relation between self and world. In particular, he found himself experiencing an ongoing "oscillation between world and self," between a conviction that the individual self should embrace the world and historical era he inhabits and a posture that Pollock describes as a form of "subjectivism." While some of the young Rosenzweig's writings cast the world as a source of value or truth that the individual self can and should embrace, others experiment with the idea that the self creates value and truth—while nevertheless worrying over the validity of such subjective creations. In the years leading up to the night-conversation, then, Rosenzweig was trying to understand how the individual could be both grounded in and distinct from the world.



Franz Rosenzweig, ca. 1905. (Photo by Peter Matzen, Göttingen Studio. Courtesy of the Leo Baeck Institute.)

This perplexity regarding self and world may have made Marcionite world denial appear quite tempting, or at least plausible. If we struggle to make sense of the relationship between our selfhood and our worldly surroundings, and if we find ourselves increasingly convinced that those surroundings offer little in the way of objective values or truth, then it is perhaps not too much of a stretch to consider the possibility that this world was not, in fact, created by the true God and that our fundamental spiritual task is to separate ourselves from it.

If Rosenzweig did not convert to a position of faith during the night-conversation, what did happen? It was, Pollock writes, "a conversion *to* the world." Forced by his friend Rosenstock to take seriously the idea that Christian life involves "world-activity"—that Christianity involves building a Kingdom of God on Earth—Rosenzweig came to see that the opposition between self and world can be overcome through history. If Christians are called to build a Kingdom of God in this world through loving deeds, then it need no longer be seen as hostile to an individual's relationship with the divine. Rosenzweig's night-conversation with his friends moved him to a belief that the world is created by God and, therefore, the site of the redemption which divine revelation charges us to seek. "What it means that God created the world and [is] *not just* the God of revelation," Rosenzweig wrote in his wartime notes, "this I know precisely out of the Leipzig night-conversation of 7.7.13. At that time, I was on the best road to Marcionitism." In fact, convinced that Christianity transforms the world through redemptive love, Rosenzweig decided to convert.

Why, then, did he recommit himself to Judaism just a few months later? Pollock does not rule out the possibility that a Yom Kippur experience played *some* role, although he notes that Rosenzweig never mentioned it and that the key evidence for such an event seems to be Glatzer's description of a report by Rosenzweig's mother. Nevertheless, Pollock argues, the decisive factor was further theological reflection by Rosenzweig. Christianity may be charged with realizing the Kingdom of God on Earth through acts of love, but it is forever in danger of leaving this task aside since its savior has already come. It is this peril, Rosenzweig insisted, that the Jewish people combats. As a group chosen by the Creator to play a role in redemption, the Jewish people reminds Christians that creation is inextricably linked to salvation—that the Kingdom of God is realized by acting in the world, rather than by escaping from it. Moreover, as a group whose liturgy and practices point toward a *future* redemption, Jews remind Christians that the world remains unredeemed. For Rosenzweig, then, the continued existence of the Jewish people is necessary.

This is why, Pollock argues, Rosenzweig returned to Judaism. Christians may be tasked with actively redeeming the world, but they will do so only if Jews remain Jews, reminding Christians that creation and salvation are linked, that redemption has yet to occur, and that worldly acts of redemptive love therefore remain necessary. We might say, then, that Rosenzweig returned to Judaism so that Christians would remember to save the world. His decision was the logical conclusion of a coherent line of thought emerging from the night-conversation: "In this very moment of rejecting Gnostic world-denial," Pollock writes, "Rosenzweig already *had* to become committed to a historical account of the reconciliation of self and world in which Judaism and Christianity play necessary and mutually supportive roles."

It should be clear by now just how problematic the accepted narrative regarding Rosenzweig is. What occurred in 1913 revolved around self and world rather than relativism and faith, and the decisive factor was rigorous reflection rather than faith experience. Pollock goes further, however, and suggests that this story is not only false but also misleading. Assuming that Rosenzweig underwent a series of faith experiences that directed him away from nihilistic relativism and academic philosophy, readers have turned to *The Star of Redemption* unprepared for its maddeningly obscure philosophical terminology and opaque reasoning. By contrast, Pollock suggests, his new biographical account illuminates Rosenzweig's philosophical development. The *Star* is, in part, Rosenzweig's presentation of a metaphysical alternative to the Marcionite world denial he gave up during that summer evening in Leipzig.

In the *Star*, Rosenzweig attempts to show how selfhood and worldliness are reconciled through the realization of the Kingdom of God, how Christianity and Judaism play complementary but distinct roles in this historical process, and how all of this

results in the redemption of the world—and, surprisingly, of God—through the emergence of a universal community united in recognition of the deity.

Pollock's account is genuinely new, insightful, and persuasive. The breadth of his sources—from little-known letters of Rosenzweig himself to an odd 1897 novel called *The Miracles of the Antichrist* by Selma Lagerlöf—and the depth in which he has read them is striking. Moreover, Pollock links Rosenzweig's philosophy and biography without reducing one to the other. Indeed, the value of this analysis becomes clear as soon as we turn to the opening pages of the *Star*, which was published eight years after the night-conversation.

Although it is notoriously difficult to summarize this book, we can say, at the very least, that it provides an account of three types of entities that we encounter—God, man, and world—and three types of relations between those entities: creation, revelation, and redemption. (These are the six points of the famous star in Rosenzweig's title.) In lines that have tantalized and haunted generations of readers, Rosenzweig opens the *Star* by claiming that the path to achieving knowledge of these beings and relations, and to moving toward redemption, begins once we take seriously our fear of death:

> From death, it is from the fear of death that all cognition of the All begins. Philosophy has the audacity to cast off the fear of the earthly, to remove from death its poisonous sting, from Hades his pestilential breath. All that is mortal lives in this fear of death; every new birth multiplies the fear for a new reason, for it multiplies that which is mortal . . . That man may crawl like a worm into the folds of the naked earth before the whizzing projectiles of blind, pitiless death, or that there he may feel as violently inevitable that which he never feels otherwise: his I would be only an It if it were to die…Upon all this misery, philosophy smiles its empty smile and, with its outstretched index finger, shows the creature, whose limbs are trembling in fear for its life in this world, a world beyond, of which it wants to know nothing at all…But the earth wants him back…Man should not cast aside from him the fear of the earthly; in his fear of death he should—stay. He should stay.

Pollock's narrative regarding Marcionism and world denial allows him to offer a fresh perspective on this famous passage—and, in fact, on the *Star* as a whole.

What does Rosenzweig mean when he says that I learn from death that "I would be only an It if it were to die"? I experience myself as an "I" who will become an "It," as a being who will *lose* something when I succumb to the fate—death—that befalls all those around me. I therefore find myself perplexed, for I experience myself as a being who is not reducible to, but who nevertheless is inextricably bound up with, my surroundings: I experience myself as an "I," as an irreplaceable and singular self different from the world, but also as an "It," as just another object in the world doomed to the same fate as all other objects. According to Pollock, then, the *Star* suggests that contemplating death puts us face to face with a version of the perplexity that had once led Rosenzweig to flirt with Marcionism. Just as Rosenzweig had experimented with Marcionism in the wake of long-standing worries about the relation between the self and the world, so too does he begin the *Star* by suggesting that our fear of death leaves us uncertain about how to understand our status as beings distinct from, yet rooted in, the world we inhabit.

According to the quoted passage, one widespread response to the fear of death is to ascribe value exclusively to "a world beyond" and thereby "cast aside from him the fear of the earthly," showing that the world possesses no great value and, by extension, that departing it constitutes no great tragedy. We might engage, that is, in precisely the type of world denial that Rosenzweig had associated with Marcionism. But this response, the *Star* suggests, is profoundly misguided, for it fails to recognize that the individual "wants to know nothing at all" of a world other than this one. On the contrary, the proper response to death and the perplexity it provokes is to "stay"—to remain involved in, and seek to redemptively transform, the world we inhabit. According to Pollock, the *Star*'s introductory remarks "announce Marcionism as the basic problem with which the book as a whole is concerned." The *Star* turns out to be an attempt to avoid the perils of world denial and develop a vision of world redemption.

Have Rosenzweig's views been overtaken by the historical events of the 20th century, in particular the founding of the State of Israel?

There are many other key passages in the *Star* that Pollock reframes in similarly illuminating ways. I believe, however, that his study has even more far-reaching implications for our approach to Rosenzweig. Pollock writes:

> [V]iewing [Rosenzweig's] personal and intellectual development through the lens of faith experience has had a deleterious impact on how scholars have come to understand the relationship between Rosenzweig's personal development and his mature thought. Once one has claimed . . . that Rosenzweig's ultimate decision to remain a Jew could not have come from thinking . . . it becomes too easy to reduce the metaphysical account of redemption that Rosenzweig developed on the way to this decision—in which Judaism and Christianity play complementary roles in the realization of the Kingdom of God on earth through history—to a post facto apology for these particular faith experiences rather than to take it up as a metaphysical position worthy of serious consideration.

Pollock forces us to recognize that Rosenzweig's philosophy is rooted in careful reflection, not inaccessible faith experiences, and thus requires serious engagement. What would it mean to accept Pollock's challenge to take Rosenzweig's work "as a metaphysical position worthy of serious consideration"?

Here I will go beyond Pollock's discussion. What, precisely, should redemptive world-activity look like? As Pollock notes, two of the examples Rosenzweig offers when discussing Christianity are missionizing activity and political imperialism: The former creates an ever-broader community of believers, while the latter facilitates the emergence of an ever-more united humanity that will allow this community to become universal. But must redemptive world-activity take these forms? What about, say, efforts to combat climate change, which are often presented as safeguarding God's creation? Would such efforts to lovingly engage the world while also directing attention to the divine count as Rosenzweigian redemptive activity? Moreover, how are we to ensure that world-activity, however well intentioned, remains sufficiently humble? How do we keep redemptive love from degenerating into intolerance and violence against those who are not (yet) members of the community of believers?

Consider, as well, Rosenzweig's account of how the Jewish people ensures that Christians remain focused on the redemption of the world. As Pollock notes, Rosenzweig takes this task to place Jews, in a sense, "outside history." Through practices such as a recurring cycle of holidays, Jews become a collective united before God and in so doing foreshadow the universal community of believers emerging from redemption. Jews thereby anticipate, or experience hints of, that redemption and are thus directed away from the world-activity within history that they call on Christianity to pursue and toward their own Jewish communal life—toward practices that already provide a taste of redemption.

What consequences would follow if we were to take seriously this claim that Jews should remain outside history for the sake of anticipating redemption? The *Star* characterizes the Jewish anticipation of redemption as an experience of eternity in time and famously renounces territorial statehood. In part, this is a suggestion that Jews imagine their communal life, with its liturgical cycle and rituals, as persisting endlessly into the future, and in so doing experience this communal life as a kind of eternity, a form of life that will continue for all time. But if this is so, the *Star*'s argument runs (in part), Jewish life cannot take the form of a territorial nation-state, since such states constantly find themselves engaged in wars and therefore cannot plausibly expect to endure. What are we to make of this? Have Rosenzweig's views been overtaken by the historical events of the 20th century, in particular the founding of the State of Israel? Or is his perspective important *precisely* because it stands in tension with contemporary politics? Does his thought offer a valuable reminder of the perils of statehood?

I don't pretend to have answers to such questions. One of the virtues of Benjamin Pollock's study, however, is that it should push us to Rosenzweig's thought in all of its complexity. His conversion from world denial to world redemption poses as many challenges as solutions, and these challenges should elicit from us some approximation of the same intellectual seriousness that transformed a young German Jew on a July evening a little more than a century ago.

Elias Sacks is assistant professor of religious studies and associate director of the Program in Jewish Studies at the University of Colorado, Boulder. His book Moses Mendelssohn's Living Script: Philosophy, Practice, History, Judaism *(Indiana University Press) is forthcoming.*

Jews on the Loose

BY JOSEPH EPSTEIN

Groucho Marx: The Comedy of Existence
by Lee Siegel
Yale University Press, 176 pp., $25

Fame is when a caricature of you requires no caption. Fame is when everyone understands it is you when only your first name is mentioned: Marilyn, Frank, Hillary, Michael (Jordan and Jackson). Fame is also when a mad person imagines that he is you, though this criterion, granted, is more difficult to establish. Groucho Marx surely qualifies on the first two criteria, and, though I don't know of anyone who imagined that he was Groucho, more people have probably dressed up as him (it was George Gershwin's favorite outfit at costume parties) than any other comic. Still, even great fame has its limits. Not long ago, when I called Barnes & Noble to order a copy of *The Groucho Letters*, the sales clerk inquired, "How do you spell Groucho?"

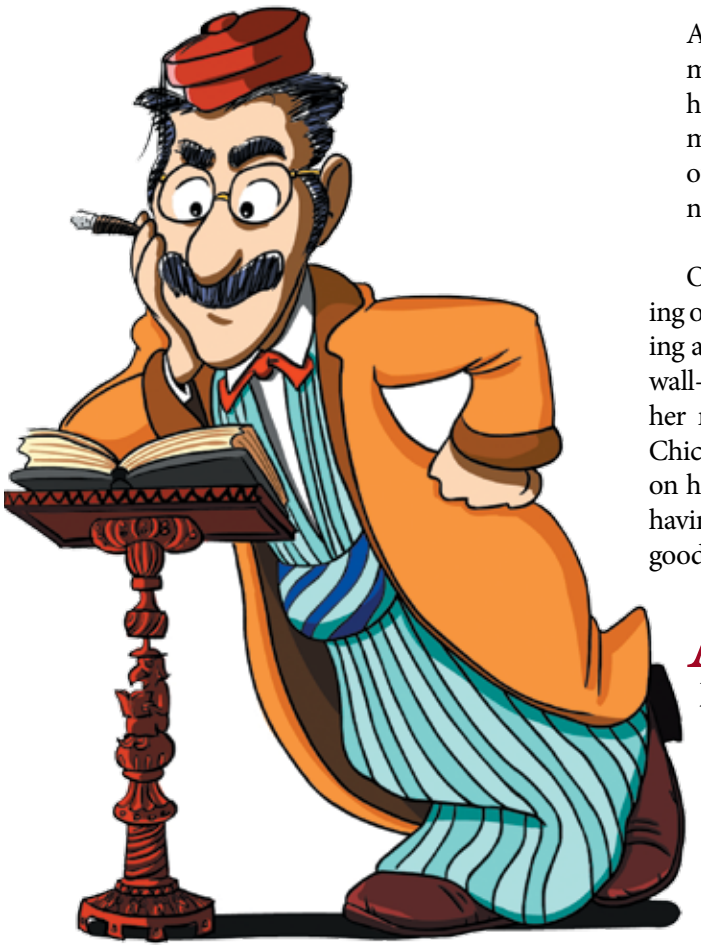
A Gallup Poll taken in 1941 asking people to name their 15 favorite comedians found the Marx Brothers finishing 13th, behind Red Skelton, Danny Kaye, Jimmy Durante, Arthur Godfrey, and others. While these comedians have now fallen from public interest, the Marx Brothers have held on. If anything, they have stepped higher up the slippery ladder of renown, and are today firmly embedded in that charmed circle of movie comics granted immortality that includes Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, W. C. Fields, and Laurel & Hardy.

At first glance, the attraction behind the Marx Brothers is not self-evident. They offer three rather homely men who specialize in the creation of havoc. One doesn't speak, but, honking a horn, wolfs after women, makes grotesque faces, drops silverware from his sleeve, extracts blowtorches, axes, and teacups from under his raincoat; he is a pit bull in a blond wig who does too-lengthy solo numbers on a harp. Another speaks, but in a preposterous Italian accent, wears the clothes of an organ grinder's monkey, and plays a fast piano, occasionally shooting the keys with his index finger as if with a pistol. The third, the main man, wears greasepainted eyebrows and mustache, glasses, keeps a cigar going at all times, and walks like a caged gorilla with *shpilkes*. The speech of this third fellow is restricted to puns and put-downs, non sequiturs and sexual innuendos, all uttered in the tone of a relentless wise guy.

Antic, zany, madcap, anarchic, the Marx Brothers were successful first in vaudeville, then on the Broadway stage, and finally, most emphatically, in the movies. Their act resembled nothing so much as a comic strip brought to life. In fact, the names of the brothers were bestowed on them by a vaudeville comic named Art Fisher, who had been inspired by a popular series of comic strips by Gus Mager about monkey-like characters with names like Knocko, Sherlocko, and even Groucho. In order of birth, Leonard became Chico (originally Chicko) for his woman-chasing, Adolph became Harpo because he played the harp, and Julius became Groucho because of his innate glumness and cynicism. Milton, who played the straight man in the early days of the act, became Gummo, because of rubber-soled shoes he wore. Herbert, who replaced Gummo in 1925, became Zeppo, though it is not entirely clear why.

What the brothers did on stage and screen was far from adult and sometimes less adolescent than childish. Grown men in clownish costumes, they palavered and cavorted. Some of their humor was cruel, little of it victimless. If the Marx Brothers' movies have a collective underlying message, it is, surely, that respectable life is a sham, a scam, not to put too fine a point on it, bullshit. Why did people enjoy this coarse cavalcade of uproarious disruption and denigration?

That the Marx family was in its origins German-Jewish, given the image of German Jews as irretrievably formal, is a touch surprising. The boys' father, Samuel, was from Alsace, and their mother, Minnie, was the daughter of an entertainer from Dornum, Germany. Sam Marx was handsome, an inept tailor, and devoted to the skirt chase, the only trait he seems to have passed on to his sons. Minnie was the brains and motor force of the family. (An old joke: When the boy told his mother he was to play the Jewish husband in a school play, she instructed him to return to school to tell the teacher that he wanted a speaking part.) Her brother was Al Shean, of Gallagher & Shean, a famous vaudeville comedy team who eventually appeared in *Ziegfeld Follies*. A stage mother to the highest power, she ran her home like a raucous vaudeville boarding house and made sure show business was her sons' fate.



Groucho Marx as The Wise Son by Richard Codor. (Courtesy of Richard Codor and* Joyous Haggadah: *www.haggadahsrus.com.)

With the exception of Zeppo, none of the brothers completed high school. Only Groucho, who departed school in the seventh grade, seems to have found this troubling. He had literary aspirations, not to say pretensions. In the 1920s, he took an occasional seat at the famous Algonquin Round Table. (Harpo, befriended by the critic Alexander Woollcott, found himself more comfortably seated there.) In the 1950s, Groucho entered into a correspondence and distant friendship with T. S. Eliot. His occasional magazine pieces resembled minor Robert Benchley or James Thurber or sub-par S. J. Perelman, though it all came out sounding like a fellow named Groucho:

> A man in my position (horizontal at the moment) is likely to hear strange stories about himself. A few years ago they were saying I made a pig out of myself drinking champagne out of Miss Garbo's slipper. Actually it was nothing but very weak punch.

Off-screen, Chico was said to be the most charming of the brothers, Harpo the most likeable—charming and likeable are not the same—Groucho, slightly wall-eyed, easily the most rebarbative. (Minnie called her middle son *die Eifersüchtige*, the jealous one.) Chico was a hopeless gambler and had often to call on his brothers to bail him out. Harpo was alone in having only one wife and was an unambiguously good father to four adopted children.

As Lee Siegel's *Groucho Marx: The Comedy of Existence*, a book in Yale University Press's Jewish Lives series, makes plain, Groucho was a man who could find a cloud in every silver lining. As a souvenir of his first sex, with a prostitute in Montreal, he came away with the clap. The only careful saver among the brothers, he was wiped out in the market crash of 1929. He was hard on each of his three wives. Toward the end of his life, Groucho, looking rather pathetic in a beret, was led about by a starlet-caregiver named Erin Fleming, who his son Arthur ended up taking to court after his father's death, accusing her of stealing his father's money. Groucho died in 1977 and made the mistake of doing so the same week as Elvis Presley, who crowded his final exit off the front pages.

The Marx Brothers made 13 movies, *The Cocoanuts* (1929) the first, *Love Happy* (1949) the last. The later movies, after *A Night in Casablanca* (1946), did less well at the box office, though Groucho, sensing the brothers act was growing stale, began to talk of retirement as early as 1939. Although Harpo and Chico tried, only Groucho went on to further show business success, first in radio, then in television,

with his comedy quiz show *You Bet Your Life*.

One need only write four or five perfect poems, it has been said, to live forever as a poet. Might the same be said of comedy? Will four or five perfect scenes or even jokes do it? Almost everyone has one or another Marx Brothers comic bit engraved in memory. For many it is that teeming stateroom scene aboard ship in *A Night at the Opera*. For some it is Groucho's rendition of "Hooray for Captain Spaulding, the African Explorer" (some people, you will recall, called him schnorrer). Or Groucho's remarking of Margaret Dumont, in *Duck Soup*, that he had been fighting for her honor; she won't. Others will remember one or another Groucho line: "One morning I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got in my pajamas, I don't know"; or, from *You Bet Your Life*, his asking a tree surgeon contestant if he ever fell out of a patient. Everyone, possibly even young clerks at Barnes & Noble, knows his, "I do not want to belong to any club that will accept me as a member."

If the Marx Brothers' movies have a collective underlying message, it is, surely, that respectable life is a sham, a scam, not to put too fine a point on it, bullshit.

The bits may loom larger than the movies themselves, a case of the parts being greater than the whole. Over three or so weeks I watched all of the Marx Brothers' movies. The better ones have the participation of the comedy songwriters Harry Ruby and Bert Kalmar. Only one movie, *Duck Soup*, had the benefit of a superior director, Leo McCarey. *The Cocoanuts* and *Animal Crackers*, originally stage plays written by George S. Kaufman and Morrie Riskin ("No schmucks they," Groucho in a high accolade called them in an interview in the indispensable *The Marx Bros. Scrapbook*), seem the best written, not least because Kaufman shared something of Groucho's comic spirit. (A confirmed philanderer, Kaufman told Irving Berlin that he would have liked Berlin's song "Always" better if it were retitled "Thursdays.") Some prefer *Monkey Business* and *Horse Feathers*, the movies written by S. J. Perelman and Will Johnstone, though in later days Groucho denigrated Perelman, and vice versa. "They're mercurial, devious, and ungrateful," Perelman reports Herman Mankiewicz told him when Perelman took on the assignment of writing for the Marx Brothers. "I hate to depress you, but you'll rue the day you ever took the assignment. This is an ordeal by fire. Make sure you wear your asbestos pants."

Although aficionados tend to prefer the rougher cut movies made at Paramount over the smoother ones made at MGM under Irving Thalberg, the truth is that they all tend to wash into one another. Was *Monkey Business* the one about college football or was that *Animal Crackers*? (In fact it was *Horse Feathers*.) What is perhaps remarkable above all about the films is that in them the Marx Brothers are so utterly unsympathetic. One's sympathies go out to Chaplin's little tramp; to the sweet naivety of the hapless Buster Keaton; to the put-upon Oliver Hardy and the nonplussed Stan Laurel; even to W. C. Fields in his role as the besieged husband. Not so, not for a moment, does one feel the least sympathy with the Marx Brothers, whom one cannot imagine entertaining at one's home without first calling in the fire department. They could, even on the screen, seem menacing, and menacing is the very reverse of charming.

In 1939, *The New York Times* theater critic Brooks Atkinson, during an era when the *Times* still employed men with two last names, interviewed Groucho. At the close of the interview, Atkinson remarked that the Marx Brothers "have covered about as much comic ground as three fantastic characters with separate personalities are able to do without bogging down in formula." Tested for its truth quotient, that sentence scores in negative integers. The Marx Brothers' comedy was nothing if not formulaic. One begins with three characters whose personalities couldn't be more locked in, adds traditional dupes and stock villains and a minor love interest, and then lets loose the dogs. A pause in each movie occurs for a shoot-the-keys piano recital by Chico, and another for an unduly sensitive harp rendering by Harpo. (Groucho claimed to be bored blue by his brother's harp playing.) In a 1946 interview in *Photoplay*, Gummo, by then a successful Hollywood agent, mentioned that his brothers were looking for a new script. "The only trouble," he added, "is the stories all have plots."



Groucho Marx as Captain Jeffrey Edgar Spaulding with Margaret Dumont, right, in a scene from* Animal Crackers*, 1930. (Courtesy of the Everett Collection.)

In a book called *The Anatomy of Cinematic Humor*, Thomas H. Jordan remarks that the Marx Brothers' "films can be seen many times without losing their appeal, for there are so many gags and jokes that no one can possibly remember more than a small number." Nor would one want to, since a high percentage of Groucho's machine-gun-fire quips ("This man's a cad—a yellow cad") and Chico's immigrant malapropisms ("From now on you and me is gonna be insufferable") do not come off. Sometimes an amusing line will be followed by an empty pun, which undermines the earlier joke. In *The Cocoanuts*, for instance, Groucho shows Chico the map of a plot of land, noting the levies. "That's the Jewish neighborhood?" Chico replies. Funny. A few moments later, Groucho curses Chico by saying, "May all your teeth have cavities," to which he adds, "And remember, abscess makes the heart grow fonder." Not funny. The slapstick changes—its most extravagant scene is the collapse of all the stage scenery in *A Night at The Opera*—but the chasing of blondes, the insulting of poor Margaret Dumont, the rat-a-tat-tat of Groucho embroidering clichés—"I am not hemmed to fit the touch of your skirt"—come to seem bits, mere *shtichlach*, little more.

This is, of course, a minority opinion. Opposed to it are numerous movie critics, celebrities, French surrealists, and most recently academics specializing in popular culture. Woody Allen thought what the Marx Brothers did was pure genius. (I myself much preferred Allen's movies before he himself became a genius.) Salvador Dali, much taken with the Marx Brothers, called Harpo "the most fascinating and the most surrealistic character in Hollywood." No less portentous a figure than Antonin Artaud, in a 1932 article in *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, made the claim that the Marx Brothers' films were essentially surrealist poems, and chided American audiences of the movies for not going beyond laughter (never much of a problem for Artaud) to understand their deeper significance.

The significance imputed to the Marx Brothers' movies is primarily cultural, but one wonders if it isn't ultimately political. The claim is that these movies constitute, in effect, an attack on the American establishment, root (its traditions and mores) and branch (its major institutions). The movies mock land speculation, first-class ocean travel, capital-S society, art collecting and connoisseurship, higher education, the opera, diplomacy and war mongering, corporate shenanigans, psychiatry and the medical profession, the legal profession, the myth of the American west, thoroughbred racing, and more. Today, though, for better and worse, there is no establishment, and many of their targets have long gone out of business. This hasn't stopped critics from pretending that the Marx Brothers' movies carry the same useful antinomian punch as at the time of their original production. The briefest dip into the criticism of the Marx Brothers' movies—Lee Siegel follows the academics in describing it straight-facedly as "Marxian" scholarship—leaves one, as Groucho might have said, reeling.

Groucho himself never bought into the deeper significance of his and his brothers' act, and felt they were vastly over-analyzed. As for the attraction behind the movies, I wonder if Chico didn't capture it best in two short sentences, when he wrote, "The reason people like to see us doing any tomfool thing that comes into our heads is quite simple. It's because that's how a normal person would like to act, once in a while." There may not be much more to say, really, unless you are writing a book on the Marx Brothers, and Lee Siegel has, in the nature of the case, a vast deal more to say. Siegel is what in our day is called a culture critic, which means someone who takes on not merely the arts, but all of the culture in its social ramifications. Whether he is writing about his refusal to repay his student loan or about his admiration

for Norman Mailer, Siegel's prose tends to overheat, and his normal penchant is to dramatize his subjects. He calls *Groucho Marx: The Comedy of Existence* "a biocommentary," in which he "weaves the outward facts of Groucho's life into and through a story about the inward facts of Groucho's life." Early in the book Siegel makes the point that Groucho's brother Chico had a larger penis than he did. Hang on, in other words, to your couch, the psychoanalyst will be with us in a moment. No scene in any of the Marx Brothers' movies is, in Siegel's reading, without meaning. The lovely line "Did someone call me schnorrer?" is really an expression of Groucho's anxiety. Siegel is not even momentarily detained by the fact that this is a line in a song by Bert Kalmar and Harry Ruby.

"I do not want to belong to any club that will accept me as a member," Groucho's letter of resignation to the Friar's Club, was, at least, certainly written by Groucho. But in Siegel's microwaved prose, it becomes in "one of its countless dimensions . . . the obliteration not of the self who is making the joke, but of the existential convention, as it were, of having a self, an ego, to begin with." Never one to leave bad enough alone, Siegel goes on:

> If Groucho abolishes his own ego in one stroke with his fabled line—never mind, for a moment, that he also establishes his superior authenticity and power—then who is doing the abolishing? Who is Groucho Marx? He seems to exist in a totally negative space, in which his freedom is synonymous with the fact that he stands for nothing.

Bet you never thought of that.

Harpo's repeated bit of forcing others to hold his raised leg is for Siegel no mere comic touch but "the hidden need to use others for our gratification, and the ceaseless urge to use other people to 'get a leg up.' It is also, as so much of the Marx Brothers' comedy is, an act of self-emasculating aggression." Reading passages like this, I kept seeing the *You Bet Your Life* duck come down as Groucho announced, "Say the over-inflated phrase and collect a hundred dollars."

Without faulty parents psychoanalytic interpretation is, of course, out of business. Siegel finds them easily enough in Groucho's family. Insufficient mother love is joined to a weak father to result in a son who "spent his career questioning just what manhood really is." The ineffectual Sam Marx, in Siegel's reading, "created sons who had a natural contempt for power, and sons who had a natural contempt for powerlessness." The brothers, as a result, set out to "discredit the concept of fatherhood itself." Siegel recounts Groucho's father telling him that if he didn't master pinochle he would never be a real man, which he reads as "an emasculating comment." Yet one of the sweetest, gentlest essays Groucho ever wrote was about his father. It tells the story of his comic business failures but emphasizes his love for a man who brought in paid boosters to the audience for his sons' vaudeville performances and became the family cook, specializing in kugels.

In his movie roles Groucho, for Lee Siegel, represents not an amusing attack on pretension but "the spirit of nihilism." Siegel disputes the view that Woody Allen is Groucho's descendant, for he feels that "Allen is simply too funny to be Groucho's direct descendant." Groucho is—and he is right about this—much darker. "No other comedians of the time," Siegel writes, "come close to the wraithlike sociopath Groucho portrays in the Marx Brothers' best films." A more compelling reason, I should have thought, is that, in their respective movie roles, Groucho plays a shtunk, Allen a nebbish with psychoanalytic tone and self-hating touches added at no extra cost. Groucho's heirs, I should have thought, are in the line of insult comedians, among them the unjustly forgotten Jack E. Leonard and Don Rickles.

For Lee Siegel, Groucho's true heir is Lenny Bruce. "In the work of Groucho and his two brothers," he writes, "the result is comedy sometimes so dark that it is not funny at all." He brings up Bruce's purported remark, shortly after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, that "Jackie hauled ass," apparently to avoid being shot herself, a remark in bad enough taste but one that scarcely captures Lenny Bruce's comedy.



Poster advertising* Monkey Business*, 1931. (Courtesy of the Everett Collection.)

As it happens, I was in the audience for Lenny Bruce's performance in a theater—he had earlier lost his cabaret license—on the Lower East Side of New York the weekend following the Kennedy assassination. Bruce appeared without fanfare or even introduction from behind the curtain, sighed, and said, "Oswald, it's a fucking rabbit's name. And who hasn't known a putz like Jack Ruby?" And then he did a bit about the reaction to the news of the assassination on the part of Vaughn Meader, a JFK impersonator, who understands that his career is now over (it was, in fact). Bruce went on from there to do a skit about a Jewish nightclub owner attempting to bribe a Puerto Rican busboy to service a putatively nymphomaniacal Sophie Tucker. ("I don't care how much money you offer, Mr. Rosenberg," the busboy says at the skit's close, "I will not *shtup* her!") All this is comedy of a very different order than the kind Groucho and his brothers ever performed or even thought of performing.

Groucho, as I mentioned earlier, exchanged letters and, when in London, had a dinner meeting with T. S. Eliot and his wife. The correspondence was light and, one gathers, was pleasing to both parties, allowing Groucho a connection with a hero of highbrow culture and Eliot one with a hero of popular culture. Lee Siegel sees it differently. He sees the relationship as, in the cant word of the day, fraught. He dissects a letter in which Eliot tells Groucho that he recently took his wife to see a rerun of *The Marx Brothers Go West* and finds Eliot's letter at bottom "a triumph of genteel passive-aggression," another of the great cant words of the age. Siegel doesn't want to give Eliot credit for being a nice man who, late in life, came to like and admire Groucho, notwithstanding the infamous anti-Semitic lines in two of his poems, and his mention of undesirability of "free-thinking Jews," decades earlier in *After Strange Gods*. Eliot was also properly appalled, indeed horrified, by the Holocaust.

How Jewish was Groucho? Given the aggressiveness of the Marx Brothers' roles in the movies, there is, in the writing about them I have read, little in the way of anti-Semitism. Chico of course came on as a stagy Italian; Harpo was from another, thus far unidentified, planet. Despite his taking on such W. C. Fieldsian movie names as Rufus T. Firefly, Wolf J. Flywheel, and Dr. Hugo Z. Hackenbush, Groucho was recognizably, irretrievably, Jewish, a fact set in italics by his stage get-up of glasses, thick mustache, and fast, usually insulting talk. In its 1932 cover story on the Marx Brothers, *Time* magazine referred to him as a "prototypical Hebrew wiseguy." When Groucho consulted Herman Mankiewicz on how to play one of his movie roles, Mankiewicz replied: "You're a middle-aged Jew who picks up spit." Yet Broadway and Hollywood both, from the early decades of the last century through the 1960s, were themselves so thoroughly Jewish that anti-Semitism was never much of an intramural problem. Nor did it appear to be an extramural one, for the Marx Brothers everywhere found ready acceptance.

Lee Siegel never mentions anti-Semitism in connection with the Marx Brothers, but he does attempt to position them in the tradition of Jewish humor. Jewish humor, in his view, is entwined with Jewish wisdom, which it surely often is. He recognizes that it is also heavily imbued with irony. And he wonders to what extent self-hatred is the basis of Jewish humor, noting that Freud is responsible for the notion that Jewish humor is about self-disparagement. He speculates upon whether at its heart Jewish humor isn't the result of diaspora (no stand-up comics, true enough, in the Old Testament), alienation, and the condition generally of outsiderishness—a condition that breeds, simultaneously, an affinity for insult, a sense of self-debasement, and a feeling of superiority. "The status of the outsider," Siegel writes, "is one place to begin to construct a definition of Jewish humor." Yes, perhaps. Then again, Jewish humor is in the end probably no more than Jews being humorous, and they have found manifold ways of doing so, from subtle to slapstick, from the blatant to the philosophical, and, God willing, they will continue to do so.

In the end, Siegel is most interested in Groucho's psyche, which, he concludes, he purged on film. These performances are, he writes, his "fullest disclosure of who he really was. They are the biographical gold." I have been trying to think of how Groucho himself would reply to such a statement. I can imagine him riffing on the bit in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* where Walter Huston tells Humphrey Bogart and Tim Holt that what they've found is fool's gold, but he just might shoot a sidelong glance and go into a version of his leering, loose-limbed, lovely Captain Spaulding dance. Did someone call him schnorrer?

Joseph Epstein's latest books are Frozen in Time: Twenty Stories *(Taylor Trade) and* Wind Sprints: Shorter Essays *(Axios Press), both of which will appear in April.*

As Though the Power of Speech Were an Ordinary Matter

BY NETA STAHL

Moods
by Yoel Hoffmann, translated by Peter Cole
New Directions, 160 pp., $15.95

At the end of the 24th fragment of Yoel Hoffmann's latest book, *Moods* (*Matzvei Ru'ach*), the following line appears: "We said 'we need to call the plumber,' as though the power of speech were an ordinary matter." The power of speech (*ko'ach ha-dibur*) is never an ordinary matter in *Moods*, which is composed of 191 subtly connected fragments and which might just as easily be described as a prose poem as a novel.

Those who have read Hoffmann's first novel, *Bernhard* (1989), will recall that it features a plumber who is a poet. It is hard to think of someone better qualified to translate Hoffmann's oblique investigations into the "power of speech" than Peter Cole, a distinguished poet-translator who translated Hoffmann's previous three books as well. Hoffmann's obsession with words—often the names of family members, with their seeming power to raise the dead—must be transformed into English while preserving his strange combination of humor and nostalgia, intimacy and irony. Cole's sensitive translation allows us to come as close as one can in English to hearing Hoffmann's words, and this is important for he is as obsessed with the sounds of words as he is with their power. "When a person who doesn't speak Hebrew hears the word *bakhah* (wept)," he writes, "he can't guess what it means."

Unlike Israel's other major novelists (Grossman, Oz, Yehoshua), Hoffmann is not a public intellectual. He began his professional life as a professor of Japanese poetry, took up fiction in middle age, and has come to be recognized as one of the contemporary masters of Hebrew prose. His sprinkling of Yiddish and German in Hebrew texts that are halfway between poetry and prose, with fragmentary narratives and several levels of metaphor, has led scholars to declare him the herald of a new Israeli postmodernism. Regardless of how accurate (or helpful) this label is, it does hint at the way in which Hoffmann's novels undermine our expectations of literature, without giving up on the traditional ideals of aesthetic delight or moral investigation.

While his previous novel, *Curriculum Vitae*, was a kind of account of his life, in 100 fragments, *Moods* provides glimpses into Hoffmann's life in literature and his ambivalence about the project of capturing life in words. Early on he writes, "Literature's so pathetic. We peddle fabric with a sun painted on it and no one even looks up." Although Hoffmann is now almost 80 (the original Hebrew novel was published in 2010), his speculation that "[t]his might be the last book we'll write" seems to be as much about the limits of literature as it is about the summing up of a life.

What stands at the center of Hoffmann's work is the endless attempt to represent the way the earth carries its habitats and the experience of being thus carried.

In *Moods*' penultimate fragment, Hoffmann writes that he would "like to leave our readers with a great gift before they move on to other books," a character:

> But we're like a building contractor whose tools are limited . . .
> Once we knew a woman whom we could describe (on our own) down to the last of the thousands of hairs on her head. That's how much care we took with her character. But if we were to do that now, our readers would sue us for excessive particularity. So all we can offer our readers is this: a large mug with the words GOOD MORNING (in English) written across it. They can drink their morning coffee from it and picture a person in their mind's eye.

What once would have been a meticulous description of character (in Hebrew) becomes a marketing gimmick, empty (English) words that exemplify the limits, even impotence, of the power of speech, in capital letters.

The limitations of speech may also explain Hoffmann's choice to switch from "I" to "we" in the 14th fragment "out of embarrassment," he explains. This may have something to do with the famous debate about the importance of the personal voice as opposed to the voice of the national collective in 1960s Israeli literature. Hoffmann's "we" is neither the homogenizing "we" of early Israeli works, nor the individualist "I" of Natan Zach and his peers; rather, it stands for the fragmentary nature of the self.

Consider again the phrase *ko'ach ha-dibur*, the power of speech, which may remind the Hebrew reader of *ko'ach ha-meshicha*, the power of gravity: an irresistible force. The sense of regret, which is so prevalent in *Moods*, turns this power not into a shared national experience, but rather into an evocation of the experience of personal memory. This is an almost impossible task, even harder in translation, and Cole manages to bring the English reader to Hoffmann's world of the very local memories from Nahariya, Haifa, Tel Aviv, and Ramat Gan. Cole also manages to reflect, despite the obvious difficulties, Hoffmann's fascination—evident here perhaps even more than in his previous works—with words and their sounds: onomatopoeias, the foreignness of Hebrew to the ears of newcomers, and the different worlds that different languages build. Here is a typical and beautiful example:

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My stepmother Francesca called the ground *Boden*. The two of us walked across the ground but, because of this other name, it (the ground) carried her differently.

Cole's elegant translation makes us forget that Hoffmann calls the ground *adama* and that therefore it carries him "differently" not only compared to his stepmother but also compared to the readers of his novel and perhaps, to some extent, also to Cole himself. These lines also remind us that, at the end, what stands at the center of Hoffmann's work is the endless attempt to find and represent the way the earth carries its habitats and the experience—our experience—of being thus carried. Toward the end of the book, Hoffmann writes:

> There's someone else we wanted to talk about but we've forgotten his name and how he looks. We remember only the other things. That he was a body's length from the earth's surface. That he came near and grew distant. That night came over him and the day made him bright, and things of this sort. We can't recall anyone more precisely. Therefore we miss him, and because we can't remember his name, our longing is greater than we can say. This person is with us wherever we go, and without him we'd die of a broken heart. And if this seems overly clever to someone, then maybe he should look at himself. This man is also the hero of this book that we're writing (and of all the books that we've written to date). If we could bring him to mind, we wouldn't need to write.



Yoel Hoffmann. (Courtesy of New Directions.)

This abstract figure, whom Hoffmann calls *adam*, is combined from the many concrete and sometimes real characters (including himself) that populate his works. The word "*adam*" appears in the original Hebrew version of this paragraph six times, but Cole's English text uses "someone," "anyone," and "this person," thereby losing something of Hoffmann's meaning. This "precise figure of a man" (*demut ha-adam ha-meduyak*) that Hoffmann struggles to recall is not (only) of a specific "someone," but also the abstract concept of a person—*adam*—that Hoffmann paradoxically wishes to locate within the rich, diverse experiences of his characters. This may be another reason for Hoffmann's choice to write most of the novel in the first-person plural. He is writing about himself

In his own translation of Japanese haiku and Zen stories, Hoffmann once wrote that "a free translation requires sensitive word choices and placements."

while attempting to refer to the shared experience of humanity. Perhaps this is also why the word "*adama*"—earth—is so crucial for Hoffmann, as it includes (in the Hebrew) the word "*adam*," and thus the simultaneously personal yet shared experience of human life on earth.

Translation is a difficult art. In his own translation of Japanese haiku and Zen stories, Hoffmann once wrote that "a free translation requires sensitive word choices and placements." My occasional disagreements notwithstanding, in bringing the *Moods* of Hoffmann into English, Peter Cole has made masterful choices on every page. One hopes that this will not be Hoffmann's last book.

Neta Stahl teaches comparative literature and modern Hebrew literature at Johns Hopkins University. She is the author of Other and Brother: Jesus in the 20th-Century Jewish Literary Landscape *(Oxford University Press). Her new book on the poetics of Yoel Hoffmann is forthcoming with Resling.*

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The Quality of *Rachmones*

BY STUART SCHOFFMAN

Shylock Is My Name
by Howard Jacobson
Hogarth, 288 pp., $25

In 2012, two years after *The Finkler Question* won the Man Booker Prize, Howard Jacobson published a comic romp called *Zoo Time*. Its randy, grumpy protagonist, a Jewish novelist named Guy Ableman, complains that literary fiction is dead and that the public favors plot-driven page-turners over good writing: "Reading should be like sex," he declares. "The ending is written in the beginning, so just lie back and enjoy the journey." *Zoo Time,* sniped *The Guardian*'s reviewer, is a "400-page tantrum" directed at reading groups, Amazon reviews, vampire novels, Kindle, and so forth. Considering Jacobson's Man Booker, the critic continued, "You'd think conspicuous success might have softened his attitude to the reading public." How, in other words, dare this inflexible arriviste, newly admitted to the pantheon of English lit, act with such coarse ingratitude?

Touchy Simon Strulovitch, had he read the review, would have doubtless taken umbrage. Strulovitch is the title character's Anglo-Jewish doppelgänger in Jacobson's sparkling new novel of resentment and revenge, *Shylock Is My Name*. The book is one of a series of contemporary adaptations by top-flight novelists commissioned by the Hogarth Shakespeare project. Jacobson, in press interviews, claimed he'd asked for *Hamlet* but was typecast to do *The Merchant of Venice*, a one-liner echoing his shtick about wearying of the label "English Philip Roth" and preferring "Jewish Jane Austen." The opening scene of his *Shylock* takes place in a graveyard, a location suggesting that Hamlet will haunt this book too, and it'll be all about ambivalence as well as anti-Semitism.

"It is one of those better-to-be-dead-than-alive days you get in the north of England in February," reads the first line, yet this is "a stage unsuited to tragedy." We think at once of "All the world's a stage" from *As You Like It*, but the more immediate allusion is to Antonio's lines at the outset of *The Merchant of Venice* (which is classified as one of Shakespeare's comedies): "I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano, / A stage, where every man must play a part, / And mine a sad one." *Shylock Is My Name* is dead serious and very funny, high criticism and low comedy.

At the cemetery, two men mourn at two Jewish graves: the late mother of one, the long-deceased wife of the other, both named Leah. The first, "a man of middle age," is Simon Strulovitch, "a rich, furious, easily hurt philanthropist with on-again off-again enthusiasms," an art collector with "a passion for Shakespeare," and "a daughter going off the rails." This counterpart to Shylock's renegade daughter Jessica is a sexually precocious teenager named Beatrice with a yen for Gentiles, currently a dopey soccer player twice her age whom Strulovitch refers to, more than once, as a "chthonic arsehole," in an exquisite Jacobsonian meld of F.R. Leavis and Lenny Bruce.

Jacobson glides past the Rialto in a gondola, visits a synagogue in the old Venice Ghetto, and chats collegially with academic experts about Shylock's probable antecedents.

The second gentleman, "here long before Strulovitch," is Shylock, who is "also an infuriated and tempestuous Jew, though his fury tends more to the sardonic than the mercurial." His Leah has been dead for more than four hundred years—she was dead even before Act I of *The Merchant of Venice*. This Leah is "buried deep beneath the snow," in Manchester at the moment, since "Long ago is now and somewhere else is here." Her husband is a wandering Jewish archetype, ubiquitous as Elijah, uxorious to a fault. He talks to her and reads to her, and she talks back and he listens: "'Imagine that,' Shylock says to Leah. 'Imagine what, my love?' 'Shylock-envy.' Such a lovely laugh she has."



Shylock and Jessica *by Maurycy Gottlieb, 1876.*

Yes, the ending is written in the beginning. The title *Shylock Is My Name* augurs that Strulovitch will become Shylock. It also reminds us, as if we needed reminding, that Jacobson, the joyful contrarian, identifies with Shylock, the silver-tongued kick-ass Jew. As described by the novel's narrator, Shylock "is less divided in himself than Strulovitch but, perhaps for that very reason, more divisive. No two people feel the same about him." Indeed, critics and scholars have been arguing for centuries over Shylock as villain, tragic hero, anti-Semitic stereotype. As John Gross wrote in his indispensable study *Shylock: A Legend & Its Legacy*, Shylock is "a familiar figure to millions who have never read *The Merchant of Venice*, or even seen it acted . . . There are times when one might wish it were otherwise, but he is immortal."

As a walk-up to the book's publication, Jacobson starred in a BBC documentary, aired in October 2015, called *Shylock's Ghost*. Here the irrepressible author, who early in his career taught English literature and co-authored a critical work called *Shakespeare's Magnanimity: Four Tragic Heroes, Their Friends and Families*, proves he's done his homework. He glides past the Rialto in a gondola, visits a synagogue in the old Venice Ghetto, and chats collegially with academic experts about Shylock's probable antecedents. Renaissance man Stephen Greenblatt cites the cruel eponymous avenger of Christopher Marlowe's play *The Jew of Malta*, as well as the sad case of Roderigo Lopez, Queen Elizabeth's *converso* physician, who was hanged, drawn, and quartered in 1594 for allegedly plotting to kill her. (Greenblatt speculates that Shakespeare watched the public execution.) James Shapiro, author of the definitive *Shakespeare and the Jews*, confirms Jacobson's hunch that the pound of flesh has much to do with circumcision, perhaps the Pauline "circumcision of the heart" that supersedes the literal Jewish version.

Shylock is bereft of his only daughter, who has stolen the turquoise ring Leah had given him, eloped with the Christian Lorenzo, and traded the ring for a monkey. Jacobson refreshes our memory of the play: "Jessica the pattern of perfidy. Not for a wilderness of monkeys would Shylock have parted with that ring." A monkey, as Marjorie Garber observes in *Shakespeare After All*, is "the emblem of licentiousness." True, and in *Zoo Time*, Guy Ableman's first novel is called *Who Gives a Monkey's?*, "an elegantly profane novel" featuring a chimp named Beagle with "a blazing red penis."

For Shylock, Jessica's purchase of a monkey "was a profanation of her ancestors and education, everything he and Leah had taught her since she was a child." In the cemetery, Strulovitch sees Shylock reading to Leah from an old, unidentified paperback. Later that day, he asks Shylock—by now a houseguest in his

baronial art-filled manse in Mottram St. Andrew, outside Manchester—which book it was. "You should be able to guess," Shylock replies; Strulovitch guesses the Bible. No, she prefers novels, they've just done *Crime and Punishment* and have now moved on to *Portnoy's Complaint*. You'd think, given Jacobson's ceaseless protestations, that it would be anyone other than Roth, but *Shylock Is My Name* is likewise fixated on the Jewish member, on circumcision as covenant, as carnal evidence of difference. And let us not forget that the Dulcinea of Alexander Portnoy's profanation is named Mary Jane Reed, also known as The Monkey.

"Shylock," Harold Bloom has said, "is one of those Shakespearean figures who seem to break clean away from their plays' confines." His language, his rage, his timelessness, burst the seams of Shakespeare's romantic comedy and Jacobson's satirical remodeling, too. "I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him," Shylock says in Act I, with Antonio nearby. "To feed, like a cannibal, your ancient grudge," he says in the novel, inserting a one-word clue that Shakespeare drew on anti-Semitic fantasies of Jewish barbarism and ritual murder. The hatred runs deep, both ways. The melancholy Venetian merchant Antonio, who spat on him and called him a dog, now needs the Jew's money to help his very dear friend Bassanio court the heiress Portia, the jaded belle of Belmont, the play's locus of fairy-tale frivolity. Shylock's famous retort: "Should I not say, / 'Hath a dog money? Is it possible / A cur can lend three thousand ducats?'" Shylock proposes the "merry bond": If Antonio fails to pay by the appointed date, Shylock may claim a pound of his flesh. Was he serious? Strulovitch, four centuries later, demands an answer:

> "Then let me ask you: did you hope that Antonio would fail to meet his bond so you could harm him?"
>
> "At the very moment of the jest, maybe not."
>
> "Then when?"

It serves Jacobson well to begin his retelling in a frozen cemetery.

> "As the tale unfolds, so does intention."

Pages of talk unfold, rehearsing Jacobson's preoccupations. Shylock says:

> "In the eyes of Christians and Muslims we have never been warlike enough. We are emasculated men who bleed like women. That's what makes it so hard for them to forgive us when we do strike tellingly back. To lose to Jews is to lose to half-men."

Strulovitch asks:

> "Do you wish you'd not been stopped?"
>
> "Stopped?" Shylock narrowed his gaze . . . "I wish, for all the good it does me, that I had not been *thwarted*."
>
> "From taking his heart?"
>
> "From finding out whether or not I could have done it."

A few lines later, Strulovitch persists: "Would you have done it?" Shylock launches into a monologue:

> "And one more time—I don't know. I have no more taste for blood than you do . . . My hatred for that superior, all-suffering, all-sorrowing, sanctimonious man boiled in my veins . . . I stood for order, he for chaos . . . He dealt in false obligation . . . I could not function in a universe as raw and haphazard as his . . . So yes, it's possible—all right, more than possible—that in that fuming rage I would have found the wherewithal, the joy, the obligation—as though answering a commandment from a furious God—and as a long-owed return on those centuries of despising, as a requital of the slander, and as a perfectly ironic eventuation of all their baseless fears . . ."

He runs on and on, eventually asking Strulovitch if he has answered his question. "But Strulovitch is asleep in his chair, worn out by too much anger and frustration, too much alcohol, and not impossibly too many questions." Speech segues to Shylock's rumination:

> This Strulovitch has a profound moral reluctance to stay awake, he thinks.
> This Strulovitch asks but he doesn't want to know the answer.
> Jews are sentimental about themselves, and this Strulovitch, though he can't decide if he's a Jew or not, is no different. A Jew, by his understanding, is not capable of what non-Jews are capable of. A Jew does not take life . . . Good Jew—kicked. Bad Jew—kicks . . .
> These famous ethics of ours have landed us in a fine mess, Shylock would like to say to his wife. If we cannot accept that we might murder as other men murder, we are not enhanced, but diminished.

This is *Finkler* territory, but the urgency has increased since then. In 2013, Jacobson delivered a riveting lecture in Jerusalem under the auspices of B'nai B'rith, with the title "When will Jews be forgiven the Holocaust?" It is available for Kindle devices as an essay and audio file, wherein he fumes against an insidious iteration of Holocaust denial:

> The latest strategy—dear to the hearts of liberal intellectuals and to my mind the most heinous—accepts the enormity of the Holocaust without demur, but accuses Jews of not emerging from it as better people: the proof of that failure being the occupation, Gaza, the settlements, etc.

Jacobson rejects his father's warning of "shtum's the word" and asks "instead of Never Forget, must our motto be Never Mention?" His dystopian *J: A Novel* is set in a society where the past is not to be discussed and some unspecifiable catastrophe can only be referred to as "WHAT HAPPENED, IF IT HAPPENED." (*J* was reviewed by Ruth R. Wisse in our Spring 2015 issue.)

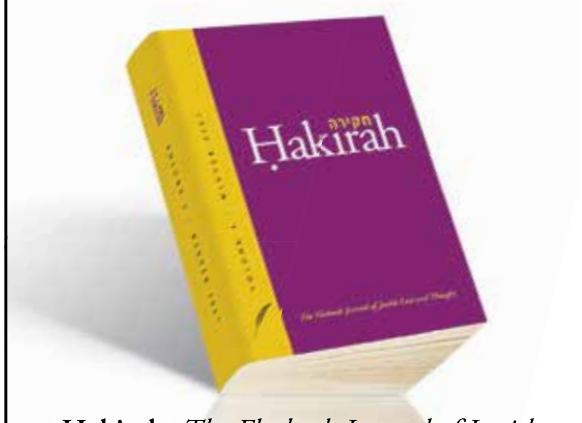
In *The Merchant of Venice,* Shylock's scenes—there are, astonishingly, only five of them—fasten on existential questions, expressed in heightened poetic form. "To reduce him to contemporary theatrical terms," says Harold Bloom, "Shylock would be an Arthur Miller protagonist displaced into a Cole Porter musical, Willy Loman wandering about in *Kiss Me Kate*." In the novel, Jacobson's dilations and digressions, the inner lives of Shylock and Strulovitch, the long Socratic exchanges between them—the beating heart of the book—interrupt the often hilarious narrative, slow it down, frustrate impatient readers, perhaps even put them to sleep. The author of *Zoo Time* could not care less. He "doesn't give a monkey's . . . ," as they say across the pond.

Jacobson re-imagines Shakespeare's frivolous Belmont in the wealthy precincts of the Golden Triangle, where Strulovitch, heir to a car-parts fortune, lives uneasily among Gentiles. It's a world apart from the Jewish Manchester of Jacobson's brilliant, blistering *Kalooki Nights*. To house his art collection, he wants to create the Morris and Leah Strulovitch Gallery of British Jewish Art in the posh town of Knutsford. His adversary is D'Anton, a well-born importer of objets d'art. D'Anton blocks Strulovitch's ambitions, arguing at the Cheshire Heritage planning meeting that such a gallery belonged at a "more culturally apt place, by which Strulovitch took him to mean Golders Green or the Negev."

Strulovitch bristles at this "ancient imputation of

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interloperie," but stops short of attacking D'Anton as an anti-Semite:

> How, sociopathologically, it had become a foul to cry foul, Strulovitch didn't know. But that was the state of things. No longer was it the hater who was unhinged; the real madman was the person who believed himself to be hated. Better, Strulovitch thought, when our enemies wore their loathing on their sleeves, called us misbelievers, infidels, inexecrable dogs, whipped us, kicked us, dishonoured, disempowered, dispossessed us, but at least didn't deliver the final insult of accusing us of paranoia . . . That, anyway, with no expectation that anything would occur to change it, was the state of Strulovitch's feeling towards D'Anton, in the period before Shylock showed up.

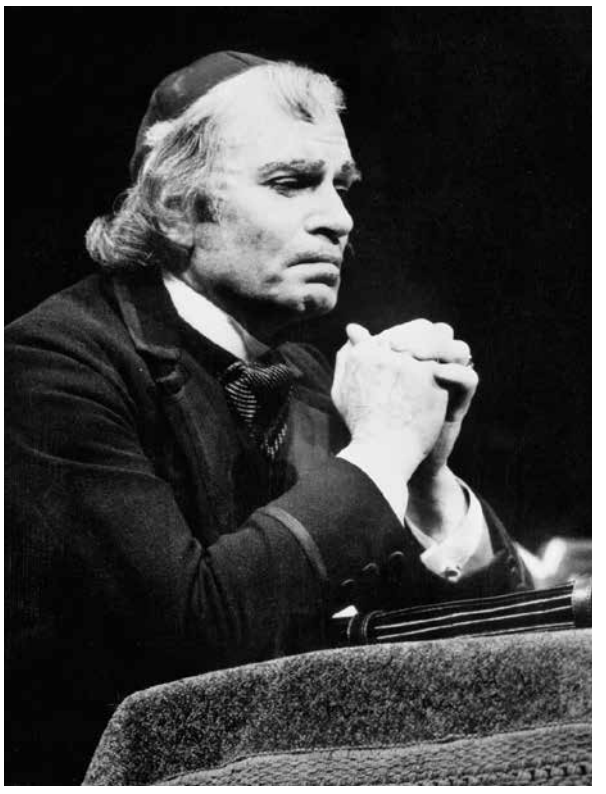
Populated by analogues to the *Merchant*, Jacobson's convoluted plot maintains its own manic logic. The older D'Anton is fond of young Gratan, the thick-witted soccer player with an "appetite for Jewesses." The wealthy, blithely anti-Semitic Plurabelle—"Daisy Duck mouth, golden tresses," "a Scandinavian weather girl's figure"—is the presenter of a fatuous cooking-and-chat show on TV. As a favor to D'Anton, she procures the rebellious Beatrice, a "performance studies" major at North Cheshire Institute, for Gratan. Meanwhile Plurabelle's suitor Barnaby, who is another protégé of D'Anton's (they first met at a pig roast), wishes to woo her with a painting. But, of course, the desired artwork was recently purchased by Strulovitch, who bears a grudge against D'Anton and won't part with it.

Strulovitch is an utterly secular Jew and no Zionist—except when he reads *The Guardian*—but he is obsessed with Jewish continuity. "Judeolunacy," his Jewish wife Kay would call it. One night he dragged his daughter home by her hair; Kay suffered a stroke soon thereafter. When Beatrice hooks up with Gratan, Strulovitch lays down the law: They can stay together only if—as Shylock has slyly suggested—he agrees to be circumcised. Beatrice is horrified, Strulovitch despondent. Shylock intervenes:

> "Have you explained to her just what the rite of circumcision is? What it stands for? What it portends? How it's the very rejection of barbarism? Why it's a passage out of savagery into refinement? . . . Try sitting her down and reading to her."
>
> "She doesn't go a bundle on Maimonides."
>
> "It doesn't have to be Maimonides. Do you have any Roth on your shelves?"
>
> "Joseph, Cecil, Henry, Philip? I have walls of Roth."
>
> "Philip will do. Do you have the one where everyone is leading someone else's life?"
>
> "That's all of them."

Here again, midway through the story, a second citation of Roth. The unnamed book is not the extravaganza of doubleness, *Operation Shylock: A Confession*, but rather, in the words of Jacobson's Shylock, "the one where Roth lets the anti-circumcisionists have it with both barrels. Circumcision, he or someone like him argues, was conceived to refute the pastoral."

Shylock is referring, it turns out, to the last section of *The Counterlife*, entitled "Christendom." Zuckerman is in a London church with his English wife: "I am never more of a Jew than I am in a church when the organ begins. I may be estranged at the Wailing Wall but without being a stranger."



Sir Laurence Olivier as Shylock in the National Theatre Company's production at The Old Vic Theatre, London, 1970. (© Anthony Crickmay/Victoria and Albert Museum, London.)

As the chapter progresses, mention is made of Jane Austen, Henry James, Trollope—and then, in Roth's grand summation:

> Circumcision is startling, all right, especially when performed by a garlicked old man upon the glory of a newborn body, but then maybe that's what the Jews had in mind . . . Circumcision is everything that the pastoral is not and, to my mind, reinforces what the world is about, which isn't strifeless unity.

"What in God's name," demands Strulovitch, "does refuting the pastoral mean?" Shylock retorts:

> "You ask me that! You who venture into your own garden as though it's snake-infested. Do you even own wellingtons? My friend, you are a walking refutation of the pastoral."

Roth/Zuckerman:

> Quite convincingly, circumcision gives the lie to the womb-dream of life in the beautiful state of innocent prehistory, the appealing idyll of living "naturally," unencumbered by man-made ritual.

Jacobson/Shylock:

> "You were circumcised in order that you shouldn't, in the first days of your life, when you were still in a womb-swoon, mistake life for an idyll."

This playful recourse to Roth may suggest that the Anglo-Jewish condition is too troubling to tackle alone. In *The Finkler Question*, Jacobson skewered Jewish anti-Zionists and probed the parameters of Jewish identity. Here, inspired by Roth, his Shylock anatomizes the question at its anatomical root:

> "Look. The mohel's knife acts mercifully, to save the boy from the vagaries of nature. I don't just mean the monkeys. I mean ignorance, the absence of God, the refusal of allegiance to a people or an idea—especially the idea that life is an obligation as well as a gift. The mohel's knife symbolises what we owe . . . We can't be saved from nature a little bit . . . It's all or nothing, it's human values or the monkeys."

Shylock Is My Name may be read as a midrash on a canonical text, a fictional meditation on anti-Semitism oddly akin to Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*. After *Hamlet, Merchant* is the second most-performed Shakespearean play of all time. At the same time, as Harold Bloom states, "one would have to be blind, deaf and dumb not to recognize that Shakespeare's grand, equivocal comedy *The Merchant of Venice* is nevertheless a profoundly anti-Semitic work." Indeed, in the 1930s there were 50 separate productions in Nazi Germany. Would the Jewish people have been better off if the play had never been written? Not at all, insists James Shapiro: It teaches us what we are up against. The play illuminates "irrational and exclusionary attitudes" and "cultural fault lines," which is why "censoring the play is *always* more dangerous than staging it." But after the Holocaust, as John Gross grimly concludes, "the play can never seem quite the same again. It is still a masterpiece, but there is a permanent chill in the air." It serves Jacobson well to begin his retelling in a frozen cemetery.

The prolific Hollywood screenwriter and Jewish polemicist Ben Hecht, who died in 1964, left behind an unfinished book called "Shylock, My Brother," which speculated that Shakespeare, like the unfortunate Dr. Lopez, was a crypto-Jew. (Strulovitch puckishly "entertains a passing fancy" that Shakespeare's ancestors, "to be on the safe side," changed their name from Shapiro.) In a chapter entitled "Should 'The Merchant' Be Suppressed?" Hecht emphatically answers no:

> Censorship of a classic can only belittle the censors . . . The plot of *The Merchant* is not the gloat of anti-Semitism, but the pain of its victim . . . The Jewish complaints against *The Merchant* would never, I am certain, have been made by Shylock himself were he in the audience and not on the stage.

Hecht might have been reacting to then-recent events in the New York theater world. In 1962, the New York producer Joseph Papp wanted to inaugurate his free Shakespeare in Central Park with a production of *Merchant*, but, as reported by *Time* magazine, "the New York Board of Rabbis loudly protested." In the lofty language of a prominent Reform rabbi, the offending play was "a drama which has been demonstrated beyond peradventure of a doubt as a breeding center for those destructive

forces which eventuated in the disasters of the 1930s and 1940s." Papp, added *Time*, "raised an Orthodox Jew, went ahead with his performance," which starred George C. Scott as Shylock.

In 1974, ABC-TV aired a filmed version of the British National Theatre's production, starring Laurence Olivier in well-tailored Victorian garb and a big black yarmulke. Prior to the broadcast, Olivier issued a statement describing the play as a "harsh portrayal of prejudice and revenge" and assured the public that he took the subject "too seriously to allow Shylock to be either sentimentalized or caricatured." Yet as viewed today on YouTube, Olivier's performance veers from stunning virtuosity to the brink of kitsch: Enter Jewish friend Tubal, kissing the *mezuza*. Shylock grieves for his daughter and the jewels she stole. When Tubal says that Antonio has lost his ships, Olivier breaks into a joyful little jig: "I'll plague him, I'll torture him." Tubal reports Jessica's trade of Leah's turquoise ring for the monkey. Shylock cannot bear it, he weeps, opens a drawer, takes out a *tallit,* kisses it as he utters the hateful words: "I will have the heart of him." Hooded in his prayer shawl, he ends the scene: "Go, Tubal, and meet me at our synagogue." One can only gasp. Small wonder the Anti-Defamation League expressed its "grave apprehensions" to ABC.

The ADL also complained about a 1981 PBS broadcast of a BBC production: "The vicious stereotype is emphasized still further in the gratuitous use by actor Warren Mitchell of a broad, middle European accent, while the other characters speak in a cultivated English manner." The director, Jack Gold, defended Mitchell's Yiddish delivery to *The New York Times*: "'We wanted to show a Jew not ashamed of being the sort of Jew he was."

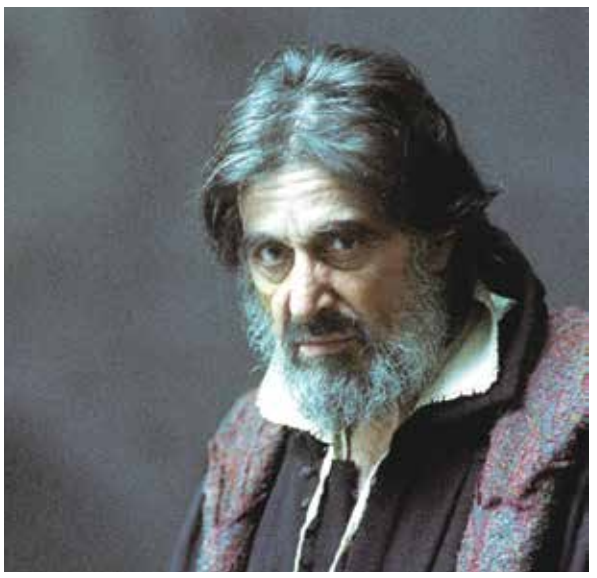
In the 2004 movie version by the British director Michael Radford, Al Pacino's Shylock is unmistakably the wronged party, raging against an anti-Semitic society. The ADL declared this version kosher and even screened it at its winter confab for big donors held at the fabulous The Breakers Hotel in Palm Beach. The Breakers had refused Jewish guests until 1965, when it was sued by the ADL, whose meetings are now held there each year. Jacobson's Shylock would be proud.

As the trial scene of *Merchant* commences in Act IV, the Duke challenges Shylock to take some money and spare Antonio's flesh: "We all expect a gentle answer, Jew." The ungentle Jew counters with the thrilling "gaping pig" speech:

> So can I give no reason, nor I will not,
> More than a lodged hate and a certain loathing
> I bear Antonio, that I follow thus
> A losing suit against him. Are you answered?

Portia, disguised as a man, urges Shylock to be merciful, but he refuses: "I crave the law . . . I have an oath in heaven." Portia outwits him; he may have the flesh but not a drop of blood. Antonio is saved, and Shylock must forfeit half his wealth to Antonio and bequeath the other half to "his son Lorenzo and his daughter," and—the ultimate humiliation—"presently become a Christian." Portia asks: "Art thou contented, Jew? What dost thou say?" Shylock replies: "I am content." (In Pacino's case, he mumbles unintelligibly.) Four lines later, the Jew exits the play, deprived of closure and with an unresolved religious status.

Did he or didn't he? Shakespeare's ambiguity is a boon for Jacobson. Shylock sits in Strulovitch's garden in the morning cold, making jokes with Leah about the baptism that never took place. Strulovitch: "So when you declared yourself 'content' to be converted you didn't mean it?" Shylock: "'[C]ontent' I would never have been. Do I strike you as a contented man?"



Al Pacino as Shylock in* The Merchant of Venice, *2004. (From Sony Classics.)

The ending is written in the beginning, or even before. Jacobson's dedication reads:

> To the memory of Wilbur Sanders
>
> How it is, that over many years of friendship
>
> and teaching Shakespeare together we never
>
> discussed *The Merchant of Venice*, I cannot
>
> explain. It is a matter of deep regret to me that
>
> we cannot discuss it now.

On completing the book, the reader wonders whether the co-authors of *Shakespeare's Magnanimity*, two gentleman scholars, one of them Jewish, were so generous to one another that they dared not speak of English anti-Semitism. Shylock, for his part, has grown weary of England:

> Shylock folded himself deliberately into an armchair next to Strulovitch's. Both chairs had views of Alderley Edge on which a light snow was falling. Living here was like living in a snow globe, Shylock thought. Art or no art, he suddenly wanted to be gone. He missed the heat and the commotion of the Rialto. The brutality, too. This was no place for Jews. He had said as much to Leah. They live with their nerve-ends exposed in this country, he'd told her. You can maim with a look, in this place. You can kill with a word. Our friend Strulovitch has lost the robustness native to our people. He could be the spinster sister of a country clergyman, he is so sensitive to slights. And as a consequence of that, he cannot judge what's worth going to war for. So he goes to war, mentally, over everything.

For Simon Strulovitch, the Jew of Venice has been a brother-in-arms, a spirit guide, a provocateur, even (as Shylock incredulously informs Leah) a "role model."

> He would miss Shylock when he went. He needed a black-hearted friend. Jews had grown so careful now. *If you wrong us, shall we not revenge?* No, we shall not. We shall take it on the chin and be grateful. Unless we're in Judea and Samaria, where we're accused of being Nazis. Coward or Nazis—which was it to be? The Rialto was not Samaria, but it too had bred a tougher Jew, Strulovitch thought. If he had, on pain of death, to be a Jew in Samaria, the Rialto or the Golden Triangle, he wouldn't have chosen the Golden Triangle.

Act V of Shakespeare's play reverts to idyllic Belmont, where, in the words of Harold Bloom, "the only crucial question is whether to stay up partying till dawn or go to bed and get on with it." Jacobson's novel winds up quite differently, juggling critical questions till the tricky end. Its 23 chapters lead to a finale called "Act Five." Plurabelle is now preparing to throw a champagne *bris* on her front lawn; D'Anton is due to be snipped as a surrogate for Gratan, who is on the lam in Venice with Beatrice. Strulovitch is out for blood, and now it is Shylock, channeling Portia, who seeks to deter him with a magnificent "quality of mercy" speech: "Who shows *rachmones* does not diminish justice. Who shows *rachmones* acknowledges the just but exacting law under which we were created. And so worships God." But Strulovitch has "deafened himself" by filling his mind with "every slight, every exclusion, every bad thing done to him and every bad thing he had done. It was more than a match, in its malignancy, for Shylock's honeyed peroration." Plurabelle, meanwhile, is swept away. She never dreamed Shylock "capable of such humanity," such "Christian sentiments." Shylock reacts with anger:

> "It is wrong not to know where you got your sweet Christian sentiments from . . . Charity is a Jewish concept. So is mercy . . . How dare you think you can teach me what I already know, or set me the example long ago set you? It is a breathtaking insolence, an immemorial act of theft from which nothing but sorrow has ever flowed. There is blood in your insolence."

"That's what you call telling them," says Leah. "Though I wish you'd shown a little of your *rachmones* to that poor girl." "Ach, I wouldn't worry for her," replies Shylock. "She fucking loves me." Shakespeare, perhaps né Shapiro, couldn't have put it better.

It would not be cricket, as they say in Albion, to reveal how everything works out. "Victory and defeat were alike absurd," muses Strulovitch. "On it stretched, backward and forwards, the line of risible time—all the way from the conversion of the Christians to the conversion of the Jews." Elegant words, a civilized finish, but for Jacobson overplaying Shylock is the best revenge.

Stuart Schoffman writes about Jewish culture and politics from Jerusalem, where he has lived since 1988. His latest translation of Hebrew fiction, The Extra *by A.B. Yehoshua, will be published in June by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.*

Chaos in the Wilderness

BY ZACK GOLD

Sinai: Egypt's Linchpin, Gaza's Lifeline, Israel's Nightmare
by Mohannad Sabry
The American University in Cairo Press, 320 pp., $34.95

The biblical description of Sinai as "a wilderness" remains accurate. This vast, undergoverned space contains tribal societies, criminal smugglers, and—in North Sinai governorate—jihadists. The 1978 U.S.-brokered Camp David Accords made Sinai, between Israel and "mainland Egypt," into a desert buffer zone, and the region has served as such since the 1979 Peace Treaty. However, the situation in Sinai today has changed, as Israel now encourages Egyptian military operations in Sinai against Wilayat Sinai, a jihadist group linked to ISIS.

As Mohannad Sabry explains in his excellent new book, *Sinai: Egypt's Linchpin, Gaza's Lifeline, Israel's Nightmare*, Sinai's separation from the rest of the country "was a natural outcome of it being a military zone" for Egypt's long-running confrontation with Israel:

> But after the signing of the Camp David Peace Accords . . . and following the full Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula in 1982, Sinai remained isolated, its Bedouin population marginalized and its development and economy excluded from the rest of the country . . . The war with Israel came to an end, but . . . aside from beachside hotels and resorts, where Bedouin are mostly not allowed to work, the overwhelming majority of the peninsula's 61,000 square kilometers has remained as lifeless and barren as ever.

The 2011 uprising against the three-decade rule of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak opened the floodgates of Sinai militancy, but Sabry traces it back further. In 2004, terrorists inspired by al-Qaeda attacked the Taba Hilton and nearby beach camps popular with Israelis and other foreigners. After the Taba strike, the State Security Investigations division (SSI) of Egypt's interior ministry took far more responsibility for Sinai away from the General Intelligence Directorate, which had overseen Sinai security since Egypt's police first deployed following Israeli withdrawal. In search of the culprits of the Taba bombing, the SSI infamously arrested an estimated 5,000 Bedouins.

Thus began the Sinai population's tortured relationship with Cairo's ministry of interior and the police and security services that reported to Mubarak's minister of interior Habib El-Adly. In Upper Egypt and the Nile Valley, the Mubarak regime's harsh counterterrorism policies of the 1990s had effectively worked, beating al-Gamaa al-Islamiya and al-Jihad into submission internally, although these groups' external remnants went on to join al-Qaeda.

In North Sinai, too, after repeated attacks on the tourist cities of Sharm el-Sheikh (2005) and Dahab (2006), the SSI's brute force managed to quiet the peninsula into submission. The interior ministry's pre-2011 policies were so harsh that today it is common for Egyptian military leaders, government officials, and diplomats to lament such mistakes, but little seems to have changed.

The 2011 uprising against the three-decade rule of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak opened the floodgates of Sinai militancy, but Sabry traces it back further.

The early days of the 2011 uprising that eventually toppled Mubarak showed just how deceptive the resultant sense of submissive calm had been. Sabry begins his book by documenting the violent clashes in the North Sinai cities of Rafah, Sheikh Zuwayed, and its capital al-Arish, which pushed the interior ministry's forces out of Sinai and introduced the security vacuum that continues to this day. What had begun as a tense stand-off between protesters and government forces blocking North Sinai's main coastal highway escalated after police shot and killed 22-year-old Bedouin activist Mohamed Atef.

As a group of men gathered just outside the town of Sheikh Zuwayed discussed how they should respond to the killing, one of them fired his AK-47 at the town's fortified police compound, marking the end of "two days of peaceful chanting, hurling rocks, and trying to avoid . . . tear gas" and the beginning of an armed rebellion. Sabry quotes Mostafa Singer, a North Sinai leftist activist who has lived his life just across from that compound: "It wasn't a protest anymore, by nightfall it had turned into a full-fledged battle; the sounds of AK-47s and the 50 calibers were recognizable. I felt the rocket-propelled grenades rocking the area and clearly heard the armored vehicles racing around." The gulf between the local population and the security apparatus imposed on them fed the rampage that spread to more North Sinai cities:

> To the Bedouins of Sinai, the torched buildings of different police departments represented nothing but the arms of a regime that excluded and oppressed them . . . A history of discrimination saturated the hearts and minds of the Bedouin community with hatred toward the state authorities. Very few police and military officers of Bedouin descent were known to the community, a fact that meant the attackers need not worry their bullets and explosives were being fired at relatives or fellow Bedouins.



A car bomb explosion that targeted a police station in North Sinai's provincial capital of al-Arish, April 2015, where security forces are battling an Islamist insurgency. (AFP/Getty Images.)

Sabry's interest in Sinai predates his career as a reporter, and his political and tribal contacts in the isolated peninsula make him a valuable resource on a region that is today under an almost complete information blackout. (Full disclosure: The world of current-day Sinai researchers is a small one; I have been acquainted with Sabry since February 2013, when several Cairo-based reporters introduced him to me as the expert on North Sinai.) The peninsula has long been a route for smuggling into Israel and the Gaza Strip. As the book's subtitle suggests, Sinai has served as a "lifeline" to both the population of Gaza and its ruling Hamas organization.

After Israel's 2005 withdrawal from Sinai—and especially following Hamas's 2006 election victory and capture of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit—Jerusalem sought to isolate the strip by limiting its imports. Sabry documents how North Sinai became a boom town for locals, and even for Nile Valley transplants, who took part in the smuggling of consumer goods and building supplies through tunnels under the border into Gaza, where Hamas eventually set up a Tunnels Affairs Commission in November 2008, taxing every item brought in, filling its coffers in the process. But Hamas and the people of Gaza were not the only ones who benefitted from the arrangement, as "one of the poorest and least populous Egyptian governorates . . . became the gateway to a purely consumerist, US-dollar-paying market almost four times its size." And as Sabry points out, the North Sinai population was less likely to air its political grievances if its economic needs were being met.

The Mubarak regime essentially pretended to be unaware of the smuggling operations, though Sabry's sources describe a level of both official sanction of such operations as well as corruption. He quotes one 30-year-old part-time smuggler:

> "The state security officers imposed their own rules. They took massive bribes and employed the tunnel owners and workers as informants; as soon as it became widely known that the officers were running the business, the lower ranks did the same, even the traffic police took bribes from the cargo trucks loaded with goods on their way to Rafah."

The Mubarak policy on the Gaza tunnels, which was maintained by the military following his ouster, was two-fold. On the one hand, as Israel set up its blockade of Gaza, Egypt did not want to open the Rafah Border Crossing to commercial traffic, claiming this would violate agreements with Israel. But by allowing trade to thrive underground—both literally and figuratively—the regime could, with a wink, show the Egyptian people it had not abandoned their Palestinian brethren.

But of course the smugglers did not just fill orders for tobacco and fuel; the tunnels also supplied fertilizer and simple chemicals that could be used to make explosives, along with landmines, into Gaza. In time, the most efficient smugglers began handling more lethal items. Indeed, an unintended consequence of Egypt's acquiescence to the tunnels was that it strengthened links between Egyptian arms smugglers and Hamas, which brought in advanced weaponry from Iran and from post-revolutionary Libya's stockpiles. Cairo publicly blamed Hamas for militancy in North Sinai and across the country, and Egypt cracked down on the tunnels to sever any such threat. However, Egypt's counter-tunnel operations actually increased incentives for Hamas to support and assist Sinai militancy.

The security forces' sweep of North Sinai in the 2000s filled Egypt's prisons with Sinai militants and criminals-turned-jihadists. The most notorious of these may be Shadi al-Menai, who was imprisoned for trafficking African migrants and went on to be a founding leader of Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (Supporters of Jerusalem), which pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in 2014.



A Palestinian man is lowered into a smuggling tunnel beneath the Gaza-Egypt border, in the southern Gaza Strip, September 2013. (Photo by Mahmud Hams/AFP/Getty Images.)

Al-Menai was released from prison before Egypt's uprising. In January 2011 he was joined in Sinai by an unknown number of the thousands of escapees who walked out of prisons when the guards left their posts. Over the course of 2011 and 2012, the interim military-led government and, to a lesser extent, then-President Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood released other long-standing security detainees, some of whom reportedly returned to fight in Sinai. These included the brother of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and Mohamed Jamal, the latter of whom was re-arrested following U.S. intelligence linking him to the September 2012 attack on the U.S. compound in Benghazi, Libya. The Sinai Peninsula was effectively lawless.

Although North Sinai was always a distant reach for Cairo, the governorate had channeled law and order through the traditional tribal structure. "Sharia and Tribal Courts" is one of Sabry's best chapters because of its in-depth look at Sinai's traditional order, Mubarak-era policy toward that structure, and the rise of Islamic courts in Sinai:

> With the arrival of the different tribes to the Sinai Peninsula centuries ago, the elders of the community were the tribal judges . . . The position was seen as sacred so that most judges did not retire, but stayed in their role until death and usually passed their knowledge to their wisest son who would inherit the position.

After Israel withdrew from the peninsula, the Egyptian regime hired a group of Bedouin elders; they became known as "Government Sheikhs." These faux tribal elites, appointed by the security authorities, lacked the popularity and respect of traditional tribal elders. Dependent on the regime for their authority, the Government Sheikhs were seen as corrupt by the local population. In this context, Sabry introduces readers to Asaad al-Beik, a Salafist preacher in the North Sinai capital of al-Arish who settled disputes on the basis of Islamic law (sharia). Prior to Egypt's 2011 uprising, al-Beik had been threatened by security forces for running this informal court; but in March 2011 he hung a sign on the guesthouse where the court met identifying it as "The House of Sharia Law in al-Arish."

Like tribal courts, the sharia courts settle private disputes between parties, but the latter are free to use and subsist on donations. Al-Beik and other sharia judges make all parties sign pledges to uphold the court's decision. However, the courts also employed what became known as a "Rights Retrieving Committee" for "investigating crimes and violations, verifying testimonies, mediating between rivals, and applying the decades-old naming and shaming system." The work of these Islamic judges and committees, made up of young Salafist activists selected by the judges, challenged both state and tribal authorities. One source told Sabry the sharia courts and retrieval committees "would have never operated" if the Egyptian state had done its job. The destruction of the tribal order by the Mubarak regime and its replacement with Salafist courts both prepared the North Sinai population for a jihadist call and hollowed out the tribal elites' ability to effectively respond to it.

Even aggressive Egyptian reporters rarely make it east of al-Arish, and those who do generally serve as mouthpieces for the army or the so-called "sovereign sources" in the peninsula. Indeed, in August 2015 Egypt passed an "anti-terrorism" law that made it a crime to report anything that contradicted official government statements. With this media blackout, the most recognized alternative to the government narrative is that of Wilayat Sinai,

the Islamic State's Egyptian branch, which spreads propaganda of its operations and alleged governance across social media. By writing *Sinai,* reporting via Twitter, and making media appearances, Sabry has served as an outlet for the Sinai population caught between insurgent attacks and military response.

Egypt's counter-tunnel operations actually increased incentives for Hamas to support and assist Sinai militancy.

Although Sabry's sources are his biggest asset, they are also his book's biggest weakness. The military and the militants have obvious interests in playing down or playing up the Sinai fight. Even if we assume the civilian population is interested only in spreading the facts, these are, at a minimum, unverifiable in a war zone, and urban (or rather desert) legends quickly become communal narratives. Sabry corroborates his details with several sources, but in an environment where everyone knows—and talks to—each other, this does not necessarily ensure factual accuracy.

One of the most glaring examples is Sabry's account of the May 2014 operation that reportedly killed al-Menai, the jihadist leader. By the time of *Sinai's* publication Sabry himself recognized that al-Menai was still alive, and it is unfortunate that this story—although a heroic story of local Bedouin standing up to jihadists—made it into the book. Another desert legend is the belief that Israeli unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) regularly circulate over, and take offensive operations in, North Sinai. This is probably a case of the local population being unfamiliar with the capabilities of its own military; aware of Israeli drone operations in neighboring Gaza, Sinai residents hear or see Egyptian surveillance drones and armed Air Tractors and assume they are from Israel.

Sinai's great strength is that it gives voice to a population that has been ignored at best and silenced at worst. Journalists and researchers in Cairo, Jerusalem, and Tel Aviv often report on official Egyptian and Israeli viewpoints about Sinai. Sabry is one of the few researchers able to present the Sinai viewpoint to a broad audience, and even occasional inaccuracies help present the view the local Sinai population has of Egypt and Israel.

Sinai's release coincided with the Islamic State's Sinai branch claiming responsibility for the bombing of a Russian civilian aircraft full of tourists in October 2015. The incident drew international attention to Sinai, to what was happening in the region, and to how such a militant threat developed. *Sinai* provides thorough answers. Sabry's engaging narrative, drawing on local sources, introduces the peninsula, its population, and its politics to those who may not have thought about Sinai since the last Egyptian-Israeli war. The rare close Sinai-watcher will appreciate the refresher provided by the book, especially its eight-page chronology and investigations into the dueling narratives of important Sinai-related events.

In his final chapter, "The Imminent Threat," Sabry laments the current situation in North Sinai. Having provided details of past ministry of interior abuses in the introductory chapters, the book in its latter half documents military operations and government policies in the peninsula since 2011 and especially following Morsi's 2013 ouster. Egypt's current military leaders under President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi recognize that the interior ministry made mistakes a decade ago and that this "became the seed that grew into a rebellion." However Sabry meticulously shows these past actions are paralleled by similar ones carried out by the present military regime. Promises to "put an end to six decades of depriving the peninsula's population of their rights to register the ownership of their land, farms, and real estate," for example, evaporated. By requiring the population to provide proof that their parents had held only Egyptian citizenship, the government placed an unreachable bar in front of the Bedouin community which "had lived until the 2000s without registering births or marriages, or even obtaining national ID cards." He concludes that "al-Sisi's regime may be able to defeat the insurgency with more brutality. But it wasn't the insurgency that called for, and accomplished, Mubarak's downfall in January 2011."

Sabry warns that repression may bring short-term stability, but it creates an inherently unstable situation. Egypt's government and military give lip service to this insight, but little more. Supporters of Egypt and of Israel who seek a stable and secure Sinai Peninsula between these two U.S. allies should be worried.

Zack Gold is a non-resident fellow with the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East.



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A Fraternal Note

BY JAMES REISS

Letters to America: Selected Poems of Reuven Ben-Yosef
edited and translated by Michael Weingrad
Syracuse University Press, 208 pp., $24.95

When my brother and his wife arrived in Haifa on Rosh Hashanah 1959, they were in their early twenties. First off they changed their names. In honor of our father Joseph, my brother, born as Robert Eliot Reiss (his middle name given him because of a poet he grew to loathe, T. S. Eliot), switched to Reuven Ben-Yosef. According to his widow Jody, now Yehudit—still very much alive in Jerusalem—their first year on a kibbutz was "rather quiet" because he insisted they speak only Hebrew.

Now that some of his work has been posthumously published in English, I can atone for my lack of Hebrew by poring over the poems in Michael Weingrad's recent translation. I can read how on Israeli army patrols my brother cleared mines near the Sea of Galilee—or else on duty in Gaza how he filed past roadblocks, "unknown alleys, peepholes." I can read his steamy poems about my sister-in-law. I can even read about myself. These poems are the best way for me to hear my big brother's voice again.

With a single slim volume of poems in English published shortly after he left the United States, Ben-Yosef began a 40-year hardscrabble career as a writer, translator, and public school teacher eventually based in Jerusalem. He and his family flew overseas to visit us a few times but otherwise hunkered in Israel. Despite his testy entreaties, neither our parents nor our younger sister joined him and his growing family abroad. My sister, Lucinda Luvaas, became an acclaimed visual artist on the West Coast. My secular Jewish parents, grieved by his absence and tempted to emigrate to be near him, decided to remain in the cosmetics business in New York. I moved to Ohio, where I taught creative writing as—what else?—a poet!

What was it like growing up with a brother who was also a poet? Four years older than me, he was my role model, though he almost never gave me the approbation I craved. When Mom and Dad made a fuss over his poems, I began to turn out my own verse for all occasions: birthdays, the Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, and Christmas—in those days we decorated our annual Christmas trees with cherished ornaments. I got hooked on my brother's early poems; I can still recite his opening lines about a budding pre-teen girl:

> Soon the angles and jutting fragments
> Will blend into ovals
> Of pink and whiteness.

One reason my brother left this country might have had to do with his being badly beaten up as an 11-year-old by an anti-Semitic street gang. I remember driving through northern Manhattan with a private detective—he showed me his gun—trying to find the culprits. We never found them, just as my brother never found himself at home in Christendom. He disdained our parents' infatuation with Unitarianism and considered becoming a Roman Catholic. He'd dropped out of college, enlisted in the American army, become an Army Language School–trained translator of Russian, and was stationed—of all places—in Germany. Once he was discharged from the service and found Judaism, he denounced the United States with its vast wealth and power. Years later, in his second "Letter to America," he laced into our sister for being a "captive among the gentiles."

I was afraid that he would read my poem "Brothers," get mad as hell, and never speak to me again.



Bob and Jim Reiss, October 1944. Bob was seven at the time and Jim was three. (Courtesy of James Reiss.)



Reuven and Yehudit (Bob and Jody) Ben-Yosef at Kibbutz HaGoshrim near what was then the Syrian border, ca. early 1960s. (Courtesy of James Reiss.)

Weingrad's *Letters to America: Selected Poems of Reuven Ben-Yosef* has as its centerpiece the title poem, a sequence of 13 such epistles written between 1974 and 1977, that addresses Reuven's family back in the United States in tones that are full of longing as well as anger. His first poem in the sequence, "Letter to My Brother," reaches out to me:

> We share no language, and yet perhaps
> some brotherly bond exists that strives, across
> the mighty waters, to touch

In his introduction, "Reuven Ben-Yosef and the Family Reiss," Weingrad contends that Ben-Yosef's on-again, off-again yearning and rage for the American branch of his family played a big part in the literary achievement of his *Letters*. The emotional intensity crackling in his missives to our mother and sister, as well as to our father, and even to our childless sister's non-existent progeny, comes together with his use of iambic pentameter—not common in Hebrew poetry. The result is an echo chamber of *cris de coeur* couched in stately lines of verse.

By then my fiction-writing brother-in-law, Bill Luvaas, and I had written the equivalent of our own epistles to our abrasive sibling. Bill's debut novel and my first book of poems found bittersweet ways of writing about brother Reuven. Without being able to read what Reuven was saying, we relied on memories of him and wrote books that unknowingly answered his eventual verse letters.

Families harbor feuds the way governments hold onto foreign policy: Nothing changes for eons until, with some luck, there's a breakthrough. Years later when I flew to Israel and gave Reuven my second book, I was afraid that he would read my poem "Brothers," get mad as hell,

and never speak to me again. Instead, he grinned at my lines: "So where are you now, Mr. Top / Dog on the Bunk Bed, Mr. Big / Back on the High School Football Team?" He told me he was glad I still remembered that he lettered in football!

I'm glad I still remember him playing our family's baby grand; one of his own Copland-like tunes has haunted me for more than 60 years. I'm glad I remember our dinnertime game: I would brag that I owned all the railroads east of the Mississippi, while he said he owned every train west of Chicago, including the Burlington Zephyr and the Super Chief. I'm glad I *don't* remember him, when I was an infant, whacking me over the head—so my mother told me—with a toy metal pistol.

Now that I can finally read his poems, I see how, even though we weren't personally close, our work developed in parallel—or what Saul Bellow called axial—lines over the decades. His long poem about New York, "The City," complements my own Big Apple poems; his portrait of the poet as an "aging lion" echoes my portrait of the king of beasts in "Three Leos"; his description of our father's funeral service aboard a rented boat pairs well with my elegy for our dad in my first book; his frequent preference for stanzas with the same number of lines equals my own; his experiments with visual poems match "concrete" verse I continue to tweak; his love of imagery and sound shows (at least in translation) in seven stark words I wish I had written: "A shack in a stand of pines."

Unlike such colloquial late 20th–century Israeli poetry as Yehuda Amichai's, and unlike much of my own work, which has been called "plainspoken," Ben-Yosef's verse apparently deploys biblical and demotic Hebrew in dense, allusive ways. If the British poets Milton and Wordsworth represent opposite extremes of style, my brother is closer to Milton than to the author of *The Prelude*. The issue of Ben-Yosef's strenuous—"literary"—use of language seems to have compounded the difficulties of translating his work. To sit down and read my brother's poetry is, even in English, not an experience of free-flowing transparent lines of verse.

Here is one poem my brother wrote in 1993 that works perfectly in translation. I can only imagine it in Hebrew:

"In the Shade of a Tree"
"No!" cried the woman and beat the air
that passed like a whisper over the open grave. "If,"
said the young man with the orders in his hand,
    still
stunned by the news. "Undoubtedly," explained
the government spokesman, pointing to the maps.
"Nonsense," pronounced the old man sitting in
    the park
in the shade of a tree, millions of leaves rising
to the sky.

Thanks to Weingrad's introduction, I learned that Ben-Yosef was so taken with my first book, *The Breathers*, that it actually inspired him to write the "Letters to America" sequence. Zionist though he was, his selected poems refer to New York, not always derisively, at least as frequently as Jerusalem—and he describes at least as many settings in the United States as in Israel. He may have thought he was entering the future, but like many another voyager he ended up being borne back ceaselessly into the past.

What irony for a poet with such a grudge against America to be published here! Fifteen years after he died, a major reassessment of Reuven Ben-Yosef's work may win him readers—an audience—on these shores. As far as I'm concerned, this book is a triumph for our family.

James Reiss's latest book of poems, The Novel *(CW Books), appeared in 2015. His novel* When Yellow Leaves *comes out in 2016—and another novel* Façade for a Penny Arcade *(both from Spuyten Duyvil) will appear in 2017.*

Letter to My Brother

I write to you with simple words,
because you do not understand Hebrew.
We share no language, and yet perhaps
some brotherly bond exists that strives, across
the mighty waters, to touch, so that
one of these days, in one of these lands,
you'll see that you have not yet reached your self.

I write to you because you do not understand,
and yet you want to be my brother,
not like those wandering relatives that every Jew
has somewhere else in the world, but my own flesh
and blood, your lack of self resounding
in my very bones, and didn't you once say,
"From this sad distance I'm proud of you."

I write to you because you do not want to be,
my brother. The king's image has left you, and nothing
remains but a clean hand on a glass stem,
wine by the sea, a holiday, your eyes gazing east
with longing, your mouth swallowing, your heart
aching, softly beating, how pleasant it is
to think of one's blessings, to relax in reverie.

How good it is—*hinei mah tov*—to bear your pain
inside you, dry all the while, with salt and wine
in your eyes, and the horizon revolving like a gear
from evening to morning and back again. Come back again,
my brother, stop yearning and read what is written.
These simple words I write to you, your brother
who lives on the Street of the Watchman, in Israel.

—Reuven Ben-Yosef

From Letters to America: Selected Poems of Reuven Ben-Yosef, *edited and translated by Michael Weingrad (Syracuse University Press, 2015). Reprinted with permission.*

Brothers

Eighteen years you beat me over the head
with the butt end of our brotherhood.
So where are you now, Mr. Top
Dog on the Bunk Bed, Mr. Big
Back on the High School Football Team?

You hauled ass out of that town
with its flimsy goalposts.
Now you're down there with your Dead
Sea, your Jerusalem, busy
with the same old border disputes

that sparked our earliest fist fights.
Israel is just another locked toy
closet on your side of the bedroom, split
by electric train tracks. It's as if
you never left home at all: Yesterday

in a bar in Washington Heights
I saw a man who could have been you.
The Jets were playing the Steelers with two
downs to go, and in the icy
lightshow of smoke

he lifted a pitcher of beer
and swilled it just as the screen
blazed red with an ad for Gillette.
And I thought, Here is my blood brother
whose only gifts to me were kicks

in the teeth, his cast-off comic books,
and worst of all, wrapped, sharpened
for a lifetime,
the perfect razor of my rage.

—James Reiss

A Dissonant Moses in Berlin and Paris

BY MITCHELL COHEN

Moses und Aron
by Arnold Schoenberg, directed by Barrie Kosky, music directed by Vladimir Jurowski, Komische Oper Berlin

Moses und Aron
by Arnold Schoenberg, directed by Romeo Castellucci, music directed by Philippe Jordan, Opéra National de Paris, Bastille

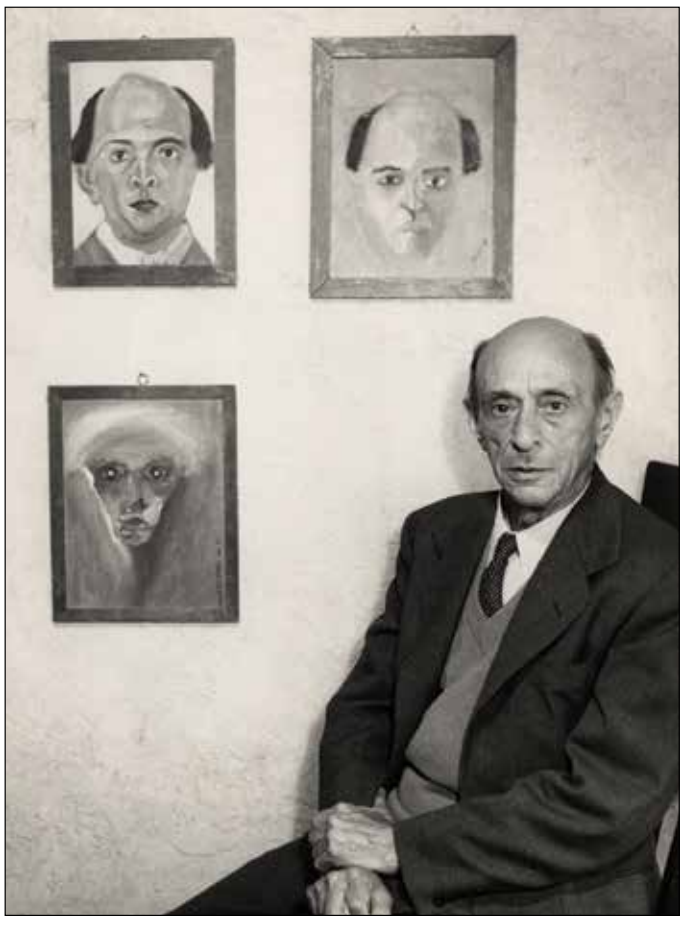
Think of last year in Europe and shudder: Islamist terrorism, waves of Middle Eastern refugees, Ukrainian woes, rising right-wing populism, destabilizing unemployment, an increasingly insecure European Union, and, of course, anti-Semitism. But lo, into the midst of this vexed continent came Moses, Aron, and Arnold.

In an arresting confluence of culture and politics, 2015 was also Arnold Schoenberg's year. Berlin's Komische Oper and the Opéra National de Paris (collaborating with Madrid's Teatro Real) presented original stagings of Schoenberg's defiant, unfinished *Moses und Aron* under the direction of Barrie Kosky and Romeo Castellucci, respectively. Schoenberg's *Moses* is an intellectual opera if ever there was one. At its center is a profoundly troubling matter: Moses and Aron struggle over whether or not a pure idea is inevitably corrupted when translated into terms accessible to masses of people. Both productions featured masterly conducting of the notoriously thorny score from Vladimir Jurowski (in Berlin) and Philippe Jordan (in Paris). The casts were strong and the choruses mighty as audiences encountered Schoenberg's brilliantly idiosyncratic interpretation of the story of Moses, Aron, and the Israelites in the wilderness.

After *Moses und Aron*, other Schoenberg works played at the Berlin Festival and in a Paris series that began by pairing the composer's breakthrough Second String Quartet with his landmark *Pierrot Lunaire*. The Quartet unleashed furies in 1908 with its stretch into what became known as Schoenbergian atonality. In *Pierrot*, from 1912, a chamber ensemble accompanies *Sprechstimme*, a Schoenbergian declamation that hovers between speech and song, of a French symbolist's poetry. Igor Stravinsky called it the "solar plexus" of musical modernism.

I saw *Moses und Aron* three weeks before the November 2015 massacres in Paris, but police were on manifest guard at the Bastille opera house. As it happens, only a few blocks away France's Museum of Jewish History and Art was presenting an exceptional exhibit entitled *Moses: Figures of a Prophet*. It opened with a projection of Charlton Heston and Yul Brynner facing off across, and Israelites traversing, Cecil B. DeMille's parting waters. Then came Jewish and Christian paintings, lithographs, haggadahs, and tapestries, from the Renaissance on. Here was Moses prefiguring Jesus; there he was a liberator opposing political absolutism. Here is Napoleon, who razed ghetto walls, as Mosaic lawgiver; there is 19th-century painter Moritz Daniel Oppenheim linking law to Jewish emancipation in German lands. Twentieth-century canvasses associated Moses with Herzl or, in Chagall's case, made him "intimate and universal," as the curators put it. One section pointed to Mosaic motifs in the American civil rights movement, most famously in Martin Luther King's "I've been to the mountaintop" speech. Near the end of the exhibit, the visitor could see extracts from a 2009 German production of *Moses und Aron*, along with *The Gaze of Michelangelo*, a 17-minute visual meditation from 2004 on the famous statue of Moses in Rome by its sculptor's 20th-century namesake, Michelangelo Antonioni. Aged and fragile from a stroke, filmmaker Antonioni stands before and touches the monumental marble figure of the Jewish lawgiver. Where Schoenberg reworked the story of revelation at Sinai through sound and theater to lay out his own aesthetic, spiritual, and political concerns, Antonioni engages the still Moses statue in silence. Antonioni's visible awe is deeply human and makes a fine curatorial contrast with Schoenberg, who once declared, "My Moses is like Michelangelo's, if only in appearance. He is not at all human."

Moses und Aron incarnates "the people" in choruses, but you can't hum along with Schoenberg.



Arnold Schoenberg with some of his self-portraits, 1948. (Photo by Richard Fish, courtesy of the Arnold Schoenberg Center, Vienna.)

Schoenberg disdained the word "atonal" and bristled when he was called "revolutionary." His quest was to find new ways of expression to sustain classical German music. He followed, he said, a "reactionary way" because of orders "from The Most High." And while he was not a political philosopher, political metaphors mix often with spiritual ones in his writings on music. At the age of 24 Vienna-born Schoenberg converted from Judaism to Lutheranism, and, though he would go on to reverse the conversion, one way to describe his project might be to call it an attempt at something like a musical Reformation. "It has never been the purpose and effect of new art to suppress the old, its predecessor, certainly not to destroy it," he explained in his *Theory of Harmony*. The "appearance of the new," he elaborated, is a "natural growth of the tree of life" even if "trees" with "an interest in preventing the flowering . . . would surely call it revolution. And conservatives of winter would fight against each spring . . . Short memory and meager insight suffice to confuse growth with overthrow . . ."

In 1922 he told his friend abstract painter Wassily Kandinsky, who thought Schoenberg was doing in sounds what he was doing on canvas, that his music was written "without any 'ism' in mind." He also once asked "by what chord would one diagnose the Marxist confession in a piece of music, and by what color the Fascist one in a picture?" Still, he held that "no great work of art . . . does not convey a new message to humanity," a "prophetic message" of "a higher form of life."

What was new in Schoenberg's music? Instead of composing in, say, E flat or G major, the usual way of anchoring a musical work, Schoenberg cast off such "traditional grammar" and created a musical language that ruled out "all taboos," as composer Ernst Krenek summarized it, by treating all notes more or less equally. In the 1920s Schoenberg turned this "free atonality" into composition by a "12-tone" (or "serial") method. Recreating rules, he composed by transforming "tone rows" fashioned from the dozen semitones of the chromatic scale. Tones "related only to one another," allowing none to have "supremacy," Schoenberg explained, calling this apparent democracy of notes "the emancipation of dissonance." To explain: We hear consonance when two or more tones sound complete together (or following one another);

dissonance, by contrast, sounds off-putting. Music needs both, but when they don't progress in the usual way, then, well, emancipating dissonance imparts new ambivalences in sound. The political resonances of such musical technique were surely evident to Schoenberg, although he denied that his concern was anything but art.

Moses und Aron is often acclaimed as the composer's 12-tone masterpiece, and audiences have always found its music and words challenging in a way that earlier biblical works such as Handel's oratorio *Israel in Egypt* or operas like Rossini's *Moses in Egypt* and Verdi's *Nabucco* were not. Like them, *Moses und Aron* incarnates "the people" in choruses, but you can't hum along with Schoenberg. He wrote the opera between 1928 and 1932, in an era of leaders and masses in perilous embrace, and his libretto is as provocative as his music.

German politics was, of course, the principal reason why Schoenberg never completed his opera. When he left Germany, he left a three-act libretto with music for the first two. "Today there are more important things than art," he is said to have uttered in spring 1933, as he walked out on a speech in Berlin exulting the new führer's coming efforts to end the "Jewish stranglehold" on music. Soon in Paris (on his way finally to Los Angeles), he re-converted to Judaism. Marc Chagall served as an official witness. In the 18 remaining years of his life, Schoenberg never saw *Moses und Aron* staged, and the Guggenheim Foundation rejected his request for a grant to finish it. Slowly, sporadically, his unfinished opera joined the repertoire after his death in 1951.



Robert Hayward as Moses in* Moses und Aron*, Komische Oper, Berlin. (Photo © Monika Rittershaus.)

The new Berlin production was a stimulating if troubling rumination about what joins particular—that is, Jewish—to universal existential questions. Director Barrie Kosky dubs himself a "gay, Jewish kangaroo" (he is Australian), and the Komische Oper has received accolades since he became its artistic head in 2012. Kosky's *Moses* was billed as marking the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, and images of the Holocaust are vital to his production.

Shirtless Moses returns from the mountaintop with the Ten Commandments carved bloody into his body, as if to say that attaining the law from above has been as painful to him as beholding the Israelite orgy before an idol below. Meanwhile, on the side, an old Hollywood-style camera films the choral bacchanalia around the Calf. It is manned by Aron and puppets of famous modern Jewish figures who are often associated with Moses: Herzl in top hat; Marx, the prophet of a different Promised Land; Freud, whose *Moses and Monotheism* was also written under the Nazi shadow; and, of course, Schoenberg (the only beardless prophet in the bunch). Members of the modern-dressed chorus of Israelites manipulate life-size dolls, many stereotyping Jews. Dismembered, these dolls pile up in a death camp image, from which law-inscribed Moses materializes.

The Golden Calf scene, wrote Schoenberg in a 1933 letter, represented "the core of my thought." It signified "a sacrifice made by the masses, trying to break loose from a 'soulless' belief." Renowned for single-mindedness, Schoenberg provided extensive instructions for the violent convulsions in this scene, including priests slitting the throats of naked virgins (a decidedly unbiblical detail). The music, as the perceptive critic Malcolm MacDonald notes, is a dance-symphony of "rhythmic force and . . . barbaric energy."

Schoenberg wrote that he wanted "to leave as little possible to those new despots . . . the producers." It is easy to appreciate his disquiet about directorial hubris, but perhaps he went too far: A creative director's staging of *Moses und Aron* may be no more distant from Schoenberg's original idea than his libretto is from Book of Exodus. The important question is whether or not a source, biblical or otherwise, is expropriated intelligently. Kosky is smart and creative (although cameo-parades of iconic Jews are a bit wearisome by now), and his Berlin is, after all, very far from Schoenberg's. Germany's 21st-century capital is an effervescent, if still haunted, place.

Kosky's stage is largely vacant, a modern wasteland of rising steps on which oriental carpets have been cast. Moses rolled out from a rug with a paisley bow tie and a frilly, purple speckled shirt under his formal suit. The contrast between the opera's seriousness of purpose and the droll appearances of Moses, who seems anxious as much as determined, and wily Aron, who surfaces in a dinner jacket and like Moses wears a magician's top hat, should make us ask: To whom should these biblical figures, these ur-Jews, appear comic? How do they see themselves?

Schoenberg's Moses is driven by "Thought," the Pure Idea that comes from encountering the Voice from the Burning Bush. He cannot convey it because his "tongue is inflexible." The Voice articulates through a small chorus mixing speech and lyricism (six vocalists are in the orchestra pit). Moses declaims in baritone *Sprechstimme*. The Voice calls on him to liberate his kin. But how can one persuade enslaved masses, who see and have nothing, of something Moses, a stutterer in the Bible, calls "invisible" and "omnipresent"?

If Moses insists on "thinking the inconceivable," Aron, a tenor, can communicate the Idea lyrically, by song, images, wonders, and enticements (it is advantageous to be chosen by the "one powerful God"). Moses cannot abide these impurities. Aron embraces the Idea, but he is also a crafty manipulator of images, symbols, and words on its behalf. His first appearance on stage is accompanied by what Malcolm MacDonald calls "suave, elegant yet unsubstantial dance music for flutes, violins and harps." Yet Aron grasps the difficulties in remaking the people he loves. It is said that Schoenberg identified with Moses. Still, his opera's vigor depends significantly on Aron's case, which Schoenberg made formidable.

One of the liberties Schoenberg takes with the Bible is to change the audience of the famous miracles performed by Moses to convince the pharaoh. Here, Aron presents them to the Israelites to bring them to the Idea. When the staff becomes a serpent, he sings:

> In Moses' hand a rigid rod: this, the law.
> In my own hand the most supple of serpents:
> Cleverness.

In English that last word, cleverness, does not catch the ambiguities suggested by the original German. *Die Klugheit* might plausibly be rendered "prudence" or "clear-sightedness." We are left, then, with another question: Should laws serve or discipline? In Kosky's production, the staff is a magician's wand.

Schoenberg's intellectual masterstroke may be in the second act's denouement. Moses has returned from the mountain to see the orgy around the Golden Calf (a plumed female performer in Kosky's production) that Aron has helped fashion. He does not smash the tablets straight away but confronts Aron, who, in turn, points at the stone tablets and says: "they are images too." Then Moses shatters the Decalogue. Presumably this is what Kosky tried to recreate by placing Moses, commandments on chest and back, with piled-up puppet-corpses. It makes a kind of dramatic sense, but it isn't as compelling as those stark four words that Schoenberg gave Aron, arguing that the Idea is always trapped by representation.

Moses sinks to the ground and despairs to the sound of a violin's tone holding steady: "Word, o Word that fails me." This is where Schoenberg's music stops. Sometimes the music-less third act is read or performed, but it was not in the productions in Berlin and Paris. The two brothers still argue. But Aron is under arrest. Should we kill him? a guard asks. Moses commands Aron's release with a caveat: He can live "if he can." That is, with mere images but no true Idea. The opera closes with Aron falling lifeless and Moses still reaching for the eternal Idea.

One difference between Kosky's Berlin production and the one mounted by Castellucci in Paris is that Castellucci is mainly interested in expropriating Schoenberg for his own purposes. So before turning to his staging it will be useful to get a sense of Schoenberg's political itinerary.

Schoenberg protested more than once that he was not "political," but he was not very convincing. As a young man, friends introduced him to Marxist theories and he was "strongly in sympathy" with social democratic goals. He conducted workers' chorales and two of his closest friends, Oskar Adler and David Josef Bach, had important social democratic links. Adler's brother Max was an eminent Kantian-Marxist theorist. Schoenberg may have learned some Marxism from these contacts, but what remained urgent for him was Kant's insistence that science and religion were radically distinct domains. Not unlike Maimonides in this orientation, Schoenberg saw the breach between the two realms as akin to that between true leaders (or artists) with ideas and "the masses" (or audiences). This tension is present in every aspect of *Moses und Aron*.

"Comrade Schoenberg," as it seems he was once known, discovered what he later called "differences between me and a laborer," namely, that he was "bourgeois." In 1912 he thought of a "Jacob's ladder" oratorio. Its subject: "modern man [who], having passed through materialism, socialism, and anarchy and, despite having been an atheist, still having in him some residue of ancient faith (in the form of superstition), wrestles with God" and learns to pray. Even when, in his youth, he was a frank non-believer, Schoenberg thought that the Bible addressed the "most difficult questions."

"Rightly or wrongly," he would write, "it is not everyone's business to concern himself with difficult and profound things . . . But the part of the public that is to be won over could and should be won over as soon as possible." As in art, so in politics—sometimes. He despised the Soviet experiment; he was (oddly) more contemptuous of than outraged by Mussolini; he found pacifism naïve; he excoriated totalistic views of the world, exempting his own singular religiosity. He mocked German racism on the somewhat disconcerting grounds that it modeled itself on Jewish chosenness: While "we are chosen to think the idea of the unitary, eternal, unimaginable, unrepresentable and invisible God," German prejudice focused "on appearances." Lacking "the Idea," Germans measured parts of the body.

"I called myself then the first dictator in Europe!" Schoenberg wrote, insisting that he was "fully aware of the implications."

And what about democracy in those dire hours? He wrote to Thomas Mann in 1939 that he knew democracy's value but also its weaknesses. Its "exaggerated" insistence on free expression abetted those who wanted it overthrown. Thus "democracy everywhere has proven itself unable to deal with opposition [to democracy]." Schoenberg responded angrily when anyone suggested that *Moses und Aron* evoked his own struggle for audiences for his music or that it had political resonance. Still, in May 1934, he wrote a letter to Rabbi Stephen Wise in which he described the Society for the Private Performance of Music he had founded in Vienna some 15 years earlier. "I called myself then the first dictator of Europe!" he wrote, insisting that he was "fully aware of the implications." What mattered was musical experience, but he was the sole arbiter of that experience. Subscribers received no advance program and critics were barred.

Schoenberg's views of the world had taken a dramatic shift in 1921. He had gone with his family to Mattsee, a resort near Salzburg, to work on "Jacob's Ladder." The local authorities demanded his baptismal certificate. Livid, he quit the place. In a letter to his friend Kandinsky (who he had been led to believe held anti-Semitic views) he wrote:

> For I have at last learned the lesson that has been forced upon me . . . and I shall not ever forget it . . . I am not a German, not a European, indeed perhaps scarcely even a human being (at least, the Europeans prefer the worst of their race to me), but I am a Jew.

If passers-by wondered if he were Christian or Jew, he would not say, "I'm the one Kandinsky and some others make an exception of." In any event, "that man Hitler is not of their opinion." It is a prescient, even astonishing remark, given that it was written half a year before Hitler became famous for his Beer Hall Putsch.

Kandinsky protested that nationality was of "the greatest indifference" to him, that he loved Schoenberg as a human being and as an artist, and that he didn't want the Jewish question to upend friendship. Still arguing more with anti-Semitism than with Kandinsky, Schoenberg responded with forceful rhetorical questions:

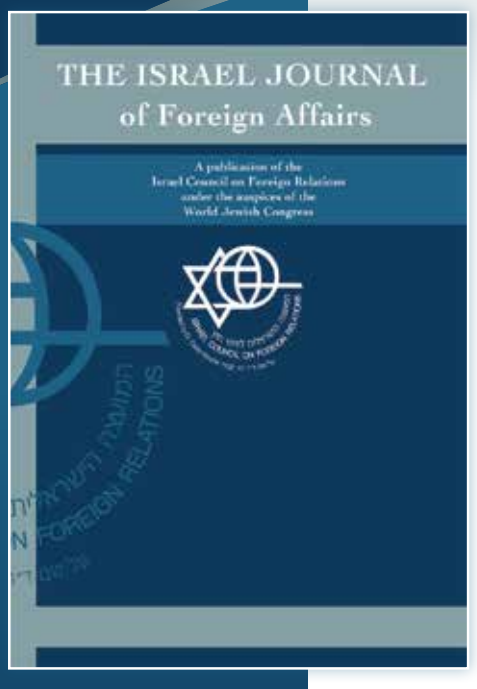
> I ask: Why do people say that the Jews are like what their black-marketeers are like?
>
> Do people also say that the Aryans are like their worst elements? Why is an Aryan judged by Goethe, Schopenhauer and so forth? Why don't people say the Jews are like Mahler . . .?
>
> What every Jew reveals by his hooked nose is not only his own guilt but also that of all those with hooked noses who don't happen to be there too. But if a hundred Aryan criminals are all together, all that anyone will be able to read from their noses is their taste for alcohol, while for the rest they will be considered respectable people.

How could Kandinsky not be irate at the bigots? seethed Schoenberg. Because of communists? "I am not one." Because of the Elders of Zion? That is "a fairy-tale." "Or do you think that I owe . . . my knowledge and skill to Jewish machinations in high places?"

Schoenberg began an intense study of Zionism, became an advocate of Jewish statehood, and wrote a (tedious) propaganda play, *The Biblical Way*. In it, he explained to the Zionist essayist Jacob Klatzkin, he tried to tell "the story of how the Jews became a people." The actual site of the play's "New Palestine" is unclear since Schoenberg's thinking was then "territorialist" rather than outright Zionist: A Jewish haven was needed somewhere, anywhere. The play's protagonist is a Herzlian leader whose name blends those of Moses and Aron. In Max Aruns' view, "Moses . . . used forty years of wandering . . . for the purpose of accustoming the rising generations to a life governed by laws." Aruns is finally unable to be both Moses and Aron. His powers dissipate and an upris-

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ing among followers dooms him, but the project—the Idea—survives.

The composer soon began talking of, indeed planning for, a "United Jewish Party" with himself as leader. In his more grandiose moments, he imagined flying across the continent addressing publicly the growing emergency. He considered attending Zionist conclaves and often sounded similar to Vladimir Jabotinsky, leader of the Zionist right wing, who demanded "pure," "monistic" nationalism in opposition to the Zionist left's mix of particularistic with universalistic ideas. Schoenberg stressed "oneness" like Jabotinsky, but dissented from his demand to proclaim Zionism's "final goal" (a state in all of biblical Palestine) and his campaign to boycott Germany (which Schoenberg thought ill-conceived). Schoenberg found Jabotinsky insufferably arrogant—a character trait that is often ascribed to the composer.

"Oneness" for Schoenberg became increasingly a simple matter of Jewish solidarity together with monotheism, and both became prominent features of his work. After the Holocaust he composed a potent, short cantata entitled "A Survivor from Warsaw." It culminates in his own chorale rendition of "Sh'ma Yisrael."



"Dance around the Golden Calf" from **Moses und Aron,** *Komische Oper, Berlin. (Photo © Monika Rittershaus.)*

Problems of the modern—or is it postmodern?—Western world animated Romeo Castellucci's brilliant treatment of *Moses und Aron* in Paris. In his production, Aron's staff created—or did it become?—a jet engine. Or was it a space probe? Either way, it was a machine that moves above, not soaring but hovering over the Israelites, a bit like *Sprechstimme* hovers between speech and song. The director, who also designed the sets, seems to be suggesting that we have made technology into an idol.

Castellucci's show was a meditation on Schoenberg's musical and theatrical achievement that cannily deployed the composer's own mythic explorations of aesthetics, Judaism, and politics to ask questions about the nature of ideas, nature itself, humanity, technology, and Western society. Castellucci has been an eminent figure in Europe's avant-garde theater since the 1990s, but his opera career began only in 2011, improbably with Wagner's last work, *Parsifal*, for the Brussels Opera. Conspicuous visual reminiscences link this now notorious staging to his new *Moses und Aron.* Both stagings employ the primary color of purity—white—to saturate the stage by means of screens, backdrops, lighting, and costumes. There were also reminiscences of Castellucci's previous engagement with Moses, a widely discussed play (*Go Down, Moses*) performed in Paris in 2014 whose preoccupation was "a burning idea that does not consume itself."

Parsifal is the polar opposite of *Moses und Aron*. It includes much metaphysical hoo-hah along with heavy-handed Christian symbolism and Wagner's neuroses about purity, particularly of a sexual-racial kind. By contrast, Schoenberg's *Moses* is obsessed with purity of an Idea. Will he be able to impart it to desert-bound slaves? The music is so disconcerting and often jagged that you cannot become aesthetically anesthetized as in Wagner; you must be alert to the intellectual issues, even if the metaphysics don't suit you. Castellucci interrogated Wagner and paid tribute to Schoenberg. While music did its stuff in *Parsifal*'s "Prelude" (overture), the face of Nietzsche, who went famously from Wagner sycophant to stinging critic, materialized, recalling censure rather than submission to sonorous temptations.

The first moments of the Paris *Moses und Aron* were stunning. If Nietzsche's picture posed questions about memory and aesthetic experience in one way, here Castellucci did so in another. A black screen traversed the stage. Projected onto it was a white tape recorder—a pre-digital memory machine whose double spools recall the two tablets of the law. As it turned, or perhaps scrolled, an image of a Golden Calf, or perhaps it was an ox, emerged.

mo•sa•ic

/mō zā' ik/

1. of or pertaining to Moses or the laws, faith, institutions, and writings attributed to him.

2. an artwork made of small pieces of inlaid stone, tile, marble, glass, etc., forming a patterned whole.

3. a web magazine advancing ideas, argument, and reasoned judgment in all areas of Jewish endeavor.



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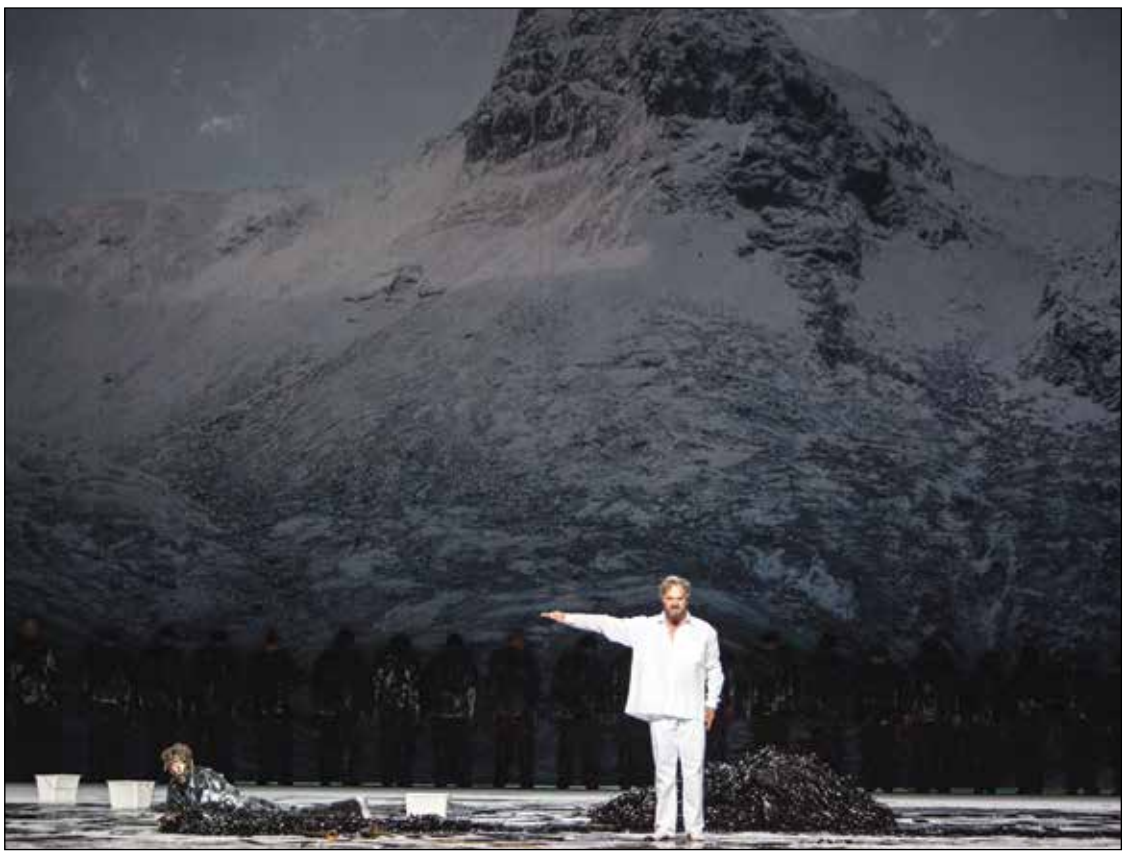
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ADVANCING JEWISH THOUGHT Mosaic

It reappeared later in the form of a massive, very alive golden animal for the orgiastic dance by the Israelites, performed in stylized slow entwinements of the chorus. (Press reports said that the Opéra prepared the ton-and-a-half creature for months by piping Schoenberg's music daily into its pen.)



Moses and Aron in a scene from Romeo Castellucci's production of **Moses und Aron** *at the National Opéra of Paris. (Courtesy of Bernd Uhlig.)*



Moses and Aron at the base of the mountain in the National Opéra of Paris's production of **Moses und Aron.** *(Courtesy of Bernd Uhlig.)*

When Moses first encounters the Voice, he wraps himself in tape descending from the spools from on high. Castellucci wants us never to forget that Moses' "calling," an event we "remember," has been recorded, re-recorded, and re-staged throughout Western history.

Moses and Aron blend in and out of whiteness, and so, importantly, does the chorus, the People. Sometimes you actually have to squint to see them while listening to Schoenberg's difficult music. Perhaps in casting Moses and Aron against whiteness, Castellucci is suggesting the difficulties humans face when tangling with a pure idea. Or is he only evoking a desert wasteland? Or are these supposed to be ghostly figures of history? No sharply etched answers offer themselves, just Castellucci's visual inducement to wonder: to take seriously the issues opened by the opera. We are somehow urged to engage imponderables—but ironically in white and soon black.

Where the recorder and the Calf's image once were, words are projected at appropriate moments, as the siblings converse and exchange positions on stage: "Brothers," "Land," "Horizon," "Path," "Space." When the People, clad in white, emerge out of whiteness they seem to be struggling to achieve their own image. As they celebrate the Calf in the second act, in which Castellucci perhaps tries to do too much, they descend into spiritual grunge by literally going into a rectangular black liquid bath that might be mistaken for a heavy-water pool in a nuclear plant. Black muck is also poured on the Calf and Aron, who, during the raucous dance, wears a calf's head. He is also wound up, trapped in that black recording tape.

The backdrop at the opera's end, however, is not simply white and black; a mountain emerges, not one that would rise above a desert but a beautiful snow-covered peak, perhaps like those in the Alps that Schoenberg might have seen not far from Mattsee. Moses re-emerges with two shofars that he throws down in anger. It is unclear (at least to me) if these horns were supposed to have come from the Golden Calf (or ox), or if they were meant to suggest the "horns" atop Michelangelo's Moses. Or, since shofar blasts heralded the revelation at Sinai, perhaps Moses's action was meant to mirror the breaking of the tablets. In any case, Castellucci's arresting, truly staggering visual imagination seems here to miss the concentrated verbal power of Aron's rejoinder to Moses, that the Tables of the Law are also images. Both the Berlin and the Paris productions thus had difficulties penetrating this vital instant. Castellucci's Moses throws a bucket of water on sludge-covered Aron. The point is obvious, but Schoenberg's philosophical insight was more bracing: Moses cannot clean up or deny the problem of representation.

Castellucci concludes with an ironic but extraordinary visual synopsis of the opera's themes. As Moses, apparently defeated, declaims his wordlessness, the mountain transforms from a realistic image into its own white outline—its Idea—against starry heavens. (In German "Schoenberg" means "beautiful mountain.")

A story, perhaps apocryphal, tells of an Austro-Hungarian officer who, during World War I, recognized the name of a new conscript. Was he the "controversial composer"? "Well sir," replied Schoenberg, "it's like this: Somebody had to be, and nobody else wanted to, so I took on the job myself." Could he say that today? Why Schoenberg and his *Moses und Aron* now? For all their divergences, the two productions made Schoenberg's motifs compelling for today's uneasy West. Both the Berlin and the Paris productions conjured up the political and spiritual danger of images, the difficulty of ideas, the arguable meanings of law, and the power of religion. And then, of course, there is the Jewish Question.

Schoenberg's originality, his quest for keyless art, emerged in a politically and culturally dangerous discordant era. Europe today is not reliving the first decades of the 20th century. But then and now, old concepts have become uncertain. Sometimes art distills, and sometimes it anticipates. Schoenberg did not just show up for the job. Things sound edgy again in Europe.

Mitchell Cohen is professor of political science at Baruch College and The Graduate Center of CUNY and editor emeritus of Dissent. *He is writing a political biography of Richard Wagner.*

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,



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.)*

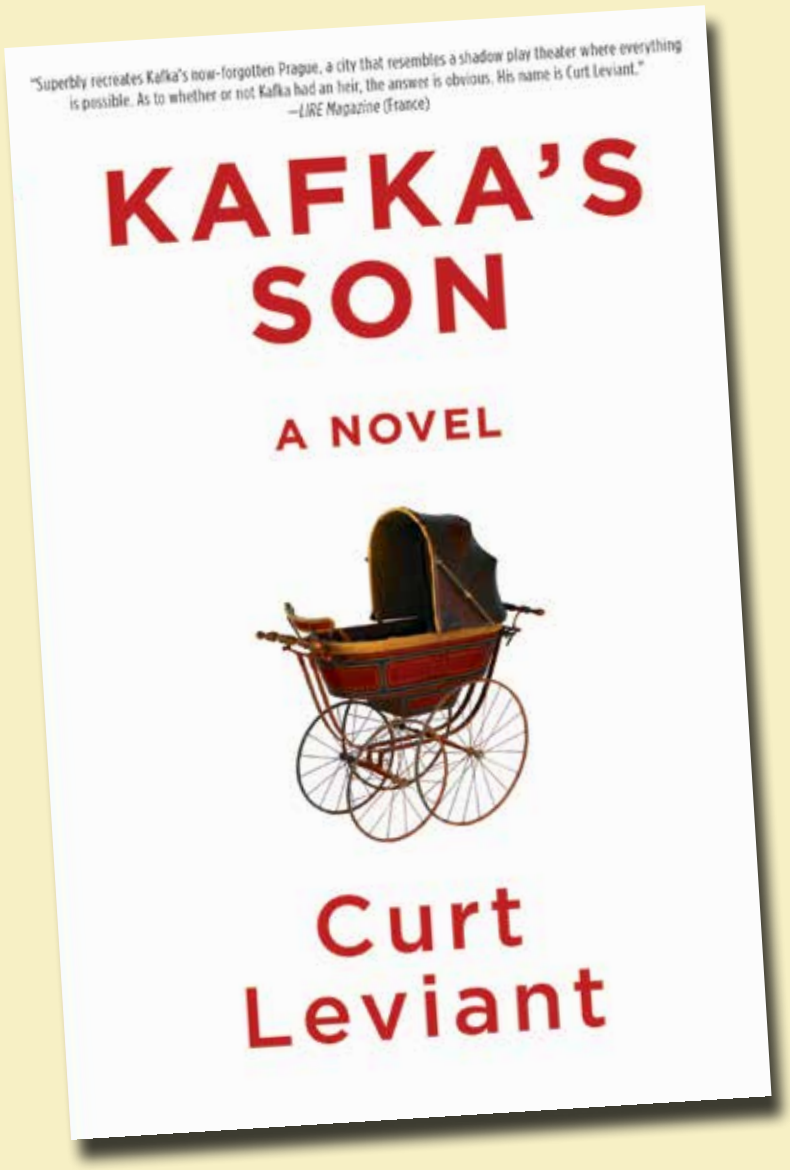
That begins: "Father bought."
It was a breezy spring day, sunny and nice,
And girls laughed with a wink in their eyes.
And both father and kid entered the song,
Waiting their turn, waiting there long.

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



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Halakha and State: An Exchange

Entanglement

BY DAVID ELLENSON

Rabbi Elli Fischer's article "Why I Defy the Israeli Chief Rabbinate" (Winter 2016) provides us not only with an erudite and concise discussion of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate and the problematic ways in which it exercises its power, but with evidence of its author's courage. I applaud Fischer for daring to officiate at marriages not sanctioned by the Chief Rabbinate, and admire the skill with which he deploys talmudic knowledge in arguing for curtailing the power of this institution.

Fischer writes as an Orthodox rabbi completely committed to halakha. I write as a Reform rabbi who has great admiration for Jewish law but does not share his absolute commitment to it. In fact, I had the opportunity to conduct a wedding in Israel last year outside the strictures of halakha. The bride was a young woman who had completed a two-year state-sanctioned Orthodox course of study and converted to Judaism in Israel. She then fell in love with a secular Israeli. While her halakhic status as a Jew was not in doubt, she was prohibited from marrying the groom because he was of priestly lineage, and, as a *kohen*, he was forbidden by traditional Jewish law from marrying a female convert (*giyoret*).

This prohibition is based on two biblical passages: Leviticus 21:7, which says that a *kohen* may not marry a "harlot," and Ezekiel 44:22, which holds that a priest must marry "only a virgin." A talmudic passage (Yevamot 61b) casts aspersions on the sexual morality of the Gentile nations and asserts that all Gentile women are presumed to fall under the legal category of "harlot." Rabbinic law therefore defines every female convert as a "harlot." Consequently, Maimonides, in *Hilchot Issurei Bi'ah* (Laws of Forbidden Intercourse) 18:1, and the other classic halakhic authorities forbid a *kohen* from marrying a *giyoret*. Since the only legal Jewish marriages in Israel are Orthodox ones, the couple in question turned to me.

I personally find the entire halakhic category that defines a female proselyte as a "harlot" morally objectionable, insulting, and obsolete. I was happy and proud to perform the wedding and sorry only that in the State of Israel it had no legal force. I wonder whether Fischer would apply his *drasha* on the Talmud's discussion of the Sanhedrin's self-imposed exile (Avoda Zara 8b) to such cases.

Fischer briefly mentions Chief Rabbi Goren's famous decision in 1972 removing the halakhic stigma of *mamzeirut* (illegitimacy) from two young soldiers, Hanokh and Miriam Langer, thereby enabling them to marry other Jews. To achieve this result, Goren had to invalidate their mother's first marriage in Poland to Abraham Borokovsky, a convert who was thought to have died in the Holocaust before turning up in Israel in the 1950s. Goren was under tremendous pressure to do so. Golda Meir threatened to resign as prime minister if a solution permitting the Langers to marry could not be found. A bill was even introduced into the Knesset to establish civil marriage in Israel, which would have allowed them to marry without rabbinic sanction.

Goren professed grave concern for Hanokh and Miriam and lamented "the bitterness of their fate." He was also, no doubt, fearful of a loss of power on the part of the Israeli Orthodox rabbinic establishment. He convened a secret rabbinic court, whose members are unknown to this day, that retroactively annulled Borokovsky's conversion, partly on the grounds that he was not an observant Jew. Since Mrs. Langer's original marriage had been to a "Gentile," someone to whom she could not be halakhically married at all, her second marriage was no longer defined as "adulterous," and her children were no longer unmarriagable *mamzeirim*.

Rabbi Goren's compassion and the "solution" he found earned him the approbation of the secular Israeli public. In the joy of the moment, it was overlooked that the chief rabbi of Israel had set a virtually unprecedented standard for conversion. If a convert's Jewishness could be revoked on account of his failure to fully observe Jewish law after his conversion, almost no conversion could ever be defined as fully irreversible. One need only look at the relatively recent ruling Rabbi Sherman issued concerning the illegality of conversions conducted under the authority of Rabbi Haim Druckman to have a sense of the Pandora's box Goren's decision opened.

I have no problem with those who wish to defend and live by traditional halakhic categories such as the prohibition against a *kohen* marrying a *giyoret* or the prohibition against a *mamzer* marrying almost any other Jew. That is their choice, and despite my feelings that such laws run completely counter to what my late teacher and colleague Israeli Reform Rabbi Moshe Zemer of Tel Aviv labelled a "sane and humane halakha," it is the right of those who wish to abide by such strictures to do so. I resent bitterly, however, the fact that the State of Israel favors Orthodox interpretations of Jewish law and their rulings over mine and those of other rabbis of different movements that are equally legitimate. What is worst of all is that it also enforces them through the power of the state.

The entanglement of Jewish law with politics in the Jewish state has, as Fischer argues, resulted in a coercive, bloated Rabbanut whose excesses and power over matters of personal status and sometimes even kashrut are resented by an overwhelming majority of Jews in both Israel and the diaspora. Chief rabbis such as Kook, Herzog, Uziel, and Unterman were, and remain, great figures. Today's Rabbanut, however, is a stain upon the State of Israel and an impediment to the unity of the Jewish people.

In my opinion, Fischer's semi-disestablishmentarian solution does not go far enough, since he still seems to envision state-sanctioned Orthodox rabbis making decisions about the lives of non-Orthodox Israelis, but it would be a start. Unfortunately, I have no hope that there will be any significant change given the current political forces in the Knesset that are arrayed against it.

David Ellenson is currently director of the Schusterman Center for Israel Studies at Brandeis University. He served as president of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion from 2000 to 2013.

Experiencing the Rabbanut

BY NETTY C. GROSS-HOROWITZ

Rabbi Elli Fischer, a Modern Orthodox rabbi, should be applauded for his brave efforts to make Israel more pluralistic. Like many Israelis, however, he seems to get one fact muddled: Even if a heterosexual Israeli Jewish couple has a civil marriage in Cyprus, for example, and doesn't bother to register the marriage, they still will need a halakhic *get* to be divorced in Israel and thus are still under the jurisdiction of the Rabbanut. I have interviewed one such woman and undoubtedly there are more. In fact, halakhic divorce following a civil marriage has been a long-debated subject.

Fischer cogently reviews pivotal moments in the Rabbanut's climb to power and its entanglement with the State of Israel, and he shows many, though by no means all, of the ways in which things have gone wrong, analyzes why it has soured, and why he no longer supports it. In the 15 years that I have covered this issue, chiefly with regard to marriage and divorce, some things have changed for the better. The Rabbanut, for example, no longer publicly posts the offenses of the divorcing parties. (It was on a wall of Rabbanut postings that I first saw the word *moredet,* "rebellious woman.") However, when I went through my own divorce in 2009, I realized how little had really changed. The Jerusalem office was dilapidated and scruffy. I was judged (and that is how it felt) by three elderly men in black caftans, one of whom slept through the proceedings. Although I do not generally cover my hair, my lawyer insisted I wear a head covering. A man who looked like a *shames* (beadle) from the Old Country ran up and down the halls screaming out names. A sense of chaos reigned. I felt like I was in Poland in the 19th century or my father's *shtiebel*. And since my *get* did not come easily, I was there often. If there is something missing from Fischer's analysis, it is an explicit appreciation for what such experiences mean to the women who undergo them. Divorcing Israeli Jews (those with vengeful or recalcitrant spouses) have had to accede to extraordinary demands to obtain a *get*. In another context the demands could be called extortion. The

aggrieved, for example, have been asked to agree to uneven divisions of marital assets or give in to outrageous custodial arrangements. If they don't, they are told they are "chaining themselves."

Here is where Fischer is indubitably, deeply correct: It's not that the individual religious court judges are necessarily any worse than those in the civil courts, it's the system that is sick. As Fischer largely argues, rabbinic power belongs in civil society, exercised in the communities that accept it. I say "largely," because it is not quite clear to me how far Fischer wants to go in disempowering the Rabbanut. It seems clear to me that there has to be a normal civil marriage option in Israel alongside a religious one (as there is in every Catholic country save the Philippines), as well as a quick way to end halakhic marriages that have gone awry.

Meanwhile, couples who are secular, gay, or simply not Orthodox are increasingly choosing to cement their unions through lawyers or jointly held mortgages, while having non-Orthodox ceremonies to allow their families and friends to dress up, dance, and celebrate at a Jewish wedding. And there is always Cyprus. If this continues, will the Rabbanut become so irrelevant that it eventually withers away? Perhaps. Then again, Fischer and I are, quite possibly, mere dreamers. The ultra-Orthodox who now control the Rabbanut are exceedingly unlikely to, in Fischer's terms, "go into exile" voluntarily, and they are too politically strong to be forced into doing so anytime in the foreseeable future.

Netty C. Gross-Horowitz is, with Susan M. Weiss, the author of Marriage and Divorce in the Jewish State: Israel's Civil War *(Brandeis University Press).*

A Historical Anomaly

BY ALEXANDER KAYE

Supporters of the Chief Rabbinate often claim that its monopoly on marriage is all that stands in the way of the dissolution of the Jewish people into factions that will not marry each other. But a dubious, arguably failed attempt at social engineering is a weak justification for restricting religious freedom. A separation of religion and state on the American model is not appropriate for Israel. But it should be noted that several European states, which have a mild establishment of religion while fully allowing for free expression, offer viable paradigms.

Those apprehensive about the weakening or even abolition of the Chief Rabbinate might do well to look closely at its history. Rabbi Fischer describes being called a maverick who is challenging a long-established fixture of Jewish life. The irony is that the current structure of the Chief Rabbinate, despite its ostensible religious conservatism, is in fact a relatively recent innovation whose impetus came from British imperial rule. In fact, the Israeli Chief Rabbinate has no real precedent in Jewish history.

It is true that under the Ottomans religious communities governed themselves in matters of personal law. But neither the *Hakham Bashi* under Ottoman rule—nor, for that matter, the chief rabbis of other Jewish communities—ever held the functions or the power of the Chief Rabbinate, which was established, at the insistence of the British, in 1921. The British desire for a Chief Rabbinate was part of the usual practice of colonial rule. The British had neither the desire nor the capacity to rule their colonial subjects by English law. Typically, the various communities under British control governed themselves by their own rules. The British did require, however, that these rules conform to what the British considered to be proper legal procedure. They needed to have an appeals process, a formal procedure for registering judges, published statutes, and so on.

The British desire for a Chief Rabbinate was part of the usual practice of colonial rule.

British rule in Palestine was no different. The British pushed for the establishment of the Chief Rabbinate in Palestine, so that legal authority, which had previously been a local or regional affair, was re-ordered into a single hierarchy. It was also under British pressure that a formal registry of rabbis in Palestine was drawn up for the first time and that the rabbinical court in Jerusalem became a halakhic court of appeal, an institution that has almost no precedent in halakha. This centralization of rabbinical authority met with fierce resistance from non-Jerusalem rabbis at the time and was only grudgingly accepted over a period of decades. Other aspects of the authority of the Chief Rabbinate are newer still. In its early years, the Chief Rabbinate had jurisdiction only over Jewish minors or adults who had voluntarily joined the officially recognized Jewish community. Only in 1953 was its jurisdiction extended over all Jews, whether they recognized the Chief Rabbinate or not.

To be sure, many rabbis saw religious meaning in these developments. At the founding of the Chief Rabbinate, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook spoke about it as a step on the road to redemption. And Fischer is right to observe that many Religious Zionists today see the Chief Rabbinate as an institution, which, whatever its shortcomings, is a powerful symbol of their particular vision of a Jewish state.

History cannot tell us what to do. Nonetheless, there is surely significance in the fact that the Chief Rabbinate in its current form is a recent innovation in Jewish law and an anomaly in Jewish history. Moreover, in its inefficiencies, corruption, and disregard for the rights of religious freedom, the Chief Rabbinate has done tremendous damage to the reputation of traditional Judaism. Although Fischer points to some of the many difficulties that reform of this institution would entail, it seems to me that the onus of justification ought to lie with those who want to retain the system in anything like its present form.

Alexander Kaye is an assistant professor of history and the Saul and Sonia Schottenstein Chair in Israel Studies Designate at The Ohio State University. He is currently writing a book about the political and legal theory of Religious Zionism.



A rabbi reads the* ketuba *(marriage contract) to the bride and groom at an Orthodox Jewish wedding in Jerusalem, 2014. (Photo by Dan Porges/Getty Images.)

The Religion-State Interface

BY KALMAN NEUMAN

Those unfamiliar with Israeli reality sometimes imagine the Chief Rabbinate to be at the apex of a hierarchical curia-type system sending its tentacles into all aspects of Israeli life. This is far from being the case. The Chief Rabbinate is one piece of the complex fashion in which the relationship between religion and state in Israel is structured (if that is the word). Therefore, the issue

is not "is the Chief Rabbinate good for the Jews?" but rather how the different points on the religion-state interface should be handled.

In fact, neither the law of the State of Israel, the Israeli public, nor even the Orthodox community regard the chief rabbis as the ultimate religious authorities. Only a small minority within the Religious Zionist community regard the institution as a sign of the spiritual renewal of the Jewish people. Nowhere is this more vividly illustrated than in the story of Yona Metzger, who was Ashkenazi chief rabbi from 2003 to 2013. Metzger is presently awaiting trial for bribery, money laundering, and other offenses, but, as far as I can tell, this has caused no disillusionment in the Israeli religious community. Metzger has long been written off as an insignificant figure, elected (for reasons too complex to explain here) precisely because of his lack of stature, even if his corruption was not yet public knowledge.

The official Rabbanut makes no pretense that halakha governs the Jewish state. Indeed the Rabbanut has no control of many aspects of religion itself in Israel. For example, funding of religious institutions is in the hands of the Ministry for Religious Affairs, the question of public Shabbat observance is generally an issue of local legislation and enforcement, while local rabbinates certify kashrut within their jurisdiction without requiring the approval of the central authority. Even the rabbinical courts are not formally subject to the authority of the Chief Rabbinate, except for the accreditation of potential rabbinical judges (who do not necessarily have to accept its halakhic directives). Of course, if the chief rabbi were a combination of Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, Jonathan Sacks, and Nechama Leibowitz (with perhaps a touch of Pope Francis thrown in), his influence would be considerable. In the meantime, the spiritual leadership of the incumbents has recently been limited to attempts to oust Shlomo Riskin, a rabbinic leader respected across the Jewish world from his position as the rabbi of Efrat, and to denigrate the Minister for Diaspora Affairs for visiting a non-Orthodox American day school. The chief rabbis, meanwhile, took no part in the discussions leading to the recent compromise regarding non-Orthodox prayer at a site at or near the Western Wall.

Those who wish that Israel would adopt a separation of religion and state according to the American (or French) model have no need for a state-accredited rabbinate. Although his rhetoric sometimes suggests it, Fischer is not really suggesting such a strict separation of religion and state for Israel. Undoubtedly, the greatest intrusion of religion on the life of the average Israeli is the one Fischer focuses upon: the law stipulating that marriages and divorces between Jews be recognized only if they are performed in accordance with halakha. Any such law presupposes a central halakhic authority. If Israel were to recognize only civil marriages the Rabbanut would, of course, be rendered superfluous, but, short of that, things get complicated.

One can get a sense of what is at stake even in Fischer's own current practice. Fischer (commendably in my opinion) requires the couples he marries to have a civil marriage outside of Israel so that they will be recognized by Israeli law as married. But Jews who are registered as married can only get divorced through the rabbinical court system, which may—or may not—demand that the couple undergo a halakhic divorce with all the difficulties that may entail. Fischer's act of civil disobedience may have given the newlyweds a marriage ceremony without state interference, but it has not succeeded in freeing the newlyweds from the jurisdiction of the Rabbanut. Indeed, any proposal to reform the present system that recognizes halakhic marriage and requires halakhic divorce in the case of such a marriage would have to establish a qualified institution to determine and regulate halakhic status.

The various grand proposals since 1948 to replace the ill-named religion-state "status quo" with a more coherent arrangement have never gained political traction. When there have been changes, they have always begun informally, "on the ground," as sociologist Guy Ben-Porat points out in his book *Between State and Synagogue: The Secularization of Contemporary Israel.* In this respect Rabbi Fischer's actions may have more effect than his words.

Proposals to redefine the status of Judaism in Israel from the top down may be principled and well-intentioned, but it's hard to see them going anywhere. Even changes regarding which there is wide consensus (such as eliminating the blanket exemption of *haredim* from an educational curriculum that includes high school math and English and then from army service) have proven impossible to implement. There may be piecemeal reform—Tzohar's wedding program has, in fact, been a great success, making a difference in many ordinary Israelis' lives—but more than that is extremely unlikely. (It is, by the way, somewhat imprecise to lay responsibility for the draconian provision of the "Tzohar law," which could, theoretically, place both Fischer and the couples he marries in prison, on the organization for which the law was named. As he no doubt knows, it was slipped in at the last minute of the legislative process by Deputy Minister of Religious Affairs Eli Ben-Dahan.)

The Chief Rabbinate has become (among other things) a source of *haredi* power and patronage. As long as Israeli politics is polarized and *haredi* parties control a significant bloc in the Knesset, the major parties will have every reason to court their support. This means that fundamental reform will probably have to wait until the Israeli table has been cleared of more pressing issues, like determining the borders of the country.

Rabbi Kalman Neuman teaches at the Herzog College in Gush Etzion and holds a PhD in the history of early modern political thought from The Hebrew University.

Semi-disestablishment-arianism: A Defense

BY ELLI FISCHER

As Rabbi Dr. Kalman Neuman noted, much has been written about what the "religion-state interface" ought to look like. The problems with the Rabbanut—here, as in the initial article, I use the term as a proxy for all state-empowered Jewish religious bodies—are well known, not least among religious Israelis. Many solutions have been proposed that seek to implement, whether wholesale or piecemeal, systems similar to those that exist in Western European countries. Yet, due to the realities of Israel's coalition politics, very little has changed, and, as the respondents note, pessimism is warranted.

Virtually all current attempts to fundamentally alter the religion-state interface reinforce the politicization of religion. Assertions that the Rabbanut is increasingly *haredi*, an Orthodox monopoly, or applies unprecedentedly stringent conversion standards may or may not be true, but each charge accepts an "us versus them" dichotomy that perpetuates the problem. In Israel, organizations active in the fight for religious freedom are all associated with the political left, whereas religious Israeli Jews overwhelmingly identify with the right. Thus, attempts to make changes by mobilizing anti-Rabbanut sentiment are viewed with suspicion and deemed anti-religious, often with good reason.

Yet, to my knowledge, there has not been any attempt to explore and nurture alternatives from within a surprisingly heterogeneous Jewish political tradition. For instance, religious separatism and secessionism are in the DNA of Ashkenazi *haredi* movements, which arose in 19th-century Germany and Austria-Hungary. Consider this statement by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the champion of German neo-Orthodoxy:

> By what right and under what law should I therefore be compelled to make financial contributions to a community . . . whose principles and objectives are diametrically opposed to my own? By what right and under what law can such outrageous religious coercion be practiced under the banner of "freedom of religion"?

And consider this statement by Rabbi Eliezer Melamed, one of today's most influential among Religious Zionist rabbis, in favor of alternatives to marriage through the Rabbanut:

> Some may claim that there is a religious duty to oppose and interfere with any type of relationship that fails to abide by halakha . . . [S]uch an obligation existed when there was full public consensus favoring such a lifestyle, . . . [b]ut in a situation like ours, the principle of freedom prevails . . .

Yet not a single organization working for greater religious freedom in Israel has attempted to emphasize these strains of Orthodox thought or to contact Rabbi Melamed to discuss his views, because religious communities, as a whole, are perceived as the "them" that must be opposed. I believe that there is potential for a change in thinking about religion and state *within* religious communities based wholly on widely respected sources. My example from the Talmud is but one small part of the ideological and theological work that must be done before political gains can be made.

I understand Rabbi Ellenson's resentment that "the State of Israel favors Orthodox interpretations of Jewish law and their rulings." This is indeed a fraught

issue. I try to avoid using the term "Orthodox" with regard to Israel and the Rabbanut because Israelis, religious and secular alike, tend to acknowledge a spectrum of religious observance without thinking in terms of distinct religious denominations. They identify what Americans would call "Orthodox" Judaism as simply "religious" ("*dati*") Judaism. Since my primary objective is the elimination of coercive aspects of state religion, I am willing to live with an "Orthodox" Rabbanut that has no coercive power unless someone opts in, allowing those who opt out to practice freely. In such a scenario, non-Orthodox rabbis and movements are likely to be acknowledged de facto. However, it is surpassingly unlikely that the Reform movement will ever be given a status equal to that of "Orthodoxy," unless, that is, a million American Reform Jews make aliyah. I realize that this may not satisfy anti-establishment Madisonians, but Lockean toleration is no mere halfway measure.

Both Neuman and Netty C. Gross-Horowitz correctly note that couples who are married civilly abroad or in a non-Rabbanut halakhic wedding in Israel must divorce through the state rabbinical court system. As such, marrying outside the Rabbanut is largely an act of protest. Nevertheless, some couples are marrying halakhically and registering as common-law spouses. The contracts that outline the financial arrangements of the marriage include clauses that require the couple to arrange a halakhic divorce (with an independent rabbinical court) in the event that the marriage fails—similar to the mechanism used in the Beth Din of America's prenuptial agreement. The jurisdiction of state rabbinical courts over such cases has not yet been tested in Israeli courts.

It should be noted that, of all the areas of entanglement between religion and state in Israel, divorce is the hardest to resolve. The specter of proliferating *mamzeirut* favors continued rabbinic control, but, as Gross-Horowitz's brief reminiscence suggests, the pain caused by the state rabbinical divorce courts is simply enormous. The Gavison-Medan pact found no way out of this dilemma, placing all marriage under a civil regime but leaving divorce under the Rabbanut.

Alexander Kaye argues that the Rabbanut should be abolished and that fears of what might happen as a result of its rapid dissolution are overstated. I agree with him that certain fears are, in fact, warranted here specifically, and I am generally apprehensive about rapid change. I also believe that he (like Neuman) underestimates the degree to which Israelis have internalized the entanglement of state and religion, even if they express displeasure with the Rabbanut. More importantly, Kaye's caution that history is not prescriptive cuts both ways. The Rabbanut may be an anomaly (though it evolved from institutions that predate the British Mandate and has evolved and grown considerably since), but the Jewish State is itself a historical anomaly, one that has never been without a Chief Rabbinate. Thus, while I understand the desire to burn the Rabbanut to the ground, I counsel prudence and invoke the law of unintended consequences.

I wish to thank all of the respondents for their considered words. Clearly the issues are broader than can be covered in an exchange like this—in fact, we have all written extensively on the subject elsewhere. Much remains to be said—and done.

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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, 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, "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 re-membered, 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.)

A startling fresco at the Dura Europos synagogue depicts some 2nd-century Jews looking very surprised to have been reconstituted and revived.

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)



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

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 afterlife 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-bestriding 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 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 Ezekielian 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.

The compound is somewhere between Google headquarters and the secret desert lair of a Bond villain.

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.

Abraham Socher is the editor of the Jewish Review of Books *and professor of religion and Jewish studies at Oberlin College.*

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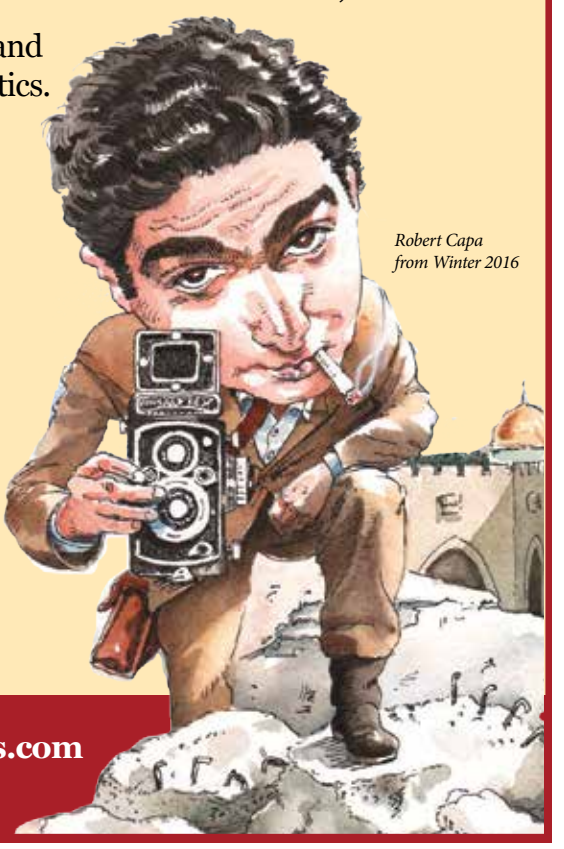
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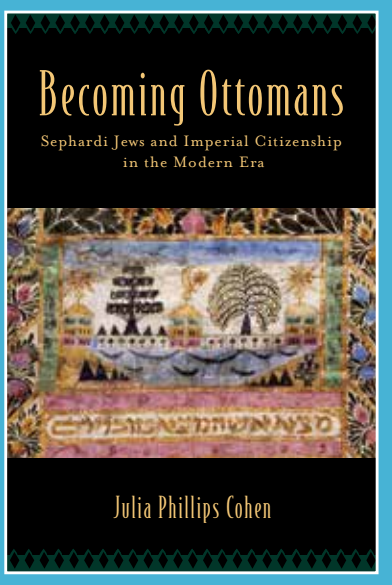
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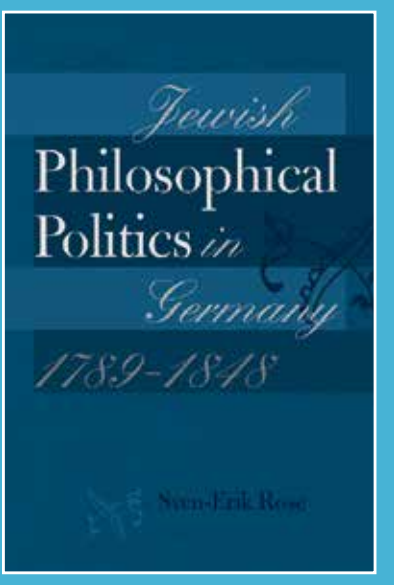
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