Hillel Halkin
Thinking with Amichai: Pinecones & Poems

Ruby Namdar
The Ruined House
(An Exclusive Excerpt)

Sarah Rindner
Dara Horn’s New Novel

Adam Kirsch
White Fire on Black Fire

PLUS
Simon Gordon
Balfour at 100
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Simon Gordon

100 Years of Solicitude: Commemorating Balfour

The controversies over how (and whether) Great Britain should celebrate the recent centenary of the Balfour Declaration were revealing. Anglo-Israel relations have rarely been uncomplicated, but they could soon be much worse.

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READING

Joseph Epstein

Joseph Roth: Grieving for a Lost Empire

Always in flight, one of the world’s permanent transients, Joseph Roth (1894–1939) was a one-man diaspora. A drunk and a fantasist, he was also a marvelous writer whose work was bedizened with metaphor, laced with simile.

THE ARTS

Ruby Namdar

The Ruined House

An exclusive excerpt from the new novel.

Diane Cole

Ink and Blood

Arthur Szyk: Soldier in Art curated by Debra Schmidt Bach • Arthur Szyk: Soldier in Art edited by Irvin Ungar

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LAST WORD

Jake Marmer

Babel's Transcendent Mistakes

On the cover: Pinecones and Poems by Mark Anderson.
Inky Seas Elsewhere

After reading Sarah Ründner's excellent review of Ilana Kurshan's new memoir, *If All the Seas Were Ink* ("Swimming in an Inky Sea," Fall 2017), I was reminded of the Qur'an's use of the same simile:

> Were the sea ink for the words of my Lord, the sea would surely fail before the words of my Lord fail. (Sura 18, verse 109)

Were the trees that are in the earth pens, were the sea ink with seven more seas to swell its tide, the words of God would not be spent. (Sura 31, verse 27)

Whether the conceit appeared in (and for) rabbinic literature first is an interesting question.

Ben Rich
Norwalk, CT

Rome and Jerusalem (and Cardinal Newman)

To seek Michael Solomon Alexander's importance, as the late Elliott Horowitz does in his learned review of Todd Endelman's book on *mishamadim* (apostates) in the Jewish world ("Straying from the Fold?" Fall 2017), is to look for it in the wrong place. That place is the history of Anglicanism and the loss of its great imperial intellect, John Henry Newman, to the Church of Rome. The Jerusalem bishopric scheme of 1841, conceived by Germans and promoted by evangelicals within the Church of England eager to convert Jews in the Holy Land, was to consecrate a bishop who would serve jointly with Lutherans. Newman immediately saw the scheme as allowing "intercommunion with Protestant Prussia and the heresy of the Orientals." It was, or so he was convinced, a declaration of the bankruptcy of Catholic principles within the English church. "Have you heard of this fearful business of the Bishop of Jerusalem?" he wrote to a friend in 1841. "It seems we are in the way to fraternize with Protestants of all sorts, Monophysites, half-converted Jews and even Druses. If any such event should take place, I shall not be able to keep a single man from Rome." In fact, it brought Newman himself to his "deathbed as regards my membership with the Anglican Church," where he lay until he left in 1845 for Rome.

Edward Alexander
Professor emeritus, University of Washington

Singer and Rabbi Dessler (and an fMRI Study)

Professor Socher wonders ("Is Repentance Possible?," Fall 2017) whether repentance is possible for those with *akrasia* (weakness of the will). Will is compounded of evolved genetic inclinations (alluded to by Rambam in the eighth Chapter of his *Eight Chapters*), environmental influences, and previous choices. Despite these constraints, Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler maintained that a person retains a *nekedut ha-bechira*, a tiny province of free will, at which moral struggle takes place. (Michtav me-Eliyahu, Vol. 1) Isaac Bashevis Singer described this process beautifully in his story "The Fast":

> Since Roise Genedvel, daughter of the Bilzer rebbe, had left Itche Nokhum, he had discovered that a man can curb every desire. There is something in the heart that lurs, but one can thumb his nose at it. It wants to think carnal thoughts, but one compels it to pore over the Holy Book. It tempts one into longings and imaginings, but just to thwart it one recites the Psalms. In the morning it wants to sleep till nine, but one awakens it at daybreak. What this enemy within hates most of all is a cold ritual bath. But there is a little spot in the brain that has the final word, and when it commands the feet to go, they go, be the water cold as ice. In time opposing this lurking creature becomes a habit. One bends it, gags it, or else one lets it babble on without answering.

The *nekedut ha-bechira* of Rav Dessler and Singer's description of Itche Nokhum's ability to overcome akarsia are borne out by a 2001 functional MRI study. Ten young adult male volunteers were presented with erotic pictures while their brain activation was measured. As expected, viewing the pictures was associated with brain activation in limbic areas known to be associated with emotion. When the subjects attempted to inhibit their sexual arousal, other areas of the brain were activated. The authors conclude that "humans have the capacity to influence the electrochemical dynamics of their brains by voluntarily changing the nature of the mind processes unfolding in the psychologic space."

The role of halakha (Jewish law) is to provide us with "oughts" so as to strengthen our evolved tendencies to moral behavior. When we fail, when we have weakness of the will, the rabbinic tradition assigns us diminished culpability for what Rabbi Basil Herring has called "choice diminished behavior." Nevertheless, we're all capable of at least some degree of repentance.

Joel Y. Rutman, MD
Zikhron Yaakov, Israel

Abraham Socher Responds:

I thank Dr. Rutman for his learned note, especially the passage from the Singer story, which I will go read. I am less certain than he is that brain science can teach us very much new about moral psychology—our differences here are no doubt professional and therefore more and more able to enter into a fully reciprocal relationship with any other, including a parent, which is, of course, how the child experiences it. Whether that's where Levinas went in his essay. I greatly appreciate your kind words about my own.

Remembrance Day

In his introduction to a recovered radio sermon by Emil Fackenheim ("Power and the Voice of Conscience: A Lost Radio Talk," Fall 2017), Michael Morgan discusses an earlier sermon, "The Psychology of the Drum," which was given, he tells us, on November 11, 1945. This was the first post–World War II anniversary of the end of World War I, a day that used to be called Armistice Day and now is called Remembrance Day in Canada. Fackenheim must have given it on that occasion.

Daniel Nussbaum II, MD, FAAP
Rochester, NY

CORRECTIONS

In "Power and the Voice of Conscience" (Fall 2017), Yossi Fackenheim was identified as Emil Fackenheim’s grandson. He is his son.

In "Homer of Lod" (Spring 2017) some lines of an Erez Bitton poem were attributed to "Song of Pursuit on Dizengoff," they are from “Summary of a Conversation (“Taktzir sicha”).
A Complex Network of Pipes

BY HILLEL HALKIN

The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai
edited by Robert Alter
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 576 pp., $18

While browsing in Yehuda Amichai’s collected Hebrew verse in preparation for writing this review, I came across a poem, previously unknown to me, that stirred a pang of memory. Since it isn’t one of the hundreds of poems included in The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai by its editor Robert Alter, I’ll translate it here:

On the day my daughter was born no one died.
Over the entrance to the hospital it said:
“Priests may visit today.”
It was the longest day of the year.
In my joy
I drove with a friend to the hills at Sha’ar ha-Gai.

We saw a pine tree, sick and bare but full of cones.
Tsvi said a tree about to die produced more cones than one assured of living. I said to him, “You’ve just produced a poem without knowing it. Man of exact science though you are, that was a poem.” He answered me, “And you, though you may be a man of dreams, have just produced a baby girl equipped with every last, exact appurtenance that’s needed for a life.”

My memory was of the many hikes I, too, took with Tsvi Sachs, who was my friend as he was Amichai’s and whose family and mine were close in those years. (Amichai’s daughter Emanuella was born in the late 1970s.) Tsvi was a professor of botany at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and a renowned figure in his field. It was always an education to be with him in nature. A few months ago, unable to attend a memorial lecture in his honor, I wrote his widow Laura: “To this day, I sometimes find myself looking at a plant, asking myself why it’s growing like he could. ”

I suppose the hospital was Bikur Cholim. An institution bordering on Jerusalem’s most heavily religious neighborhoods, it would have taken the trouble to inform kohanim, members of the priestly caste forbidden by Jewish law to be in the vicinity of a corpse, that they were free to enter on that June 21 when Amichai drove with Tsvi Sachs to Sha’ar ha-Gai. “The Gate of the Ravine,” where the Judean lowlands meet the Jerusalem hills. There’s a lovely humor in the poem’s switch of roles, its scientist speaking like a poet and its poet fathering a work of scientific perfection. But in fact, I imagine that the scientist was speaking like a scientist. All Tsvi probably meant to say was that the tree’s imminent death triggered the release of plant hormones that maximized its reproductive forces in a last effort to propagate itself. It took a poet to see a poem in this. And that, when one thinks of Yehuda Amichai, is a large part of his greatness. The man saw poetry and, conversely, a passage of prose can have many. Poetry differs from prose because of its sound: meter, rhythm, rhyme, echo, alliteration. Prose can have some of these things, too, but it ceases to be prose when they are heightened to a certain level, just as a walk speeded up to a certain point becomes a run. It’s a matter of music.

Amichai’s poetry has its music, but it is for the most part background music. He abandoned the occasional use of rhyme, regular meter, and driving rhythms early in his career, after which his lines took on a conversational tone devoid of special sound effects. I can’t think of another major poet of our or any other age whose poetry depends so much—at times, it would seem, almost exclusively—on figurative language.

Take—I’m still browsing—his poem “I Am Invited to Life,” translated by Alter:

I am invited to life. But
I see that my hosts show signs of fatigue and impatience.

Trees sway, clouds fall ever more silent. Mountains move from place to place, the heavens gape. And in the nights, winds move around objects uneasily, smoke, people, lights.

I sign the guestbook of God: I was, I lingered, it was good, I enjoyed, I was guilty, I betrayed, I was impressed by the reception in this world.

This is a poem that playfully hinges on the metaphor of life as the giver of a reception or cocktail party by whose end the poet has bored the other guests, the elements of nature, to distraction. They sway with too much to drink, yawn (the literal meaning of m’lahakim, translated by Alter as “gape”), moodily withdraw, wander aimlessly around the room, even take to moving around its furniture. And yet the poet has had a good time. He is impressed by the grand affair the world has staged for him, even though the world has not been in the least impressed by him.

Alter’s translation is fluent. It isn’t its fault that it can’t reproduce the levity of the internal rhyme in “I was, I lingered” (haYit, shulat) or fully convey the religious allusions in “I was guilty, I betrayed” (ashamti, bagadeti) and “in this world” (ba-olam ha-zeh)—

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the first of these alludes to the confessional in the Yom Kippur prayer that begins *ashamnu, bagadnu*, “we have been guilty, we have betrayed,” the second to the rabbinic contrast of “this world” (ha-olam ha-zeh) with “the next world” (ha-olam ha-ba). If one wished to press a point, one might invoke the well-known saying in *Ethics of the Fathers*, “This world is like a parlor before the world to come; prepare yourself in the parlor that you may enter the banquet hall.” The cocktails will be followed by a formal dinner in another room—but to that, it seems, the poet is too nonchalant about his life and its gifts to have been invited.

Amichai was a deeply Jewish poet. His Orthodoxy education and upbringing in Germany before emigrating with his family to Palestine at the age of 12 in 1936 (he died in Jerusalem in the year 2000) left their permanent mark on him, though his adult life was lived as a non-observant Jew in secular Israeli society. This society regarded him as its own quintessential expression. He lived and wrote about its wars and tragic conflicts; he shared its appetite for life and its love of its land; his irreverent humor struck a chord in it. And yet he also had an ironic detachment from it, a distance that came partly from being steeped in a Jewish tradition that was foreign to it. He knew, as it didn’t, what had been lost. He had a yearning for the sacred whose pieties and pretensions he liked to tease. “What kind of man are you?” people ask me,” begins a five-stanza poem of his translated by Chana Bloch. And he replies:

I am a man with a complex network of pipes in my soul, sophisticated machineries of emotion and a precisely-monitored memory system of the late twentieth century, but with an old body from ancient days and a God more obsolete even than my body.

This stanza, too, is controlled by an extended metaphor. But what has suggested it? And why, after the second stanza further explores the idea of "an old body from ancient days" (“I am a man for the surface of the earth. / Deep places, pits and holes in the ground / make me nervous. Tall buildings / and mountaintops terrify me”), does the third stanza switch to an entirely new set of images?

I am not like a piercing fork nor a cutting knife nor a scooping spoon nor a flat, why spatula that sneaks in from underneath. At most I’m a heavy and clumsy pestle that mashes good and evil together for the sake of a little flavor, a little fragrance.

“Guideposts don’t tell me where to go,” continues the first line of the fourth stanza in Bloch’s translation. Actually, “arrows,” the literal meaning of *chitzim*, the word used by Amichai, would have been, as we shall see, better. The rest of this stanza and the last one read:

I conduct my business quietly, diligently, as if carrying out a long will that began to be written the moment I was born.

Now I am standing on the sidewalk, weary, leaning on a parking meter.

I stand here free, for my own man. I’m not a car. I’m a human being, a man-god, a god-man, whose days are numbered. Hallelujah.

And only now, having reached the poem’s end, can we reconstruct its chain of associations. These start with the parking meter. Stopping to rest against it in a Jerusalem street, the poet has thought to his amusement, “If I were a car I’d have to pay for this—but I’m not.” This causes him to ask, more seriously, just what the difference between a human being and a machine is and to come to the first stanza’s paradoxical conclusion that even if the mind or “soul” can be analyzed in mechanical terms as a technologically advanced arrangement of neurons and synapses, the more primitive body remains a spiritual organism in need of God. It is in the poet’s body—described as conservatively earth-hugging in stanza two and as the transmitter of ancestral imperatives in stanza four—that his humanity most resides.

But why the shift of imagery in stanza three? Here, I suggest, the associational chain starts with "arrows." The street the poet is standing in has signs, whether to indicate that it is one-way or to designate turning lanes at a traffic light, and these cause him to think in the first line of the fourth stanza: “And because I am a human being, I will not let myself be directed like a car in traffic.” But arrows not only direct. They also pierce, and the next association, taking us back to the third stanza, is with other piercing objects like knives and forks. The thought of these leads to the thought of kitchen utensils in general and from there to the whimsical question: “If I were a kitchen utensil, what kind of kitchen utensil would I be?” To which the answer is: not the kind that neatly divides things up or separates them out into categories that form the basis for hard-and-fast judgments, but the kind that nonjudgmentally preserves their unity, which is more confusing but far richer than anything considered separate from or in opposition to everything else.

And all this looping back and forth of ideas and images, culminating in the fifth stanza’s celebration of the ultimate, although perhaps doomed, unity of the human and divine (for the poem’s ambiguous last line makes us ask just whose days are numbered, the poet’s alone or all humanity’s), has originated in a chance encounter with a parking meter! Thought leads to thought, metaphor to metaphor. And it leads us to the thought that metaphor, though not a necessary condition for poetry, can sometimes be its main attribute.

For what, broadly speaking, is a metaphor, called by Amichai in an interview with the Israeli American literary critic Chana Kronfeld (as cited in her recently published *The Full Severity of Compassion: The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*), “the greatest invention of mankind, more than the wheel and the computer”? It is a link between distant phenomena, just as a rhyme is a link between distant words and a metric foot a link between distant lines. Seemingly unrelated items are brought into contact; discrete objects or ideas are set side by side. Each time Amichai says something like, “Like a newspaper clingling to a fence in a blowing wind, / so my soul clings to me. / If the winds stop, / my soul will fall” (from “A Great War Is Being Fought,” translated by Kronfeld); or “Like an old windmill, / two hands always raised to shout to the sky / and two lowered to prepare sandwiches” (“To the Mother,” Robert Alter); or “The echo of a great love is like / the echo of a huge dog’s barking / in an empty Jerusalem house / marked for demolition” (“71” from *Time*, Ted Hughes); or “Like a knife peeling a round fruit, I sense / the motion of time round and round” (“Herodion,” Leon Wieseltier), he heightens our awareness of the potential interconnectedness of all things. Not clumsily like a pestle, but with the precision of a needle, a good metaphor stitches together fragments of the world that have never been joined before.

Metaphors humanize the world, just as did primitive religion when it personified nature and anthropomorphized the gods. They commit the “pathetic fallacy,” scorned by science (although the only pathetic thing about it is not realizing that when John Ruskin coined the phrase, he was using “pathetic” to mean “feeling-full,” not “pitiful”), of filling the world with human thoughts and emotions. There is a passage toward the end of Amichai’s great early poem “The Elegy for the Lost Child” that is also not in Alter’s anthology. In it, the search for a small boy who has gone missing in the Israeli countryside is juxtaposed with a love affair. (Love and death were Amichai’s two great themes.) A man and a woman are in bed in their attic room:

Last winter’s rains lived on even in summer. The trees spoke loudly in earthy sleep. Tin voices rang in the stirring wind. We lay together. I rose to go. The eyes of the woman I loved were wide-open with fear. She propped herself up in the bed on her elbows. The sheet was the white of Judgment Day and she wouldn’t remain in the building alone and left for the world that began with the stairs by the door. But the child remained and began to resemble the mountains and winds and trunks of the olive trees. As in a family likeness: the face of the youth who fell in the Negev recurs in the face of the cousin born in New York. A mountain the Arava broke in two appears in the broken look of a friend.
It was in the Negev, whose Arava Valley is part of the Syro-African Rift, that Amichai fought as an infantry soldier in Israel's 1948 War of Independence. Perhaps the friend is the parent of a boy killed in battle. It is the dry Israeli summer, not long before Yom Kippur (on which it is customary to wear white), though the roots of the trees still drink old rainwater. The wind ripples in the trees and rattles the tin roof over the attic. The poet rises from love's bed to join the search party for the child. The young woman is frightened. But the child, found dead at the poem's end, is with the elements amid which it came to grief.

One thinks of Dylan Thomas's "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London" and its vow to "not murder / The mankind of her going / With any further / Elegy of innocence and youth." Amichai, who once journeyed to visit Thomas's grave in Wales and wrote about it, surely knew the poem; the word for "elegy" in his title is the loan word elega. His own poem does not refuse to mourn. What it refuses to do is turn its child into a symbol. "London's daughter / robed in the long friends, / The grains beyond age, the dark veins of her mother" is made to stand for us all.

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A joy to suit their laughter? At a child's death? Of course not. But the searchers who have told the media, or curious bystanders, that it was still light out when they reached the place where they later, in darkness, found the child's body (perhaps "clean and neatly combed" because it has died in a sudden accident, so that it seems "licked by the tongues of God and the night")—the searchers who have searched not only for the child but also, unknowingly, for something in themselves—these searchers will, like the rest of us, go on living their lives looking for the right outward correlatives—the right metaphors, if you will—for their inner states of being. And how hard it is to find them when "not everything suits everything" and even a pair of hands can be attached to the wrong body!

The lost child's death, despite its tantalizing intimation of bearing some message, some light in the darkness, stands for nothing; after the first death, there is every other. The "family likeness" of metaphor is relationship, not identity. Kronfeld, in discussing Amichai's use of metaphor, speaks of its "living on the hyphen" in the sense of "never erasing[ing] the disparate domains that it brings together, even while it strives to make the transient, limited space in between them as existentially meaningful as it can possibly be." This is a good point. (There are many good points in Kronfeld's book, which are unfortunately blunted by her frequent resort to the dulling discourse of academic literary theory.)

It is up to Amichai's readers to enter this "in between" and explore its possibilities. The motion of time may be infinitely circular, but it is also cruelly finite, because the knife in "Herodion" will soon have finished peeling the fruit that will then be eaten. The word for soul in "A Great War Is Being Fought," Kronfeld points out, is nefesh, while the Hebrew word for wind, ruach, also means spirit, so that in terms of medieval Jewish philosophy's tripartite division of the soul into nefesh, neshama, and ruach, the biological soul, the emotional soul, and the mental-spiritual soul, the newspaper-nefesh, the life force clinging to the body, is kept there only by the pressure of the spirit. The apparent simplicity of Amichai's metaphors can be deceptive.

Because its music is so muted, Amichai's poetry is relatively easy to translate. There is no disrespect for the gifted translators in The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai (besides those already mentioned, these include Glenda Abramson, Assia Gutmann, Barbara and Benjamin Harshaw, Stephen Mitchell, Ruth Nevo, Tudor Parfitt, and Harold Schimmel) in saying that the challenges that faced them were on the whole fewer than those presented by other prominent modern poets. "On the whole," however, does not mean always. Preserving the natural flow of the verse while finding the best equivalent for a Hebrew word or phrase that has no exact counterpart in English, conveying a facet of Israeli life or society immediately recognizable to the Hebrew but not the English reader, coping with Amichai's often veiled allusions to Jewish tradition—all these things pose problems. Nor can one solve them, as one often can in translating prose, by smuggling explanations into the text, since the tightness of good poetry rarely allows for such stretching. In dealing with these difficulties, the translations in Alter's volume, most of them previously published, have done their job well without attempting to do the impossible. They read smoothly and hardly ever make one wince by going off-key or stepping on a poem's toes. Although the English Amichai of this volume may not in every case be as fully nuanced as the Hebrew one, he is an accurate enough facsimile. Alter has chosen wisely and seen to it that English readers have gotten the real thing.

Amichai was a prolific poet. It is impressive how high a percentage of his poems are very good ones—considerably higher, I would say, than among most poets of stature. And a poet of stature he is. He ranks with the major Hebrew poets of antiquity such as Yosi ben Yosi and Hakalir, with such medieval greats as Halevi and Hanagid (whom he particularly admired; "On the Day My Daughter Was Born" has a distinctly Hanagidish flavor), with the best the 20th century can boast of. It is fitting that he and Bialik should have opened and closed this century in the Jewish Tradition (Princeton University Press).
We are proud of our pioneering role in the creation of the State of Israel. We are proud to stand here today together with Prime Minister Netanyahu and declare our support for Israel. And we are proud of the relationship we have built with Israel.” So British Prime Minister Theresa May assured guests at the Balfour centenary dinner, hosted by the current Lords Balfour and Rothschild. Indeed, her November 2017 speech contained much to cheer the predominantly Jewish, and Zionist, audience. She advertised the growing economic links between Britain and Israel, stated her commitment to Israel’s security, condemned efforts to delegitimize Israel, and spoke about the new Holocaust memorial under construction alongside the Houses of Parliament. So far, so crowd-pleasing.

But Britain’s relationship to Israel, and to her own history in the Middle East, is rarely that comfortable. Despite rejecting the Palestinian Authority’s demand for Britain to apologize for the Balfour Declaration, May was at pains to emphasize that there was still “unfinished business,” since Balfour’s “fundamental vision of peaceful co-existence has not yet been fulfilled.” As has become customary in any British government statement relating to Israel, the prime minister reiterated her dedication to a two-state solution and her opposition to the construction of settlements beyond the Green Line. In his statement on the Balfour centenary to the House of Commons, Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson also spoke of “unfinished business.” Evidently, the official line was to celebrate the declaration, but not without qualification.

Speaking in response, Netanyahu was gracious to his hosts, praising May for “keeping Britain on the right side of history.” Yet he did not shy away from challenging Britain’s historical propensity to hedge its bets. Noting Britain’s “painful retreats” from the Balfour Declaration during the Mandate, Netanyahu recalled that it had remained unfinished business for the Jews, too. The real tragedy of the Balfour Declaration, he said, was that its fulfilment came three decades too late for the Jews of Continental Europe: “Some people mistakenly believe that there is an Israel because of the Holocaust. In fact, it’s only because there was no Israel that the Holocaust could occur.”

If Anglo-Zionist relations have not always been easy, they could soon be much worse. The elephant in the room—or rather outside it—was Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the Labour Party, who refused to attend the dinner. A patron of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign who has previously referred to his “friends in Hamas and Hezbollah,” Corbyn is the kind of radical leftist until recently considered anathema to mainstream British politics. But these are unusual times. If his election as leader of the Labour Party in late 2015 surprised pundits, his narrow loss in the 2017 snap elections—during which a 25-point Conservative lead in the polls largely eroded over the space of seven weeks—provoked widespread disbelief in the country at large and disquiet in the Jewish community. Corbyn’s excuse for not attending the Balfour celebration was that he “doesn’t do dinners.”

The official line was to celebrate the Balfour Declaration, but not without qualification.

Yet, in the same week, he found time to attend an evening reception in the House of Commons hosted by Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND), a charity with Islamist connections dubious enough for most other members of Parliament to give the event a wide berth. Labour was represented at the Balfour centenary by its shadow minister and her opposition to the construction of settlements. In his statement on the Balfour centenary, Prime Minister Simon Coveney made clear that “the most important way of marking it is to give the event a wide berth. Labour was represented at the Balfour centenary by its shadow foreign secretary, Emily Thornberry, but she was clear that her attendance should not be understood to imply endorsement. Asked about the centenary in a recent interview, Thornberry replied, “I don’t think we celebrate the Balfour Declaration,” adding that “the most important way of marking it is to recognize Palestine.” Had Labour won in June, there may have been no official celebration.

The recent controversy over the celebration of the Balfour Declaration’s 100th anniversary is a microcosm of Israel’s place in British politics. Indeed, the centenary has fallen at a potential inflection point in Anglo-Israel relations. By British standards, the governments led by Prime Ministers Cameron and May over the past seven years have been particularly sympathetic to Israel. Quickly abandoning the critical-friend posture he had adopted at the start of his premiership (notorious—implementing a “prison camp” during a visit to Turkey in 2010), Cameron emerged as a vocal ally of Israel. During both Operation Pillar of Defense in 2012 and Operation Protective Edge in 2014, Cameron stood firm in his support of Israel’s right to self-defense against rocket attacks from Gaza, defying not merely a well-organized pro-Palestinian lobbying campaign but also Liberal Democrat members of his coalition government.

Ruling alone since 2015, the Conservatives have been emboldened to go further. In February 2016, taking a lead from several American states, the second Cameron administration introduced new guidance to prevent boycotts of Israel by public bodies in procurement contracts (though this has since been partially overturned by the High Court), has continued in the same vein. In December 2016, the United Kingdom became one of the first countries to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s definition of anti-Semitism, which includes “targeting the state of Israel, conceived as a Jewish collective.” In March 2017, the British delegation put the UN Human Rights Council “on notice” over its bias against Israel, warning, “If things do not change, in the future we will adopt a policy of voting against all resolutions concerning Israel’s conduct in the Occupied Syrian and Palestinian Territories.”

But this high-water mark of official British support for Israel still falls short of mainstream positions in American politics. President Obama’s refusal to veto Security Council Resolution 2334, which condemned Israeli settlements including those in East Jerusalem, was widely perceived as a vindication of Palestinian attempts to internationalize the conflict, and a nadir in U.S.-Israel relations. Yet Britain voted for it.

While some reports have attributed Britain’s support for the resolution to a mistake by a junior minister, it was in fact consistent with government policy.

The fear of appearing too close to Israel affects more than British policy on settlements. Less than a week after the Balfour centenary, a diplomatic scandal involving senior Israeli officials precipitated the resignation of Secretary of State for International Development Priti Patel. One of the most outspoken supporters of Israel in the Cabinet, Patel had apparently been meeting Israeli ministers, including Netanyahu, behind the foreign secretary’s back, while formally on vacation. Somewhat furtively, she was flown back from a mission to Africa to be dismissed.

But the official version of events was soon called into question. The Jewish Chronicle, citing sources in Downing Street, reported that Patel’s unofficial...
diplomacy in Israel took place with the consent of the prime minister, who had asked her not to disclose the meetings. The truth of the matter remains unclear. But would a breach of diplomatic protocol involving another country have provoked the same response?

Priti Patel’s exit from the Cabinet reflects the wider weakness of the current government. Shell-shocked by a failed election gamble which cost her party its majority in Parliament, Theresa May has struggled to regain her authority and to resolve internal disagreements over Brexit in the Cabinet. Were the government to fall, and another election to ensue, the polls point to a Labour victory.

A win for Corbyn, the most left-wing Labour leader in more than 30 years, would radically reverse Britain’s approach to the Middle East. Yet Labour has not changed its spots overnight. Since Tony Blair’s resignation in 2007—in part precipitated by his defense of Israel’s 2006 campaign in Lebanon—the party has continually moved to the left in both domestic and foreign policy. Ashamed of the last Labour government’s backing for the Iraq War, Corbyn’s predecessor, Ed Miliband, effectively vetoed any British military intervention against Bashar al-Assad. Yet Labour has not changed its spots overnight. Since ‘Tony Blair’s resignation in 2007—in part precipitated by his defense of Israel’s 2006 campaign in Lebanon—the party has continually moved to the left in both domestic and foreign policy. Ashamed of the last Labour government’s backing for the Iraq War, Corbyn’s predecessor, Ed Miliband, effectively vetoed any British military intervention against Bashar al-Assad.

The party’s policy on Israel was by no means exempt from this leftward shift. In contrast to Cameron, Miliband condemned the IDF during Operation Protective Edge. Two months later, he whipped Labour MPs to back a nonbinding parliamentary motion on the unilateral recognition of Palestine. Whether or not Corbyn makes it to 10 Downing Street, its next Labour occupant is likely to be far less friendly toward Israel than any prime minister since Ted Heath in the early 1970s.

This prospect poses a dilemma for British Jews, whose own relationship with Zionism has evolved significantly over the past century. While the Zionist group led by Russian-born immigrant Chaim Weizmann included several influential figures in the Jewish community (Israel Sieff, Simon Marks, Leon Simon, and Harry Sacher among them), high-profile Jews were also among the most ardent opponents of the Balfour Declaration. On learning that Britain planned to endorse a Jewish national homeland over the summer of 1917, Edwin Montagu, the newly appointed secretary of state for India and the only Jewish member of the Cabinet, circulated a memo “on the Anti-Semitism of the Present (British) Government.” His opposition to Zionism arose from the fear that the establishment of a Jewish state would leave Jews who remained in the diaspora susceptible to the charge of dual loyalty:

But when the Jew has a national home, surely it follows that the impetus to deprive us of the rights of British citizenship must be enormously increased. Palestine will become the world’s Ghetto. Why should the Russian give the Jew equal rights? His national home is Palestine.

Montagu was not alone in objecting to the Balfour Declaration. The dispute in the Cabinet was mirrored in the institutions of Anglo-Jewry. Important members of the Board of Deputies of British Jews (initially) and the Anglo-Jewish Association opposed the Zionist project, while Chief Rabbi Joseph Hertz and the Jewish Chronicle supported it. The final text was, in fact, a compromise, which reflected Montagu’s objection in its insistence that “nothing may be done which may prejudice … the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.”

By comparison to its forebears, modern Anglo-Jewry is much less divided with regard to Israel. Balfour 100 commemorations have filled the communal calendar over the past year. The sense of estrangement from Israel, palpable in parts of progressive American Jewry, is notably less pronounced among British Jews. Indeed, in recent years, they have demanded more vocal support from Israel from the Jewish leadership. Much as the Jewish Chronicle inveighed against the aristocratic Board of Deputies a century ago, a public backlash against the modern board over its muted response to criticism of Israel during the 2014 Gaza conflict provoked a more robust pro-Israel stance thereafter. Jonathan Arkush, president of the Board of Deputies since 2015, pulled no punches in his reaction to the United Kingdom’s support for Resolution 2334, calling the Security Council’s decision “a disgrace” at a public rally against it. He was similarly forthright in his support of Israel’s refusal to allow Hugh Lanning, chair of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, to enter the country, stating: “If the Palestine Solidarity Campaign wants to avoid being treated like a pariah, it has to stop behaving like one.”

The importance of Israel to British Jews helps explain the dramatic recent shift in their political allegiances. Just prior to the 2010 election, a survey of Jewish voters suggested an even split between Conservative and Labour, with each party claiming 30 percent. By 2015, with Miliband leading Labour, similar research found that 67 percent of Jews intended to vote for the Conservatives, compared to just 14 percent for Labour. In 2017, faced with the prospect of Corbyn becoming prime minister, that gap had widened to 77 percent for the Conservatives and 13 percent for Labour—such that, in an election where the Conservatives lost seats in the capital, constituencies with high Jewish populations in north-west London conspicuously stood out as blue islands in a sea of red.

Jewish nervousness about a Corbyn premiership relates not just to his record on Israel, but also to his apparent indifference to anti-Semitism within his party. Offenders have been merely suspended from the party, rather than expelled. These include the former mayor of London Ken Livingstone, who has repeatedly insisted that there was “real collaboration” between Zionists and Nazi Germany prior to World War II, and Jackie Walker, former vice-chair of the pro-Corbyn campaign group Momentum, who, in a discussion of the Holocaust on her Facebook page, wrote that Jews were among “the chief financiers of the sugar and slave trade.” An internal inquiry into anti-Semitism, which found no evidence of it, was widely dismissed as a whitewash. Corbyn subsequently rewarded its author, Shami Chakrabarti, with a seat in the House of Lords and a position in the Shadow Cabinet. Given Corbyn’s prior record as an apologist for anti-Semitic conspiracy theorists and terror sympathizers, expectations of leadership from him on this issue were low. He has not exceeded them.

If Jews are becoming personae non gratae within Corbyn’s Labour party, the question arises as to what kind of climate he would foster as prime minister. As yet, there has been no widespread Jewish emigration from Britain to Israel, as there has been from France—in part, because British Jews have not been targeted by thugs and terrorists in the same way as their French counterparts have. But might a Corbyn government precipitate a comparable exodus?

Thankfully, Edwin Montagu’s fears about the status of Anglo-Jewry in the wake of the Balfour Declaration have proven largely unfounded over the last 100 years. Nonetheless, it is not impossible that British Jews may come to thank Arthur Balfour for providing them with an escape route.

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Black Fire on White Fire

BY ADAM KIRSCH

The Jewish Bible: A Material History
by David Stern
University of Washington Press, 320 pp., $50

What is a Torah, exactly? If you were trying to explain it to a visitor from Mars, the easiest way might be to lead him to a synagogue, open the ark, and point: This scroll of parchment covered with ink is what Jews call a Torah. But of course such a response would not come close to exhausting the meaning of Torah for Judaism. After all, the ancient rabbis believed that it preexisted the created world, which obviously cannot be true of any physical object. Unlike every other book, which comes into existence only in the act of writing, the text of the Torah is prior to its script. When the Talmud says that the Torah given to Moses was written “in black fire on white fire,” it again emphasizes the distinction between the language of the Torah, which exists eternally (or, as we now say, virtually), and its physical medium.

It is a kind of paradox then that the Torah scroll is the most changeless of Jewish objects. If the original Torah was made of fire, why should it matter whether we read it as a parchment scroll or a print-ed codex, or for that matter on an iPhone screen? Why do Jews reading Torah in a synagogue today use exactly the same technology as their ancestors two thousand years ago? In the first chapter of The Jewish Bible: A Material History, his brilliant and fascinating new book, David Stern makes the point with a pair of images. One illustration depicts the oldest surviving complete Torah scroll, a product of Babylonia in the 12th century; the other shows a Torah scroll written in the United States in the 20th century (actually, a Torah in use at Harvard Hillel). Both are open to the same passage, the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15, which is written in a distinctive pattern known as “a small brick atop a full brick.” The text and its layout are identical in both scrolls; the passage of eight hundred years has changed the physical appearance of the Torah not at all.

As Stern points out, the highly conservative nature of the Torah scroll makes it difficult to study its history as an object. “Because these scrolls cannot contain any extratextual notes or features, it is very difficult to date or localize Torah scrolls with certainty or to trace their histories,” he writes. Yet in the last half-century, the scholarly turn toward “the history of the book”—to study books as the material objects that actual readers encountered rather than disembodied texts—has affected Jewish studies no less than other fields in the humanities. In The Jewish Bible, Stern masterfully synthesizes this scholarship, offering a chronological history of Jewish sacred books from Qumran to the JPS Tanakh.

For if the Sefer Torah itself hasn’t changed, other ways Jews encounter their scripture definitely have. Indeed, as Stern shows, the Jewish book serves as a lens through which we can study central themes of Jewish history and thought.

The book itself—that is, the codex, whose pages are folded in half and bound with a cover—came relatively late to Judaism. Rabbinic tradition fixed even, Stern argues, embodiments of the divine. To this day, they are decorated with crowns and kissed by worshippers. In the Middle Ages, folk tradition attributed magical powers to the Torah scroll: German Jews would bring one into a room where a woman was giving birth, while North African Jews would leave the ark open after prayers ended so that women “could approach it and address the Torah scrolls with special petitions and prayers for healing, fertility, livelihood, matchmaking, and the like.” Perhaps it is no coincidence that these traditions involved Jewish women, who were excluded from the reading of the Torah. If they could not use it as a text, at least they could interact with it as an object.

When the manuscript codex was finally adopted by Judaism—the earliest surviving examples date from around the year 1000—it brought with it a new kind of freedom. A Torah scroll could be written only one way, but a Bible—which Jews referred to not by that Greek word, but as mikra—could be annotated, illustrated, and combined with translation or commentary. It was not that Jewish books used unique techniques of production or design. On the contrary, one of Stern’s central arguments is that the Jewish book always reflected the conventions of the Gentile culture in...
which Jews lived, whether Christian or Islamic. He compares, for instance, the famous Leningrad Codex—the oldest complete Hebrew Bible, produced in Muslim Cairo in 1008—with a Bible produced some two centuries later in Christian Berlin. The former is decorated with “carpet pages,” whose intricate pattern of lines and shapes (and complete lack of representative images) resembles those found in contemporary Qur’ans. The latter, by contrast, features illustrated capitals and marginal drawings of fantastic beasts, of the kind found in Christian illuminated manuscripts.

Yet in both cases, the style is given a decisively Jewish twist through the incorporation of micrography. Look closely at the dragon swallowing a snake in the Berlin Bible, and you will see that the lines are made up of tiny Hebrew letters, as are the lines delineating squares and circles in the Cairo Bible. In both cases, this comprises the text of the Masorah, the annotations developed by Jewish grammarians between the 7th and 11th centuries, which indicate the way the words should be pronounced and chanted—and thereby help to determine the text’s actual meaning.

As Stern shows in a concise introduction to the subject, the Masorah also functioned as an index or concordance, a record of unusual words, and a subject, the Masorah also functioned as an index—the oldest complete Hebrew Bible, produced in Venice by the Christian printer Daniel Bomberg, who recruited converted Jews as editors, each page of the rabbinc Bible featured the original Hebrew, the Aramaic translation or Targum, the Masorah, the commentary of Rashi, and further commentary by Ibn Ezra and others.

It was in this book that the archetypal Jewish page of print—later to be adopted by and associated with the Talmud—first made its appearance. Where early Christian editions of the Bible featured translations running down the page in parallel columns, the Jewish page created a kind of hypertext, with each column of text linked to a host of other sources. So influential was this layout that Moses Mendelssohn adopted it for his own translation of the Bible into German, *Sefer nettivot ha-shalom*: Stern reproduces the first page of this book, in which the Targum has been replaced by Mendelssohn’s elegant German (written in Hebrew characters) and the traditional commentaries by Mendelssohn’s own. By contrast, when Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig wanted to produce an ultramodern, 20th-century German Bible, they made their intentions clear by abolishing the crowded traditional page, instead printing the German text in columns that look like free verse.

The big question that looms over the conclusion of *The Jewish Bible* is whether we are on the verge of another paradigm shift in the way we interact with the sacred text. The changes from scroll to codex and from manuscript to print each changed the way Jews read and thought about the Bible; surely the shift from print to digital will do the same? Surprisingly, however, Stern tends to downplay the significance of the post-Gutenberg age. While the Internet has drastically expanded the reach of scholarship, putting many far-flung editions and texts at the researcher’s fingertips, Stern does not believe it will fundamentally change what we know as the Bible. “[T]he most dramatic transformations that the new technology can effect will,” he argues, “likely be in the study of the Bible rather than in the text itself.”

Stern foresees Jews continuing to read from parchment scrolls, as they surely will. More important, he implies that we will continue to think of the Bible as a book, sequentially divided into chapters and verses. But if a hundred or a thousand years from now books themselves no longer exist except in museums, why would the Bible be an exception? More likely, we can’t even guess at the form that the Bible will take in the consciousness of the future. Maybe Torah will return to its origin as something virtual, text without script—black fire on white fire.

Adam Kirsch is a columnist for Tablet and the author of *The People and the Books: 18 Classics of Jewish Literature* (W. W. Norton & Company), among other books.
In Praise of Humility

BY STUART SCHOFFMAN

The Origin of the Jews: The Quest for Roots in a Rootless Age
by Steven Weitzman
Princeton University Press, 408 pp., $35

In his biography for the Yale Jewish Lives series, Solomon: The Lure of Wisdom, Steven Weitzman observes that ultimate knowledge is ultimately perilous. Jewish tradition credits King Solomon as the author of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. Over the ages, scores of other books were attributed to him, such as The Key of Solomon, a magical treatise from the Renaissance. In such works, Solomon unlocked arcane secrets of the universe. Some of those books were banned; even the three biblical books were considered suspect by various rabbis. For all his knowledge, he ended badly: too many wives; idolatry run amok; his kingdom in shambles, fatally divided after his death.

This morality play may offer a skeleton key to Weitzman’s subtle, eclectic, and unusual new book, The Origin of the Jews: The Quest for Roots in a Rootless Age. He does not set out to discover the origin of the Jews, but to write an intellectual history of the inevitably imperfect attempts—linguistic, genetic, archaeological—to decipher the enigma. This method enables him to be fair and balanced to a fault, taking a wide variety of thinkers and scholars seriously; and to task.

Intellectually, Weitzman is wary of origins. He acknowledges the influence of Foucault, Derrida, and other postmodernists critical of the very nature of roots as homogenous and hegemonic. He worries that certitude of one’s origins may be a recipe for exceptionalism. On the other hand, it’s only natural that certitude of one’s origins may be a recipe for self-hatred. “At present, he writes, “[t]here is simply no way to establish a secure evidentiary chain to connect contemporary or recently living people with ancient ancestors.” Still, such claims are worth studying as examples of constructed identity. In the case of David, Jewish families adopt a useful narrative of heroic ancestry, stretching back to the realm of myth.

At another extreme you have the contrarian Israeli historian Shlomo Sand, author of The Invention of the Jewish People (2008), a best-seller in Israel and an international sensation, translated into many languages, Arabic included. As summarized by Weitzman, Sand is out to debunk the widespread assumption that Jews are a nation. Judaism is a religion; the idea of the “Jewish People” arose in the 19th century “and became a reality only as the result of a social-engineering process initiated by Zionist leaders and intellectuals.” Most Jews do not derive from the Israelites of old, but are a motley cultural mix, often the offspring of converts, not least the controversial Khazars. For the sake of precision, Weitzman quotes Sand directly:

“...to task.

To promote a homogenous collective in modern times, it was necessary to provide, among other things, a long narrative suggesting a connection in time and space between the fathers and “the forefathers” of all the members of the present community . . . . With the help of archaeologists, historians, and anthropologists, a variety of findings were collected. These were subjected to major cosmetic improvements carried out by essayists, journalists, and the authors of historical novels. From this surgically improved past emerged the proud and handsome portrait of the nation.

In other words, the “Jewish People” is an artificial, photoshopped fiction, designed to enable the ethnocentric Zionist project. Sand’s objective, says Weitzman, “is to un-invent the Jewish people by exposing the real history he accuses earlier historians of having suppressed.” The ultimate goal is the conversion of Israel into a secular state of all its citizens. In 2013, Sand doubled down in French, with a book-length manifesto called Comment j’ai cessé d’être juif, published in English by Verso as How I Stopped Being a Jew. He begins by crowing that many readers will consider his arguments “illegitimate” and “repugnant,” and will regard him as “an infamous traitor racked by self-hatred.” Weitzman sees this as self-aggrandizing:

Certainly, the scholarly critics do not seem particularly scandalized by the book’s thesis, just unpersuaded by it. The problem for them is that Sand seriously misrepresents the scholarship he claims to be reacting against, casting himself as a daring iconoclast for challenging positions that had never been argued by scholars to begin with or that, conversely, had long been broadly acknowledged.

Is Weitzman himself scandalized by Sand’s thesis of national self-invention? In one sense, hardly. “Sand has a point,” he says. “Zionist leaders went to great lengths to foster a sense of a unified Hebrew culture . . . and were thus compelled to recast their goals in the language of a religious tradition.” The creation and inculcation of a usable past is what nations do, and we are no different. The German-trained historian Ben-Zion Dinur (Dinur), author of the multi-volume Yisrael ba-gola (Israel in Exile), strove to “instill a sense of national...
consciousness” among the ingathered Jews, “or as he might put it, to remind them of a history they had forgotten.” As Israel’s first minister of education, Dinur introduced a history curriculum aimed at the construction of a collective identity. Weitzman notes that Sand was taught Dinur’s narrative as an Israeli schoolboy: “I cannot help but think that his strong aversion to the idea of the Jewish people comes from his own experience as a student.” He also points out that Sand himself relies on “a contested analogy of origination (invention) that simplifies the reality; and he recycles ideas that have an anti-Jewish pedigree.”

For his part, Weitzman sees merit in both “primordialist” and “constructivist” models of Jewish origin. Instinct and upbringing bind him to the grand narrative of Jewish antiquity, but academic rigor demands recognition of how that story can be manipulated and exploited. He is sensitive to political implications:

In Israel at least, the choice to be primordialist or constructivist is often tied to whether one is on the right or the left of the political spectrum, whether one embraces Zionism as integral to the State of Israel or advocates for a postnationalist conception of the state.

And not just in Israel. Still, as an academic specialist in the Hebrew Bible, Weitzman knows that “it cannot be relied on for an understanding of history,” making the point gingerly:

The story told of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in Genesis, most biblical scholars would agree, is an attempt by much later authors to explain the origin of their people: they might preserve certain kernels of genuine experience, but for the most part, many scholars believe, they do not reflect historical reality, having been composed in a much later period and projecting on to the past the experiences and perspectives of much later authors.

Weitzman also analyzes anti-Jewish, “counter-origin” narratives that “seek to mock and discredit the Jews by negating their own understanding of their origin.” In the Hellenistic era, when Jews again lived in Egypt, Greek writers contended that the Hebrews were actually lepers, expelled by the pharaoh for the public good; this charge was repressed by the Roman historian Tacitus.

In the Hellenistic era, when Jews again lived in Egypt, Greek writers contended that the Hebrew origin narratives that “seek to mock and discredit the Jewish origin” should be revised in favor of a theory of hybridity. The very word “Judaism,” first appearing in the 2nd century B.C.E., exemplifies the “fusion of Judean and Greek culture”; Yehuda plus ismos. “Jewishness,” writes Weitzman, “morphed in this period from an ‘ascribed’ status, a fixed status assigned at birth, to an ‘achieved status.’” The Hasmonaeans adopted the Greek idea that religious identity could be acquired through an educational process. Archeologists have dated the first mikvah and tefillin, ritual practices that parallel Greek baths and amulets, as belonging to the Hellenistic period.

That sounds plausible to me, but Weitzman has his doubts. Does Shaye Cohen posit too sharp a break between Hellenistic Jewishness and the forms of Jewish and Israelite identity that came before? Is hybridity as understood by Homi Bhabha passé, and is the more complex “rhizomatic hybridity” a preferable model? Was modern Jewish scholarly fixation on the Greek educational ethos of paideia colored by unrequited admiration for the German ideal of Bildung, as in the case of the eminent historian Elias Bickerman? Readers comfortable with such references will greatly enjoy Weitzman’s byways, even if they lead nowhere.

The thirst for origins is often thwarted by archeology. In Solomon: The Lure of Wisdom, Weitzman writes: “Today, when not one single find can still be confidently attributed to the Solomonic era, it is no longer clear that there even was such an era.” In discussing archeology, Weitzman focuses on Tel Beth Shemesh, the excavation near the Israeli city of Beit Shemesh. Motorists on nearby Route 38 whisk past Shimshon Junction, the turn-off to the reputed grave of Samson and his father Manoach. This is the borderland where Israelites and Philistines clashed at the time of the Bible. David slew Goliath not far from here, or so the story goes.

Tel Beth Shemesh, says Weitzman, is not famous like Megiddo or Lachish (not to mention Jerusalem), but it’s an excellent laboratory of “ethnogenesis,” a place to discover how a people began. First the Hasmoneans adopted the Greek idea that religious identity could be acquired through an educational process. Archeologists have dated the first mikvah and tefillin, ritual practices that parallel Greek baths and amulets, as belonging to the Hellenistic period.

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Ethnogenesis, according to this view, is a form of self-defense, a way for the people of a region imperiled by an external enemy to strengthen itself by pulling together what had been a heterogeneous population under the banner of a single cohesive identity.

The Origin of the Jews is a jewel box of erudition, cushioned with misgivings. The familiar identification of the ancient Hebrews with the Habiru people of the Amarna Letters (14th century B.C.E.) turns out to be troublesome. The term “Habiru” apparently referred to nomadic brigands and rebels, and plays into the unsettling stereotype of the Wandering Jew. More appealing is the thesis of Shaye Cohen in The Beginnings of Jewishness that the classic opposition of “Hebraism” and “Hellenism” should be revised in favor of a theory of hybridity. The very word “Judaism,” first appearing in the 2nd century B.C.E., exemplifies the “fusion of Judean and Greek culture”; Yehuda plus ismos. “Jewishness,” writes Weitzman, “morphed in this period from an ‘ascribed’ status, a fixed status assigned at birth, to an ‘achieved status.’” The Hasmonaeans adopted the Greek idea that religious identity could be acquired through an educational process. Archeologists have dated the first mikvah and tefillin, ritual practices that parallel Greek baths and amulets, as belonging to the Hellenistic period.

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Ethnogenesis, according to this view, is a form of self-defense, a way for the people of a region imperiled by an external enemy to strengthen itself by pulling together what had been a heterogeneous population under the banner of a single cohesive identity.
Thus the Canaanites of Beth Shemesh became Israelites because of the incursion of the Sea Peoples, specifically the Philistines who settled the southern coast of Palestine and founded Ashdod, Ashkelon, and Gaza. These Canaanites, deduced Bunimovitz and Lederman, created an “invisible social barrier” between themselves and the Philistines. They accentuated their differences by means of certain practices, possibly including circumcision and certainly, on the strength of archeological evidence, a food taboo: Virtually no pig bones were found at Beth Shemesh.

The people of Beth Shemesh chose to shun a kind of food that the Philistines loved to eat, a taboo that would have probably impeded other forms of interaction between the two peoples since feasting together was such an important way for strangers to get to know each other in ancient Mediterranean culture.

In other words, it could lead to mixed dancing or worse: Just ask Samson, shorn and blinded.

Finally, we have a thesis that ties the whole room together, like the Dude’s shag rug in The Big Lebowski, that classic of postmodern epistemology. But Weitzman abides by never having all the answers. “It is important to acknowledge that this theory is vulnerable to its own share of criticisms,” he adds. “There is no way to fully reconstruct the process of identity formation that may have been at work in early Iron Age Beth Shemesh because such a process unfolded internally, within the minds of the Israelites.” And besides, too much hinges on pig bones.

Readers will come away disappointed, and Weitzman knows it. His final chapter is an extended aria of frustration:

Scholarship has produced many accounts of the origin of the Jews; some can be shown to be false; others stretch beyond what can actually be known; all are uncertain and subject to debate, and there seems to be no way beyond this impasse . . . Indeed, it seems to me that the more scholars have learned, the more difficult it has become to reach any kind of conclusion . . . Our quest has taught us that if the origin of the Jews is remote, invisible, or hard to access, all are uncertain and subject to debate, and there seems to be no way beyond this impasse . . . Indeed, it seems to me that the more scholars have learned, the more difficult it has become to reach any kind of conclusion . . .

In truth, Weitzman says, the possibility of finding a clear-cut answer “was probably lost from the moment people began to question the Genesis account many centuries ago . . .” This is not a conclusion likely to satisfy those who opened this book expecting to learn how the Jews originated.” But then again, “I think something significant would be lost if scholars ever completely gave up.”

I confess to still nursing the hope that, despite all the dead-ends we have come up against in this book, scholars will find ways to keep asking how the Jews originated. This is not because I expect them to ever break through to a definitive answer but because I value the humility that comes from recognizing that we do not know that answer and because at the same time, I would lament the loss of a certain kind of ambition that modern-day scholarship has inherited from the myth-makers of old, the dream of being able to solve the enigma of beginnings.

So gracefully ends this unique, rewarding book. But I closed it wanting more. As a citizen of Jerusalem, I have a special stake in Jewish origins. This is no ordinary city, where you fight traffic and eat pizza and wait in long lines—this is Isra’el, the Bedrock of Our Existence. As I pondered Weitzman’s confession, I thought: What better time than Sukkot for a Jew to visit the City of David?

I walked from my house in the German Colony to the Old Train Station, where Theodor Herzl arrived in 1898. I took the free shuttle bus to the Dung Gate, near the Western Wall, and made my way down to the Visitor Center of the City of David. Strolling amid groups of tourists, I saw the remains of stone structures that archeologist Eilat Mazar controversially attributes to David and Solomon. The ongoing dig is designed to bolster the Jewish narrative. I read the official signs, each one featuring verses from the Hebrew Bible: “So David slept with his fathers, and he was buried in the City of David” (1 Kings 2:10, a line I chanted at my bar mitzvah).

Many generations of ancient Jerusalem’s residents were familiar with the Tombs of the House of David that were situated inside the city . . . In the generations following the destruction of the Second Temple, the tombs were demolished and their location was forgotten . . . In 1913, Baron Edmond de Rothschild purchased large tracts of land in the City of David and commissioned French-Jewish archaeologist Raymond Weill to conduct excavations here. Weill discovered several tunnels carved into the rock and identified them as the Tombs of the House of David.
Rachel and Her Children

BY SARAH RINDNER

Eternal Life: A Novel
by Dara Horn
W. W. Norton & Company, 256 pp., $25.95

One way of telling the story of rabbinic Judaism is to say that it was born in a conversation between Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkaia and the Roman general Vespasian, in the shadow of a besieged Jerusalem. Rabbi Yochanan had feigned death in order to be smuggled out of the walled city in a coffin despite the opposition of the Jewish zealots, who were not interested in negotiations with the enemy. Vespasian, impressed by Rabbi Yochanan's bravery and his prediction that Vespasian would eventually become emperor of Rome, asked him what he wanted. Rabbi Yochanan's famous answer was "give me Yavneh and its [Torah] sages," thus establishing a center of Jewish learning independent of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Rabbi Yochanan's foresight transformed the brick-and-mortar reality of a Temple-centered Judaism into the portable diaspora-ready religion with which we are familiar, and thus granted a powerful second wind to a Jewish nation that might have been otherwise brought to its knees by Roman oppression.

Dara Horn's mind-bending new novel, Eternal Life, takes place from the perspective of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkaia's heretofore unknown mother Rachel. Rachel embodies a gruesomely literal interpretation of Rabbi Yochanan's lofty project. Like a Judaism that endures beyond destruction, Rachel cannot die because of a vow she took at the Temple in order to save an ailing Yochanan. With the Temple's destruction she is left in this liminal state, along with her lover, Elazar ben Haninah, the son of the high priest and the child's real father. The novel, and Rachel and Elazar's occasionally intersecting lives, span the centuries between Second Temple Jerusalem and modern-day New York. Eternal Life is Horn's fifth novel, and like her others it crosses time and place to tell a transfixing, multilayered story that draws on Jewish texts with its seamless incorporation of translated biblical verses and rabbinic phrases into its lively narrative: "If all the heavens were parchment, and all the seas ink, such would not suffice to record the days of Rachel, whose years are no more than an eyeblink in the Master of the World." In addition to Eternal Life's profound meditations upon Judaism, time, and history, it is also a novel about motherhood. The perils of actually achieving immortality have been explored to great effect before: from Gulliver's Travels to Tuck everlasting and even modern vampire fiction. But Horn is one of few authors, if any, who has made it her central concern to think through what it would mean for an immortal parent to bear mortal chil-

Recalling the biblical matriarch Rachel who perpetually weeps over her children, Horn's Rachel is burdened by her responsibilities to others in a way that is almost unbearable. New parents think of each day as a cascade of beginnings. . . But old parents like her saw only endings: the last time she crawled, the last time she spoke in a pure raw sound unsculpted into the words of others, the last time she stood before the world in braids and laughed when she shouldn't have, not knowing. Each child died before the person did, a small rehearsal for the future.

Rachel's eternal state of motherhood and mourning does not dull her affection; rather it brings her sensitivity and powers of observation to greater and almost transcendent heights. Despite the hundreds upon hundreds of consecutive child-rearing years, Rachel never forgot a child.

In framing Jewish historical experience through the perspective of a parent, Horn also suggests a theological analogy for the relationship between God and the Jewish people as it manifests itself in the Bible and beyond. While Rachel remains baffled by an unknowable God, she becomes somewhat God-like in her position of infinite empathy for Jewish suffering despite her position of immunity. In the dysfunctional and unhealthily protracted, yet also oddly moving, relationship between Rachel and Elazar, there is also a subtle theological undercurrent. The prophet Hosea suggests that the relationship between God and Israel is like a
marriage: “I will betroth you to me forever.” Rachel and Elazar dramatize what such a never-ending relationship might actually look like—for better and for worse.

Over the centuries Rachel and Elazar watch children who suffer and die horribly under the Romans, during the Inquisition, in Russian pogroms, and in Nazi gas chambers. Sometimes, of course, they die of natural or accidental causes, but in some of those cases their parents are painfully at fault. Their children not only suffer because of history; they suffer because they are Rachel and Elazar’s children, something neither parent is able to forget.

Horn has traversed some of this thematic ground before. In past novels she jolted her reader out of a potentially complacent understanding of the facts of Jewish history through the use of viscerally moving fictional episodes. In The World to Come, the dramatic weight of the Soviet oppression of its Jews comes to bear in a cramped apartment in Moscow, where a loving father is pointlessly torn away from his wife and daughter. In this novel, Horn paints the years leading up to the Roman destruction of Jerusalem with vivid, perfectly chosen vignettes: a closely averted altercation with some Roman guards, a hapless Jewish zealot who is caught up in something that is beyond him, the fleeting glimpse of a captured and bound daughter who awaits her fate in Rome’s human marketplace.

In this sense, Horn’s work is both comparable to and very different from other Jewish historical fiction such as Alice Hoffman’s depiction of Masada on the eve of its destruction in The Dovekeepers, albeit with lesser literary sparkle. But Steinberg, Diamant, and Hoffman engage the Jewish past through alternative histories: Steinberg pays homage to the heretical questioner the Rabbis tried to suppress; Hoffman introduces us to the fictive, gentle souls who would have averted the carnage at Masada; and Diamant reveals what she understands to be the pagan influences and religious syncretism that are stilled by the biblical account. Horn, on the other hand, is interested in “the story” itself, not an alternative narrative driven by a contemporary agenda. Her characters may be mischievous or impious, but she does not seek to upend tradition; she seeks to understand it and bring it to life.

If there is one novel Eternal Life is most reminiscent of, it is Horn’s previous novel, A Guide for the Perplexed, which traverses the book of Genesis, the medieval world of Maimonides, the 19th-century discovery of the Cairo Geniza, and post-revolution modern Egypt. Both A Guide for the Perplexed and Eternal Life are intrigued by, of all things, data collection and storage. A Guide for the Perplexed meditates on the possibility of full memory recall, both in a single person’s life and for a larger culture, and the narrator is a successful software developer who develops an app for that. In Eternal Life, Rachel’s 68th son Rocky has a similarly grandiose quest to create an unbreachable Internet “blockchain” where all of one’s past transactions can be effortlessly recorded:

It’s like a ledger, basically the record of every transaction that’s ever happened in the system. It’s a permanent record of the past that can never change, and it happens without trusting anyone at all.

The parallel between this description of the basis of cryptocurrency and Rachel herself, who has been set adrift to witness the passage of centuries without any end in sight, is not hard to detect. Although it moves briskly and is not terribly long, there are countless subplots, both individual and national, alluded to in Eternal Life. This too is part of the ken of the novel—the layers of stories that compose a tradition and the importance of preserving this meta-story even when, as in the case of Rabbi Yochanan, it may have come at a great cost.

Throughout the novel, Horn embraces the possibilities of cutting-edge technologies, both real and fictional, to illuminate timeless concerns. She does this in a manner that is somehow consonant with the traditional sensibility of the novel. Eternal Life entertains us with extended Twitter conversations, social media trolling, and hashtags (her original proposed title was #EternalLife). Sometimes these detract from the sublime “music of an unknown world” that is detectable elsewhere in the novel. But the jarring juxtaposition is also part of the point. After all, Rachel keeps living.

Moreover, the reality that Rabbi Yochanan constructed through the transformation of Temple-based Judaism into rabbinic Judaism was a kind of “virtual reality.” In Horn’s words, “He had been the first one to replace the real with the virtual, the one who turned two thousand years of otherworldly power into a metaphor.” At one point Rachel meditates in a somewhat gratingly Malcolm Gladwell-esque manner on Yochanan’s cutting-edge disposition: “Those future-facing children, Rachel knew, were the most insufferable of all children—disrespectful, arrogant, dismissive, ungrateful, impossible to raise. Worst of all, they were invariably, right.”

Rachel, unlike her son Yochanan, has trouble disconnecting from the past. Everywhere she looks, she sees the luminous Temple gleaming in the distance. When she returns to Jerusalem for the first time after its destruction in 70 C.E. on a visit with her family shortly after the Six-Day War, Rachel crumples “into hysterical, gagging, wrenching sobs. To be so close, and to still be trapped!” She desperately wants to be freed from the yoke of life into the world to come, or anything really. Rachel has had and seen enough suffering. Yet her agony here also evokes a larger Jewish pain, one that desperately yearns for the construction of the Temple in Jerusalem, even despite, or perhaps due to, the brilliance of the rabbinic tradition. Yochanan’s forward and Rachel’s backward visions vie with each other on the pages of the novel, and this tension is reflected in the structure and even the very language of the book itself.

Parenthood, Judaism, and even the novel itself are places where past and future meet and reveal their interdependence. In this way, the elaborate fictional conceit of Eternal Life reveals something we could have, or should have, known all along.

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The Family Heretic

BY BERNARD WASSERSTEIN

What You Did Not Tell: A Russian Past and the Journey Home
by Mark Mazower
Other Press, 400 pp., $25.95

Once a familiar political type, the Jewish revolutionary has long since disappeared from the historical stage. Celebrated on the left, exploited as a bogeyman by the right, he (and often she) flourished from the early 19th century to the middle of the 20th. A precursor was the Polish-born Zalkind Hourtoulis, who played a walk-on role in the French Revolution. A late epigone was Daniel Cohën-Bendit, aka “Danny the Red,” a leader of the student tumults in Paris in 1968 (today he is a Green member of the European Parliament). In between these opera buffa characters were such major historical actors as Ferdinand Lassalle, Rosa Luxemburg, and Leon Trotsky.

The prominence of Jews among radical leaders and thinkers led the historian Isaac Deutscher to maintain that “[t]he Jewish heretic who transcends Jewry belongs to a Jewish tradition.” A Trotskyist, Deutscher disclaimed belief “in the exclusive genius of any race.” Yet he suggested that Jewish revolutionaries were “in some ways . . . very Jewish indeed. They had in themselves something of the quintessence of Jewish life and of the Jewish intellect.” The conception of Judaism as inherently revolutionary is, of course, nonsense. The same claim has often been made of Christianity, and today we frequently hear it of Islam. The reality is that all three spiritual traditions contain both passive and aggressive streams—sometimes intermingled.

Of course, radicalism, particularly in retrospect, is more glamorous than conformity. Pantheonization of revolutionary heroes is a familiar historical paradigm, often shaped to serve contemporary political ends. Deutscher’s life of Trotsky, a masterwork of biographical advocacy, ultimately fell into that category.

Mark Mazower’s What You Did Not Tell: A Russian Past and the Journey Home belongs to a newish genre, less ambitious but more subtle: the Jewish revolutionary has long since dis­tincted its illegal journal, Vremia. Founded in Vilna in 1897, almost at the same moment as the Zionist Organization, the Bund, with its brand of socialist diaspora particularism, appealed to a man who was “driven by a very old-fashioned passion for justice.” Mark tells us that Max “had a visceral opposition to tribalism of any kind, ethnic and religious above all, an opposition that came from the gut as much as the brain.” Yet, like other Bundists, though an internationalist in principle, he could not quite shake off the idea of a specifically Jewish road to socialism.

In reading about Max Mazower, I was forcibly reminded of an encounter in China some years ago. On a visit to Beijing in 1990, I visited one of the People’s Republic’s most honored citizens in his government-provided apartment at the Friendship Hotel. His name was Israel Epstein. Born in Warsaw in 1915 to parents who had been active over the previous decade in the Bund in Vilna, he had been brought to China as an infant.

I had first heard Epstein’s voice on the English service of China National Radio a few days earlier, delivering an encomium in memory of a female American communist, an “old China hand.” Marveling at his old-fashioned British accent, I asked my official minders to arrange a meeting with him.

“Eppy,” as he was known to his friends, told me that he had attended the English-language Tianjin Grammar School (hence his Ronald Colman–like locutions). His parents raised him in the Bundist faith, and he recalled punch-ups with teenage gangs from Beter, the rival youth movement of the Zionist Revisionists, then active in the Far East. As a young man, Eppy committed what was in Bundist eyes a cardinal sin akin to apostasy: He joined the Communist Party. In 1951 he was appointed editor of China Reconstructs, the Communist government’s main English-language propaganda organ. Like other foreign sympathizers with Maoism, he came close to being devoured by its children during the cultural revolution of the 1960s: He was imprisoned for five years. After his release, however, he was allowed to resume work and did so without qualms. In recognition of his services, he was appointed to the People’s Consultative Council, a quasi-legislative body roughly equivalent in status (and in lack of power) to the British House of Lords.

Cheerful, gregarious, and overflowing with anecdotes about his past, Eppy was a likeable, silver-tongued conversationalist. His autobiography, My China Eye, published in 2005 shortly before his death, is similarly engaging and slippery. Did Max meet Eppy’s father during their shared years in the Bundist underground in Vilna? Almost certainly—though we cannot know for sure. But they were in any case kindred spirits, yoked in a common cause.

Max was clearly a dedicated militant: He served on the party’s Vilna central committee and supervised its illegal journal, Der Klassenkampf. “[T]he consummate organizer,” he was, writes his grandson, “a figure of the shadows, someone who seems never to have sought the podium but knew what to do when a new press was needed, an activist smuggled in or out of danger, or workers brought out
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on strike.” Known to comrades by the party name “Daniel,” he also, unfortunately for him, became an object of interest to the secret police: They called him “the Handsome One.” He was arrested twice and dispatched into internal exile, from which, with luck and ingenuity, he escaped on each occasion.

In 1907 Max made his way to England, where he secured a job with an American typewriter company involved in trade with Russia. To outward appearance he was now a respectable businessman. The Bolshevik revolution, however, found him back in his homeland. As a Bundist, he became suspect to the new rulers and was detained by the Cheka, the Soviet regime’s secret police. Perhaps thanks to old contacts among revolutionary activists, he was released after a few months. On flimsy evidence, Mark Mazower speculates that Max “might have easily come to know” Feliks Dzierzynsky, head of the Cheka, and/or Maxim Litvinov, a future Soviet foreign minister. Or could Max have been a British spy? Tantalizingly, Mazower raises this question but after much sleuthing finds no supporting witnesses or documentation.

Max left Russia in 1919, this time for good, and returned to London. The revolutionary phase of his life now definitively concluded, he settled down to a different mode of existence at 20 Oakshott Avenue, near Hampstead Heath, not far from the grave of Karl Marx in Highgate Cemetery. His house became the equivalent for him of Eppy’s Friendship Hotel apartment, though Max, unlike some other Jewish refugees of the period, was never elevated to the House of Lords. As for many Bundists in exile, party loyalty for Max became largely an exercise in nostalgia. Save for interwar Poland where it remained a political force, Bundism henceforth degenerated into little more than a Landsmannschaft, an international social club that indulged in wistful recollection of past revolutionary glories, sang lusty political songs, and contemplated with impotent horror the collapse of communism into bloody dictatorship. A visitor in this period recalled Max’s “warm, socialist home.” Mark has affectionate memories of his grandfather but notes that in later life the former revolutionary declined into sad passivity. Whereas Eppy was accorded a state funeral prior to the interment of his ashes in the Babooshan revolutionary heroes’ cemetery in Beijing, Max’s family bade him farewell in a more modest ceremony at the Golders Green Crematorium.

Mark Mazower writes eloquently about his grandfather. His depiction of the pathos of Max’s final years is particularly affecting. During the Second World War Max, like Deutscher, was on intimate terms with Shmuel Zygielbojm, the Bund’s representative on the Polish National Council in exile in London. Zygielbojm committed suicide in May 1943 as a protest against the inaction of the Allies in the face of the “the greatest crime in the history of mankind.” For Max, the slaughter of Polish Jewry left a desolate void: “[N]othing remained to be said or done on the larger issues for which he had once risked his life. . . . Vilna, Łódź, Warsaw—the once flourishing cities where Max had lived and played a role of some import—were vestiges, unrecognizable.”

Unlike many of his former comrades, Max refused to make the ultimate ideological adjustment. “As for the triumph of Zionism in the Middle East
When I heard that Mark Mazower had written a memoir of his grandfather, I assumed it was about his other grandfather, the great Yiddish novelist Sholem Asch.

and the creation of an independent Jewish state,” Mazower writes, “this represented the antithesis of everything Max had believed in, and there is no evidence that I have come across that Israel's founding moved him in any way.” The Mazower household instead cherished “the afterlife of a late-nineteenth-century Russo-Jewish socialist tradition—one that had begun with the Bund and then been overtaken and overshadowed but never entirely erased by Bolshevism... What lingered invisibly in London’s Metroland, passing down through the generations, was an outlook, no longer confident of its capacity to shape the future but still engaged, highly informed, and faithful to its original values.”

Unfortunately, the diminuendo of Max’s later life story, basically completed about a quarter of the way through the book, seems to have left the author with something of a problem about how to fill up the rest. He does so by recounting the stories of other members of his family. “Uncle André,” possibly Max’s illegitimate son, becomes the object of a fascinating exercise in biographical detective work. The “black sheep of the family,” André studied at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, and was taken up as a protégé by T. S. Eliot. In 1940, anticipating a German invasion of England, he changed his surname from Mazower to the more English- and less Jewish-sounding Marling. After the war, he emigrated to Spain. There he found work first as a nightwatchman at the British Embassy, later as an announcer on the English-language service of Spanish national radio. With his Cambridge background, André’s broadcasting voice must have resembled Eppy’s—though the two Bundist scions purveyed very different messages. André too made a radical break with his background—but in the opposite direction. He not only became an apologist for Franco, he also published (under yet another name) anti-communist, anti-Masonic, and anti-Semitic pamphlets that drew on The Protocols of the Elders of Zion to warn of a “red threat” of occult conspiracy bent on destroying Christian civilization.

Such political deformation distressed the Mazowers, but Mark reports that it was André’s reception into the Roman Catholic Church that “Max found really shocking.” Not that the family harbored any residual religious commitment to Judaism: Like Ian Buruma’s grandparents, they had no compunction about celebrating Christmas and Easter, albeit as feasts drained of religious content. In this the London Mazowers differed from the Tianjin Epsteins who celebrated Purim and Hanukkah, though they did not fast on Yom Kippur. When Max once asked his father what being Jewish meant to him, “he said that what it evoked for him was chiefly that sense of solidarity that he and his parents had felt with the refugees trying to escape Germany and Austria after the Nazis came to power.” Again there is a parallel with Buruma’s grandparents, who helped save Jewish children from Germany in 1938–1939.

Much of the second half of the book is devoted to an account of the life of Mark’s father, Billy. By contrast with Max’s revolutionary youth and André’s spectacular embrace of fascism, Billy’s was a conventional, relatively uneventful life. His studies at Balliol College, Oxford, were interrupted by war service. In writing about this period, Mark strains to draw “a provisional sketch of the road map of the emotional landscape of England in wartime” that his father had known and traveled. Billy pursued a somewhat dull-sounding career as a manager with Lever Brothers, dwelling among the heavily Jewish, middle class, mildly left-wing intelligentsia of north-west London. Sympathetic to both his father and grandfather, Mark sees Billy’s life of quiet, domestic contentment as a reaction to the turbulence of Max’s background. A peculiarity of this book is what is not in it. When I first heard that Mark Mazower had written a memoir of his grandfather, I immediately assumed it was about his other grandfather (actually, it turns out, his mother’s grandfather), the great Yiddish novelist Sholem Asch. Yet Asch appears only in a few lines toward the end of the book. Perhaps Mazower felt (wrongly) that Asch’s life story had already been sufficiently explored. Or maybe he felt alienated from Asch’s bourgeois, middlebrow ethos? Either way, it is a strange omission.

Above all, what we have here is a eulogy for the lost figure of the Jewish revolutionary. Max’s grandson writes: “In the courage and commitment of his youth I saw something exemplary for our more jaundiced age with its demagogues and its obscene wealth and its ever more intense introspectivity.” The last phrase is odd, given that Mark himself—greatly to the book’s benefit—strikes an unusually subjective note for an academic historian. In passing, he confesses something of his own professional credo: “A culture of caring for history’s losers seems more attractive to my mind than an easy identification with its winners—not least because in the end no one really wins.” Should Max Mazower be classed among history’s losers? In a political sense the answer must be yes, though a comparison with Eppy, an ostensible winner, might give one pause. In the hands of his grandson, Max’s story is nevertheless well worth reading. It sheds light on the acute political, social, and intellectual dilemmas that confronted European Jews (and others too, but most particularly Jews) in the early 20th century. Beyond that, it is an affecting human portrait, drawn from life. Mark Mazower writes with sensitivity, imagination, and a literary flair worthy of his other better-known forebear. Perhaps he will next produce the serious, sympathetic biography of Sholem Asch that cries out to be written.

Bernard Wasserstein, an emeritus professor of history at the University of Chicago, is the author of On the Eve: The Jews of Europe before the Second World War. He lives in Amsterdam.
Ritchie's Boys and the Men from Zion

BY MATTI FRIEDMAN

Sons and Soldiers: The Untold Story of the Jews Who Escaped the Nazis and Returned with the U.S. Army to Fight Hitler
by Bruce Henderson
HarperCollins, 448 pp., $28.99

Racing Against History: The 1940 Campaign for a Jewish Army to Fight Hitler
by Rick Richman
Encounter Books, 288 pp., $25.99

H ad you happened by a cave outside a certain kibbutz in British Palestine in late 1941, you would have been startled to find a small group of Nazi soldiers singing German songs by firelight under swastika flags. This wasn’t an advance unit of a Wehrmacht invasion force, though at the time the Afrika Korps wasn’t far away. It was the “German Section,” an outfit run by the British Special Operations Executive and the Palmach, the Jewish militia, and its members were German Jews who could pass for “Aryans.” Their job would be sabotage and subterfuge in Nazi uniform—young men forced from Germany never activated. But the image of those Jewish soldiers was instructive because they were Germans—came back to me as a soldier in Patton’s army. When Brombert went to find a small group of Nazi soldiers looking for a girl he’d loved, he was told her fate in German hands during the setback in the Ardennes. When their captors identified them as German Jews, they were separated from the other Americans and shot. Through all of this the Ritchie Boys came to be seen as a crucial part of the American invasion force, delivering fresh information from captured Germans in time to save American lives. Sons and Soldiers presents this unfamiliar history for the first time, and a great deal of research is on display. The approach to the material, however, is more shotgun than sniper rifle; the cast is unwieldy and the plotlines numerous, which makes an important, fascinating story a little harder to follow than it should be.

Once in Europe after the Normandy landings the Ritchie Boys were running unique risks, because if they were caught their fate wasn’t that of regular POWs. “a cacophony of foreign languages.” But military life wasn’t all friendly: Angress, for example, while still in a regular U.S. infantry regiment, spent time in something called an “alien detachment” because of his German identity, along with other foreigners denied weapons and relegated to cleaning latrines. “At night,” Henderson writes, “drunken soldiers coming back from town would curse loudly at them, calling them ‘Nazi pigs’ and worse.”

With its population of soldiers of different nationalities preparing for the different battlefields of the world war, Camp Ritchie was a haven for Americans with strange backgrounds and accents, the question that remains topical, if not pressing. Germany’s Jews best wield power and protect themselves in a world that tends to be predatory or indifferent? It’s a question that remains topical, if not pressing.

O ur appreciation for stories of Jewish bravery in those years sometimes obscures the fact that as a group Jews were powerless, reduced to begging others for a chance to bear arms. The Ritchie Boys joined the fight by embracing America and lived their lives as Americans afterward. That was one Jewish choice, one of the few available to those fortunate enough to remain alive.

A second new book, Rick Richman’s Racing Against History, examines a more radical option—Zionism—by describing three visits by Zionist leaders to the United States in the desperate year of 1940. Chaim Weizmann, David Ben-Gurion, and Vladimir Jabotinsky stepped off ocean liners in New York that year, hoping to sound an alarm about the fate of Jews in Europe and to encourage the creation of a Jewish force to fight in the war. This was tricky, because the United States was still neutral, and American Jews weren’t sure how much they could help without endangering their own fragile position at home. Arriving separately and often at odds with each other, the three Zionist politicians addressed rallies, met important people, gave interviews, and wrote down their impressions, leaving material that Richman ably mines for this concise and illuminating account.

The three emissaries represented different ideological streams and rhetorical styles. Weizmann, the future Israeli president, a veteran of the back rooms of the British Empire, comes across as stately, manlike and cautious. Ben-Gurion, the future prime minister, is direct, practical, and preoccupied with Zionist politics. The Revisionist leader Jabotinsky speaks most clearly about the coming catastrophe and the urgency of Jewish self-reliance, seeming alarmist at the time and prophetic in retrospect.

All three failed to create a Jewish fighting force. But in Richman’s distillation of this little-remembered moment, we meet thoughtful people dealing with a key question that is also present between the lines in Sons and Soldiers: How should Jews best wield power and protect themselves in a world that tends to be predatory or indifferent? It’s a question that remains topical, if not pressing.
Of the three leaders in Racing Against History, Weizmann was the most careful in his public utterances. He grasped the danger of the perception that world war was being waged for Jewish interests and preferred the quiet maneuver. He privately lobbied Chamberlain, the British prime minister, to accept “Jewish manpower, technical ability, resources” and was politely turned down. He privately lobbied for 20,000 permits to Palestine for Jewish children from Poland and was politely turned down. In America, he wrote, even mentioning what was happening to Jews in Europe might be “associated with warmongering.” American attitudes, he found, had “no relation to the grim realities which today face humanity at large and the Jews in particular.”

American Jewish thinkers of the time, Richman reminds us, included rabbis such as David Philipson of Cincinnati, who regarded the Jews as a universal people and the Land of Israel as “an outgrown phase of Jewish historical experience.” In an autobiography, the rabbi wrote: “Every land is the homeland for its Jews—the United States for me, as England for my English Jewish brother, France for my French Jewish brother, and so in every country.” Those lines, Richman notes, were published in 1941, with Europe under Nazi occupation.

In this volume, the sharpest contrast to Weizmann’s style is offered by Jabotinsky, who was outspoken about his impatience:

The old fallacy, the curse of our past, has been revived: that there is no Jewish problem; that all our troubles can be cured _en passant_ by general measures of progress, and there is no need to worry about any special remedies. The allied victory will ensure democracy and equality . . . and that will be enough for the Jews.

Jabotinsky wanted a Jewish army raised immediately and said so, even though the mainstream American Jewish leadership called him a “militarist” and published a pamphlet warning against his views. In the pages of the _Forward_, editor Abraham Cahan mocked him as a “naïve person and a great fantasizer.” There was no need for Jabotinsky’s Jewish army, Cahan thought, and the Jewish problem would be solved not by a Jewish state but by an allied victory and democracy: If “true democracy exists, there is no place for anti-Semitism.” In other words, the way forward was to be American citizens and soldiers, like the Ritchie Boys. Recent events in Europe and America would seem to suggest that anti-Semitism does, in fact, have a place in democracy; the English-language descendant of Cahan’s own _Forward_, for example, recently printed a bizarre op-ed by a Jewish supporter of an anti-Jewish boycott expressing sympathy for some of the views of an American neo-Nazi. The old idea of “Jewish warmongering,” about which Weizmann was so careful in 1940, is still current, as evidenced by the flap in September over a tweet by Valerie Plame, the former CIA agent, suggesting just that. And though the Zionist plan succeeded and there is a Jewish army, the normalization of the Jews has failed to materialize and their existential fears continue. Both the Ritchie Boys and the three Zionist leaders profiled in these books might be surprised how much the questions of their times remain unresolved 70 years later.

Matti Friedman, a journalist in Jerusalem, is the author of _The Aleppo Codex_ and _Pumpkinflowers: A Soldier’s Story_ (both from Algonquin Books).
The Many Dybbuks of Romain Gary

BY BENJAMIN BALINT

The Kites
by Romain Gary, translated by Miranda Richmond Mouillot
New Directions, 384 pp., $27.95

Promise at Dawn: A Memoir
by Romain Gary, translated by John Markham Beach
New Directions, 336 pp., $16.95

S
ome time ago, a French friend invited me to an event at the Institut Français de Jérusalem, a cultural center tucked into a corridor leading from city hall to the Old City. I noticed the place was named for Romain Gary. “Who’s that?” I asked. “A heroic bullshit artist,” my host replied, promptly turning to grab a glass of Beaujolais nouveau.

Not long after, I picked up a copy of Gary’s hybrid memoir-novel, Promise at Dawn (1960), re-published by New Directions this fall to accompany the first English translation of Gary’s last novel, The Kites. The introspective tone of Promise at Dawn is one of disarming sincerity. It is a stirring picaresque tale, eventually made into a Broadway play, a film in 1970, and again in 2017, starring Pierre Niney as Romain and Charlotte Gainsbourg as his mother.

Yet Promise at Dawn also displays a splendid indifference to facts and a rare talent for self-aggrandizing embellishment. Gary—a Lithuanian Jew who regarded himself a Frenchman par excellence—emerges in the memoir as a master of self-invention and (just as immoderate) verbal invention, a chameleon of pseudonyms, a man of irreconcilable contradictions, divided against himself, though none of this precludes sincerity. The philosopher Harry Frankfurt has said that our own natures are “notoriously less stable and less inherent than the natures of other things. And insofar as this is the case, sincerity itself is bullshit.”

The unembellished facts are exceptional enough. Romain Kacew (pronounced “Katzev”) was born in Vilna in 1914, a few weeks before the outbreak of the First World War, to Mina and Arieh-Leib Kacew. The father (whom Gary would later pretend was of Mongol or Cossack descent) abandoned his wife and child when Roman was 10. Mina, Gary’s mother, was of Russian means “burn!” he said in a book-length essay, besides expecting greatness for her only son, and (just as immoderate) verbal invention, a chameleon of pseudonyms, a man of irreconcilable contradictions, divided against himself, though none of this precludes sincerity. The philosopher Harry Frankfurt has said that our own natures are “notoriously less stable and less inherent than the natures of other things. And insofar as this is the case, sincerity itself is bullshit.”

The passport of Romain Gary’s mother, Mina Kacew, with her son. (Petras Malukas/AFP/Getty Images.)

(a title bestowed on resistance fighters for exemplary conduct) and was decorated with the Croix de Guerre.

Gary became entranced by the figure of de Gaulle, leader of the Free French, whom he met several times. “He was a fantastically clever and gifted impersonator of ten centuries of French history,” Gary said. According to Gary’s biographer David Bellos:

De Gaulle became Gary’s best excuse for his own approach to the relationship between dream and reality, imagination and achievement, truth and showmanship . . . The towering figure of Charles de Gaulle dominated Gary’s view of what it meant to be a great man, that is to say: a myth.

If de Gaulle’s myth was singular, Gary’s would be multiple. In the decade and a half after the war, the heroic aviator married an English novelist and popular historian named Lesley Blanch and turned himself into a diplomat, posted to Sofia, New York (as spokesman for the French delegation at the United Nations), and Los Angeles (as the French consul general).

In December 1959, Gary met the American actress Jean Seberg, the star of Otto Preminger’s Saint Joan and Jean-Luc Godard’s Breathless. He divorced Blanch, married Seberg, and inhabited, with brio, his next role: Hollywood celebrity spouse and film-maker.


He would write 27 books (six of them in English, his sixth language after Yiddish, Russian, Polish, French, and German). Burdened by an excess of memory, by the strain of writing humanely after the wartime inhumanities, Gary tried on and cast off a series of pseudonyms and personas—in retrospect they look like a series of suicides and rebirths. He published as Shatan Bogat (Russian for “rich devil”); John Markham Beach (the fictional translator into English of Promise at Dawn); Fosco Sinibaldi; François Mermont; and most famously Emile Ajar. By means of an elaborate hoax, he became the only writer to win the prestigious Prix Goncourt twice—first in 1956 for his novel set in Africa, The Roots of Heaven, and 19 years later, as Emile Ajar, for The Life Before Us—though the rules of the prize permit an author to receive it only once.

The postwar French literary establishment resented Gary’s fame and commercial success, and more often than not dismissed him as a middlebrow. One did not read Gary’s novels, a critic said. “One would not have been seen dead reading them. Nobody read them. Except, of course, the public.” “The avant-garde are people who don’t exactly know where they want to go,” Gary answered in one of his bon mots, “but are the first to get there.”

Until the mid-1970s, Left Bank intellectuals’ political engagements (including on behalf of Stalin and Mao) camouflaged a lack of engagement with history, a turning away from the painful—and shameful—
memories of the recent French past. (Even Gary’s friend Albert Camus, who went farther than most in this respect, depicted the pestilence in *The Plague* as biological, not ethical in origin.) Gary, by contrast, put that past at the heart of his work. He set store in the old-fashioned humanist view that literature could contribute “to human enlightenment and progress” (as he wrote in *The Life and Death of Emile Ajar*). As such, Gary refused to play the part of the “engaged” writer in the style of Sartre:

I have been so overexposed to history since my early teens that the very idea of signing a manifesto, of making another purely verbal protest, denouncing another intolerable social situation just to relieve my conscience and to feel better, to feel a fine human being, fills me with shame. I cannot resist human suffering; I fill my books with it.

In his book *Hope and Memory: Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (2000), the Bulgarian French writer Tzvetan Todorov commends a group of humanists who resisted the dehumanization of the 20th century. They included Vassily Grossman, Primo Levi, and Romain Gary. In his chapter on Gary, Todorov praises the way Gary’s novels, unclouded by ideological intention and unflinching in the face of suffering, radiate colors at once “tragic” and “vibrant with joy and life.”

Nowhere is Todorov’s praise truer than in Gary’s last novel, now appearing for the first time in English in the superb translation of Miranda Richmond Mouillot, *The Kites* (originally published in 1980 as *Les Cerfs-Volants*) is a nuanced coming-of-age story set in a Europe on the road to ruin. Gary dedicated it “To Memory.” Though the book is set in the dark days of German-occupied woodlands. Some are animals: a fish “that wiggled its silvery scales and pink fins in the air,” dragonflies with iridescent wings, creatures with flapping paunches and wings shaped like ears. Other kites are figures out of French history: a Victor Hugo, a paunches and wings shaped like ears. Other kites are out of French history: a Victor Hugo, a

Romain Gary and American actress Jean Seberg at the Cannes Film Festival, May 1971. (Photo by RDA/Getty Images.)

France, it is cast in language, as Mouillot says, “as soaring and amusing and beautifully whimsical as the kites for which it was named.”

The narrator, Ludo, orphaned by his Catholic parents, is 14 years old when the novel opens in the 1930s. He lives with his uncle, the eccentric pacifist and kite maker Ambrose Fleury, in the town of Cléry in the French countryside in Normandy, near the Channel coast. The boy admires his uncle’s whimsical creations, bobbing and fluttering above the Channel coast. The boy admires his uncle’s whimsical creations, bobbing and fluttering above the

Romain Gary, signing books, ca. 1940s. (Courtesy of the Associated Press.)

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Romain Gary and American actress Jean Seberg at the Cannes Film Festival, May 1971. (Photo by RDA/Getty Images.)
of turning it into a business. My uncle ended up with an entire team of assistants. And thus, floating above the shameful camp, it was possible to see bouquets of kites whose gay colors seemed to proclaim the inextinguishable hope and faith of Ambrose Fleury.

Ambrose's luck however was not inextinguishable. Ilse Koch, the commandant's infamous wife, asks him to make for her a kite of human skin. His refusal earns him a trip to Auschwitz. Ambrose's final words to his nephew before leaving Cléry had been: "She'll be back. There will be a lot to forgive her." "I couldn't tell whether he was talking about Lila or France," Ludo says.

As D-Day approaches, Lila at last returns. Having had to sleep with German occupiers to survive, she's stigmatized as a "fallen woman." The town barber had to sleep with German occupiers to survive, she's stigmatized as a "fallen woman." "The moment the bullets pierce Cohn, his dybbuk permanently embeds itself in his murderer's soul. To the bewilderment of his colleagues, even two decades later the possessed ex-Nazi finds himself singing Yiddishe Mame and reciting Kaddish on his knees. Unlike The Kites and Promise at Dawn, it would be hard to make a purely literary case for The Dance of Genghis Cohn, though Gary did write to the New York Times to accuse Thomas Pynchon of stealing Gary's joke name for his own character Genghis Cohen in The Crying ofLot 49. (Pynchon's response: "I took the name of Lot 49 from the name of Genghis Khan (1162–1227), the well-known Mongol warrior and statesman. If Mr. Gary really believes himself to be the only writer at present able to arrive at a play on words this trivial, that is another problem entirely, perhaps more psychiatric than literary, and I certainly hope he works it out.")"

Romain Gary's work, like his life, was by no means all of a piece. Perhaps in the end the writer and the writing alike are best seen not so much under the aspect of bullshit as under the category of protean multiplicity. Perhaps Gary was possessed by a multitude of self-invented, defiantly hopeful dybbuks. Through a distinguished diplomatic career, two marriages, more than two dozen books, and a handful of films, he served as a ventriloquist to them all.

Not long before his death, in a radio interview devoted to The Kites, Gary said: "I don't always manage to apply to my life the precepts of my books, but this whole book is the story of people who don't know how to despair." In that novel, Gary writes of Ambrose the kite maker: "even the final pieces he cut his mouth and took his own life. He was 66 years old. In his suicide note, Gary quoted the last line of The Kites and signed off: "I have at last said all I have to say." The trial by fire had consumed his last I.

According to Gary's lover (and later biographer) Myriam Anissimov, "he told me that when he wrote about Jewish subjects, his books were always failures." Certainly he was ambivalent about his Jewish patrimony. Yet in the decades after his death, some critics (notably Jeffrey Mehlman and David Bellos) have read Gary's fiction as an attempt to come to terms with the memory of French complicity in the deportation and extermination of the country's Jews.

Gary's “Holocaust comedy” The Dance of Genghis Cohn (1967) can support both arguments. Among other things, it is an attempt to incorporate the Shoah into the tradition of Jewish legends. A half-Mongol and half-Jewish cabaret comedian is deported to Auschwitz. Made to stand naked on the edge of a mass grave, Genghis Cohn thrusts his bare bottom at the SS firing squad and shouts, in Yiddish, "Kush mir in tokhes!" (Cohn's ghost confesses: "There have undoubtedly been more worthy and noble last words in history than 'Kiss my ass,' but I have never made any claim to greatness and, besides, I'm quite pleased with my effort.")

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Benjamin Balint, a writer and translator living in Jerusalem, is the author of Kafka's Last Trial (forthcoming from W. W. Norton).
Succession, Secession!

BY ZALMAN ROTHSCCHILD

T he notion of zera kodesh, “holy seed,” appears only twice in the Bible, both times in reference to the people of Israel as a whole. For Hasidim, however, it has a more restricted meaning. It denotes what Samuel Heilman, in his new book *Who Will Lead Us? The Story of Five Hasidic Dynasties in America,* calls the “genealogical sanctity” of the offspring of rebbes, a characteristic that qualifies them (and almost them alone) to succeed to any vacant thrones of Hasidic courts.

A reigning rebbe’s infertility can thus create problems. These weren’t quite resolved for the Munkács rebbe Chaim Elazar Shapiro when he finally had his first child in 1915 at the age of 43, for his (second) wife gave birth to a girl. She proved to be their only child, and since she could never inherit her father’s position it was imperative that she marry, in Heilman’s words, “someone both worthy and capable of carrying on the Munkács tradition.” By the time she was 11, she was betrothed to a suitable candidate, a relative whose seed was quite holy in its own right, Boruch (Boruchel) Rabinovich. Upon his father-in-law’s death in 1936, the 23-year-old Boruchel began a career as a rebbe and, soon, an ex-rebbe in distress, one that involved peregrinations from Munkács to Poland to Budapest and, before long, to Brazil. “Breath of Hasidic etiquette” assigning a larger part in the ceremony and the celebration to himself than to the groom’s father. Boruchel endured this humiliation for as long as he could, but when Chaim Ber danced with the groom longer than he himself had, he exploded:

Saintly as they are reputed to be, rebbes are human beings vying for what is essentially political power.

Exasperated, Boruchel lunged at Chaim Ber, tearing hair from his beard, then grabbing the microphone from the band and stopping the dancing. The abrupt violence and sudden silence was frightening. Now Boruchel began a stunning tirade, letting out all his feelings. Overwhelmed by what he saw as a public slight and embarrassment, he talked about why he had left Munkács and had not settled in America. He justified his disappointments with his Hasidim.

They, in turn, became even more disappointed with Boruchel who, after taking up “a position in the Israeli state rabbinate in Holon,” engaged in a legal battle with his son over control of the valuable Munkács library. Moshe Leib, for his part, still presides over his court in Borough Park.

The peculiar story of the Munkács succession helps to explain how Hasidism managed to reinvent itself after being nearly annihilated in the Holocaust to become one of the largest Jewish denominations in America, on the way to becoming perhaps the largest. The secret of Hasidism’s success, Heilman suggests, lay in each Hasidic group’s strong drive to preserve the dynasty to which it was attached, the realization of the importance of the rebbe for the perpetuation of the group, and the ability to identify and cultivate a new generation of rebbes in the face of formidable obstacles.

W hile the main subject of Heilman’s book is Hasidic succession in the United States, he backs into the pre-American history of Hasidism to review many earlier developments, including the well-known struggle over succession that followed the death in 1812 of Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of Chabad. “The contest” between his leading disciple and his son, Heilman writes, “may have seemed ideological or personal, but in fact it was structural and economic.” Yet the very paragraph that begins with this bald assertion concludes with a partial retraction. Heilman writes that this first Chabad succession “was driven as much by a desire of the family to hold on to the Hasidim and the economic and political power of the court as any matter of ideology or spiritual development.” However, with regard to these matters of ideas and spirit, Heilman has little to say.

Unfortunately, this almost exclusive focus on material factors pervades Heilman’s entire book. This is not surprising, for he tells us forthrightly in his prologue “what this book is not.” It “is not a consideration of the writings, ideological arguments, and teachings of Hasidic rebbes or the spirituality that animates followers’ attachment to them.” But can the story of succession really be told in complete abstraction from such matters? After all, a key

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*Who Will Lead Us? The Story of Five Hasidic Dynasties in America* by Samuel C. Heilman
University of California Press, 336 pp., $29.95
part of what these men do as rebbes is teach, make ideological and interpretive arguments, and inspire their followers toward greater spirituality.

Heilman shows how rebbes seek to obtain positions that will allow them control over extensive assets that grant them economic security, power, and influence. Saintly as they are reputed to be, rebbes are human beings vying for what is essentially political power. This does indeed seem to be the case among, say, the Satmar Hasidim. When Moshe Teitelbaum, the third rebbe of Satmar, died in 2006, Aaron and Zalman Leib, his two sons, battled for control of the dynasty. With more than $50 million of assets at stake, the fighting was fierce. As Heilman reports, defenders of Aaron used verbal and physical violence, even going as far as hiring nightclub bouncers to beat up their rival’s followers.

But what is true of the Satmars today was not necessarily true of their sect at all times. Yet Heilman believes that the very first Satmar rebbe, Yoel Teitelbaum, engaged from the start in self-serving behavior. As the youngest child of the rebbe of Sighet, knowing full well that there was little to no chance that he would inherit his father’s position, he conspired, in Heilman’s account, to gain control of a Hasidic crown by unconventional means. Yoel was well known for his piety, as demonstrated by his practice of barely unbelievably regular fasting and study for long hours in seclusion. According to Heilman, however, Yoel’s pious practices were deliberate maneuvers to gain distinction and stand out in order to secure for himself the mantle of rebbe. Indeed, Heilman even suggests that Yoel decided to marry at the age of 17, not because marrying at that age was (and is) the custom of Hasidim—especially the children of rebbes—but because he had to be married in order to be a viable candidate for the position he sought.

Heilman explains Menachem Mendel Schneerson’s ascendency to the position of rebbe of Chabad in 1951 similarly. Here he expands on his 2010 biography (co-authored with Menachem Friedman) of the seventh Chabad rebbe, The Rebbe: The Life and Afterlife of Menachem Mendel Schneerson, in which he portrays Schneerson as a failed electrical engineer in need of a job, who seized upon the opportunity to become a social engineer as the Chabad rebbe. Aware that his investment of time and energy in pursuing a career in engineering had deprived him of sufficient experience and exposure to Chabad Hasidim, Schneerson made a conscious choice to play catch-up and outflank his father-in-law Shmaryahu Gourary, who had been by their father-in-law’s side for decades, who was well known to Hasidim, and whose marriage to Yosef Yitzchak’s eldest daughter had made him first in line.

According to Heilman, Schneerson positioned himself to accomplish this goal of winning the interest and loyalty of Hasidim during the year of mourning for his father-in-law. He even sat shiva, led services, and recited Kaddish in a different room from Shmaryahu, where he was able to showcase his abilities and compete with his brother-in-law for “a more enthusiastic, larger, and engaged audience.” (Never mind that it is Chabad’s custom for each mourner who accepts the responsibility of reciting Kaddish to lead his own services, of necessity in a separate room.) Since he clearly desired the position, the fact that Schneerson rejected repeated pleadings from Hasidim, including senior Hasidim with great authority, that he accept it must have been nothing but a ploy. Heilman’s cynical assessment of Yoel Teitelbaum and Menachem Mendel Schneerson is not preposterous. It is surely possible that these leading Hasidic lights did vie for their positions and craftily sought to gain control of them. Yet of all the possible explanations for their motives, one wonders why Heilman generally opts to assume the worst. Is it not possible, if not plausible, that Schneerson, for example, truly did not want to assume the position of rebbe, as he asserted repeatedly, and ultimately agreed to accept it because he felt compelled to continue his father-in-law’s work and believed that he had been called to the task? If one listens to the recording of Schneerson’s inaugural mamor (discourse given by a rebbe) on the 10th of Shevat 1951, for example, one cannot help but be moved by his tear-choked voice when he speaks of having responsibilities for which he was not given a choice.

Regrettably, Heilman’s sweeping conjectural claims about different Hasidic masters’ motivations for becoming a rebbe are matched by a similar explanation of the positions taken by the various rebbes toward messianism. He suggests that in Hasidism the concept of messianism generally reflects a concern about succession and is a means of quelling anxiety. Basing his argument on a short, thought-provoking essay by Joseph Dan, Heilman maintains that in Hasidism the rebbe and the messiah are basically interchangeable. Since both serve the same function of providing Hasidim
with material and spiritual blessing, the promise of the messiah is nothing more than a more permanent rebbetzin. From this Heilman concludes that when the pathway to a new rebbetzin is secure, there is little need for discussion of the messiah. Conversely, when there is no natural successor in sight, a messiah is needed for the Hasidim to receive the blessings of “bana, chai, u’mezonot” (children, health, substance) and spiritual guidance to which they would have grown accustomed by virtue of having had a rebbetzin.

Not surprisingly, Chabad serves as Heilman’s primary case study with which to test this theory. Although messianism was present in the teachings of all of the Chabad rebbes, beginning with its founder, Schneur Zalman of Liadi, it did take on a more urgent tone in the talks of Yosef Yitzchak, the sixth Chabad rebbetzin, and the prolific writings and discourses of Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the seventh. Of course, the easiest and most obvious explanation for Yosef Yitzchak’s increased emphasis on messianism is his experience of the horrors of Stalinist Russia and the Holocaust and the longing for redemption that it stirred in his soul. However, on Heilman’s analysis, Yosef Yitzchak took a great interest in messianism only when he realized that his grandson Barry Gourary, for whom he had once harbored great hopes, was no longer a suitable candidate to one day replace him. Similarly, Schneerson, who eventually did assume the position, stressed messianism at the outset of his tenure as rebbetzin and made it a staple of the 40-plus years that he held that office because he was childless. According to Heilman, Schneerson realized from his very first day in office that he would die without an heir; therefore, he constantly felt the need to placate his followers’ anxieties swirling around the unanswerable question of how they would eventually manage without a rebbetzin.

While it is certainly possible that Schneerson’s childlessness played a role in his messianic obsession, especially in 1988 after his wife died and his messianic teachings took a new turn, it is hard to believe that his complex messianic ideology, worked out over the course of four decades, can be reduced to his anxiety over succession. In his 2009 book Open Secret, Elliot Wolfson persuasively argued that Schneerson’s messianism represents a type of monistic hyper-consciousness, built on nearly two centuries of Chabad teachings, which had little to do with the messiah or the blessings and comforts the messiah might provide. Even if one disagrees with Wolfson’s analysis, his work at the very least proves that Schneerson’s messianism was a highly nuanced and sophisticated work of theology. The lives of Hasidic masters cannot be as easily detached from their ideas as Heilman would like to think.

Nonetheless, Who Will Lead Us? includes many great stories, all of them sharply and engagingly told. Heilman’s account of the fight over the leadership of the Bobovers (resolved after years of infighting by the hard cover volume alone. By zeroing in, however, on only the most material aspects of his subject, he has made some of the all-too-human leaders of Hasidism look more ordinary than they really are.

Zalman Rothschild holds a PhD from New York University in Judaic studies and will complete his JD at Harvard in 2018.
History of a Passé Future

BY RACHEL BIALE

We Were the Future: A Memoir of the Kibbutz
by Yael Neeman, translated by Sondra Silverston
Overlook Duckworth, 256 pp., $26.95

Neeman describes a melancholy trajectory from a childhood “dipped in gold” to the realization that “we were born to a star whose light had long since died.”

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n 1945, Martin Buber famously called it the one utopian experiment that had not failed. And for decades, the kibbutz took pride of place among Israel’s most innovative accomplishments. But with a post-1967 capitalist juggernaut bulldozing the old socialist experiments, the kibbutz ideal has undergone, by now, five decades of disillusion and disintegration, followed by a re-fashioning to save community at the expense of its original (and naïve) idealism. Most kibbutzim have either partially or fully privatized, once bustling dining rooms are now largely empty, and agricultural labor is more likely to be performed by Thai migrant laborers than by the “New Hebrew Man” envisioned by their founders.

Kibbutz education spearheaded these changes. At their inception, the children’s house and collective education were to shape a new kind of emotionally healthy person unfettered by the crippling bonds of the traditional or bourgeois Jewish family. Over the last two decades or so, a cultural backlash has set in among some of those raised in children’s houses. In a small avalanche of art and writing, both memoir and fiction, graduates of the utopian educational system opened up a public reckoning with an upbringing they often depicted as traumatic. Yael Neeman’s We Were the Future is one of the very few of these testimonies to appear in English. As such, it offers a window into a virile tradition kibbutz founders sought through the eyes of children such as herself: “Their intention was . . . to separate the children from the oppressive weight of their parents . . . to protect the children from the bourgeois nature of the family.” “The Internationale” was sung at every kibbutz holiday: “We flint stones, like the cavemen we’d learned about—but (fortunately) we failed. There were the mandatory afternoon naps when you had to lie still in bed, without even being allowed to go to the bathroom. In the middle of the night frightened children would sometimes run to their parents’ homes, often to be forcibly returned.

As Neeman describes, we lived with a strange mix of anxiety and security: We dreaded infiltrators entering the kibbutz and the howling jackals, but, at the same time, we were unafraid to be left alone at night, taking care of ourselves. Our courage stemmed from an abiding sense of solidarity. In my room in kindergarten, we had a boy who still wet his bed. We would wake up before dawn and change his sheets and pajamas, stuffing the wet ones deep in the middle of the laundry basket, so the metapelet (caretaker) wouldn’t find them in the morning and he would be spared humiliation. We were only four years old but already understood it was up to us to take care of everyone in our group and make things right on our own.

Adopting the narrative voice of young children, almost always using “we,” rather than “I,” allows Neeman to capture this collective identity. “We were so close to each other, all day and all night,” she writes. “Yet we knew nothing about ourselves.” This is deeply sad and it rings true of at least some kibbutz children. The lack of self-knowledge among kibbutz children was already noted by Bruno Bettelheim in his controversial, yet influential, critique of the kibbutz upbringing, The Children of the Dream (1969). Nevertheless, it must be noted that those who grew up in the children’s houses have, as a rule, turned out no different than the norm in Israeli society.

Neeman’s decision to write from a child’s perspective in the first-person plural also has significant drawbacks. One often wonders whether
she is truly capturing the collective consciousness of her children’s house in the 1960s or reading later attitudes into it. For instance, in describing what she and her peers knew of the siege of her kibbutz, Yehiam, during the 1948 War of Independence, Neeman writes, “was it an attack on Yehiam, or in the Auschwitz camps? One convoy merged with another; an armored vehicle with a train.” But in kibbutz education, stories of the 1948 war were deliberately marshaled as tales of heroism and victory in diametric opposition to the narrative of the Holocaust, so this conflation seems unlikely.

It is possible that Neeman’s conflation of war in Israel and war in Europe can be attributed to her youth, but her naiveté isn’t simply limited to early childhood. She doesn’t mention the Yom Kippur War at all, which took place when she was 13, took the life of one of Yehiam’s young men, and was an unprecedented national trauma. Later, stationed in a Jordan Valley IDF base, she meets a fellow soldier awaiting trial for refusing to serve in the occupied territories. “Only then did I realize that the battalion was in the occupied territories.” This is simply not credible. Her kibbutz was in the left-wing Hashomer Hatzair movement where political education and activism were both vigorous and mandatory. No one with such an education would have been this oblivious.

Neeman’s choice of the first-person plural becomes odd, and, I would argue, both distorting and confusing. The “we” switches meaning from “I” to “I and my siblings” when she discusses her own family, to “I and the other kibbutz children.” She recalls a rare occasion of sleeping in her parents’ home: “[We] slept in our parents’ house, a strange and terrifying sleep. Our parents’ close proximity seemed sick and crazy, as if we were locked in an embrace with death, which sang us a lullaby.” For me and all the other kibbutz kids I’ve ever known, the rare “sleepovers” at our parents’ were a treat; our “we” cannot be included in Neeman’s “we.”

I have little doubt that Neeman’s family was atypical children too, though undoubtedly deeply informed by the experience of collective education, ended up as adults who reflected their nuclear family more than the communal environment.

For me and all the other kibbutz kids I’ve ever known, the rare “sleepovers” at our parents’ were a treat.

It would be unfortunate if the English reader’s sole exposure to recent books about the kibbutz were limited to We Were the Future. Assaf Inbari’s Ha-baita (Going Home, 2009), which has not been translated yet, portrays the founding generation of his kibbutz, Afikim (south of the Kinneret), with both loving compassion and ironic distance. He enters into the founders’ minds, their conversations, their almost religious devotion to work, their ardor for the land and the place they lovingly call the Russian diminutive “Totchka” (the spot). He also perceptively dissects their inability to comprehend and integrate the radical changes in the kibbutz taking place before their eyes, telling a story at once inspiring and heart-breaking.

Amos Oz’s Bein chaverim was translated as Between Friends in 2014, although the English title cannot render the layered meaning of “chaverim” in the kibbutz: friends, comrades—with all the old socialist connotations—and fellow kibbutz members. Oz’s linked short stories are psychologically complex and astute, the very qualities missing in Neeman’s book. All of the kibbutz members, including the powerful movers and shakers, are lonely, wounded, and emotionally stifled. But there are also fleeting moments of grace and kindness.

As it happens, Oz and Neeman shared a translator for their kibbutz books, Sondra Silverton. Generally speaking, Silverton provides us a good translation but it is marred by occasional odd choices and infelicities. For instance, she misses what is going on in Neeman’s description of how children were befuddled by a sign posted in every kibbutz car. It warned against throwing cigarette butts and matches out of the window. Like Neeman, we misread “bidlei” (butts) as “ba-dli” (in the pail). Silverton never explains the misreading, leaving us puzzled about this mysterious “pail.”

The 19th-century historian Moritz Steinschneider famously—and utterly erroneously—said that the task of his school of scholarship was “to give Judaism a decent burial.” Neeman perhaps has set out to undertake a similar task, but the patient, the utopian kibbutz, died long ago and the time now is not for eulogies, but for and a more accurate historical assessment.

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City on a Hilltop: American Jews and the Israeli Settler Movement
by Sara Yael Hirschhorn
Harvard University Press, 368 pp., $39.95

The pizza in Efrat is delicious. There's a shop in the southern part of the settlement that serves large slices with thick crusts and real cheese, which is not surprising since it is located in a West Bank settlement that is heavily populated by immigrants from the United States.

American Jews are no rarity in the West Bank, as is well known, and the tens of thousands who reside there have for a long time received a great deal of media and scholarly attention. In City on a Hilltop: American Jews and the Israeli Settler Movement, Sara Hirschhorn presents a history of the American participants in the settler movement, including those who once established themselves in, but were long ago removed from, the Sinai Peninsula. Her valuable book provides a wealth of information about these people, even if it leaves readers wondering about some crucial aspects of their lives and experiences.

Hirschhorn's account begins almost inevitably with Israel's astonishing victory in the Six-Day War, which she describes as a "watershed" moment for American Jewry that "profoundly reconfigured the emotional concerns of those who would migrate to Israel and the occupied territories." However, she also moves beyond the "cosmic drama" of 1967 to reflect on the impact of the Holocaust, the revival of ethnicity, and a marked disillusionment with the politics of the New Left that both pushed and pulled certain American immigrants toward the settlements in Israel's newly acquired territories. Her book makes a convincing case that these immigrants were inspired just as much by American progressive values of "pioneering and building new, utopian, suburbanized communities" as they were by ancient biblical imperatives. Hence her very apt title choice, which of course echoes the 17th-century Massachusetts Bay Colony governor John Winthrop's call to build a "city upon a hill" that would be a moral beacon for others. If the settlements have fallen short of such grand ideals, as she clearly believes they have, it is in large part because the area in which the settlers sought to implement them was not a vacant wilderness but a land raving with conflict.

At the center of her book are three chapters that describe the establishment of the settlements of Yarat, Gush Etzion Bloc, south of Jerusalem, and Efrat and Tekoa (south of Jerusalem). Contingents of American Jews played a central part in the founding of all three communities, and Hirschhorn utilizes their stories to highlight both the opportunities and problems presented by the settlement project. She does an expert job of interviewing major figures from each settlement and in capturing the personal, the humorous, and sometimes the deeply emotional dimensions of the lives of these self-described pioneers. Throughout the narrative Hirschhorn works to offer a complex understanding of American Jewish settlement in the West Bank and Sinai, one that is marked by historical empathy, which is not to say sympathy (or antipathy).

At this she succeeds notably in her chapter on Yarat, in which she introduces us to Chaim Feifel, the energetic and determined founder of Garin Yarat. Claiming that "I'm not a spectator, I'm a ball-player, I want to be where the action is," Feifel and his wife, Sarah, founded the garin (seed community) in 1974. Feifel wrote back to the U.S. that "the citizens all have their share of gripes and complaints, but they also take matters into their own hands to try and effect positive change." If life never quite measured up to the settlers' original ideals, it at least seemed to be on the upswing. In August 1976 Feifel wrote back to the United States that "the citizens all have their share of gripes and complaints, but they also take matters into their own hands to try and effect positive change." The whole project however was very soon taken out of these citizens' hands, since the price of peace included their evacuation. By 1982 Yarat had been leveled and the land on which it had briefly stood had been returned to Egypt, but not without harsh scenes of violence between the IDF and those (mostly outside groups) who opposed the peace process. Hirschhorn documents how the American cadre was generally prepared to pay the price of peace, and the violent resisters, including a small number of Kahanists who threatened suicide, had little to do with the garin's inhabitants. Looking back in 2014 at what was and could have been, "Garin Yarat's Jewish-American 'father' Chaim Feifel" could still wax nostalgic: "I did things that I never thought I could do... It was one of the six and a half best years of my life."

Hirschhorn tells Yarat's story within the context of the "political debates about future withdrawals from the occupied territories in the interest of peace." When she relates how one set of young Jewish American idealists steeped in the liberalism of the 1960s "abandoned their city of the sea, looking to the horizon of peace between Israel and her neighbors," one cannot help but suspect that she is silently asking whether a similar process might once again unfold in the West Bank, where American Jews have also maintained a considerable presence.

The settlements of Efrat and Tekoa are both located within the Gush Etzion bloc south of Jerusalem, and both, Hirschhorn writes, illustrate "the clash between Jewish-American liberal ideology and settler realities." The story of Efrat dates...
back to 1976 when Manhattan-based Modern Orthodox rabbi Shlomo Riskin and one of his followers founded Garin Reishit Geula (Seed Colony for the Origins of Redemption). By 1979 Reishit Geula consisted of 181 families, and in 1980, shortly after the signing of the Camp David Peace Accords, construction at the site began. Hirschhorn describes Riskin as a "quixotic and controversial" figure whose Zionist vision "combined apocalypticism with American utopianism." Like his allies in the religious settler movement, Gush Emunim, Riskin viewed the Six-Day War as a unique opportunity to "raise Jewish consciousness" by promoting "a program of large scale aliyā [that could] provide a crucial impetus to the growth of Torah Judaism in Israel." His utopian vision of religious nationalist sovereignty notwithstanding, Riskin worried greatly about taking possession of the entire West Bank and thus depriving the area’s Arab residents of what he considered to be their rights. "You couldn't give the Arabs less than we asked for ourselves as a minority people," Riskin once responded to the spiritual head of Gush Emunim, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook (son of the famed rabbi Abraham Isaac ha-Cohen Kook), after being asked why he didn’t join his messianic movement.

Though Efrat has been beset by charges of illegal appropriations of land from neighboring Palestinians, Hirschhorn notes that "unlikely alliances" did form there "between Jewish-American immigrants and local Palestinian villages." In the 1980s and 1990s Rabbi Riskin, who believed "that dialogue was a divine commandment," tried to forge informal relationships with Efrat's Palestinian neighbors, even hosting Palestinian leaders in his home during the First Intifada. But over the years, as Efrat has prospered and grown into a municipality of approximately 9,000, these relationships have withered. Riskin himself, as Hirschhorn notes, changed his political philosophy after the First Intifada and the launching of the Oslo process:

"We've worked hard to develop a reputation for fairness toward our Arab neighbors," Riskin boasted in an interview [in 1995], but he had clearly had a change of heart about national sovereignty, as "this land is too small for a separate Palestinian state. It's a prescription for war, and I don't want to commit suicide—that's also an ethical value."

No American-born rabbi played a part similar to Shlomo Riskin's in the history of the much smaller settlement of Tekoa, established by American graduates of the Revisionist Zionist youth group Betar not far east of Efrat at what seemed to them at first to be "the end of the world." While they were imbued from the start with Zionist passion, these young escapees from the America of the radical 1960s and 1970s also "envisioned making the modern state bloom in a uniquely American fashion," as they wanted, in the words of their leader, Bobby Brown, "to build and produce, to advance academic research, and infuse the American style of professionalism into Israel's communication industry."

They soon learned that they would have to do so in the face of considerable violence directed against them, which only intensified during the first and second Palestinian uprisings, and continues today. When confronted with the grim realities of life in the West Bank, some American expatriates began to question the liberal attitudes that they had brought with them to the Holy Land. "It was peace, love, and happiness when I first moved here," maintained Murray Allon, formerly from Brooklyn, in 1991. "I thought we're making peace with the Arabs by living with them. They work with me, I visit, they visit. I thought we were moving in the right direction, but the intifada threw me for a loop."

Another American immigrant, Eli Birnbaum, described in an interview with Hirschhorn "punitive actions" where settlers would "come with sticks and break the windows. A simple thing. Not overly violent . . . We didn't go and beat anyone up . . . that was our way of telling the Arabs we are not going to sit and be quiet." Other Tekoa settlers broke their silence in different ways. After American David Rosenfeld was murdered in 1982 in a bloody knife attack at the site of the ancient Herodian fortress, members of Tekoa, including Bobby Brown’s wife, Linda, responded with the classical Zionist move of establishing a new outpost. Their encampment in

A settler tends to his goats at an outpost settlement near Tekoa, south of Jerusalem, June 2003. (Photo by Orel Cohen/ AFP/Getty Images.)

A Palestinian shepherd near the Israeli settlement of Efrat, March 22, 2017. (Photo by Gershon Elinson/FLASH90.)
with key Palestinian figures, including the spiritual leader of Hamas, Ahmed Yassin. “For the most part,” Hirschhorn tells us, “American-Israelis in the settlement were sanguine about their controversial spiritual leader.” As Bobby Brown put it in an interview with Hirschhorn in 2009,

Look, we have . . . a very special rabbi. He has warm relations with Hamas, with all kinds of people who I would say 99.9 percent of the community doesn’t like. Some people like him less, some people like him more, certainly he is controversial in our eyes . . . yet he lives here.

City on a Hilltop closes with a chapter that focuses on one specific settlement but on various extremists and moderates within the American Jewish settler camp in general. The extremist minority includes of course the notorious Baruch Goldstein, who in 1994 massacred 29 Palestinian worshippers at the Cave of Machpelah, as well as lesser-known figures such as Eta Rapaport and Jack Teitel, who also committed heinous acts of violent terror against Palestinians. Most American Jews in the West Bank, as Hirschhorn makes clear, have “rejected . . . vigilantism for both ideological and tactical reasons.” But Hirschhorn spends less time elucidating these reasons than she does describing groups of Israeli American settlers who have turned their activism into professional careers as English-language media spokespeople, politicians, journalists, and lobbyists, many of whom have defended the settlement enterprise with what she calls “American-style rights talk.” Hirschhorn cites the spokeswoman and translator Shira Blass, for instance, who marched on Washington in 1968, vociferously objecting to settlement bans in the occupied territories in 2009 as “outrageous in terms of human rights . . . Could they really say [you can’t live here] because you are a Jew?”

City on a Hilltop is superbly researched, altogether accessible, and will dispel many lazy stereotypes about the people whose story it tells. But it leaves out just in the Middle Eastern Jewish “city on a hilltop,” just as in the New England Puritan “city upon a hill,” there are divergent answers to the question of how to construct a utopia whose influence would shine out. Hirschhorn however does tell us enough about the settlers’ differing views with regard to Israeli society, politics, and religion. Her account of Tekoa’s pluralism does touch on such matters, but a thicker description of the settlers’ own understanding of their relationship to the rest of Israel would have greatly enriched her narrative.

City on a Hilltop glosses over another highly significant aspect of the settlements’ religious life. While giving us for instance some sense of Rabbi Riskin’s theological bent, it really doesn’t clarify the nature of his fundamental beliefs about the relationship between political Zionism and an ultimate messianic redemption. An equally important American-born resident of the West Bank, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, is mentioned only once, and merely as one of Riskin’s teachers back in the United States. A son-in-law of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik and a co-dean of Yeshivat Har Etzion in Alon Shvut, Lichtenstein was one of the few rabbinic figures in the West Bank who did not automatically oppose the Oslo Accords’ land-for-peace paradigm on religious grounds. He and other American Jewish immigrants in the Gush Etzion bloc and beyond have been instrumental in introducing into the Israeli religious sphere a pragmatic understanding of the messianic idea that competes with the mystical convictions of Gush Emunim. On closer examination, Riskin’s messianism, and that of the community he founded, may not turn out to be quite as “apocalyptic” as Hirschhorn would have us believe it.

Efrat itself may have a touch of “Occupied Scarsdale” to it, to borrow the phrase of one of the town’s critics whom Hirschhorn cites, with its “two major commercial complexes with full-service supermarkets and . . . other businesses, such as a dry cleaner, clothing boutique, optometry clinic, toy store, Judaica gift shop, post office, bagel bakery and café, pizzeria, and hamburger chain franchise.” But just beneath the placid suburban surface, there is a decidedly different reality. That excellent pizzeria for instance is owned by a man whose soldier son died in a parachute accident. According to army reports, he cut his own cords and fell to his death when his reserve chute couldn’t open in time, ultimately sacrificing his own life in order to save his commander. I have heard Rabbi Riskin speak about this incident, which he calls a true Kiddush Hashem, a sanctification of God’s name. Efrat’s pizza shop, presided over by a man whose sadness is etched in his face, might look like it’s in America, but it’s part of a story that is uniquely and irredubitably Israeli.

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The Last Bedtime Story: Roz Chast’s Sort-of Tour Guide

BY MATTHUE ROT

Going into Town: A Love Letter to New York
by Roz Chast
Bloomsbury, 176 pp., $28

Over the past four decades, the cartoonist Roz Chast has become a fixture at the New Yorker, which has published nearly a thousand of her slice-of-life meditations. They swerve from memoir to satire or social commentary, and occasionally to something like philosophy. Her recurring themes include relationships, midlife/post-midlife crises, mom brain, and New York urban living. Among her characteristic captions are “The Gingerbread Man Hits 50,” “Urban Trail Mix”—the accompanying drawing is a bag full of anxiety meds—and “Orpheus Descends into the Laundry Room.”

That last cartoon is emblematic of Chast’s work, blending high and low, the casual with the sublime, the eternal with the ephemeral. Even her earliest cartoons for the New Yorker (she’s been appearing in its pages since 1978) and other outlets are marked with a sort of resigned wisdom. There’s often a heady, cerebral anxiety running through the background of her work, but in the forefront there is rarely anything but warmth. Her subjects, even the wacky ones and the lonely ones and the sad ones, are depicted kindly and with empathy.

She’s also, to be honest, not very funny—not in a conventional way, anyway. Her comics aren’t laugh-out-loud funny and they’re not chuckle-to-yourself funny. Rather, one looks at Chast’s waver lines and the wry text of her cartoons and slowly realizes the perfect aptness and humor of her observations. And one feels that one knows her.

Her new book, Going into Town: A Love Letter to New York, begins with an anecdote that doubles as a curious confession: Chast and her family successfully fled the city 27 years ago for the (relative) affordability of suburbia. In the book’s early pages she describes the move as bewildering: A panel depicts her two-year-old son toddling down a street lined with multicolored, empty crack vials, saying “I eat dat.” Four pages later, we find Chast looking perplexed in front of a big oak, thinking: “I own this tree.” Flash forward and the author’s daughter is going away to college in New York. “I own this tree.” Flash forward and the author’s daughter is going away to college in New York.

It is a charming book, and a surprisingly personal one, as if Chast needs to tell her daughter one last favorite story before she leaves home. She paints the city as a very private, very personal playground where she spent the most significant years of her life. Her career has been spent crafting loving portrayals of its inhabitants and their neuroses, and suddenly her daughter has announced her intention to have her own relationship with the city, to lay claim to it on her own terms.

Chast’s book, like the city, is fast but full of surprises, and stumbling across each one is a small joy. Even while giving over a lesson as simple as the north-south direction of avenues (as opposed to streets), there’s something charming and compelling about her sloppy, dramatically not-to-scale maps.

Upon turning to a two-page splash of cartoon-Chast entering a shop that sells only ribbon, I inadvertently uttered an audible cry of delight while on the B train traversing the Manhattan Bridge—“I’ve been to that shop!”—causing, of course, my fellow straphangers to glare in silent disapproval and wonder whether I was insane or merely a tourist who had just realized I could see the Statue of Liberty from there.

This book then is an impassioned, revealing parental monologue of the sort that is both necessary and almost inevitably ignored, the ephemeral prayers we say as our children slip off to sleep or out of the house.

Chast is a product of New York—not Manhattan but Brooklyn, its bigger and dirtier misshapen kid sister. Nowadays it is glamorous, but in Chast’s childhood it was the cheaper, crappier version of the Lower East Side, where Jews like those of her parents’ and grandparents’ generations moved to live modest lower-middle-class lives. Throughout the book, Chast interjects bits of her own parents’ ambivalent relationship with Manhattan. They boarded the subway and made the cross-borough voyage only occasionally and only to see a Broadway show, never stopping in a restaurant, never lingering. “My mother blamed her bad feet,” she writes, “but I suspect there were other concerns.” A cacophony of word bubbles follows: Pickpockets! Dirty! Too expensive! Crowded! Mrs. Zimmerman ate at one of those restaurants* and she found a cockroach in her lasagna! (The asterisk leads us to this text: “i.e., any place in Manhattan.”) Elsewhere in the book,
Chast tells us that whenever her father went into Manhattan he brought his own food with him: a piece of honey cake wrapped in wax paper or graham crackers in a bag. And yet, she writes, the city is a paradise of food: “If you can’t find what you want to eat here, maybe you don’t like food.”

In such vignettes, Chast's parents come off as small-minded, xenophobic, and poor. It's not that she’s belittling them, but there is an underlying feeling: *Thank God I escaped that, and I can give my daughter something better*. In the book’s first pages, Chast tells us that when her family decided to leave Manhattan their choice was either the suburbs or Brooklyn, near her parents. “For some people, this would have been a plus,” she writes, “but I had ‘mixed feelings.’” What follows is an explosion of *NO* scribbled all over the page.

Chast gets much of Manhattan spot-on. Practically the only thing she doesn’t talk about is money. Life in Manhattan is hard to achieve, she admits, but it has always been hard. The “Stuff to Do” chapter features a lot of free museums and activities, but it paints thriftiness as a fun leisure-time activity rather than a legitimate question of survival in this city where a restaurant bill might be more than you earn in a day. Her Manhattan is a wonderful, cacophonous collection of cultures, a kind of amusement park. There is an almost willful refusal in this book to admit the endangered quality of the spots and people Chast treasures. The city is thriving, as it was not when Chast fled its crack vial–infested streets, but these days there are a lot fewer of her beloved places and things. “Stores of Mystery,” and a lot more unpopulated Chase ATM walk-in kiosks.

As a fantastic and successful cartoonist for the *New Yorker*, Chast is an example of a certain kind of Manhattan fairy tale come true, and the charming, buoyant optimism that runs through this book is one way she acknowledges this. When she comes to Grand Central Terminal, she describes the lovingly restored astrological murals that adorn its ceiling. The terminal narrowly avoided being replaced with a squat, ugly box building, but the murals remind us, Chast says, that “sometimes, the good guys win.”

In the book’s later chapters, Chast discusses the nitty-gritty of Manhattan living. She tells her daughter about crosstown subway navigation, all-night diners, window shopping, and museums. She provides a list of her five favorite parks—all text, no illustration—including favorite little details, while leaving it to the reader to discover how big or small they are, how dangerous or inviting.

She paints the city as a very private, very personal playground where she spent the most significant years of her life.

Chast’s illustrations disappear all but entirely in the book’s final pages, when she turns to E. B. White’s 1949 guidebook *Here Is New York* for a couple of meaty, meaningful quotes. White’s book came out in the years after World War II, at the beginning of the baby boom, when refugees from Europe emptied into America, when a whole new surge of non-native New Yorkers would claim the city for their own reasons. In an eerily prescient paragraph, White wrote:

“The city, for the first time in its long history, is destructible. A single flight of planes . . . can quickly end this island fantasy, burn the towers, crumble the bridges, turn the underground passages into lethal chambers, cremate the millions. . . . All dwellers in cities must live with the stubborn fact of annihilation . . . [but] New York has a certain clear priority. In the mind of whatever perverted dreamer might loose the lightning, New York must hold a steady, irresistible charm.

To which Chast adds, in her own voice:

But New York came back. This is the best place in the world, an experiment, a melting pot, a fight to the death, an opera, a musical comedy, a tragedy, none of the above, all of the above. We’re a target for seekers and dreamers and also nuts. We live here anyway.

Maybe she’s right that New York is an indestructible phoenix. *Going into Town*, which began as a “sort-of guide” for her daughter and became “a thank-you letter and a love letter to my hometown and New Yorkers everywhere,” ends with a grainy snapshot of Chast and her mother bundled up for winter, standing in front of a subway station.

Matthue Roth’s most recent book is the novel *Rules of My Best Friend’s Body* (*Hevria Press*). Among several other titles, he is the author of the picture book *My First Kafka: Runaways, Rodents, and Giant Bugs* (*One Peace Books*). He’s written for *Sesame Street* and helped create the personality of the Google Assistant. He lives in Brooklyn and keeps a secret diary at mattheuh.com.
A Tale of Two Stories

BY ALLAN ARKUSH

The Story of the Jews, Volume Two: Belonging, 1492–1900
by Simon Schama
HarperCollins, 800 pp., $39.99

Et Hadashah (A New Age: Eighteenth-Century European Jewry, 1700–1750)
by Shmuel Feiner
The Zalman Shazar Center, 590 pp., 128.70 NIS

I was aware that Simon Schama’s *The Story of the Jews* was a television series before I knew that it was also going to be a book, and that may be why I didn’t even look at the first volume, which covered the years from 1000 B.C.E. to 1492 C.E., when it came out a few years ago. But I found it more difficult to resist the second volume. It was hard not to be curious about what a historian of his caliber would have to say about the Jews of an era he knows so well. Before I opened the book, I have to admit, I also experienced a bit of anticipatory Schadenfreude. I more than half expected that Schama would prove to be as dilettantish in his treatment of his own people’s history as any number of other prominent Jewish scholars who have turned aside from their main concerns to concentrate for a while on more parochial matters. Although I’m not proud of it, I looked forward to making a joke or two at the expense of a man whose literary accomplishments dwarf my own.

And, in truth, there are some real bloopers in *The Story of the Jews, Volume Two: Belonging, 1492–1900*. In a section devoted to the ill-fated early-18th-century messianic agitator Judah the Hasid, Schama misnames his deputy Hayim Malakh (angel) as Hayim Melech (king). This wouldn’t have been so bad if Schama hadn’t gone on to say that “Hayim Melech turned out to be king in name only.” Elsewhere, placing too much weight on the severe animadversions in the Talmud and kabbalistic writings against masturbation, Schama wrongly maintains that “the deliberate spilling of semen was regarded in Jewish law as a far more serious transgression than adultery.” But these and other missteps, errors, and omissions are not really egregious, and they are outweighed by the book’s many virtues.

As readers of Schama’s previous books know, he is a first-rate raconteur with a very broad reach. The Jewish story, he enthusiastically told his readers in the brief foreword to Volume One, has “a lot more to it than pogroms and rabbincities, a chronicle peopled by ancient victims and modern conquerors.” This sounded like an announcement that he was going to steer clear of the old-fashioned, much denigrated “lachrymose history,” with its focus on suffering and scholarship, along with more recent tendencies to lionize the commanders of the IDF. To see how Schama will treat Moshe Dayan and Yitzhak Rabin, we will have to wait for Volume Three, but in Volume Two at least he gives ample coverage to all sorts of persecution of Jews from one end of the world to the other and has a lot to say about the Jewish study-house as well. His best stories, however, in tune with the volume’s subtitle, are about more or less successful attempts at “belonging.”

Several of the book’s principal episodes unfold in Great Britain, where Schama himself was born (he now teaches at Columbia). One story he tells is that of Daniel Mendoza, the London-born Sephardi boxer who in the late 18th century began “an entirely new chapter” in modern Jewish history—that of “the Jew who fights back.” Using contemporary newspaper accounts as well as Mendoza’s own book, *The Modern Art of Boxing*, Schama colorfully describes the highlights of his career, including his ongoing rivalry with Richard Humphreys, who was “at that time England’s paragon of pugilistic grace, force and elegance.”

The two fighters’ third and final battle took place on September 29, 1790, and “it became a commonplace of the writing of the time that no British eyes or ears paid the revolution in France much heed for they were all on Humphreys and Mendoza.” After all the blows were exchanged, “Mendoza laid Dick Humphreys on the floor of the ring as though he were putting a child to sleep.” Mendoza was never the same again after this tough fight, but his fame endured, and when he went on a countrywide tour with a circus, “[t]he whole of Britain wanted to see the wonder who was ‘not the Jew that Shakespeare drew’.” The boxer had always wanted to “show his countrymen that a Jew could be a ‘manly’ Briton too,” and nothing fulfilled this wish better than the friendly and admiring reception he received from the king and the royal family. He had, in Schama’s words, shown that, “He was the best of the British, and still every bit Mendoza the Jew.”

A cross the Channel at the same time, Jews were engaged in a different kind of struggle for acceptance. Schama knows this period of French history as well as anyone, but in his rightly celebrated *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (1989) he had little to say about French Jews’ battle in the years after the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen to be counted among the people who benefited from it. Now, however, he emphasizes that the fate of the Yiddish-speaking majority of Jews in France constituted an important “test case, both of the nation’s promised homogeneity, and its capacity to ‘regenerate’ even those it judged unpromising human specimens.”

Schama more than makes up for his earlier neglect by supplying us with a vivid and illuminating account of the debates over the Jews’ eligibility for citizenship in the French National Assembly between 1789 and 1791. More than any other Jewish historian’s treatment of these debates (and there are many), it rests on a deep knowledge of the key participants in them. Everyone quotes Count Stanislas de Clermont-Tonnerre’s statement that, “We must refuse everything to the Jews as a nation and accord everything to Jews as individuals,” but who else notes that he came from an old military family and observes that this “gave him first-hand knowledge of just how much the royal army owed to Jewish contractors and purveyors for their effectiveness in the field”? And other Jewish historians, their eyes pinned solely on the Jews’ ultimately successful struggle, all dispense with Clermont-Tonnerre as soon as he

Schama’s story of the Jews in the modern world isn’t entirely about belonging or failing to belong.

A Capuchin friar disposing of his habit to a Jewish second-hand clothes dealer during the French Revolution, 1789. (Carnavalet, Paris, Alamy.)
The longest stories that Schama tells in his chapter on American Jewry are of those two cousins who flourished during the first half of the 19th century, at a time when the officially free and equal Jews of the United States still had to cope with “an anti-Semitic undercurrent so deep and strong that no constitutional amendment was ever going to dispel it.” Both Uriah Phillips Levy and the considerably more famous Mordecai Manuel Noah defiantly set precedents and stood up for their own rights and those of other Jews.

Levy fought his way up the ladder in the U.S. Navy in the face of what he called “a large share of the prejudice and hostility by which, for so many ages the Jew has been pursued.” He had to fight even to stay on the ladder in 1835 when a deeply biased “Plucking Commission” sought to rescind his commission as an officer, but he eventually became Commodore Levy, commander of the United States Mediterranean squadron. From 1834 until a year into the Civil War (when the Confederate government seized it as the property of an “enemy alien”) he was also the de facto Egyptian squadron. From 1834 until a year into the Civil War (when the Confederate government seized it as the property of an “enemy alien”) he was also the de facto Egyptian squadron. Levy’s career was his noble but quixotic effort in the early 1820s to create for persecuted Jews “an asylum within America.” Schama quickly but evocatively describes the odd dedication ceremony on Grand Island, in the Niagara River near Buffalo, characteristically singling out the fact that Noah, who wanted “a quasi-priestly robe,” for the occasion could come up with only “a Richard III costume borrowed from a local theatrical group.”

When Schama crosses the Rhine, his story of the Jews’ steps toward “belonging” has fewer heroes, Jewish or Gentile. Moses Mendelssohn and his progressive circle of Jews and Gentiles receive their fair share of attention, but when he is finished with them Schama focuses much more on those Jews who didn’t want to belong in Germany, and those Gentiles that didn’t want them, than those who felt otherwise. He talks about Karl Marx, “who defined Judaism as gold-madness”; Richard Wagner’s “biologising of Jew-hatred”; and Moses Hess’s publication in 1862 of his Rome and Jerusalem, in which he declared “the liberal experiment in integration and assimilation” to be a failure and called for the Jews’ return to Palestine. But Schama doesn’t even mention Gabriel Riesser, the proud fighter for Jewish emancipation in Germany who served as the vice president of the revolutionary Frankfurt Parliament that outlawed religious discrimination in 1848. The tragic turn in the German Jewish story in the 20th century seems to have precluded any celebration on Schama’s part of some of its ephemeral successes in the 19th.

Schama’s story of the Jews in the modern world isn’t entirely about belonging or failing to belong. Much of it is about Jews who struck out on their own. I knew, for instance, of Rabbi Adolf Jellinek as a scholar, preacher, and leader of the Viennese Jewish community in the second half of the 19th century, but I had no idea that the Mercedes was named after his granddaughter. From Schama I learned of the rabbi’s wayward son Emil, who dropped out of school and went to work for a railway company that fired him when “he was discovered to be organising nocturnal locomotive races.” Emil subsequently moved to Morocco, where he and his Sephardi wife gave their daughter “the pretty name of Mercedes.” After moving to France and making some money in the insurance business, Emil “became intrigued by a motorised four-seater carriage and its inventor Wilhelm Maybach.”

On balance, I think, there is more in Schama’s second volume about how the Jews were fitting into the world than how they weren’t. The overall framework of Schama’s journey through more than four centuries of Jewish history suggests however that the author himself sees things from a somewhat different perspective. The book’s first chapter, entitled “Could It Be Now,” retells the sad story of the 16th-century messianic adventurers David Ha-Reuveni...
and Solomon Molkho, who died in the process of promoting “the grand design of Jewish redemption.” The last chapter, which follows a fairly lachrymose account of the emergence of modern anti-Semitism in Central Europe, the Russian pogroms of 1881–1882, and the early stages of the Lovers of Zion and the First Aliyah (the subject of Schama’s second book), is entitled “Should It Be Now,” and contains a highly sympathetic treatment of Theodor Herzl and the creation of the Zionist movement.

Bucking one of the regnant trends in Jewish historiography, Schama says not a word about the origins in late-19th-century tsarist Russia of the socialist Bund (the General Jewish Workers’ Union in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia) and its alternative ideal of doikeit (hereness), a diasporic solution to the “Jewish problem.” But if there is a Zionist teleology here, it isn’t uncritical. Schama’s account of the early Zionist movement is sprinkled with hints of the problems the whole enterprise would ultimately face as a result of its internal tensions as well as its failure to give due consideration to the presence of a significant Arab population in the land it was trying to obtain. I’m curious to see how he will deal with all of this in Volume Three.

Schama clearly draws on the research of a lot of modern Jewish historians, and he cites a handful of them by name, but only once does he praise a living practitioner of Jewish studies. He credits the Bar-Ilan historian Shmuel Feiner with having “brilliantly” shown how among traditional Jews “the lure of worldly knowledge was resisted as if it were sexual temptation.” Feiner himself, as it turns out, has just now published (in Hebrew) a new volume that bears comparison in some respects with Schama’s book. *Et Hadashah* (A New Age: Eighteenth-Century European Jewry, 1700–1750) is a big book; at close to 600 pages it’s more than 100 pages shorter than Schama’s, but when it’s translated into English it will no doubt grow. And it’s also an installment of a larger project, a two-volume history that will eventually make its way up to 1800. This points of course to major differences between the two works; Feiner’s recent volume focuses on only a half of one of Schama’s four centuries, and he restricts himself to only one part of the Jewish world. Yet the two historians share a refreshingly old-fashioned determination to tell the story of the Jews as a story.

Unlike Schama, Feiner is not a born storyteller, but in his previous, path-breaking, deeply researched work on the Jewish Enlightenment he has skillfully blended together the criss-crossing biographies of his protagonists and accounts of the birth and development of their transformative and often clashing ideas. In his *The Origins of Jewish Secularization in Eighteenth-Century Europe* he introduces us to a gallery of forgotten skeptics and subversives who bored away at the foundations of traditional Jewish society decades before Moses Mendelssohn appeared on the scene. His biography of Mendelssohn delves as deeply into the philosopher’s everyday travails and the crises of his life as it does into his ideas. But in his new book, Feiner looks through a wider lens, one that enables him to see and describe a world populated not only by thinkers but by other sorts of people who reflect the spirit of a new age, even if they themselves are not particularly reflective. Drawing as much as possible on their own written testimony, while situating them within their disparate political,
It is not the details of Glückel's busy life as the mother of a dozen children and a sharp businesswoman that interest Feiner but her consciousness of herself.

Jewish diarist. Schama, in his rather brief and cursory treatment of the early 18th century, refers in passing to her famous memoir as the "notable exception" to the general rule that "Jewish autobiographies had been the exclusive province of rabbis, philosophers," and other "men of mind and faith," but he doesn't stop to explain who its author was. Feiner, however, has as much to say about her as he does about just about anyone else.

It is not the details of Glückel's busy life as the mother of a dozen children and a sharp businesswoman that interest Feiner but her consciousness of herself. He notes how Glückel's life took a turn for the worse in 1700, with an unfortunate second marriage, and how this left her downcast. "Writing about her life," Feiner says, "enabled her to raise a voice of private protest for the benefit of herself and her children." In this protest, Feiner continues, "in the sense of enslavement brought about by the chains of matrimony, and in the very unusual act of telling her own story in such a personal way, Glückel lifted herself, at least inwardly, out of the larger group of the community and the family and defined herself as an independent individual." And while one has to take seriously her expressions of resignation in the face of disaster and her theological proclamations that this "world of vanity" is of little consequence, it is obvious that her enjoyment of earthly prosperity was wholehearted enough.

Feiner follows several of Glückel's descendants as they pursue happiness in their different ways. Some of her children had strong ties with leading court Jews such as Samuel Oppenheimer and Samson Wettwer and, with mixed success, used these connections. One of her grandchildren, the English-born, wealthy, and well-educated Moshe Marcus, converted as a young man to Anglicanism, which for him represented not so much a rejection of the world from which he came as an affirmation of one in which he could be himself. One of the last characters to appear in Feiner's book is yet another grandson, Aaron Gumpertz, an editor of the Haskalah, is more concerned with telling the story of how 18th-century Jews conceived of themselves and lived, as individuals, in relation above all to Jewish tradition and their fellow Jews, and only secondarily to the world around them, even if it left deep marks on them.

The difference between the two books is clearest where they overlap. In the small number of pages that Schama devotes to the period with which Feiner is exclusively concerned, the main characters are court Jews and early maskilim, although he does devote some attention to more insular figures such as Judah the Hasid and Jacob Emden. Schama comments wryly on the fact that virtually the same time Judah was "leading his thousands to Zion," the palatial home in Vienna of the court Jew Samuel Oppenheimer was being torn to pieces by a mob. Feiner too notes this coincidence, but he also connects the dots. He reports that Oppenheimer, motivated by genuine piety and presumably unaware of the secret Sabbateanism of Judah and his group, had purchased transit permits for them and supplied them with two ships, food, and money. His son Mendel, he adds, served as their treasurer.

Schama mentions Jacob Emden's pursuit of secular knowledge and the limitations that he himself placed upon it, but says nothing of his inner struggles or struggles with covert Sabbateans, subjects that Feiner discusses in depth. Figures such as Moshe Chaim Luzzatto and Moshe Hagiz are just too far from any significant association with the Gentile world to merit Schama's attention.

But why should one expect a diaspora-based historian of Europe and European art attempting to tell his people's story to a broad audience and a historian of the Jewish Enlightenment living in Israel who is now ready to repaint the picture of a whole century to share an agenda? Examining the Jewish past from their differing vantage points, both have brought their subjects to life with far more success than many of the specialists in Jewish history of whose works they make very profitable use.

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Joseph Roth: Grieving for a Lost Empire

BY JOSEPH EPSTEIN

In Ostend, his book about the German and Austrian émigré literary group that gathered in the Belgian resort town after Hitler came to power, Volker Weidermann describes Joseph Roth, the most talented of these writers, looking “like a mournful seal that has wandered accidentally onto dry land.” Roth was small, thin yet potbellied, slightly hunched over, with a chosen nose, a bad liver, and missing lots of teeth. He began most mornings, like the serious alcoholic that he was, vomiting. Always in flight, one of the world’s permanent transients, Roth was a one-man diaspora: “Why do you people roam around so much in the world?” asks a Galician peasant in one of his novels. “The devil sends you from one place to another.”

Joseph Roth happens also to have been a marvelous writer, and he might have gone on to be a great one had he not died in 1939, in his 45th year. (He is of that uncharmed circle of writers—Chekhov, Orwell, F. Scott Fitzgerald—who died before they reached 50.) Not the least of Roth’s marvels was his astonishing productivity. In his short career between 1923 and 1939, he published, in German, no fewer than 15 novels, a batch of short stories, and, by his own reckoning in 1933, something on the order of 3,500 newspaper articles, most of them of the genre known as feuilleton, those short, literary, free-form, usually non-political essays that were once a staple in French and German newspapers. None of his writing that I have read, even the most ephemeral journalism, is without its felicitous touches, its arresting observations, its striking evidence of a first-class literary mind at work.

Roth’s work is bedizened with metaphor, laced with simile. In the short story “Strawberries” one finds: “The sun came out, as though back from holiday.” “Later they planted pansies on the lawn, beautiful big pansies with soft, clever faces.” Crows were at hand like bad news, they were remote like gloomy premonitions. “In the room. A minor character in The Radetzky March is ‘the father of three children and the husband of a disappointed wife.’” Another minor character in the same novel reveals “a powerful set of teeth, broad and yellow, a stout protective grill that filtered his speech.” A woman in the story “The Triumph of Beauty” has “a long but unexciting chin,” a man in the same story has a large square torso that makes him look like “a wardrobe wearing a blazer.”

A strong taste for aphorism and risky generalization runs through all Roth’s work. In his early novel Hotel Savoy (1924) one finds: “All educated words are shameful. In ordinary speech you couldn’t say anything so unpleasant.” “Industry is God’s severest punishment.” “Women make their mistakes not out of carelessness or frivolity, but because they are very unhappy.” In The Emperor’s Tomb we learn that “honor is an anesthetic, and what it anaesthetized in us was death and foreboding” and “to conceal and deny frailty can only be heroic.” Joseph Roth was a writer, as was once said of Henry James, “asailed by the perceptions.”

At the same time, Roth’s eye for detail is unerring. In a story called “The Place I Want to Tell You About,” a character, setting out for Vienna, remembers “the umbrella with the ivory handle” before leaving. That ivory handle puts one onto dry land. “The devil sends you from one place to another.”

He went on to the University of Vienna, where he dropped the Moses from his name and claimed his father was (variously) a Polish count, an Austrian railway official, an army officer, and a munitions manufacturer.

Travelling in steerage to America the family at the center of his novel Job: The Story of a Simple Man sleeps along with 20 or so others, “and from the movements each made on the hard beds, the beams trembled and the little yellow electric bulbs swung softly.” In his preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus and “The Secret Sharer,” Joseph Conrad wrote: “My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel, it is, before all, to make you see. That and no more—and it is everything.” Roth understood.

A second marvel is that Joseph Roth was able to get as much done as he did under the strained conditions in which he worked. The strain was permanent than by necessity. A spendthrift always hovering on personal pauperdom, he had the additional heavy expense of a wife who fairly early in his marriage had to be placed in various sanatoria for schizophrenia. (In 1940, Friederike Roth was removed from a Viennese hospital and murdered under the Nazis’ euthanasia program.) Much in Roth’s letters—published recently in English as Joseph Roth: A Life in Letters—is given over to pressing publishers and newspaper editors for the payment of advances or for raising his fees, complaints about his barely scraping by, and the expressions of guilt because of his need to borrow from friends, chief among them the commercially much more successful Stefan Zweig, who was his dearest friend and practically his patron.
Many of Joseph Roth’s novels are of modest length, some barely beyond that of the standard novella. (His final work, The Legend of the Holy Drinker, published in 1939, runs to 49 pages.) The four of these novels I find most accomplished are Right and Left (1929), Job: The Story of a Simple Man (1930), The Emperor’s Tomb (1938), and, the lengthiest and most fully realized, The Radetzky March (1932). An account of life under and a tribute to the Dual Monarchy, as the Austro-Habsburg dynasty was also known, The Radetzky March is one of those extraordinary works of fiction that, like Lampedusa’s The Leopard, cannot be anticipated by what has gone before in its author’s oeuvre. (Michael Hofmann, Roth’s ablest translator and most penetrating critic, writes of “the accelerated development otherwise known as genius.”) The novel’s title derives from Johann Strauss’s famous march and is one of those books that when two people meet who discover they have both read it sends a pleasing shock of recognition between them, followed by the bond of mutual admiration for an extraordinary work of literary art.

The range and variety of Roth’s fiction are impressive. That fellow in Eliot’s great poem might have done the police in different voices, but Roth in his fiction could do poor shtetl Jews and the Emperor Franz Joseph, Polish nobles and Ruthenian peasants, down-and-outs and successful entrepreneurs, Romanians, Czechs, Poles, Germans, Cossacks—in short, the entire Austro-Habsburg Empire, and all in perfect pitch.

Moses Joseph Roth was born in 1894 in Brody, a Galician town of roughly 18,000 people, two-thirds of whom were Jewish, on the border between Poland and Ukraine, 54 miles north-east of Lemberg (now called Lviv). He never knew his father, who died in a mental asylum. In 1913 he earned a scholarship to the University of Lemberg, and after a year there went on to the University of Vienna, where he dropped the Moses from his name and claimed his father was (variously) a Polish count, an Austrian railway official, an army officer, and a munitions manufacturer; at one point he took briefly to wearing a monocle; later he would claim to have been an officer, not the enlisted man that he was in the First World War. All this in the attempt to shed the identity of the Orfűske, then held in much contempt in Vienna. This outsider, outlander even, became the great chronicler, and eventually the prime mourner, for the Dual Monarchy, later in life declaring himself a monarchist. On his gravestone in a cemetery outside Paris the words “Ecrivain Austro-Hungarain” are engraved.

Of the cards dealt at birth, not the least significant is that of the time into which one was born. Here Roth drew a poor card. He came into his majority with the onset of the Russian Revolution and the First World War—“world,” as a character in The Emperor’s Tomb says, “because of it, we lost a whole world”—and left it as Hitler was gearing up the machinery for his Final Solution. (Communism, he noted in a letter to Zweig, “spawned Fascism and Nazism and hatred for intellectual freedom.”) Meanwhile, the First World War, the Russian Revolution, and the Treaty of Versailles finished off the Dual Monarchy, reducing what was once a sprawling empire to a shriveled Austrian Republic. The multidimensional fatherland Roth knew as a young man evaporated in the fog of nationalism. In his splendid story “The Bust of the Emperor,” Roth quotes the Austrian playwright Grillparzer on the fate of the Dual Monarchy: “From humanity via nationalitiy to bestiality.”

What Roth valued in the Austro-Habsburg Empire was the fluidity it allowed its subjects, who could travel from country to country without the aid of passports or papers, and its discouragement of nationalism, which worked against the nationless Jewish people. “I love Austria,” he wrote in 1933. “I view it as cowardice not to use this moment to say the Habsburgs must return.” In 1935 he wrote to assure Stefan Zweig that “the Habsburgs will return . . . Austria will be a monarchy.” Before the approaching Anschluss of 1938 he even attempted, through the offices of Kurt Schuschnigg, the chancellor of the Federal State of Austria, to restore the monarchy by installing Otto von Habsburg, heir of the Emperor Franz Joseph, on the empty throne. Not that there wasn’t anti-Semitism, that endemic disease, under the Dual Monarchy. Nor was it absent in France, where, after Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933, Roth lived out his last years, but, as he wrote in a strange little book called The Wandering Jews (1927), there “it is not one hundred proof. Eastern Jews, accustomed to a far stronger, crueler, more brutal anti-Semitism, are perfectly happy with the French version of it.”

Never other than unpredictable, Roth, that most cosmopolitan of Jews, valued the shtetl Jews of Eastern Europe above all. He valued their Jewish authenticity and felt that those Jews who had taken up the assimilated life in Germany and elsewhere and pretended to a patriotism that ultimately wasn’t returned to them, “those rich Jews,” as he wrote in Right and Left, “the ones who want more than anything else to be native Berliners” and who “go on celebrating their holiest festivals in a kind of shamefaced secrecy, but Christmas publicly, and for all to see,” these were the Jews most deceived and hence most to be pitied.

The real subject at the heart of The Wandering Jews is the distinctiveness of Jews. “Of all the world’s poor, the poor Jew,” Roth writes, “is surely the most conservative . . . he refuses to be a proletarian.” The difference between the Russian and the Jewish peasant is that “the Russian is a peasant first and a Russian second; the Jew is Jew first and then peasant.” Roth underscores the intellectual cast of the Jews. “They are a people that has had no illiterates for nearly two thousand years now!” Not wishing to fight other people’s wars, “the Eastern Jews were the most heroic of pacifists. They were martyrs for pacifism. They chose crippledom!”—a reference, this, to the Jews who inflicted self-mutilations to avoid fighting in the army of the tsar, especially since only in Russia was anti-Semitism, more than the usual free-floating version, “a pillar of government.”

Zionism was the best answer to the Jewish question for Roth, “for it is surely better to be a nation than to be mistreated by one.” The Jews “are forced to be a nation’ by the nationalitiy of the others,” and “if one must be patriotic, then at least let it be for a country of one’s own.” Even though “the American cousin is the last hope of every Eastern Jewish family,” it is only the presence of blacks that “insure[s] the Jews won’t have the lowest status in America.” Whether Roth would have made aliyah had he lived longer cannot be known—toward the end of his life he called himself a Catholic—but there is little doubt that he yearned for an end to “the flight out of Egypt, which has been in progress now for thousands of years.”

Intensely Jewish though he was, apart from Job: The Story of a Simple Man, his novel with a shtetl setting, Jews tend to figure only peripherally in Roth’s fiction. Until the small commercial success of Job, Roth was in fact better known for his journalism. His early fiction is always brilliant but emotionally spare. Roth wrote against the grain of the ascending modernism of his day. He thought little of James Joyce. “No Gide! No Proust! Nor anything of the sort,” he wrote to a journalist and novelist named Hans Natonek. He criticized Na- tonek’s penchant for abstraction. “A novel is not the place for abstractions. Leave that to Thomas Mann.” In his novel Right and Left, the criterion he sets for a wealthy character’s buying art is “that

a picture should repel his senses and intelligence. Only then could he be sure of having bought a valuable modern work.”

In Right and Left, Roth lays out the fictional program under which he worked, holding foremost that “passions and beliefs are tangled in the hearts and minds of men, and there is no such thing as psychological consistency.” Change interested him more than consistency. We are, he held, chameleons all, changing character with the opportunities life provides us: “The more opportunities life gave us, the more beings it revealed in us. A man might die because he hadn’t experienced anything, and had been just one person all his life.” Roth the novelist believed that in the drive through life none of us is really at the wheel.

“No interest in day-to-day politics,” Roth wrote to Natonek. “They distort. They distort the human.” Elsewhere he referred to “the hollow pathos of revolutionaries.” In a brilliant passage in “The Bust of the Emperor,” he writes that “the inclinations and disinclinations of the people are grounded in reality.” Reality is quotidian life. “After they have read the newspapers, listened to the speeches, elected the representatives, and discussed the news with their friends, the good peasants, craftsmen, and traders—and in the cities the workers—go back to their homes and workshops. And their misery or happiness is what awaits them there: sick or healthy children, quarrelsome or agreeable wives, prompt or dilatory customers, pressing or easy-going creditors, a good or bad supper, a clean or squalid bed.”

The characters in Roth’s own fiction may be sentient but are rarely sapient. Never heroic, they are more acted upon than acting. Consider the opening paragraph of Job: The Story of a Simple Man:

Many years ago there lived in Zuchnow a man named Mendel Singer. He was pious, God-fearing and ordinary, an entirely everyday Jew. He practiced the modest profession of a teacher. In his house, which consisted of only a roomy kitchen, he imparted to children knowledge of the Bible. He taught with genuine enthusiasm but not notable success. Hundreds of thousands before him had lived and taught as he did. Like the biblical Job, Mendel Singer’s essential decency is repaid with relentless sorrow. His two sons are unruly, and one goes off eagerly to join the tsar’s army; he has a daughter who is arranging trysts with Cossacks and who will later, when the family emigrates to America, descend into insanity; a wife whose regard for him is dwindling and who will die an early death; and, worst of all, a last-born son, Menuchim, deformed in figure and barely able to speak. Mendel Singer did nothing to deserve any of this, but must somehow cope with all of it. “All these years I have loved God,” Mendel thinks, “and He has hated me.”

The only flaw in Roth’s Job is the uplifting reversal of fortune on which the novel ends. In the realm of plot, the art of fiction consists in making the unpredictable plausible. In this one novel of Roth’s, alas, the predictable seems implausible. Forgive my blasphemy, but I have never been much convinced by the ending of the biblical version of Job either.

Yet, as with the biblical story, so with Roth’s novel, the (relatively) happy ending merely soils but does not spoil the story.
Roth’s next book, _The Radetzky March_, embodies his central ideas about the human condition: that we are at the whim of happenstance, our fate despite what more romantic novelists might hold not finally in our own hands, with ours not to reason why but to live out our days with what dignity we might manage and then die.

What is surprising is the drama that such dark notions of character can evoke in Joseph Roth’s skillful hands. _The Radetzky March_ is a family chronicle, recording three generations of a Slovenian peasant family, the Trottas, whose rise begins with a son, serving in the Austro-Hungarian army, who one day, almost as much by accident as through bravery, takes a bullet intended for the emperor. He is immediately raised in rank, known in the textbooks as “the Hero of Solferino,” and his family, henceforth allowed to call itself the von Trottas, ennobled. The novel centers on the lives of the son and grandson of the Hero of Solferino. The son, though wishing for a military career like his father, instead, at his father’s order, becomes a midlevel bureaucrat, serving out his career like his father, instead, at his father’s order, to meet with Carl Joseph’s father, the district commissioner. The emperor is also given a chapter to himself, a brilliant chapter, in which he gauges his own position as a leader thought near to a god even as his mental powers are slipping. Roth assigns the emperor, while inspecting the troops, “a crystalline drop that appeared at the end of his nose” and “finally fell into the thick silver mustache, and there disappeared from view,” thus in a simple detail rendering him human. (Roth’s portrait of Franz Joseph is reminiscent of Tolstoy’s of Napoleon in _War and Peace_ and Solzhenitsyn of Stalin in _The First Circle_.) Herr von Trotta and the emperor die on the same day, and “the vultures were already circling above the Habsburg double eagle, its fraternal foes.”

In Michael Hofmann’s translator’s introduction, he refers, peremptorily, to _The Radetzky March_ as a work that “seems to have been done in oils.” What gives the novel that done-in-oil aspect is its weight, its seriousness, ultimately its gravity. No better introduction, for the student of literature or of history, is available for an understanding of the Austro-Habsburg Empire than this splendid novel, written by a small Galician Jew, who came of age in its shadow, grieved over its demise, and owes to it its permanent place in the august, millennia-long enterprise known with a capital L as Literature.

Joseph Epstein’s latest books are _Frozen in Time: Twenty Stories_ (Taylor Trade) and _Wind Sprints: Shorter Essays_ (Axios Press).

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The Ruined House (An Excerpt)

BY RUBY NAMDAR

In 2014 Ruby Namdar won the prestigious Sapir Prize for his novel Ha-bayit asher necherav, the first time in the award’s history that it went to a writer not living in Israel. On November 7, 2017, Harper released the book under the title The Ruined House: A Novel, in an English translation by Hillel Halkin. The Jewish Review of Books is pleased to present this excerpt from the novel’s opening.

One clear morning, on the sixth day of the Hebrew month of Elul, the year 5760, counting from the creation of the world, which happened to fall on Wednesday, September 6, 2000, the gates of heaven were opened above the great city of New York, and behold: all seven celestial spheres were revealed, right above the West 4th Street subway station, layered one on top of another like the rungs of a ladder reaching skyward from the earth. Errant souls flitted there like shadows, one alone bright to the point of transparency: the figure of an ancient priest, his head wrapped in a linen turban and a golden fire pan in his hand. No human eye beheld this nor head of hair with its playful wink of gray. His table stood a bit apart, framed by a bright triangle of sunlight that seemed to elevate it slightly off the floor. Two young, pretty students giggled and whispered while stealing admiring glances at him from afar. Cohen smiled to himself as he leaped through his notes. He was used to the warmth of his female students’ adoring stares. But although he probably could have seduced almost any one of them, he was a man of moral fiber and almost never strayed from the ethics of his profession. His eyes flitted across the faces of blithe nonchalance. Department secretaries scowled at anyone who dared enter their offices to ask a question or request assistance. Although he kept staring at his notes, he could no longer read his own handwriting. The outline in front of him. He was a natural teacher, in firm control of his material, and anyway, he was at his best when

so that she could smoke a forbidden cigarette, “it’s not the ‘aura’” (her fingers sketched ironic quotation marks in the air) “that the phony New Age mystics talk about. It’s more like Hollywood or TV. You see it in celebrities, especially if they’re in a private setting away from the spotlight, at a party, or at some restaurant . . . . They have this halo, as if they hadn’t removed their makeup and the lights were still on them. They’re shiny. Their skin actually glows . . . . Come on, let’s go back.” She threw the burning cigarette butt on the floor and strode inside, the doctoral student on her heels. “They don’t look real. That’s the thing: they’re unreal. They’re like wax models of themselves, perfectly executed and lit. I suppose it’s an accomplishment of a sort to turn yourself into an icon and become a symbol of who you are or, better yet, of what you are. You know what I mean.” The doctoral student, who was slightly in love with Cohen, nodded eagerly despite not being at all sure that she did in fact know.

In honor of the new semester, Professor Cohen was wearing a white suit that would have looked raffish and pretentious on anyone else. A green tie with scarlet embroidery completed the jaunty, somewhat amused look that he liked to cultivate. His whole person was characterized by a stylish boldness that tested the boundaries of good taste without getting dangerously close to them. He sat alongside his students listening to a guest lecturer from gender studies who spoke about the covert sexual biases in the supposedly genderneutral world of virtual reality. “You see,” Angela explained to the bespectacled doctoral student who had accompanied her through the emergency exit
he couldn’t make out. His heart felt like bursting; his eyes filled with what appeared to be two large, round tears about to overflow.

The whole strange episode didn’t last long—not more than a moment or two. The skies shut and the ascending ladder of light slowly faded. A final gliter of gold flickered in the misty distance, then all reverted to its former state, as though nothing out of the ordinary had occurred. Cohen pulled himself together. His fingers gripped his empty espresso cup, and he put a drop rolled onto his tongue and brought back to his senses. His eyes focused on his notes again. The letters re-formed into words, and the words into sentences. Everything, almost, was as before. The hand he had extended toward the knot in his tie, as though to loosen it, returned awkwardly to the table. What on earth had gotten into him? He hadn’t felt so close to tears in years.

O

Manhattan, isle of the gods, home to great happenings of metal, glass, and energy, island of sharp angles, summit of the world! Have not we all—rich and poor, producers and consumers, providers and provided for—been laboring for generations with all our might, under the direction of an unseen Engineer, to build the most magnificent city ever known to humankind? We lay down more and more avenues, rule them straight, strive to get the proportions of their buildings right. We pour our lifeblood into the foundations of the skyscrapers, raising them ever higher: the Empire State Building has added two feet to the foundations of the skyscrapers, raising them ever higher: the Empire State Building has added two feet to

The 9th of Elul, 5760

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September 9, 2000

The 9th of Elul, 5760

Ten a.m. Andrew chooses a CD and slips it into the stereo, which swallows it eagerly. He presses play, waits for the hot milk to finish foaming in the noisy espresso machine, and carries his coffee cup from the kitchen counter to the brown leather couch in the adjoining living room.

An inviting pile of magazines, periodicals, and weekend papers await him on the coffee table. The music fills the large, bright, clean apartment. Sunbeams trickle through the open door of the bedroom. In the living room, four large windows, all facing west, look out onto the familiar view that he loves: the green treetops of Riverside Park and, beyond them, the line of the Hudson, a shimmering strip of metallic blue. The view reigns over the apartment. The river is visible from the front door, the dining room, and even (Andrew attaches special importance to this) the kitchen. When he renovated, he broke down the walls with a daring that was determined, undaunted by the tyranny of what lay behind it. The former owner, a retired elderly Jew who had moved to Florida and sold him the place for a price that now seems ridiculous, had never thought of turning his cramped New York dwelling into the unified, free-flowing space that Andrew crafted. He can stand in the kitchen cutting vegetables, making coffee, or have his breakfast on the bar stool at the slate countertop, with the light-filled view spread out before him, appearing and reappearing in the living-room windows like a landscape painted on four panels. The light changes by the hour: a modernist experiment in texture and color. Winter strips the trees of their foliage, leaving them nakedly somber and gray against the steel backdrop of the river. On long summer evenings, the sunsets are theatrically stunning, throwing their golden-orange shadow on the dark water and turning the ugly industrial buildings and residential towers across it into yet more elements in a breathtaking work of art. Although Andrew has been living with this view for eight years, it keeps revealing new secrets. He has never gotten entirely used to it, not really.

Saturday mornings are his favorite time of the week. He likes to spend them alone and refers to them as “my quality time with myself.” The slowly sipped coffee, the tastefully chosen music, the enjoyable leafing through of the weekend papers—all are a kind of meditation by which he experiences, undisturbed and undistracted, a heightened sense of self that recharges him with the creative energy needed for the rest of the week. A fierce, silent bliss runs through him on such mornings. He does all he can to prolong them, congratulating himself, sometimes almost explicitly, on his wisdom and courage in having left home, with its ceaseless, cloven clamor of family life, for the personal and aesthetic independence of the marvelous space inhabited by him now. His apartment stands in sharp contrast to the feminine clutter that symbolized, more than anything else, his life with Linda: the furniture, the rugs, the bric-a-brac; the framed snapshots of the children, the photographs in color and black and white; the bright cushions with their wool and linen tassels, the patchwork quilts, the swatches of embroidery; the bookends shaped like rabbits, frogs, and bears; the flowerpots, the vases, the hammered copper trays, the carved wood, ivory, and mother-of-pearl jewelry boxes; the elongated black metal dachshund shoe scraper by the front door; the little bird’s nest with its three indigo eggs; the old ceramic pots from Morocco, the painted tiles from Mexico, the nude African women carved in ebony. Each piece was elegant and authentic—Linda’s taste was consistently excellent—but as her New York Jewish penchant for exaggeration increased with the passage of time, so did the objects that filled the house to bursting until it resembled one of those self-deleting, overcrowded antique shops that drive their customers away to their competitors.

The more Andrew felt asphyxiated by his marriage, the more infernal the house had become. Linda, as he once put it to his therapist, was trying to be her own mother by clinging to the aesthetics of the suburban respectability she had grown up with. The content, to be sure, was different: ethnic rugs instead of synthetic carpets, original paintings rather than reproductions, rustic wood furniture, not plastic and Formica. Yet the structural essence remained the same. Even had he wanted to, Andrew could never have spent his life chained to the tedious mediocrity of such bourgeois domesticity. Eight years after his divorce, it still exhilarates him to step out of the shower each morning, a large towel wrapped around his waist, and stride to the espresso machine on the kitchen counter through the uninterrupted, almost empty expanse of a living room elegantly punctuated by a few handsome, carefully selected items: the large screen of Chinese calligraphy whose vertical characters spelled the Mandarin word for “serenity”; the art deco chest of drawers; the carved oak china cabinet; and of course, the costly collection of antique African sculptures and masks hanging on the eastern wall. The startling, almost sterile spotlessness of the place is a statement, too. Not that Linda’s house wasn’t clean, but its cleanliness was of a kind that had to be worked at and maintained by Carmen, the Colombian housekeeper who scrubbed, dusted, and vacuumed three times a week. Andrew’s apartment seems to clean itself, as though repelling every last speck of dirt and dust, politely but imperiously driving it, properly shamed, back to the raucous street it had come from. His own housekeeper, Angie, once said, “I just come here to do the laundry and look at the view. There’s nothing to clean here, this place is always spotless.”

Ten thirty. Although he is having ten guests for dinner the next evening, Andrew is unfazed. He will shop for food later in the day and have everything, as always, ready in time. Settling onto the couch, he puts down his coffee and joyfully began reading the Saturday editions of the Sunday papers. Between the two newspapers, he决战地学习的, 学到的东西. Every word, every sentence. Everything, almost, was as if it were new. The letters re-formed into words, and the words into sentences. Everything, all of it, was as if it were new. The content, to be sure, was different: ethnic rugs instead of synthetic carpets, original paintings rather than reproductions, rustic wood furniture, not plastic and Formica. Yet the structural essence remained the same. Even had he wanted to, Andrew could never have spent his life chained to the tedious mediocrity of such bourgeois domesticity. Eight years after his divorce, it still exhilarates him to step out of the shower each morning, a large towel wrapped around his waist, and stride to the espresso machine on the kitchen counter through the uninterrupted, almost empty expanse of a living room elegantly punctuated by a few handsome, carefully selected items: the large screen of Chinese calligraphy whose vertical characters spelled the Mandarin word for “serenity”; the art deco chest of drawers; the carved oak china cabinet; and of course, the costly collection of antique African sculptures and masks hanging on the eastern wall. The startling, almost sterile spotlessness of the place is a statement, too. Not that Linda’s house wasn’t clean, but its cleanliness was of a kind that had to be worked at and maintained by Carmen, the Colombian housekeeper who scrubbed, dusted, and vacuumed three times a week. Andrew’s apartment seems to clean itself, as though repelling every last speck of dirt and dust, politely but imperiously driving it, properly shamed, back to the raucous street it had come from. His own housekeeper, Angie, once said, “I just come here to do the laundry and look at the view. There’s nothing to clean here, this place is always spotless.”

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Ruby Namdar. (Courtesy of the author.)
wealth of paper and fresh, deliciously crisp words in all sizes, shapes, and colors. Each typeface has its aroma and hidden semantic field. The thin, ascetic newsprint of the Times contends with the glossy sheets of slick magazines that made him think of the leather seats of luxury cars; the creamy leaves of professional journals lay beside the recycled, wrapper-like paper of avant-garde reviews whose fuzzy print, an iconic replication of the typewriter’s cover. Continuing to ignore it, he pursues his regular Saturdays between the hours of ten and twelve, he reads casually through the front of the book until he comes to the table of contents.

By now his embarrassment is long gone. The tingle of uncertainty with which he searches for his name reminds him of his childhood birthdays, the excitement of getting out of bed in the morning intensified by the titillating fear that this year he had been forgotten. Slowly, he would descend to the ground floor with its pile of presents and the smell of blueberry pancakes made especially in his honor. Every time, encountering the printed name of Andrew P. Cohen seems a distant echo of his heart’s wild leap when he saw his first published article, which appeared only after an editorial board had put him through all the hellish rituals of the academic tribe. The manuscript had been returned to him for “improvements” no less than eight times, and each time he had been forced, in those pre-word processing days, to type its twenty pages all over again. The changes demanded were so great that every draft became a new article, every iteration increasingly devoted to the scholarly work of one of the editors. He still remembers his fascination reaction when he first began to publish and saw his words transformed into a definitive presence, as if given an objective validity by the printed page not had by them before. He puts this experience to use in the classroom in order to illustrate the concept of “reification.” He asks a research assistant to collect samples of a class’s writing and then returns these printed and bound with the request that the students spontaneously record their feelings at having their work “made official.” They would remember it long after graduation.

Andrew sits up and turns to his latest piece with the same anticipation and to hide the slight embarrassment he feels each time he is overcome by a childish joy at the sight of his name in print above words recognizable as his own. Prolonging the sweet suspense, he sifts through the pile, sampling a headline, a masthead, or half an editorial until the sweet suspense, he sifts through the pile, sampling a headline, a masthead, or half an editorial to the ground floor with its pile of presents and smell of blueberry pancakes made especially in his honor. Every time, encountering the printed name of Andrew P. Cohen seems a distant echo of his heart’s wild leap when he saw his first published article, which appeared only after an editorial board had put him through all the hellish rituals of the academic tribe. The manuscript had been returned to him for “improvements” no less than eight times, and each time he had been forced, in those pre-word processing days, to type its twenty pages all over again. The changes demanded were so great that every draft became a new article, every iteration increasingly devoted to the scholarly work of one of the editors. He still remembers his fascination reaction when he first began to publish and saw his words transformed into a definitive presence, as if given an objective validity by the printed page not had by them before. He puts this experience to use in the classroom in order to illustrate the concept of “reification.” He asks a research assistant to collect samples of a class’s writing and then returns these printed and bound with the request that the students spontaneously record their feelings at having their work “made official.” They would remember it long after graduation.

Andrew sits up and turns to his latest piece with satisfaction, reading it as carefully as if going over the proofs one more time. The clarity and originality of his phrasing—his own yet no longer his own—pleases him greatly.

The clarity and originality of his phrasing—his own yet no longer his own—pleases him greatly.

its print, and begins to leaf casually through it, proceeding at a leisurely pace through the front of the book until he comes to the table of contents.

By now his embarrassment is long gone. The tingle of uncertainty with which he searches for his name reminds him of his childhood birthdays, the excitement of getting out of bed in the morning intensified by the titillating fear that this year he had been forgotten. Slowly, he would descend to the ground floor with its pile of presents and smell of blueberry pancakes made especially in his honor. Every time, encountering the printed name of Andrew P. Cohen seems a distant echo of his heart’s wild leap when he saw his first published article, which appeared only after an editorial board had put him through all the hellish rituals of the academic tribe. The manuscript had been returned to him for “improvements” no less than eight times, and each time he had been forced, in those pre-word processing days, to type its twenty pages all over again. The changes demanded were so great that every draft became a new article, every iteration increasingly devoted to the scholarly work of one of the editors. He still remembers his fascination reaction when he first began to publish and saw his words transformed into a definitive presence, as if given an objective validity by the printed page not had by them before. He puts this experience to use in the classroom in order to illustrate the concept of “reification.” He asks a research assistant to collect samples of a class’s writing and then returns these printed and bound with the request that the students spontaneously record their feelings at having their work “made official.” They would remember it long after graduation.

Ruby Namdar was born and raised in Jerusalem to a family of Iranian Jewish heritage. His first book, Haviv (2000), won the Israeli Ministry of Culture’s Award for Best First Publication. He currently lives in New York City with his wife and two daughters, and teaches Jewish literature, focusing on biblical and talmudic narrative.
Arthur Szyk: Soldier in Art

BY DIANE COLE

Ink and Blood

Arthur Szyk: Soldier in Art

BY DIANE COLE

Arthur Szyk: Soldier in Art
curated by Debra Schmidt Bach
through January 21, 2018 at the New-York Historical Society

Arthur Szyk: Soldier in Art
edited by Irvin Ungar
D. Giles Limited, with Historicana and the Arthur Szyk Society, 240 pp., $54.95

Arthur Szyk may well be the only great Jewish artist whose work countless people recognize simply because they have attended a Passover Seder. First published in 1940 and still a Passover favorite, Szyk's The Haggadah, with its striking mix of modern and ancient imagery, has imprinted itself on our communal holiday memory of the retelling of the exodus from Egypt.

Less well known are the explicit connections between the Egyptian pharaoh and Hitler that Szyk had embedded in his original version of the haggadah he created in the 1930s. It also featured swastika-bearing Egyptian taskmasters and a sinuous serpent with a row of swastikas on his back. Szyk painted them over to ensure publication, but there's no mistaking the anti-Nazi message that remained in his sarcastic depiction of the "wicked" son as an assimilated German Jew proudly sporting Bavarian-style riding gear and a Hitler-like mustache. Nor was his haggadah Szyk's only political salvo before, during, or after World War II. As a self-described "soldier in art," he wielded brush and palette as a weapon throughout the 1930s and 1940s to attack fascism, plead for the rescue of European Jewry, and argue the case for an independent State of Israel. His illustrations and drawings were animated and passionate, seen in biting political cartoons in newspapers around the country, on the covers for such mass-market magazines as Time and Collier's, and on numerous posters, programs, and other printed materials.

Szyk's activist art represents only one aspect of his highly successful career—his vibrant illustrations of the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen, Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales, and other literary classics embody another—but it is the most dramatic. It is also the central focus of an invigorating exhibition currently at the New-York Historical Society and its accompanying catalogue, both titled, appropriately enough, Arthur Szyk: Soldier in Art.

The 45 works on display at the New-York Historical Society provide a choice sampling of Szyk's career from the 1930s onward. Here are savage anti-fascist caricatures of Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito; in one, titled Murder Incorporated, they hold a pirate flag of skull and bones. To commemorate the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, he paints Jewish fighters as muscular, modern-day Samsons.

In the scathing drawing De Profundis, published in the Chicago Sun in February 1943, Szyk portrays a huddled mass of dying and dead Jews, over which Jesus holds the tablets of the Ten Commandments, with the text "Cain, where is Abel thy brother?" Also from 1943, Ballad of the Doomed Jews of Europe further indicts Western indifference to the annihilation of European Jewry with a poem by Ben Hecht.

Illustrated with images of traditionally garbed Jews dangled from nooses and a snoozing United States soldier indifferent to the urgent ringing of a telephone bringing news of the horrors. And then there are Szyk's rousing patriotic works rallying Americans to support the war effort, the most famous being Arsenal of Democracy, a panorama of determined American workmen pounding out the weaponry needed to win the war, set against New York harbor with the Statue of Liberty in the background and a slithering snake decorated with swastikas that Szyk did not paint over this time. The image appeared on the cover of Collier's magazine—and on the covers of the Manhattan and Brooklyn telephone directories. Nor did Szyk cease and desist fighting for world Jewry at the conclusion of World War II. A particularly strong Zionist statement from 1946 juxtaposed a depiction of the Mayflower with an "illegal" ship bearing Jewish survivors of the Holocaust en route to Palestine, where the British would turn them away.

The facts of Arthur Szyk's biography reflect the currents of his era. He was born in 1894 in then Russian-occupied Lodz, Poland, the son of nonobservant middle-class Jewish parents. After he showed an early prowess in art—he liked to sketch scenes from the Bible—his parents sent him to Paris. There, between the ages of 15 and 18, he studied at the Académie Julian art studio. Already concerned about political and social issues, he also began contributing political cartoons to Polish newspapers.

The year 1914 marked his first and only visit to Palestine, six months that solidified his Zionism. Seeing Jewish settlers and farmers at work was a powerful experience that stayed with him throughout his career (witness The Haggadah's idyllic image of a yarmulke-wearing sower seedling the field with grain). When World War I began later that year, Szyk was conscripted into the Russian army. He left (or perhaps escaped, the record is not clear) after fighting against the Germans in the Polish-Soviet War.

Yet the years 1919 to 1921 found Szyk in Poland. Over the next dozen years, Szyk developed his craft. He studied at the Académie Julian, with its striking mix of modern and ancient imagery, has imprinted itself on our communal holiday memory of the retelling of the exodus from Egypt. The year 1914 marked his first and only visit to Palestine, six months that solidified his Zionism. Seeing Jewish settlers and farmers at work was a powerful experience that stayed with him throughout his career (witness The Haggadah's idyllic image of a yarmulke-wearing sower seedling the field with grain). When World War I began later that year, Szyk was conscripted into the Russian army. He left (or perhaps escaped, the record is not clear) after fighting against the Germans in the Battle of Lodz, and spent the rest of the war in Poland. Yet the years 1919 to 1921 found Szyk in Poland. Over the next dozen years, Szyk developed his craft.
Italian Renaissance, as in Szyk's 1926 portrait of his wife, in which an open window reveals a walled garden and azure sky. But most of all, he pays homage to the illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages and Renaissance through elaborate decorative borders, the use of panels and insets that tell multiple stories at once, abundant images of coats of arms both fantastical and made up, animals both real and mythical, and exquisite calligraphy, all suffused with brilliant color.

These elements come vividly alive in his late 1920s series of 45 watercolor and gouache miniature paintings illustrating, and reminding contemporary viewers of, the so-called Jewish Magna Carta, the 13th-century Statute of Kalisz. The statute guaranteed the Jews of Poland fair treatment, James Kettlewell writes in his catalog essay, "protecting [them] against a long list of abuses, many of which had begun reappearing in Szyk's own time." One of the illustrations depicts contemporary Polish Jews plying their various crafts and trades (shoemaking, baking, weaving, blacksmithing, and so on), making a statement about the roles Jews played in the past in the life of Poland with an implicit expectation that they would continue to do so in the future. It is a poignant work that speaks to Szyk's identity as both a Jew and a Pole, and it also sets the stage for the political works to come.

By the time Hitler came to power in 1933, Szyk had already successfully exhibited his work in France and Poland, published several illustrated books (including his brilliant Book of Esther), and received awards for his work from both the French and Polish governments. He was also preparing for a visit to the United States, where yet another work—his 38-painting series about George Washington and the American Revolution—was to be exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum and the Library of Congress as part of the celebration of Washington's 200th birthday. In 1934, Szyk returned to Europe—to Lodz—and began his haggadah.

The Haggadah is generally regarded as Szyk's artistic masterpiece. One needs a magnifying glass to fully explore the elegant intricacies of its border patterns, which are often interspersed with delicate calligraphy and miniature figures of humans and animals. Szyk collector and scholar Rabbi Irvin Ungar also points to the book as a Jewish call to action. "In need of militant role models to inspire his fellow Jews to fight back, Szyk's Moses is a muscular leader, his David takes down Goliath, his Elijah slays Ahab, and his Judith beheads Holofernes," Ungar writes.

Szyk's fighting message was unmistakable, notes Holocaust scholar Michael Berenbaum in his catalog essay "Arthur Szyk: The Artist as Soldier, the Artist as Messenger," and he carried it to London, where he lived from 1937 to 1940, and then to the United States, where he and his family immigrated and spent the rest of their lives. "Only an immigrant can love his country—even a newly adopted country—in the way we experience in the work of Arthur Szyk," writes retired museum director Tom L. Freudenheim in his catalog essay "Arthur Szyk: Immigrant as Quintessential American Patriot." Szyk's dedication to American ideals of democracy, expressed in his earlier series on George Washington, reappear in his 1942 quartet of watercolors depicting a knight defending the Four Freedoms that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had highlighted in his 1941 State of the Union address. After WWII, Szyk continued his fight for democracy with scathing political cartoons condemning racism, advocating for civil rights, and attacking McCarthyism. In 1951, two years after Szyk was himself named as a target of the House Un-American Activities Committee, he suffered a heart attack and died.

Despite Szyk's popularity in life, after his death his work fell into neglect, with the exception of The Haggadah and a handful of his other illustrated books. But his reputation is clearly on the rise again, perhaps due to the strong political nature of his work and also to the greater scholarly recognition paid to graphic art and illustrations today than in the past. Earlier this year, the San Francisco area–based Taube Philanthropies' gift of $10.1 million allowed the Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life at the University of California, Berkeley to acquire a collection of 450 pieces of Szyk's art, purchased from the collection of Rabbi Ungar. Plans are under way, says Magnes curator Francesco Spagnolo, for making the entire collection available digitally by 2020. In the meantime, a small exhibition of Szyk's work is on display at the library. Among the recent visitors were a 10-year-old boy and his sister. "They were absolutely mesmerized by the intricacy of the details of Szyk's work," Spagnolo says. "The vibrancy of Szyk's work continues to resonate."

Diane Cole is the author of the memoir After Great Pain: A New Life Emerges and writes regularly for the Wall Street Journal, among other publications.
"The Point of Free Will": A Response to Abraham Socher

BY ANDREW N. KOSS

In Friedrich Schiller’s poem “The Philosophers,” the following conversation takes place between the “Scruples of Conscience” and “Decision”:

Scruples of Conscience: I like to serve my friends, but unfortunately I do it by inclination. And so I am bothered by the thought that I am not virtuous.

Decision: There is no other way out but this! You must begin to despise them. And do with repugnance what duty bids you.

I was put in mind of this passage by Abraham Socher’s lively and penetrating essay “Is Repentance Possible?” (Fall 2017). The essay is concerned with two competing approaches to morality: Aristotelian virtue ethics based on the cultivation of character and dispositions, and the Judeo-Christian understanding based on obedience to laws and commands. As Socher notes, Aristotle could not even imagine the question Schiller so coyly poses above, a variant of which Moses Maimonides stated more frankly: Is it better to overcome one’s evil inclinations to do good, or to do good wholeheartedly out of “innate longing and desire”? For Aristotle the latter was the only kind of morality. The talmudic sages, by contrast, leaned toward the former position, leaving Maimonides to explain away various statements to this effect so as to save virtue ethics. While unimpressed by Maimonides’s interpretive gymnastics, Socher nonetheless sets up a compelling case for the Aristotelian view, only to turn the tables on us by pointing out that, if it is correct, repentance isn’t possible. And who wants to live in that moral universe?

Like Socher, I find neither side of the debate entirely satisfying. But I think there is a way out of this dilemma from within the Jewish tradition, though not in the medieval writings—which still maintain something of a monopoly on contemporary discussions of Jewish philosophy—but in the oft-neglected realm of Eastern European rabbinic thought, in particular that of Rabbi Eliyahu Desser (1892–1953). Before turning to his answer, a word about Desser himself. His impact on the non-Hasidic ultra-Orthodox world is difficult to overestimate, and his impact on Modern Orthodox thinking is significant, but he is almost entirely unknown outside of Orthodox circles. He was a disciple of the great teachers of what is known as the mussar school, a movement originating among the 19th-century “Lithuanian” (i.e., non-Hasidic) yeshivas that sought to emphasize moral and spiritual self-cultivation alongside traditional talmudic study.

The word mussar has taken on the connotation of chastisement (or “motivational admonishment,” as my own mussar teacher put it), and the movement from its inception focused on employing psychological techniques (what today would be called a cognitive behavioral approach) alongside meditations (often on hellfires) to produce purity of behavior, thought, and motivation. What is often missed, especially by academic scholars, is that mussar gradually developed its own theology, focused primarily on moral philosophy. Desser epitomized this shift.

For mussarists, the internal struggle between good and evil is the great cosmic and spiritual drama, a position entirely in line with the conventional rabbinic view of moral decision-making. Desser, in one of his most important essays, elaborates on how such decisions take place by describing what he calls “the point of free will.” Most of the time, he writes, people make moral decisions by force of habit. Only rarely must they engage in true moral struggle. A thief, he points out, won’t hesitate to steal, but might face a true moral choice if he must choose between killing and being caught. By contrast, Desser gives us the example of an Orthodox Jew who wouldn’t dream of eating non-kosher food, but doesn’t hesitate to gossip. Each person then has his or her own “point of free will,” where real moral decision-making happens.

In a memorable passage, Desser employs the metaphor of a war; true moral struggle takes place only at the front lines. And this brings us to his conception of repentance:

When two armies are locked in battle, fighting takes place only at the battlefield. . . . If one side gains a victory at the front and pushes the enemy back, the position of the battlefront will have changed. . . . The situation is very similar with regard to [moral choice]. . . . With each good [choice] successfully carried out, the person rises higher in spiritual level; that is, things that were previously in the line of battle are now in the area controlled by the [good inclination] and actions done in that area can be undertaken without struggle. . . . In this sense we can understand the [talmudic] saying, “one mitzva leads to another.” (Strive for Truth!, vol. 1, part 2, pp. 52–54)

Repentance then doesn’t mean having to overcome temptation each time one is confronted with it, but to achieve a state where there is no struggle whatsoever. But, Socher might object, this is mere habituation; what about the original question, concerning the cultivation of inner virtue? How does someone without virtue, or without a particular virtue, truly repent—not in the sense of acknowledging wrongdoing after the fact and begging forgiveness from God and man, but by actually improving himself or herself?

It so happens that the cultivation of inner virtue was a prime concern of Desser and his fellow mussarists, who were fixated—perhaps excessively—on obtaining purity of motive and thought. It’s hard to believe that he didn’t see successfully moving the front lines as involving some sort of inner change as well. But how? While Desser doesn’t say so explicitly, I think the answer comes from another rabbinic statement: “One should always study Torah and fulfill commandments for ulterior motives (shelo lishma), since, by doing them for ulterior motives one will ultimately come to do them for pure motives (lishma).” To put it differently, good outward actions can foster inner virtue; the means justify the ends. And if the appeal to talmudic authority doesn’t convince you, modern psychology has come to the same conclusion. According to what’s known as dissonance theory, when a person’s belief is out of sync with his behavior, the most likely outcome is that his beliefs will change to accord with his actions.

Thus the components of repentance proceed in steps: First, repeatedly win the internal struggle. After a few victories, the struggle attenuates. The external actions are slowly internalized, creating improvement of character, and eventually simply become habit. Then the penitent can move on to the next moral struggle, and “proceed from strength to strength,” as the Psalmist puts it.

The interesting thing is that Aristotle had a similar view of how to develop character: “[By refraining from pleasures,” he writes, “we become tem-
perate, and once having become temperate we are most capable of refraining from them” (Nic. Ethics II:10). Indeed, the Ethics puts a great deal of emphasis on habit, and it's no coincidence that the words for “character” and “habit” are nearly identical in Ancient Greek—both transliterate as ethos. And Aristotle, whose virtue ethics philosophy professors like to contrast to the “deontological” (i.e., law-based) system preferred by Judaism, concludes the Ethics by discussing the potential of laws to render people virtuous.

Now, the gap between Aristotle and the rabbis remains. He doesn’t sanctify the moral battle and the overcoming of the evil inclination; he is quite clear that his preference is for virtue to be instilled in children when they are young, so that they will love the good and shun the bad. Of course, Dessler would prefer that too. But he, unlike Aristotle, would argue that such people will nonetheless have to fight their own struggles, albeit on a level of piety far more exalted than yours or mine—yet equally profound and dramatic. Dessler’s approach suggests that Judaism’s answer to Maimonides’ question can be “both”: God wants us to triumph on the moral battlefield, but then to cultivate our triumphs into virtue.

In the quotation from Schiller with which I began, the poet was not parodying rabbinic moralists, but Immanuel Kant. Kant believed that one should do good not because she desires to, or loves the good, but because she ought to. But to this he added a very unarabbitian idea: First, a person must determine the good through her own faculty of reason, legislating for herself by applying the famous categorical imperative. For the rabbis, of course, legislation ultimately comes from God. I first encountered Schiller’s poem in G. W. F. Hegel’s Elements of the Philosophy of Right, in which Hegel seeks to synthesize Kantian and Aristotelian thought; he does so by attacking the former for confusing morality (an inner event) with ethics, which are based on habit. I won’t get into whether Hegel’s attempts to redeem the ideas of habit and law in modern moral philosophy are ultimately successful. I certainly don’t claim to have mastered his notoriously dense writing on the subject. But it is worth noting that Dessler and some of his fellow mussarists can be set alongside the great German idealist just as surely as Maimonides or Mendelssohn. Who knows? Perhaps they can even help us find our way out of the modern crisis of moral thought that is the subject of Socher’s essay.

Andrew N. Koss is an associate editor at Mosaic magazine. He is currently writing a book on the Jews of Vibia during World War I.

Always Messy: A Rejoinder to Andrew Koss

BY ABRAHAM SOCHER

It’s hard to take exception to a critic who says your essay on repentance reminds him of a funny poem in which Schiller parodies Kant, and then neatly segues into a discussion of the great 20th-century mussarist Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler on free will. So I won’t, or at least not right away.

Still, with all of these widely disparate thinkers and closely related concepts buzzing around, it may be difficult to focus on the issues at hand. Let me try to briefly restate some of them. Part of my argument was that, like weakness of the will (akrasia), repentance is hard to account for if one understands ethics, with Aristotle, as the cultivation and practice of virtues of character such as courage, generosity, temperance, and so on. Contrary to Koss, I don’t say it’s entirely impossible to do so, just difficult, because the habits of both vice and virtue are first formed in childhood—a period, incidentally, in which Aristotle and his followers are surprisingly uninterested—and reinforced through lifelong practice. With what psychological resources does one break such patterns of behavior? Moreover, whereas heirs to the Jewish (and Christian) conception of ethical life as one of obligation and compliance with law tend to regard acts of repentance as heroic battles against temptation, a pure virtue ethicist will see them as, at best, rough, external approximations of real virtue.

The great 12th-century halakhist and philosopher Moses Maimonides was both an Aristotelian virtue theorist and the author of the canonical “Laws of Repentance” (Hilkhot Teshuvah). Although he strives mightily and ingeniously to bring repentance under the rubric of his theory of the virtues, one can occasionally see the strain. This is particularly clear in the discussion of repentance in old age: “Even if he transgressed his entire life and repented on the day of his death and died as a penitent all of his sins are forgiven.” But what could such a last-minute and merely verbal repentance even mean? It would seem to consist in the regret that one wasn’t a different person, didn’t lead a different life. Such regret would be understandable, but why equate it with a life that really was lived in virtue? I suspect that this is one of those places where Maimonides’s esoteric position is at some variance with the tradition he codifies.

And yet—here I want to turn the tables in a somewhat different direction than Koss suggests I did—both Aristotelian virtue theory and the ethics of obligation are true to our felt experience of different aspects of, or moments in, moral life (which is, incidentally, why Kant wasn’t wrong to think that there was an element of compulsion to moral experience). Twentieth-century philosophers such as Elizabeth Anscombe and Alasdair MacIntyre have argued that this is merely a result of something like our modern fallen state in which we attempt to make sense of our lives with the broken shards of two or more incommensurable moral vocabularies. Perhaps, but if so, it’s worth noting that this was the case in 12th-century Cairo too. Indeed, Aristotle’s final, cryptic discussion of the place of law in moral education suggests that it may have been the case some 1,500 years earlier in Athens. Maybe, as I suggested in the final line of my piece, moral thinking was always messy.

Andrew Koss thinks that the tradition of mussar, and Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler in particular, has something to teach us on these matters. I have no doubt that this is the case, but I doubt that it will lead us out of the dilemmas I’ve briefly outlined above (mainly because I think nothing will). I agree that the mussarists were prescient in what would now be called their cognitive behavioral approach to moral development. I have my reservations about those meditations on hellfires that Koss mentions, but about guilt and its place in everyday life the old mussarists were never wrong.

The passage Koss quotes from Dessler does not involve hellfires; rather it is a vivid allegory of internal moral struggle in which two armies are engaged. The real fighting, he says, “takes place only at the battlefront,” which is to say free moral choice happens only when one’s inclinations toward good and evil are perfectly counterpoised. Behind the lines of the forces of good is moral ground already won—the province of one’s virtues—while behind the lines of the forces of evil lie moral attainments that are at present inaccessible. The decision point, the place where the question of free will is relevant, is where these forces are engaged.

This splitting of the moral subject is no doubt true at some level as everyone from Plato to Pixar has argued. Indeed, Dessler’s original Hebrew formulation in Mikhtav me-Eliyahu looks like it may be indebted to Plato’s allegory of the soul as a chariot driving two competing horses. In his letter to the editor (see page 4), Dr. Joel Rutman suggests that these different modules of the mind can be associated with specific areas of the brain, which can be seen lighting up when exercised on an fMRI.

It may be useful as a tool for moral self-improvement to see oneself as adjudicating between opposing forces within one’s breast or brain, though where precisely the adjudicator, or charioteer, resides is more than a moot point. But I’m afraid I don’t see how such a picture reconciles virtue ethics with an ethics of obligation, or solves the puzzles in moral psychology to which the experience of weakness of the will and the moral phenomenon of repentance give rise. More generally, I think ethical life is best described at the level of the conscious individual, the moral agent.

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BY JAKE MARMER

When I was 12, my parents bought me a gigantic Yiddish-Russian dictionary. Maybe this was their way of compensating for the fact that they had not told me I was Jewish until second grade, when I came home singing a Ukrainian ditty with the word “zhid.” Or maybe the gift was inspired by the Soviet Union’s collapse, which made it possible to purchase such a dictionary in a regular bookstore. That year, I spent many afternoons trying to memorize the words that began with alef. I had a craving for a Jewish language—as identity, as an answer of some sort—and I knew that neither Russian nor Ukrainian would suffice. Needless to say, neither the alef words of Yiddish nor the shreds of Hebrew I picked up in the newly opened Sunday school helped me very much.

That same year, my parents gave me a volume of Isaac Babel’s short stories. The book was handed to me with a gesture that suggested the reverence one reserves for ritual objects—and with a certain glee that seemed to undercut the reverence. And there it was: Babel’s Russian was the first Jewish language I could come to call my own.

Reading, and rereading, Babel particularly his Odessa stories, was an almost hallucinatory experience. The sensory overload of every single image, the dense, drunken music of it all, bewildered me in a way that was visceral. Even today, 25 years later, I still remember how my body felt when I read that book. It was an illicit pleasure—and not merely because of the subject matter—above all, it was the broken Russian grammar and phrasing, wrought because of the Union’s collapse, which made it possible to purchase such a dictionary in a regular bookstore. That year, I couldn’t fully understand any of this at the time.

Both my grandmother and my aunt taught Russian language and literature in high school. Along with my mother, who grew up in their menacingly pedagogic shadow, they were exacting in their demands on my Russian, which was to be grammatically impeccable and spoken with a properly modulated Slavic diction at all times, whether I was tagging along to the marketplace or reciting poetry. Babel offered an alternative that was revelatory. I may have intuited that this deliriously broken and Yiddishized Russian spoken by Babel’s characters was, like all such creoles, an alternative that was revelatory. I may have intuited that the deliberately broken and Yiddishized Russian spoken by Babel’s characters was, like all such creoles, a way one could carve out a self within a culture that seemed to swallow you whole without ever accepting you.

I couldn’t fully understand any of this at the time, of course, but I’ve been thinking about it a great deal lately as I read Val Vinokur’s new translation of Babel’s stories, _The Essential Fictions_. To translate Babel is to attempt to invent, or reinvent, a language—a Jewish language—particularly given Babel’s predilection for marrying the argot of the underworld with highly sophisticated narration. What would its English equivalent be? Saul Bellow’s high-low American English? Jackie Mason’s tonalities? Mickey Katz’s lyrics? Yeshiva talk? None of these seem quite right, but it is clear that Vinokur is willing to experiment. There is an iconic scene in “The King”: A nameless young man interrupts Dvoira Krik’s wedding celebration. He gets Benya’s attention with a phrase that betrays a Yiddishism lurking behind it, with two twisted conjugations and a well-missused word. There isn’t a trace of this in Peter Constantine’s fine 2002 translation, but Vinokur takes a chance with “I got a couple things to tell you.” The dropped preposition may not create a sense of an invented language, but it hints at something lurking underneath, as does, for example, “Benya, you know what kind of notion I got? I got a notion our chimney’s on fire,” which, too, is smoothed over in Constantine’s work.

Vinokur also pays close attention to names, one of Babel’s specialties: street names, Yiddish names, Slavic names, and especially nicknames. Thus, in Vinokur’s rendition, you get, among others, “From the Rook,” “Monya Gunner,” “Lyova Rooski,” and “Ivan Fiverubes.” Vinokur’s impressionistic work is most challenged, however, in Babel’s complex narration. For instance, describing Benya’s raid he translates, “on that dread night when stuck cows bellowed and calves slipped in their mothers’ blood.” This sounds a bit rough around the edges, especially when compared with Constantine’s elegant “that terrible night when the slashed cows skidded in their mothers’ blood.”

As I read Babel’s Odessa stories in the book my parents gave me, I became more attuned to our older relatives, the ones I saw on our annual pilgrimages to the small village of Haschevato, where my father’s family has its roots. Every year we gathered at the local cemetery, near the mass grave where members of our family who had been too old or reluctant to evacuate during the Holocaust are buried. There, a large wall bears names that were very familiar to me, along with first names, of the sort I only encountered in Babel’s work. The elderly relatives I met there, those of my great-grandparents’ generation, spoke Russian much like Babel’s characters did. Listening to them, I understood that the reason my parents had given me this book with such reverence had something to do with these relatives.

Not long after the Soviet Union collapsed and Ukraine became its own country, the government rushed to create a sense of a national literature, slapping together a quick high school curriculum, which I was unfortunate to encounter. We read works of dubious merit—but at least they were written in Ukrainian. A play “One Hundred Thousands,” by Ivan Karpenko-Kary, describes a Ukrainian peasant-dreamer who gets ripped off by an anonymous Jewish counterfeiter. The author had clearly read _The Merchant of Venice_ but lacked Venice, a sense of humor, and an understanding that a Jew had not only eyes etc., but, as Shylock insists, “dimensions.”

He did, however, allow his Jew to speak, occasionally dropping what Karpenko-Kary thought to be Yiddish, or Yiddish-sounding, phrases that elicited much mirth from my classmates as we read the play out loud and recited monologues by heart. To this day, I feel the cold sweat on my neck and the paralyzing shame shooting through me when I think of that play. If I could go back in time and say something to my terrified 13-year-old self, I’d begin with Babel, whose brilliant appropriation of Russian was the real mic drop to Karpenko-Kary and others like him.

The twisted Russian of Babel’s characters is full of sublime mistakes. In one of Benya’s finest monologues, the author reveals to us what they are really all about:

[If] you need my life you may take it, but everyone makes mistakes, even God. A huge mistake has been made, Aunt Pesya. But wasn’t it a mistake on God’s part to settle Jews in Russia and let them be tormented worse than in hell? And would it have been so bad if the Jews lived in Switzerland, where they would be surrounded by first-class lakes, mountain air, and nothing but Frenchmen? Everyone makes mistakes, even God. Listen to me with your ears, Aunt Pesya.

The first Jewish language I learned was the language of mistakes. Mistakes that turned, in defiance, into pure poetry.

LAST WORD

Movie poster advertising Benny the Howl (1926), based on Isaac Babel’s _The Odessa Tales_.

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Support for this program is generously provided by the Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation of Portland, Oregon.