Eitan Fishbane **Radiant Zohar**

# Jewish Review of Books

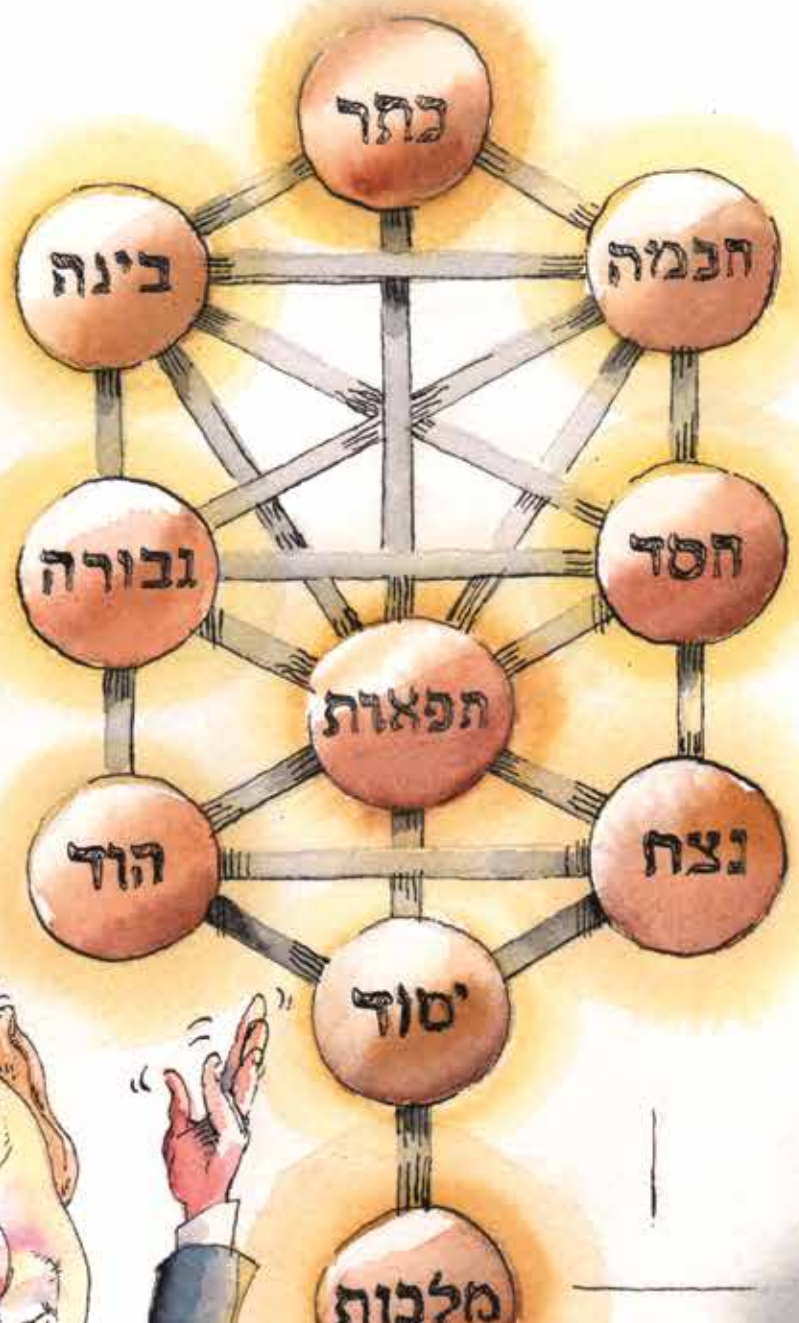
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## Steven Aschheim
## Scholemania!

## Ruth R. Wisse
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## Trilling's Jewish Demons

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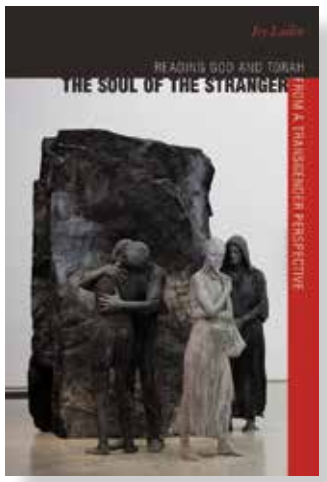



## Zionist Ideas
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## The Soul of the Stranger

Reading God and Torah from a Transgender Perspective

**Joy Ladin**

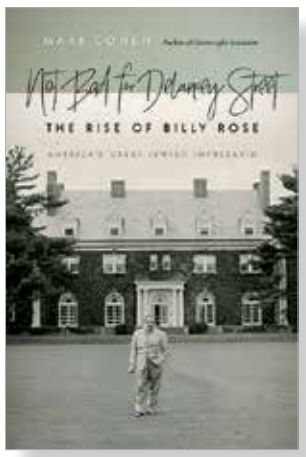
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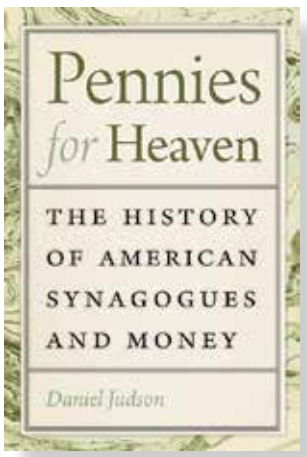

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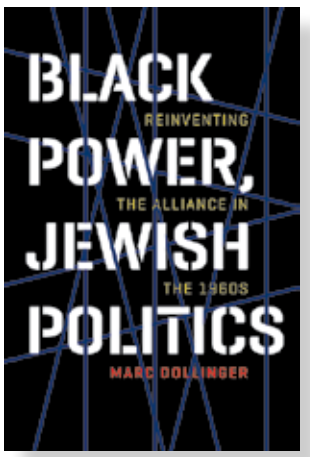

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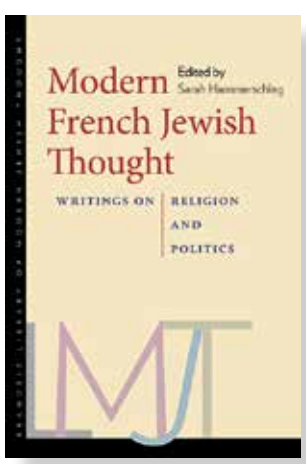

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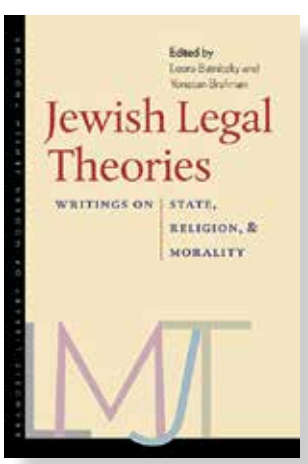

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# Jewish Review of Books

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## LAST WORD


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On the cover: *Scholem at the Portae Lucis* by Mark Anderson.

### The Melting Pot and the Cheshire Cat

For the last 25 years I have been applying Lewis Carroll's famous description of the Cheshire Cat, who "vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone," to American Jewry. Even as the Reform and Conservative movements now seek to boost their declining membership rolls and pay their bills by drawing non-Jews into their ranks, smiling apologists continue to reassure us that all is well . . . just different. But in fact we are witnessing yet another Jewish historic tragedy, albeit this time self-inflicted.

In his article "In the Melting Pot" (Summer 2018), Allan Arkush states that he "can't believe in the long-term survivability of any form of Judaism in our modern liberal democracy that isn't rooted in solid convictions and consolidated by a disciplined and more or less segregated communal life." Granted Arkush is writing about the challenges confronting American Jewish life. But why does his article ignore the state of Israel? Only in Israel is Jewish long-term survivability not dependent upon the religious convictions and segregated communal life to which he refers. The Jews of Israel face numerous threats, but demographic dissolution is not among them. Intermarriage in Israel is virtually nonexistent. The Jewish families comprising some 80 percent of the country's population have on the average 3.16 children. Contrast this with 1.9 children among non-Orthodox Jewish families in America.

And, of course, there is the Hebrew language and the Hebrew calendar: The former inflects the most prosaic conversation with nuances of Jewish tradition; the latter arranges the daily lives of even the most secular Israelis. These are but two of the factors that work to unite the immigrant Jews of modern Israel who brought with them the varied cultures in which they were raised. Like America, Israel is a melting pot but one in which the Jews cannot dissolve.

Ardie Geldman
Efrat, Israel

### *Allan Arkush Responds:*

Ardie Geldman is more pessimistic than I am about the prospects for non-Orthodox Jewry in the United States, but he doesn't insist that I abandon all hope for it, as he apparently has. He just wants to know why I didn't pay any attention to Israel in my essay. Instead of answering that question, I'll say what I would have said if I had veered into that subject. I very much doubt U.S. Jewry would be anything like what it is today if the state of Israel had not been established. But I don't think that a connection with Israel can do much to fend off the kind of disintegration that threatens us—unless it is bound up with religion, Orthodox or liberal.

Geldman describes Israel as a melting pot, too, but one in which the Jews can survive. True enough. In the Jewish state, you don't need strong convictions; it's enough to be segregated from others. But what happens to those not inconsiderable numbers of (overwhelmingly secular) Israeli Jews who leave their country for ours? On the basis of what I have seen and read, they, or rather their children and grandchildren, tend to disappear into the American melting pot at least as fast as any previous wave of Jewish immigrants.

*(Editor's Note: For further discussion of Allan Arkush's essay, see our recent online symposium with Jack Wertheimer, David Biale, Edieal Pinker, and Erica Brown at www.jewishreviewofbooks.com.)*

### Yom Kippur Dance

Ronald and Allis Radosh describe rebellious young Jewish atheists "mocking the holiest day on the Jewish calendar" by holding a dance on Yom Kippur in their discussion of early 20th-century Jewish anarchists ("Free Radicals," Summer 2018). No doubt they *were* rebelling against tradition, but perhaps they also remembered a famous mishnah that quotes Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel as saying that on Yom Kippur "the maidens of Jerusalem used to go out dressed in white . . . and danced in the vineyards, saying 'Young men, look and see who you will choose.'" Or maybe it is just a historical irony, of which we Jews have more than a few.

Talia Kagan
Tel Aviv, Israel

### The Courts and the People

I was surprised and disappointed with Tom Ginsburg's conclusion that there is no realistic alternative to the judicial imperialism that Daniel Friedmann describes in *The Purse and the Sword* (see "You Shall Appoint for Yourself Judges," Summer 2018). Ginsburg tells us, in essence, that the best Israelis can hope for is to watch as judicial power wanes and then waxes again. Sometimes the people control their destiny, Professor Ginsburg tells us, and sometimes the judges control it.

Ginsburg also minimizes the vast scope of Justice Barak's power grab. In the U.S., courts decide only "cases and controversies," and this limitation on their power is effectuated by restrictions on "standing"—who can bring a "case"—and on "justiciability"—the concept that determines the kinds of disagreements a court is empowered to resolve. In Israel these restrictions have been completely eliminated. Barak and his disciples didn't merely "expand" standing: There is now *no* limit on standing in Israel. And they didn't merely loosen the limits on justiciability: In Israel, *everything* is now justiciable.

Ginsburg's title quotes Moses's instruction in chapter 16 of Deuteronomy that the Jewish people should appoint judges for themselves. But in Israel, as Ginsburg does not really deny, for the last several decades the judges have appointed one another. This means that Israel's Supreme Court has seized substantive control over the most important decisions the state must make and simultaneously taken control of the choice over who makes those decisions.

Judicial assertiveness may not be unique to Israel, but Ginsburg does not tell us that in any other country the courts have taken control over both many substantive political choices *and* the choice over who does the choosing. And if he were to have told us that, it would hardly be a comfort. Granted that it can be both courageous and valuable for a judge to stand between a real tyrant and the power he or she seeks. But, as anyone who has watched Israel's Knesset at work for a quarter of an hour knows, there is no danger that that legislature will ever be beaten into submission by any earthly force. Much less does Israel need fear tyranny at the hands of any prime minister or any single party: For many decades, parliamentary control in Israel has not been held by anything other than a razor thin, and eternally unstable, majority.

Jerome Marcus
Narbeth, PA

### *Tom Ginsburg Responds:*

Mr. Marcus obviously sides with Friedmann on the proper role of judges in a democracy and would hardly be comforted were I to list India, Pakistan, and other countries in which judges have both eviscerated standing requirements and dominated the appointments process. There are many more examples of countries, including some with relatively functional legislative branches, in which the judicial role has expanded even without that extreme combination.

The legitimacy of this global expansion of judicial power is hotly debated, and I am in print as being critical of the trend. But to understand the alternative, we cannot fall back on an abstract construct like "the people," which hardly does justice to the complexities of modern government, and it is the case that in most democracies (including my own), legislatures are currently held in particularly low esteem. It is not for me to tell Israelis how to run their democracy, but if the Knesset wants to, it could adopt more of Friedmann's proposed reforms to the Judicial Selection Committee. He was unable to get his whole package through while minister of justice, which suggests that perhaps the Israeli "people" don't agree with Mr. Marcus either.

### Humanism in Ma'ale Adumim?

I am astonished and disturbed to read the long essay you have published by Allan Nadler extolling the ideas and personality of Nachum Rabinovitch, whom Nadler presents as a veritable Maimonides redivivus ("Maimonides in Ma'ale Adumim," Summer 2018). His encomium of Rabinovitch as an advocate of "universalist humanism" sits awkwardly with his candid admission that Rabinovitch uttered vile incitements to violence (some recorded on tape) on several occasions. Your readers deserve better than such whitewashing of a settler-rabbi who represents much that is most despicable in modern Israeli and Jewish life.

Bernard Wasserstein
The Netherlands

### *Allan Nadler Responds:*

May I suggest to Dr. Wasserstein, whose own scholarly work I have long admired, that he spend some time actually studying the works of Rabbi Nachum Rabinovitch and learning more about his actual career, halakhic views, and personality before condemning him as representing "much that is most despicable in modern Israeli and Jewish life." The accusation that my article in any way "whitewashed" Rabinovitch suggests the cover-up of some horrible crime, an accusation based on a secretly recorded personal conversation, rather than a vast body of rational and humanistic rabbinic scholarship, which represents to me that which is so admirable and inspirational in modern Israeli and Jewish life. My piece was an analysis of his masterpiece on Maimonides's Code of Law, a work of unprecedented magnitude and scholarly fortitude. I had no choice but to address the calumnies against Rabbi Rabinovitch, which have unjustly tainted one of today's greatest rabbinical minds and distracted attention from what is most important and true about his life and work, calumnies now resurrected carelessly by Dr. Wasserstein.

# The Book of Radiance

BY EITAN P. FISHBANE

***The Zohar: Pritzker Edition***
translation and commentary by Daniel C. Matt
Stanford University Press; Volume 1–8, $60; Volume 9, $80

Daniel Matt's magisterial translation of the *Zohar* begins:

> Rabbi Ḥizkiyah opened, "*Like a rose among thorns, so is my beloved among the maidens*" (Song of Songs 2:2). Who is *a rose*? Assembly of Israel. For there is a rose, and then there is a rose! Just as a rose among thorns is colored red and white, so Assembly of Israel includes judgment and compassion. Just as a rose has thirteen petals, so Assembly of Israel has thirteen qualities of compassion surrounding Her on every side. Similarly, from the moment [אלהי״ם] (*Elohim*), *God*, is mentioned, it generates thirteen words to surround Assembly of Israel and protect Her; then it is mentioned again. Why again? To produce five sturdy leaves surrounding the rose. These five are called Salvation; they are five gates. Concerning this mystery it is written: *I raise the cup of salvation* (Psalms 116:13). This is the cup of blessing, which should rest on five fingers—and no more—like the rose, sitting on five sturdy leaves, paradigm of five fingers. This rose is the cup of blessing.

I will return to the meaning of this deep and dizzying passage: What is the "Assembly of Israel" and what does it have to do with the lover and beloved of the Song of Songs? Are roses both red and white? And so on. But first let us ask a more general question: What is a great translation?

In his classic essay "The Task of the Translator," Walter Benjamin distinguishes between a translation that successfully transfers information from one language to another and the far more profound kind of translation that arises from the organic life and afterlife of a great work of art. Such translation is part, in fact a necessary part, of the cultural unfolding and flowering of the original work:

> The history of the great works of art tells us about their antecedents, their realization in the age of the artist, their potentially eternal afterlife in succeeding generations. Where this last manifests itself, it is called fame. Translations that are more than transmissions of subject matter come into being when in the course of its survival a work has reached the age of its fame. . . . [S]uch translations do not so much serve the work as owe their existence to it. The life of the originals attains in them to its ever-renewed latest and most abundant flowering.

The lifeblood of the original work—that which motivates the act of translation in the first place—spreads through the arteries of a living cultural organism, wherein the past is made present again and again. The great translation of a classic work depends not only on its ability to accurately capture the meanings of words for the reader unable to access the text in the original but also on its ability to render what Benjamin called "the unfathomable, the mysterious, the 'poetic,' something that a translator can reproduce only if he is also a poet."

The *Zohar* is not only the central classic of the Kabbalah, it is one of the most extraordinary productions of human creativity in the history of the world. But it was not until our own time—some seven hundred years after its original composition—that this work found its great translator in Daniel Matt, who has succeeded masterfully in recapturing and




***Title page of the* Zohar*, Mantua, 1558. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress.)***

conveying the unfathomable, mysterious, and, especially, poetic aspects of this "book of radiance" (the literal meaning of *Sefer ha-Zohar*). In fact, Matt's first translations from the *Zohar*, published some 35 years ago in the Paulist Press Classics of Western Spirituality series, were in verse. Thus, he translated the beginning of the *Zohar*'s commentary on Genesis 1 as:

> When the King conceived ordaining
> He engraved engravings in the luster on high.
> A blinding spark flashed
> within the Concealed of the Concealed
> from the mystery of the Infinite

The *Zohar* itself was not composed in verse, but in Matt's early effort he was already working to capture a deep truth about this transcendent text, with its unique, sparkling language, symbolic imagery, and poetic cadence. (His equally brilliant prose translation of these lines is: "At the head of potency of the King, He engraved engravings in luster on high. A spark of impenetrable darkness flashed within the concealed of the concealed, from the head of Infinity.")

Arriving on the heels of a century of kabbalistic creativity in southern France and northern Spain, the *Zohar* is the crowning achievement of medieval Jewish mysticism and perhaps the single most important body of literature—it isn't a book in the conventional sense—in the entire history of Jewish spirituality. While nearly all other kabbalistic works of the period were written in Hebrew and generally claimed by their authors, the *Zohar* was pseudepigraphic and written in Aramaic: It represented itself as the product of the 2nd-century Galilean sage Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. The earliest references that we have to the text describe it as "*midrasho shel Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai*," a mystical midrash that had arisen in medieval Castile after centuries of concealment.

The text of this work was new-old—at once infused with the language and texture of ancient tradition and a radically original mode of imagination and expression. The choice of an inventive Aramaic was not only an attempt to reproduce or channel the voices of ancient sages, it was also part of the authors' efforts to cast a veil of mystification and wonder upon its audience—to invite the reader to bask in the mists of spiritual consciousness. Indeed, the *Zohar* is itself a fascinating attempt to translate and express the poetry and mystery bequeathed to it by a distant world.

In the *Zohar*, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his disciples read the Bible as a coded, symbolic document in which every element of earthly reality alludes to a hidden mystery within the divine world. These interpretations are interwoven with an episodic tale in which the disciples wander about the ancient Galilee in quest of mystical wisdom. Given that it was written by Castilian kabbalists of the 13th and 14th centuries, what we have in the *Zohar* is thus a deeply imaginative *fictional* creation—an invented world of holy men and spiritual adventures wrought in the fires of stunningly innovative medieval minds.

Let us now return to the opening passage of the *Zohar*. Rabbi Hizkiyah's explication of the famous verse comparing the poet's beloved to a rose among thorns presupposes not only that the Song of Songs is an allegory of divine love, as the classic rabbinic tradition taught, but that this love is, as it were, *within* God. That is, it is a relationship between certain *sefirot*, which are the 10 divine emanations or potencies, through which the mystery of the infinite is projected into the world. Thus, Rabbi Shimon bar

Yochai's disciple is reflecting on the inner dynamics of the divine self. The rose, he is telling us, represents the tenth *sefirah*, the *Shekhina*, referred to here as the Assembly of Israel (*Keneset Yisrael*), which is identified with the Jewish people and understood to be female. "Just as a rose among thorns is colored red and white," we are told, "so Assembly of Israel includes judgment and compassion"—that is to say, she receives and filters the divine forces that flow downward from the *sefirot Chesed* and *Gevurah*.

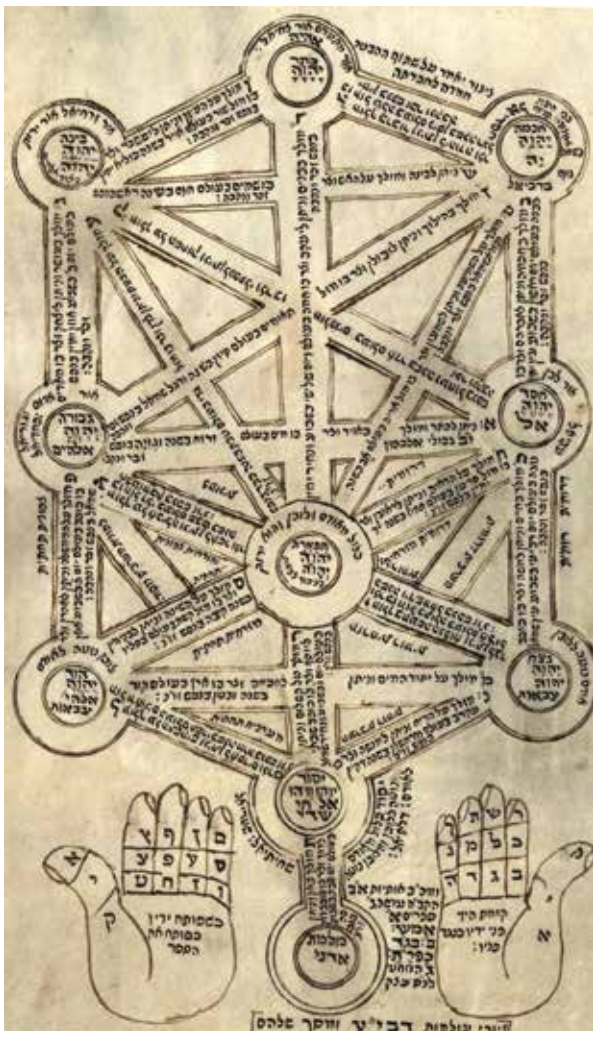
Rabbi Hizkiyah also ruminates on the symbolic allusiveness of the natural world, comments on the mystical meaning of familiar ritual ("This is the cup of blessing, which should rest on five fingers—and no more"), and takes the reader into the transcendent mythology of the *sefirot*—all while weaving together verses from Song of Songs, Genesis, and Psalms. Matt's translation opens up the meaning of the *Zohar*'s original Aramaic while retaining both its spiritual mystique and its lightness of touch. Of special note is his running commentary in the footnotes, which cites rabbinic antecedents and kabbalistic parallels while lucidly explaining the text and often illuminating its broader historical and literary context. Thus he notes that while the "rose" (in Hebrew, *shoshana*) of the verse is probably actually a lily or a lotus, "Rabbi Ḥizkiyah has in mind a rose," and then goes on to explain what he means by describing it as both red and white:

> **colored red and white** As is *Rosa gallica versicolor* (also known as *Rosa mundi*), one of the oldest of the striped roses, whose flowers are crimson splashed on a white background. The striping varies and occasionally flowers revert to the solid pink of their parent, *Rosa gallica*. The parent was introduced to Europe in the twelfth or thirteenth century by Crusaders returning from Palestine. Both parent and sport were famous for their aromatic and medicinal qualities. Elsewhere (2:20a–b) the *Zohar* alludes to the process of distilling oil from the petals of the flower to produce rose water, a popular remedy. During this process the color gradually changes from red to white.

The notes that follow explicate the dense web of kabbalistic symbolism embedded in such phrases as "thirteen petals . . . thirteen qualities of compassion" and so on. "A rose blossom," he informs us, "can have thirteen petals in its second tier. . . . God's thirteen attributes of compassion are derived from Exodus 34:6–7. . . . According to Kabbalah, these qualities originate in *Keter*, the highest *sefirah*, the realm of total compassion untainted by judgment."

In important ways, Matt's project is heir to the tradition of *Zohar* scholarship from its earliest days. One of the great exemplars of early translation of the text into Hebrew is a turn-of-the-14th-century kabbalist named Rabbi David ben Yehudah he-Hasid, who was the subject of Matt's doctoral dissertation at Brandeis. Among the many other partial translations over the centuries are those made into Latin by or for early modern Christian kabbalists such as Pietro di Galatino and Guillaume Postel through 20th-century productions such as the dry and relatively unusable English Soncino translation (available online) and Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag's *Peirush ha-sulam*. Ashlag, who translated the text into a lucid Hebrew with an embedded commentary, was influenced by the 16th-century Kabbalah of Rabbi Isaac Luria, and his edition was an attempt to disseminate esoteric knowledge to a world that he believed could no longer survive without it. Another precursor to Matt's translation, and for many decades the most significant scholarly translation project devoted to the *Zohar*, was Isaiah Tishby's *Mishnat ha-Zohar*, translated into English by David Goldstein as *The Wisdom of the Zohar*. Tishby translated a wide array of passages, accompanied by informative introductions and extensive annotations. Despite the importance of *Mishnat ha-Zohar* for generations of scholars and students, however, the anthologized texts were ultimately only excerpts from a dramatically larger textual stream. Thus, Matt both continues a long tradition of translation and charts new territory.

**There was no single manuscript still in existence (if there ever was one) that preserved everything we now regard as being a part of the *Zohar*.**



**Ilan ha-sefirot** ***(sefirotic tree) and 26 letters that correspond to jointed sections of the hand, with allusions to*** **Sefer yezirah** **(*Book of Creation*). *(Courtesy of the Gross Family Collection.)***

When the philanthropist Margot Pritzker (an heir to the Hyatt Hotel fortune) enabled Matt to retire from the Graduate Theological Union and devote two decades of his life to translating the entire *Zohar*, it wasn't just to fill a scholarly desideratum. It was to continue what Benjamin called the "potentially eternal afterlife" of an undeniably great work.

For much of the 20th century, Gershom Scholem's conclusion that the *Zohar* was largely the work of a mystic named Rabbi Moses de León in late 13th-century Castile held sway over scholarly opinion. Scholem's theory was compelling and far from unfounded. As Matt notes in the very first footnote to the opening passage just discussed, there is a parallel passage in de León's *Sefer ha-rimmon*, and Scholem and others have noted many parallels of language and doctrine between the *Zohar* and de León's works. In testimony quoted in a late 15th-century text, the kabbalist Isaac of Akko is represented as saying that de León's widow told him that the work was entirely from her husband's hand. The 19th-century Jewish historian Heinrich Graetz, who was opposed to mysticism of all kinds, described the *Zohar* as a forgery. Scholem set out to disprove Graetz but concluded that he was correct in spite of his rationalist prejudices, though Scholem understood well that pseudepigraphy was not forgery but a phenomenon of premodern religious creativity, the spiritual identification of a later author with a revered figure from times of old.

This consensus has been shattered in recent decades. First came Yehuda Liebes's path-breaking theory that a group of Castilian kabbalists including de León, not unlike the imagined circle of disciples around Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, were responsible for the composition of the *Zohar*. More recently scholars have argued that there were likely several groups of authors in successive decades and even generations, each of whom edited and added to what we now know as the *Zohar* (among them, that early translator Rabbi David ben Yehudah he-Hasid). This evolution in the theory of authorship has gone hand in hand with a greater appreciation for the relationship and tension between the existing manuscripts of the *Zohar* and the text as it was first printed in 16th-century Italy.

As the research of Daniel Abrams, Boaz Huss, and Ronit Meroz has shown, prior to the 16th century, there were a range of disparate, overlapping, and incomplete zoharic manuscripts that were weaved together into a new whole by the editors of the Mantua and Cremona printings in the late 1550s. There was no single manuscript still in existence (if there ever was one) that preserved everything we now regard as being a part of the *Zohar*. So what text did Matt translate?

The manuscripts were all incomplete or problematic in different ways. Therefore, it would not do to use one of these as a "diplomatic" text, supplemented by notes indicating manuscript variances, as has become common practice in the production of critical editions. Matt instead chose to use the established printed edition (which was essentially the Mantua printing combined with variants from the Cremona printing) as a starting point, substituting superior readings from a host of different older manuscripts where he saw fit to do so. Matt has characterized this work as a "scraping away" of accumulated "scribal accretions and glosses" to try to get as close as possible to the elusive original (or, perhaps, *originals*), and he has noted these changes in an online Aramaic edition on the website of Stanford University Press, which itself is a major contribution to scholarship.

Not everyone agrees with this "eclectic critical method," since it must be admitted that the base text established by Matt is one that quite likely never existed in this exact form before. In my own opinion, given the choices that Matt had before him, this was the right way to go, since it offers what he regards as the best possible textual reading in each case. When the full textual apparatus is eventually published online, researchers will be able to follow and debate his choices.



***Daniel C. Matt. (Courtesy of the author.)***

*The Zohar: Pritzker Edition* itself spans 12 thick and handsomely produced volumes, the first nine of which were composed by Matt and the remaining three by Nathan Wolski and Joel Hecker, under Matt's editorship. (Wolski translated and annotated volume 10, Hecker did the same for volume 11, and the two collaborated on volume 12.) Of particular note in Wolski's work is his elegant translation and learned annotation of *Midrash ha-ne'elam*, thought to be the earliest stratum of the *Zohar*; an especially notable section of Hecker's translation is his richly poetic rendition of the Matnitin and Tosefta sections. In this essay, however, I have chosen to reflect on the accomplishments of Matt in the first nine volumes, which comprise the material often referred to as *guf ha-Zohar* (the body of the *Zohar*), along with several other classic sections. Let us turn now to another famously resonant passage, in which Matt's zoharic English virtually reincarnates the text, emerging organically from the living organism of its source:

> When Israel enacts the unification of the mystery of שמע ישראל (*Shema Yisrael*), *Hear O Israel!* (Deuteronomy 6:4) with perfect intention, one radiance issues from secrecy of the upper world, and that radiance strikes a spark of darkness and scatters into seventy lights, and those seventy flash into seventy branches of the Tree of Life.
> Then that Tree wafts fragrances and aromas, and all the trees of the Garden of Eden waft fragrances and praise their Lord, for then *Matronita* is adorned to enter the canopy with Her Husband. All those supernal limbs unite in one desire, in one aspiration, to be one with no separation. Then Her Husband is arrayed for Her, to bring Her to the canopy in single union, to unite with *Matronita*.
> Therefore, we arouse Her, saying שמע ישראל (*Shema Yisrael*), *Hear O Israel!* (Deuteronomy 6:4)—Adorn Yourself! Behold, Your Husband is near You in His array, ready to meet You. *YHVH our God, YHVH is one* (ibid.)—in one unification, in one aspiration, without separation; for all those limbs become one, entering into one desire. As soon as Israel says *one*, arousing six aspects, all those six become one. This mystery is ו (*vav*), one extension alone, with no other attachment, expanded by all, one.
> At that moment, *Matronita* prepares and adorns Herself, and Her attendants escort Her to Her Husband in hushed whisper, saying "Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom forever and ever!" This is whispered, for so must She be brought to Her Husband. Happy are the people who know this and compose the supernal arrangement of faith!

The striking poetry of zoharic myth is captured in this description of the divine mystery behind the central Jewish affirmation of faith. Divine emanation is described here as the mysterious emergence of light from the depths of cosmic hiddenness—the striking of that primordial, paradoxical "spark of darkness," a moment of wondrous divine blacksmithing. This image of the cosmic spark of darkness (*butzina de-kardinuta*) appears in several passages as a kind of flashing brilliance in the transcendent universe above, as well as in the deepest recesses of the human contemplative mind.

But here it is the inner-divine Tree of Life that flashes into revealed form as the metaphysical expansion and embodiment of the splintered sparks of supernal darkness. It is a divine sparkling, and then an aromatic overflow, that results from the human act of reciting the *Shema* "with perfect intention." This is theurgic ritual—human actions that provoke reactions in the divine world—at its most dramatic and sensory, at once visual and olfactory. The Jewish people call forth the emanation of luminous divine energies from the upper *sefirot*, and it is the power of their prayerful intention that causes the eruption of an explosive brilliance within God. They ignite the divine Tree of Life, an erotic union of male and female within the dynamic divine self.

Matt's own poetic craft is visible in his translation choices here: "*itpaleig le-shiv'in nehorin*" becomes "scatters into seventy lights"; "*inun shiv'in lahatei be-shiv'in anafin*" is translated as "those seventy flash into seventy branches"; and "*ha-hu ilana seleik reichin u-busmin*" is rendered as "that Tree wafts fragrances and aromas." Deep knowledge of the resonance of each Aramaic word is at play here, but so too is the artistry of achieving the cadence, nuance, and crispness of zoharic mythopoesis in English. As with the first example we considered, Matt's richly learned commentary in his notes fills out the picture, citing rabbinic sources and zoharic parallels, and unpacking the bold mythic eroticism of the text: the sacred union between the *sefirot Tiferet* and *Shekhina* that lies at the heart of the *Zohar*. Like his translation, Matt's notes are heir to the grand tradition of *Zohar* scholarship, from Rabbi Moses Cordovero's massive commentary *Or yakar* to the handwritten notes in Gershom Scholem's annotated *Zohar* and the notes to Charles Mopsik's great French translation,




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SEFARAD IN MY HEART:
A LADINO READER
Lazar, Moshe (editor). Lancaster California: Labyrinthos, 2009.
Anthology of 15th–20th century secular and religious literature written in Ladino (Hebrew script) or translated from Hebrew and Latin scripts such as Judeo Spanish, facing romanized Ladino transliteration. Commentaries in English by scholar and linguist Moshe Lazar explain the content and importance of each text. A wide selection of prose and poetry: newspapers, folklore, plays, songs, romances, history, liturgy, Kabbala and the Bible. Early texts represent the cultural heritage that Iberian Jews carried to Italy and the Ottoman Empire after the expulsion. Illustrated with black and white facsimiles from manuscript and print sources. Ladino pronunciation guide; tables of the transcription systems for Ladino and Hebrew to Latin script; Hebrew, Aramaic and Turkish glossaries in English; bibliographic references.
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*Le Zohar*. Indeed, Matt's commentary may be the most significant and comprehensive line-by-line exegesis of the *Zohar* to ever appear, given its fusion of wisdom gained from the older religious commentaries and the fruits of modern critical scholarship.

Part of the power of the *Zohar*'s myth is the way in which it both explains and infuses religious practice with metaphysical meaning. Thus, for instance, the *Zohar* emphasizes the deep significance of the requirement that only the Torah reader's voice be heard during the public reading of the Torah in the synagogue. For the *Zohar*, this ritual stipulation is understood to be a reflection of the inner divine harmony and unity of the *sefirot*: "With the Torah scroll, one voice and one utterance should be heard." After detailing the "arrangement to be prepared by the Holy People on this day and all other days for the Torah scroll," including "a throne (*kursayya*) called 'a reader's desk' (*de-ikri teivah*)," taking out the Torah and laying it on the reader's desk are depicted as directly comparable to the revelation at Mount Sinai:

> When the Torah scroll is lifted onto there, the whole people should arrange themselves in awe and fear, trembling and quaking, all below, intending in their hearts as if they were now standing at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. They should listen and incline their ears. None of the people, nor anyone else, is permitted to open his mouth with a word of Torah, and certainly not with any other word. Rather, all of them in awe, as if they had no mouth, as has been established, for it is written: *As he opened it, all the people stood up* (Nehemiah 8:5); *and the ears of all the people were attentive to the Torah scroll* (ibid., 3).

In Matt's skilled and artful hands, the English formulation conveys the original *Zohar*'s atmosphere of mystical experience—where the routine ritual of the synagogue is infused with the hush of revelation, the fear of receiving the divine word. The Aramaic phrases *le-sadra garmaihu be-eimata, be-dechilu, be-retet, be-zei'a* are transformed into "should arrange themselves in awe and fear, trembling and quaking."

Once again, Matt's commentary on these pages adds a great deal. Notably, Matt offers a historical-textual revision, commenting on a segment of text that is one of the most famous passages in the *Zohar*, known as the "*Berikh shemeih de-marei alma*" (Blessed is the name of the Lord of the universe) because of its prominent place in the Sabbath morning liturgy before the reading of the Torah. Matt argues that this passage is actually a much later addition by manuscript copyists and quite likely not part of the original composition. I will quote the note to give a glimpse of the depth of textual scholarship in his commentary.

> Remarkably, the prayer (together with the preceding paragraph: "Rabbi Shim'on said . . .") is a later addition to the *Zohar*, as indicated already by Cordovero (*Or Yaqar*) and as evidenced by the fact that it appears in none of the following manuscripts: C9, M5, M9, Ms24, N10, N41, O17, P2, R1, T1, V5, V7, V18, nor in the text accompanying *Or Yaqar*. In O2 a bit of it is inserted by a later copyist, while in the Cremona edition it appears in a smaller, different font. The passage appears in full in the Mantua edition and in nearly all subsequent editions (those that are based on Mantua). In a fifteenth-century kabbalistic manuscript containing various compositions (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, heb. MS 835, 114b), this prayer is attributed to Naḥmanides. Nevertheless, because of the prayer's historical, cultural, and religious significance—and because it is so widely known—I have included it here, placing the entire passage in brackets.

Following this bracketed translation of the "*Berikh shemeih*" passage, Matt renders the continuation of the *Zohar*'s portrait of the Torah reading in which one person should be heard chanting and the rest of the congregation should listen in rapt silence "as if they were receiving it at that moment from Mount Sinai." Only afterward they should hear the voice of its public translation, an old rabbinic custom.

> Another should stand next to the one reading and be silent, so that only one utterance exists, not two. The holy tongue is one—one and not two; if there are two with the Torah scroll, the mystery of faith is diminished, along with the glory of Torah. One translator, and this mystery is shell and kernel: mystery of this world and mystery of the world that is coming.

The singularity of each voice has metaphysical implications for the *Zohar*. Confusion below leads to diminishment above in the realm of the *sefirot*, which the *Zohar* often refers to as "the mystery of faith" (*raza de-meheimanuta*). Here, the interplay between holy tongue and translation—between Torah reader and public translator—is framed in distinctively mystical terms: The Hebrew original of the Torah is likened to the inner kernel, while the translation corresponds to the outer shell. While the holy tongue represents the hidden dimension of the heavenly world to come (*alma de-atei*), the translation channels the revealed dimension of this lower world.

Translation is actually necessary, then, to protect the vulnerable inner core, the fragile essence of divine reality, but it is also only by way of that outer shell of translation that the deepest spiritual truth can be accessed in this world. As Matt puts it in his commentary: "Just as the divine kernel is protected by a shell in order to be manifested in this world, so the Torah is accompanied by translation in order to be understood by all."

The work of the translator is a creative act in which the otherwise hidden language is filtered and revealed through the prism of a new poetic revelation. The translation draws its sustenance from the life force of the original, and yet it is only through the exegetical bridge of that translation that the untouchable spirit of the first text can enter into the world. It is not too much to say that Daniel Matt's work discloses the mysteries of the *Zohar* in this same way: with a fresh light—an organic, new-old speech of secrets.

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# The Secret Metaphysician

BY STEVEN E. ASCHHEIM

***Gershom Scholem: Master of the Kabbalah***
by David Biale
Yale University Press, 256 pp., $25

***Gershom Scholem: An Intellectual Biography***
by Amir Engel
University of Chicago Press, 240 pp., $40

***Stranger in a Strange Land: Searching for Gershom Scholem and Jerusalem***
by George Prochnik
Other Press, 544 pp., $27.95

***Gershom Scholem: From Berlin to Jerusalem and Back***
by Noam Zadoff
Brandeis University Press, 344 pp., $40

I never met Gershom Scholem, though I could—or better still, should—have. In 1978, working on my doctorate on the encounter between Eastern European and Western European Jews, my advisor George Mosse told me that I absolutely had to interview the Master. In 1917, after being banished by his father from the family home for his opposition to the war and excessive Judaism, Scholem had lived for a while in a Berlin boarding house called Pension Struck, where he befriended leading Eastern European Jewish intellectuals, including the great Hebrew writer S. Y. Agnon, who would become his lifelong friend, and Zalman Rubashov (later Shazar), future president of Israel. He was, in fact, a living witness and participant of the cultural story I proposed to tell. But at that stage of my life, telling me to approach Scholem was akin to saying, "Why don't you visit God?"

I stood in awe of the man whose writings flashed off the page like the holy sparks he had identified in the Kabbalah. Scholem managed to mesh the holy with the subversive, creation with destruction. He had animated a seemingly moribund tradition with messianic notions of the apocalyptic, the mythic, and the irrational, and his rereading of Judaism was informed by modernist categories—abyss, rupture, paradox, dialectic—that appealed to someone like me, who ordinarily would not have taken the slightest interest in Kabbalah. Moreover, I was aware that he was admired and feared throughout the world, in dialogue (and conflict) with the leading Western thinkers of the time. So, duty-bound but incredibly reluctant, I gingerly set about approaching him in the hope that—like the *Ein Sof* of the Kabbalah—he would be inaccessible. I looked in the Jerusalem telephone book (today an archaic relic) hoping that the Scholems would not be listed. Sadly, they were. Trembling, I dialed the number in the fervent desire that no one would answer (at that time one couldn't leave a message) or that Scholem's second wife, Fania, would come to the phone and tell me that her husband was not available. None of this happened. Instead, after one ring (or perhaps in the middle of it), a loud voice boomed out: "SCHOLEM." In shock at hearing the great man himself, I immediately slammed the receiver down in terror, never to meet the antinomian *maggid* (as the Frankfurt School philosopher Theodor Adorno called him).

**"I am occupying myself always and at all times with Zion: in my work and my thoughts and my walks and also, when I dream. . . . All in all, I find myself in an advanced stage of Zionization."**

His aura, it seems, was always there. From his tempestuous youth onward, Scholem's unique and forceful personality was the constant object of both fear and a sometimes-bemused fascination. As early as 1921, Franz Rosenzweig perceptively said of Scholem that he had "not yet found such a thing among West European Jews. He [Scholem] is perhaps the only one who has really already come home. But he has come home *alone*." The fascination with Scholem has clearly persisted; indeed, it has grown since his death in 1982. How else can we account for the remarkable fact that—in addition to Princeton University Press's recent republication of his magisterial 1957 biography of Shabbtai Zevi and the appearance of his 1939–1940 Hebrew lectures on the history of the Sabbatean movement—David Biale, Amir Engel, George Prochnik, and Noam Zadoff have all recently published biographies of Scholem? In addition, Mirjam Zadoff has written a much-needed biography of his ill-fated communist brother, Werner, who was murdered by the Nazis in Buchenwald in July 1940. Moreover, in a forthcoming book, Jay Geller will explore the history and fate of the entire Scholem family as a microcosm of bourgeois German Jewry.



***Gershom Scholem studying the* Zohar *on Sukkot, October 1925. (Courtesy of the National Library of Israel.)***

While the biographies in question all in one way or another seek to account for this fascination, they are themselves evidence of Scholem's ongoing allure. This is only one of the many tasks—and traps—Scholem's biographers face. The challenge is especially daunting because, in certain deliberate and mischievous ways, Scholem reveled in enigmatic personal and intellectual concealment. He approved of a description of his method as that of "a secret metaphysician . . . disguised as an exact scientist." At times he referred to himself—in the third person!—as a "master magician," and when asked if his mystical "quarry may have been all the time in the pursuer," he responded, "I have invented at least twenty different answers, whereas the true one is hidden away between some of my lines."

The "ultimate" biographer of Scholem would not only have to document, contextualize, and assess Scholem's life and scholarship, as well as analyze the relation (or possibly the nonrelation) between the two, but also master key aspects of 19th- and 20th-century German and European cultural and intellectual life, as well as the study of Kabbalah, German Jewry, Zionism, and Israel. That it is possible to even attempt a true biography at all is a result of the fact that we now have his archive, which includes not only his correspondence from 1914 through the end of his life but also his revelatory (mainly, but not exclusively, youthful) diaries. I doubt that we will ever have an ultimate biography. But each of the books discussed here throws new light on a towering and peculiarly unique 20th-century intellectual.

Born into an acculturated Berlin middle-class family, with his restless, brilliant mind and his stormy (indeed, fanatical) temperament, Gerhard (as he was then called) very early on not only rebelled against his assimilated Jewish bourgeois home but also rejected the possibility of any meaningful life for Jews in Germany. As an adolescent, he went in search of a radically renewed Jewish authenticity. Indeed, there are manic moments in

his diaries when he seemed to regard himself as the messiah of such a renewal. In a startling passage quoted by Biale, Scholem wrote that Martin Buber had prepared the way for Jewish renewal but was not himself the redeemer:

> And the dreamer whose name also signifies that he is the Expected One [is] Scholem, the Perfect One [a wordplay on *Scholem* and *shalem*, "perfect," "whole"]. It is he who must . . . forge the weapons of knowledge.

After a brief flirtation with Orthodox Judaism, Scholem turned to an arcane theo-metaphysical version of Zionism and Hebrew as both the only proper Jewish way forward and "preparation for the eternal." All the while, he was preparing himself furiously with the linguistic and textual "weapons of knowledge." In November 1916, he wrote to a friend: "I am occupying myself always and at all times with Zion: in my work and my thoughts and my walks and also, when I dream. . . . All in all, I find myself in an advanced stage of Zionization, a Zionization of the innermost kind. I measure everything by Zion."

Like his brother Werner, with whom he had a complex relationship, Scholem opposed World War I. Gerhard's Zionism, Werner's socialism, and their shared opposition to the war were too much for their explosive father, Arthur, who regarded all three positions as treacherously un-German and angrily expelled the brothers from their home. (Ironically, despite their fundamental differences, as Biale perceptively suggests, Gershom seems to have inherited his volcanic personality from his father.) Unlike Werner, who increasingly turned to the cause of "world revolution," Scholem turned away from what he regarded as the "impurities" of Europe. His Jewish revolution, he noted in his diary in January 1915, could "not proceed from the corpses of West European strangers."

It was in 1915 that Scholem met Walter Benjamin, the greatest intellectual and personal influence of his life. Their playful, passionate exchanges around the esoteric and the subterranean, and Benjamin's interest in language and translation, sharpened Scholem's textual sensitivity and moved him away from his earlier enthusiasm for Martin Buber's romantic notion of *Erlebnis*, a kind of lived ecstatic experience, as the ineffable essence of mysticism. It was during these late adolescent and early adult years that Scholem studied mathematics and, most crucially, as Biale puts it, "transformed himself from a brilliant autodidact with broad, eclectic interests into a highly disciplined scholar of Kabbalah." Yet what always distinguished Scholem was his broader animating metaphysical vision, a fascination with the redemptive but subversive tendencies at play in the tradition itself. As he later put it, accompanying his scholarly rationalistic skepticism was an "intuitive affirmation of mystical theses that walked the fine line between religion and nihilism."

In 1923, Scholem moved to Palestine, a few months after his fiancée, Escha Burchardt, who he soon married. He had planned to teach math, but he quickly obtained a position as head of the Hebrew division in the newly formed National Library and a little later was appointed as a faculty member of the Institute for Jewish Studies when the Hebrew University was inaugurated in 1925. Continuing his research on Kabbalah, and occasionally penning disillusioned poems and depressed oracular ruminations about the despiritualized condition of the Zionist project (with its emphasis on power politics and statehood rather than Judaic renewal), he joined Brit Shalom, a small group of intellectuals pressing for the creation of a shared binational Arab-Jewish polity. Given their very small numbers, lack of political talent, the absence of support in the Yishuv, and the reality of Arab hostility, their efforts, however noble in intent, were largely in vain.

Settled in Jerusalem, Scholem pursued his kabbalistic studies with fanatic intensity from the 1930s to the 1950s, producing most of the works for which he became famous. Through his major works of that era—the best known are his 1938 New York lectures delivered at the Jewish Institute of Religion, which became *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*—he made Kabbalah's intricate interplay with and reworkings of tradition accessible and exciting to modern secular audiences by connecting the universal with the particular.



*Shabbtai Zevi enthroned. (Amsterdam, 1666.)*

He proposed a three-stage progression of religion and mysticism both in general and specifically for Jewish Kabbalah. Originally, he speculatively argued, religion began with the immediate experience of God. After that unsustainable experience, in the second stage laws and institutions were established, marking the distance between man and the Divine. In the third stage, mysticism appeared as an attempted return to the immediacy of the experience which law had obscured. Mysticism was thus "new" in that it recognized the abyss between man and God. What rendered Kabbalah or Jewish mysticism unique was that it understood itself to be a tradition of interpretation, and hence necessarily mediated by language. Kabbalah, then, was not about ineffable experience but daring speculative interpretation that inquired into the Divine's inner workings.

It was probably mind-boggling for his American Jewish audience to learn about ideas such as Isaac Luria's doctrine of *tzimtzum*, which taught:

> [T]he existence of the universe is made possible by a process of shrinkage in God. God was compelled to make room for the world by, as it were, abandoning a region within Himself, a kind of mystical primordial space in which He withdrew in order to return to it in the act of creation and revelation.

To adapt a favorite metaphor of Scholem's, his lectures revealed the scandalous winds blowing through the apparently not-so-stuffy house of Judaism.

Scholem's most strikingly subversive essay was his 1937 essay on Sabbatean theology, "Redemption Through Sin." For Shabbtai Zevi and his followers, some commandments could only be fulfilled through transgression. Thus, Shabbtai Zevi's conversion to Islam was viewed as part of his messianic task of redeeming the world; the sin of apostasy was necessary to rescue the sparks of good that were lodged in the remotest spheres of evil. In this bizarre theological movement, Scholem daringly suggested, were the seeds of Jewish modernity itself. The breakdown of traditional life was as much an internal, immanent process as it was determined by outside pressures. Paradoxically, the heresy of messianic nihilism had opened the way and prepared Jews for the Haskalah, religious reform, and even the secular Enlightenment.

As David Biale notes, "No reader can ignore the passionate rhetoric in which Scholem tells his story." The essay is shot through with a profound dialectical ambivalence; his critique of the messianic dangers of Sabbatean and Frankist heresy is unmistakable, as is his obvious fascination, if not relish, for their related forces of liberation and destruction. Rendering these episodes as integral to the Jewish experience was part of Scholem's insistence that Judaism was an open, living, historical phenomenon, with both utopian and catastrophic potential. Although he wrote in both Hebrew and German in these years, this essay, he felt, could only be composed in Hebrew. Zionism enabled the possibility of history shorn of apologetics, in which one could explore and understand the darker aspects of the Jewish experience.

Scholem could not abide fools. Upon his arrival in Palestine, he recorded his astonishment that he had come across "*astoundingly* stupid" people. Colleagues and students were often shamed, cruelly intimidated. Yet, his biographers concur, there was also a more gentle, considerate Scholem. His letters to his depressed friend George Lichtheim, the translator into English of *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* who ultimately committed suicide in London, are tender and caring in a fatherly way.

His more vulnerable—albeit inconsistent—side is touchingly revealed in Biale's unexpected chapter, "Scholem in Love," which chronicles his early infatuations and makes a strong case that his greatest love was (as his second wife Fania once suggested) Walter Benjamin. Certainly, he shows that Scholem was bewildered by the depth of emotion he felt for

his friend. *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* was famously dedicated to the memory of Benjamin, who committed suicide when he was threatened with a return to Nazi-occupied France after crossing into Spain: "The friend of a lifetime whose genius united the insight of the Metaphysician, the interpretive power of the Critic and the erudition of the Scholar."

My late-1970s fear of him notwithstanding, Scholem seems to have mellowed with age. His earlier lack of tolerance was increasingly sublimated into an ironic, impish sense of humor. Prochnik relates the story with which Scholem regaled Cynthia Ozick about a man who was not interested in attending a faraway future social event and who, apologizing, took out his diary and declared, "Oh, I'm so sorry, but I have a funeral on that day."

More seriously, Scholem's biographers record the complicated effect that the rise of Nazism and the Shoah had on Scholem. From distant Palestine, he watched events unfold. He admitted that they assumed a somewhat abstract character: "It's just too far away and nobody has any real notion of what it might be like." Indeed, his letters to his mother during the early Nazi years, in which he was still requesting that she send ties and marzipan, now make for uncomfortable reading. But there were many palpable, personal shocks: Benjamin's death, the 1940 murder of his brother, his family's desperate flight to Australia, and his depressed search through postwar Europe for lost Jewish books and manuscripts for the Commission on European Jewish Cultural Reconstruction.

Yet, while Scholem famously berated German Jewry for their deluded belief that there ever was or could be "a German-Jewish symbiosis," he never really presented his understanding of German society, its anti-Semitism, the rise of Hitler and Nazism, or the genocide itself. A partial exception was his blistering response to Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (especially her uncharitable depiction of the Jewish councils as collaborators). To be sure, he often did ponder its after-effects. Thus, his 1948 essay "The Star of David: History of a Symbol," published shortly after Israel's declaration of independence, argued that the symbol of the yellow star "which in our own days has been sanctified by suffering and dread has become worthy of illuminating the path to life and reconstruction." For the most part, however, he claimed that the necessary distance for any kind of historical perspective had not yet arrived. Amir Engel, who puts special emphasis on the "Star" essay, claims that the personal pain was so great that Scholem turned to the more distant past "because he could not keep his eyes on the catastrophe of the present."

Yet, some of his biographers suggest a definite influence of the Holocaust on his writings, albeit a more subtle and coded one. In different ways, they suggest that Scholem hinted at possible responses to Nazism in his earlier studies of Lurianic Kabbalah and Sabbateanism, which he regarded as creative if problematic answers to the expulsion from Spain. Scholem's "Redemption Through Sin," Biale suggests, can "be read against the backdrop of the political catastrophe of the 1930s."

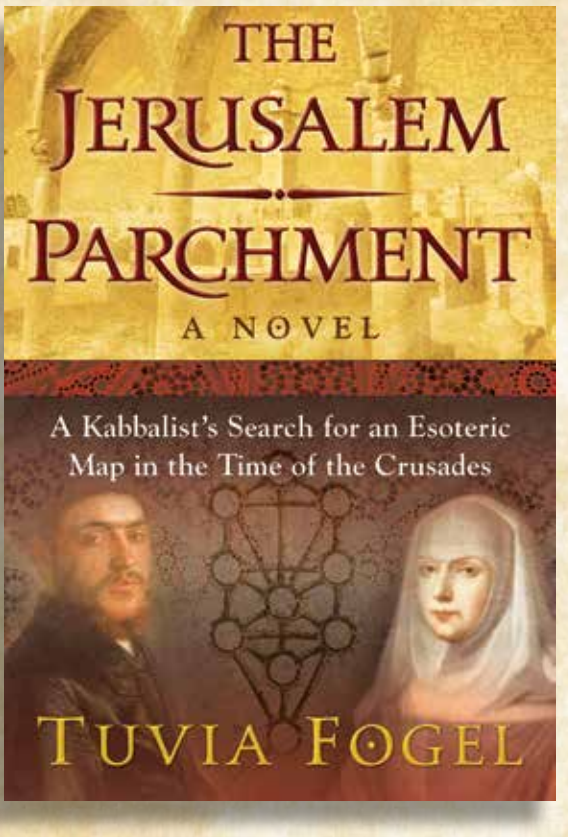
> It is hard to escape the feeling that the way Scholem described Jacob Frank, the demonic "tyrant," pointed toward a much more demonic figure on the contemporary stage. . . . The historical catastrophe of the expulsion from Spain now seemed to foreshadow a world in which God was hidden and nihilism unleashed.

**What always distinguished Scholem was his broader animating metaphysical vision, a fascination with the redemptive but subversive tendencies at play in the tradition itself.**

And yet, as Biale also recognizes, the historical activism of the Sabbatean movement—a willingness to "force the end"—seems to foreshadow the secular Zionist return to history in some of Scholem's writings.

Amir Engel claims to have "demystified" his subject by seamlessly connecting, if not reducing, Scholem's scholarship to his personal, political, and historical context; Engel regards this as his "most substantial finding." Scholem, he argues, did not discover metaphysical truths in the Kabbalah; rather, "he organized pliable textual materials according to his already given concepts." But, to return to the ideal or "ultimate" biography, such an argument would require the biographer to engage more closely with Scholem's readings of this textual material in a far more detailed and subtle way.

In 1979, David Biale penned *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History*, the first—and still unsurpassed—systematic exposition of Scholem's thought. In his new book, he employs the diaries and letters (and decades of reading, writing, and thinking about Scholem) to "enter into his inner life and view him not only as a thinker and writer but also as a human being." Thus, he shows that the years 1934–1936 were a period of profound personal turmoil for Scholem, in which his first marriage collapsed, and a time in which "he found himself buffeted by profound romantic emotions . . . [and] felt deep guilt about his behavior in his personal relationships." He goes on to argue that the remarkable rhetoric of "Redemption Through Sin" and Scholem's simultaneous attraction and repulsion toward Jacob Frank found therein might not only reflect the tumultuous world history of the time but also "be a projection onto history of its author's own innermost struggles." Whether and how to make such speculative leaps constitutes the great quandary facing all biographers. To what extent can one gauge another person's interiority and the ways in which it is externally expressed? Scholem himself once commented that, "I don't understand my own depths and am clever enough to accept this." Still, a biography devoid of inner life would be sterile. And surely, in Scholem's case, such leaps are unavoidable given the diary entries in which he recorded his suicidal thoughts, conceits, insecurities, depressions, messianic pretensions, and intense personal attachments and animosities. On their basis, Biale also questions whether Scholem's exemption from German military service on psychological grounds, which he always described as the result of a ruse, was a reflection of real mental instability.


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Biale's book is a fresh, often surprising depiction of Scholem. He shows us the vulnerable man behind the sovereign scholar without reducing the one to the other or relinquishing his admiration. Scholem's tombstone describes him as "a man of the Third Aliyah," an aliyah generally associated with Zionist pioneers, not philologists, but Biale concludes that "this Germanic scholar in his suit and tie . . . too, dug deep into arid soil to bring forth a world both strange and wondrous."

George Prochnik's *Stranger in a Strange Land: Searching for Gershom Scholem and Jerusalem* evinces a more wide-eyed admiration. Written as a kind of dual nonfiction Bildungsroman, Prochnik interweaves a vivid account of Scholem's life with that of his own. It is through the prism of Scholem's magnetic attraction that Prochnik recounts his youth, marriage, and spiritual quest in Jerusalem. Here Scholem becomes the model and foil for self-exploration. Some may regard this as a rather presumptuous, even narcissistic exercise, yet this narrative approach, together with Prochnik's writerly skill, enables him to bring Scholem to life in often unexpected and insightful ways. If Amir Engel controversially regards Scholem's scholarship as a set of modern myths and "stories" for carving out his identity and informing our times, Prochnik evokes the remarkable inventiveness and the deeply spiritual yearning for redemption that underlay Scholem's lifelong scholarly quest.

As the title of Noam Zadoff's *Gershom Scholem: From Berlin to Jerusalem and Back* suggests, it is perhaps the most revisionist of these biographies. Scholem titled his famous memoir of his early life *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, but, Zadoff asks, why did he end his story with his immigration to Palestine in 1923, when it was really just beginning? His answer is that Scholem's Zionist turning point was "not as final and decisive as he had presented it." Scholem's personal and intellectual formation took place not only in Germany, Zadoff argues; he became increasingly disillusioned with the Zionist project over his years in Israel. As Zadoff shows, from 1949 until the end of his life he returned, to some extent, to "Berlin," that is to the European and German intellectual life where he felt very much at ease.

A central aspect of this "return" to Europe was his participation in the annual Eranos conferences, held in Ascona, Switzerland, which he attended from 1949 until almost the end of his life. These conferences were held under the intellectual influence of Carl Gustav Jung, and Scholem had some initial qualms about participating because of Jung's early ideological dalliance with the Nazis. That Scholem overcame them, Zadoff argues, is evidence of his desire to speak with and to fellow European intellectuals. Many of the classic synthetic essays Scholem published later in his life began as Eranos addresses delivered in beautifully polished German. Indeed, his last Hebrew book appeared in 1957!

As time went by, he was bountifully awarded and feted by German institutions and intellectuals. In his various guises as a German Jew, Israeli, Judaic scholar, and powerful intellectual presence, he was increasingly regarded as a post-Nazi moral authority, an exemplar of a lost humanist tradition. Overcoming his initial ambivalence, Scholem felt more and more at home in Europe. This is a biographically understandable, interesting, and important corrective to the standard Scholem story, but one should not take it too far. His travel schedule and political disappointments notwithstanding, he remained fully committed to the intense Jewish and Zionist world of "Jerusalem."

But this discussion misses a critical element. From late adolescence until the end of his life, Scholem had a highly idiosyncratic metatheological vision of Zionism, one that combined total commitment with fierce disdain for all those who disagreed. Even from within his own sworn allegiances, as Prochnik notes, Scholem always needed to think *against*. "I want something completely different from all other Zionists," he wrote in 1918, and that remained true. At all times then, he wove together fanatical fidelity with unrestrained recrimination. These two poles of his thought and personality—the utopian and the critical—coexisted in permanent tension. Indeed, that very tension is reflected in the differing interpretations of Scholem's Zionist legacy, from the political right and left. Yoram Hazony, employing the pursuit of Jewish state sovereignty as the absolute Zionist yardstick, has powerfully attacked Scholem and fellow Brit Shalom intellectuals as betrayers of the Zionist cause. Yet many of Scholem's students became supporters of the settler movement. Critics on the left claim this was no accident, given that Scholem's world was animated by "irrationalist" categories such as myth, nihilism, the demonic, and antinomianism. Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin has argued that while repeatedly warning against political messianism, Scholem "delineated Zionism in terms of a utopian return to Zion (namely, in messianic language)." That singular emphasis on Jewish return and redemption, he argues, prevented a necessary sensitivity to the plight of the Palestinians.



***Gershom Scholem in his apartment, 1950s. (Courtesy of the Leo Baeck Institute, New York.)***

Scholem's enduring charisma, one might almost say his aura, is related to the fact that he was essentially a European intellectual who brought his sparkling intelligence and categories of explanation to a radically new vision, a metamyth, of Judaism and propounded it from Jerusalem, of all places. As Prochnik puts it, "Scholem imported from Weimar Germany to Mandate Palestine a way of reading Jerusalem itself as a construct of Central European thought." More specifically, although Scholem resembled fellow exiled Jewish intellectuals of his generation such as Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Hannah Arendt, and Leo Strauss, who have been similarly lionized (and who were his real interlocutors), he was the only one of them who chose Zionism and Israel. Their common suspicion of bourgeois conventions, their postliberal sensibility, their rejection of all orthodoxies, and their fascination with esotericism was (and continue to be) attractive to those convinced that conventional approaches to the modern predicament were (and are) not viable. All sought novel answers to what they regarded as the bankruptcy of 20th-century civilization and its ideological options.

Perhaps too, Scholem's fascination for contemporary audiences is linked to a certain affinity between his concentration on textuality, rupture, paradox, the abyss, and the doubts and ironies of our postmodern world. But, in contrast to the postmodernists, Scholem maintained his belief in ultimacy, in the possibility of redemption. "A remnant of theocratic hope," he wrote, "accompanies that reentry into world history of the Jewish people that at the same time signifies the truly Utopian return to its own history." Yet this hope was always combined with a delicious subversiveness, as he remarked when he was nearly 80: "I have never stopped believing that the element of destruction, with all the potential nihilism in it, has always been the basis of positive Utopian hope."

Never a conventional historian, Scholem can be credited, Prochnik writes, "with pushing intellectual history and scholarly metaphysics toward a kind of lyric sublime." Which other historian could write without embarrassment that redemption was not messianism "secularized as the belief in progress . . . It is rather transcendence breaking in upon history, an intrusion in which history itself perishes, transformed in its ruin because it is struck by a beam of light shining into it from an outside source"?

Many aspects of Scholem's kabbalistic scholarship have come under fire, and, as with all giants, there are those who seek to chip away at his legacy. Viewed from the present, his emphasis on messianic myth, the demonic, and the irrational point to political dangers about which he warned, but in subtle, perhaps unintentional ways encouraged. Yet, for all that, he remains a titanic figure. He came onto the scene at critical flashpoints of European and Jewish history and left an indelible mark. Upon Scholem's death, the philosopher Hans Jonas wrote: "He was the focal point. Wherever *he* was, you found the center, the active force, a generator which constantly charged itself; he was what Goethe called an *Urphänomen*." Will we ever see his like again?

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*Steven E. Aschheim is emeritus professor of cultural and intellectual history at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His latest book, out this month, is entitled* Fragile Spaces: Forays into Jewish Memory, European History and Complex Identities *(De Gruyter).*

# Visualizing Hasidism

BY GLENN DYNNER

***Hasidic Art and the Kabbalah***
by Batsheva Goldman-Ida
Brill, 450 pp., $196

***Historical Atlas of Hasidism***
by Marcin Wodziński, cartography by Waldemar Spallek
Princeton University Press, 280 pp., $75

For many Jews living in 19th-century Eastern Europe, a personal crisis would have prompted a pilgrimage to one of the region's burgeoning Hasidic courts. These pilgrims arrived en masse, often on foot, bearing petitions and "redemption" money in return for blessings and advice from the rebbe (tzaddik). At certain courts, the rebbe's closest devotees (Hasidim) brought special silver coins for him to bless. Some would tuck these *shmire* (talisman) coins under their pillows to ward off disease. Others would collect them and have them melted down and forged into *shmire* cups engraved with fiery lions, deer, or eagles.

What these coins, cups, petitions, and pilgrimage sites demonstrate is that the popular mystical movement known as Hasidism has a crucial material dimension. This may be traced all the way back to the movement's originator, Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, the "Ba'al Shem Tov," an 18th-century practical kabbalist whose novel mystical world view exudes a magical sensibility. Everything contains sparks of the divine, he and his disciples taught; therefore, everything—even material things—can be sanctified. Certain objects, spaces, and places, however, can attain an extra level of holiness and harbor unique potency.

Historians of Hasidism have tended to highlight the movement's charismatic rebbes and ingenious teachings, which still retain the power to inspire and occasionally infuriate. But Hasidism's material side has been relatively neglected. Two new books provide a glimpse of that less explored dimension. Furnished with sumptuous photographs and illustrations, each represents as much an aesthetic as a scholarly achievement.

Batsheva Goldman-Ida's *Hasidic Art and the Kabbalah* sets up a visual feast that recalls the ancient Tabernacle or Temple vessels while, at the same time, expanding our notion of the sacred. The reader is treated to a procession of ornate Hasidic prayer books, kiddush cups, Seder plates, Sabbath chandeliers, prayer shawl ornaments, women's bonnets, pipes, snuffboxes, amulets, *shmire* cups, and chairs, or more properly, thrones, each of which Goldman-Ida decodes by means of kabbalistic and Hasidic texts. Lest we soar too high, however, she reminds us that ritual "anchors the participant in physical reality by means of touch, which is the first, most basic, sense by which we relate to the physical world."

What exactly constitutes a sacred object can be rather surprising. Seder plates and prayer shawls, to be sure. But pipes, snuffboxes, and chairs? This sacralization of functional objects illustrates Hasidism's infectious optimism about the potential holiness of all things. That optimism even extended to non-Jewish decorative art forms like *galanterie* (luxury objects) and Russian *lubok* (folk) prints, which heavily influenced the designs of multitiered, intricately engraved Seder plates. From the Hasidic perspective, the foreign art forms were redeemed through their incarnation into ritual objects.

**The Hasidic visual imagination rekindled the mundane, physical realm and bolstered Jewish morale in Eastern Europe.**

Judaism is famously aniconic; God is simply not to be artistically depicted. Yet the urge to visualize the invisible God is hard to shake, and, as Elliot Wolfson has observed, it can yield rich symbolic depictions that allow God to be seen and yet not seen. Hasidic artists and artisans were particularly creative in this regard. Each of the objects detailed in this pioneering contribution to Jewish art history alludes to an aspect of the divine for those who are in the know.




***Collection of sayings of Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk, Belarus, created in Sadhora, Bukovina. (Photo © Ardon Bar-Hama, courtesy of the GFC Trust.)***

Invoking manifold kabbalistic and Hasidic texts, Goldman-Ida lets us in on the secret. The letters in a prayer book rendered in unique calligraphy, we learn, hint at the letters with which God spoke the world into existence. The cherubs crowning the Hebrew word for crown on the page opposite the Kedushah prayer remind human worshippers that they are crowning God as they recite it. Kiddush cups in the form of apples gesture at the supernal "orchard." Seder plates and hanging Sabbath lamps portray the 10 emanations of God (*sefirot*). A prayer shawl ornament (*atara*) evokes the crown that angels weave from our prayers and place on God's head. The rebbe's pipe helps him uplift soul sparks and reenact his own entry into the divine realm. Goldman-Ida explains:

> As smoking is amorphous, it may reflect supernal worlds that the intellect cannot comprehend. Hence the Hasidim drew a comparison between the rabbi's smoking and his ascension to the upper worlds.

Smoking never seemed so right.

But the larger point here is that by confronting the material dimension of Hasidic worship, we are able to better appreciate how the Hasidic visual



***Apple-shaped Hasidic kiddush cup with symbolic references to the* Shekhina*, ca. 1850. (Photo © Ardon Bar-Hama, courtesy of the GFC Trust.)***

imagination rekindled the mundane, physical realm and bolstered Jewish morale in Eastern Europe. The idea that no place is empty of the divine and that we can therefore worship *through* corporeality yielded a huge stock of sacred objects. Their mainly anonymous male and female creators helped make the long exile seem less bleak.

Hasidism's reenchantment of the material world extended to geography, as well. The emergence of a whole network of Hasidic courts, prayer halls, yeshivas, and pilgrimage sites in Eastern Europe and beyond is portrayed with great resourcefulness in Marcin Wodziński's *Historical Atlas of Hasidism*. By means of detailed, vibrant maps composed by Waldemar Spallek, sumptuous artistic and photographic reproductions, and clear historical explanations, the atlas helps us visualize Hasidism's historical landscape.

The atlas tells a story of spectacular expansion. We see how the movement moved, emanating out of Międzybóż and Międzyrzecz toward every corner of partitioned Poland and then to the Land of Israel before the end of the 18th century. Other maps reflect how Hasidic leaders began to multiply. This does not necessarily mean that more Hasidic leaders in a given region equaled more followers—as Wodziński admits, certain leaders had few rivals, making their regions appear less Hasidic on the maps. But the extraordinary increase of Hasidic courts in the space of a century suggests a cultural coup, a transformation of Eastern European Jewry.

Several of Spallek and Wodziński's maps reflect




*Map by Waldemar Spallek, with permission from Princeton University Press.*

real ingenuity. Who would have thought to produce a map of the socio-economic status of Hasidic groups based on contemporaneous accounts of each dynasty's relative affluence? Or a series of layouts of Hasidic courts and prayer halls in various towns? Yet here they are, furnished with vivid photographs of spaces, places, documents, and people wherever possible. The collection process must have been painstaking.

Perhaps the most intriguing maps are those based on a tallying up of hundreds of early 20th-century prayer halls (*shtiblekh*) affiliated with Hasidic dynasties, which are used to gauge each dynasty's popularity. The regional winners were (at least according to map 5.3.4) Ger, Aleksander, Belz, Chernobyl, Chabad-Lubavitch, Karlin-Stolin, and Sadagura. But popularity wasn't everything. A map of Hasidic *yeshivot* in interwar Poland allows us to behold each dynasty's investment in higher education. From an intellectual standpoint, the most prominent dynasties were thus Bobov, Radomsk, Aleksander, and Chabad-Lubavitch. Together, such maps constitute the most complete sketch of Hasidic dynastic expansion available.

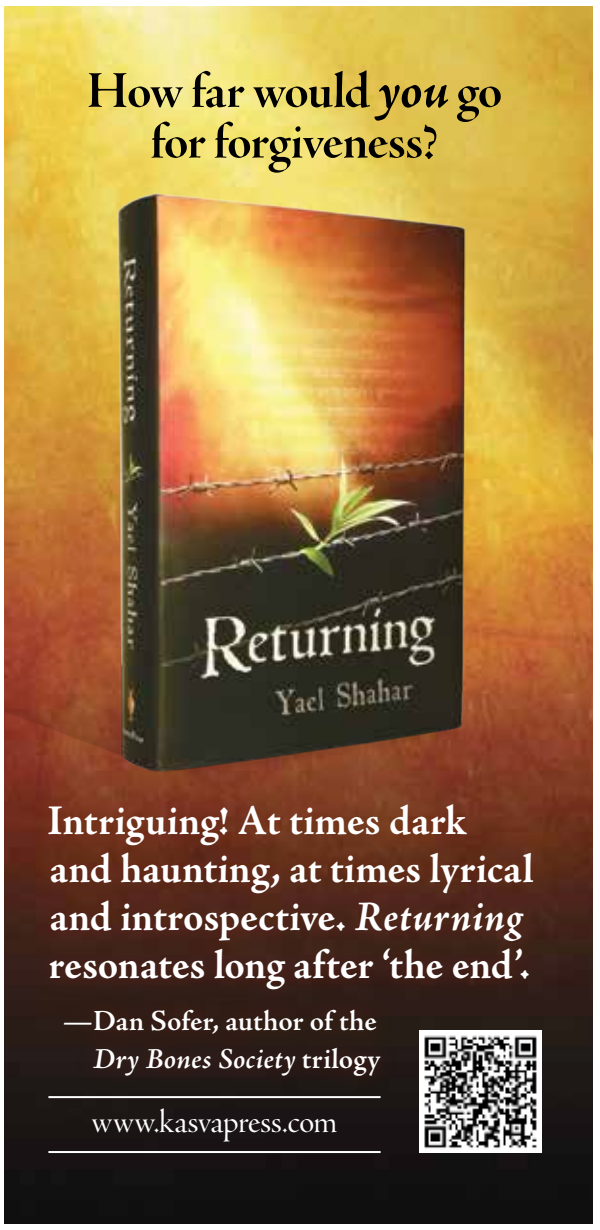
In a project of this scale there are bound to be issues, and many happen to relate to Chabad-Lubavitch. The Alter Rebbe's town of Liady (Lady) changes locations between maps, while the town of Horodok, the seat of his erstwhile mentor Menachem Mendel and a temporary Hasidic center, is missing altogether on a crucial map. Certain maps cut out large regions of Lubavitcher influence or omit key Lubavitcher courts such as Rostov, Leningrad, and Otwock. In the chapter on Soviet-era Hasidism, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe's famously heroic underground activities go unmentioned. And Chabad headquarters, the iconic "770," should really be counted as a New York pilgrimage site. Your local Chabad rabbi may be upset.

He will gain some consolation, however, from the astounding two-paged map of Chabad Houses across the globe today. What is so impressive about this and other maps in the atlas is that contemporary Hasidism is shown to be thriving despite the devastating setbacks of the previous century.

If you are an avowed secularist, these maps might even make you a bit nervous. But you will have to admit that Hasidism's defiance of our assumptions about the inevitability of secularization is interesting, at the very least. Thanks to both books, we can begin to visualize one of the most unexpectedly vibrant phenomena of Jewish modernity.

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*Glenn Dynner is a professor and chair of religion at Sarah Lawrence College. His most recent book is* Yankel's Tavern: Jews, Liquor, and Life in the Kingdom of Poland *(Oxford University Press).*



# Lost from the Start: Kafka on Spinoza Street

BY STUART SCHOFFMAN

***Kafka's Last Trial: The Case of a Literary Legacy***
by Benjamin Balint
W. W. Norton & Company, 288 pp., $26.95

If one had a dime for every time the adjective "Kafkaesque" has been used in print, one could have bought the original manuscript of *The Trial* from Esther Hoffe of Tel Aviv, secretary and heir to the childless Max Brod. Well, maybe not quite: She got $1.98 million for it from a rare book dealer representing the German Literature Archive in Marbach, Germany 20 years after Brod's death. Kafka fan Philip Roth, reacting to the 1988 sale in a letter to the *New York Times*, bemoaned the "lurid Kafkaesque irony" of selling the manuscript to the country that killed Kafka's three sisters and would have murdered him too, had he not died of tuberculosis in 1924, a month shy of his 41st birthday.

Now, 30 years later, the Jerusalem-based writer Benjamin Balint has crafted a wise and eloquent study of Kafka around the eight-year battle in Israeli courts over Brod's literary estate. Following Esther Hoffe's death in 2007, Brod's papers, including Kafka manuscripts and notebooks that Brod had spirited from Nazi-occupied Prague to Palestine in 1939, landed in the hands of her two daughters. Over the years, many other Kafka papers had made their way to Marbach or the Bodleian Library at Oxford. The literary treasures that remained in Tel Aviv were stored in safety-deposit boxes or in the apartment on Spinoza Street that the unmarried Eva, a longtime employee of El Al, shared with many cats. (Her sister, Ruth Wiesler, died in 2012.)

The case began in family court in Tel Aviv, when the sisters sought to probate Esther's will, continued on in District Court, and culminated in the Supreme Court. The contest turned on the issue of national rights versus property rights. The lawyers for Israel's National Library claimed that since Franz Kafka is a Jewish national asset, his papers should belong to the Jewish State, and that this would fulfill Brod's wishes that they be turned over to a public archive. Eva's advocates argued that she had inherited the estate Brod bequeathed to her mother and could do with the papers as she wished. In particular, she could sell them to the Marbach archive, whose attorneys were also on hand. The lawyers, writes Balint, "fluctuated between two rhetorical registers, the legal and the symbolic." He does the same, alternating between a chronicle of the "last trial" and a literary history of Kafka: his telenovela life, the reception of his work in Israel and Germany, and his deep involvement with Max Brod, which lasted long after Kafka's death. The book is a felicitous mixture of reportage and scholarship, and can serve as a splendid gateway into Kafka for readers who may not have gotten through *The Trial* in college.

Balint artfully makes Eva Hoffe, with all her cat-lady histrionics, into a sympathetic protagonist, a surrogate for Kafka's bewildered Josef K. Supreme Court Justice Elyakim Rubinstein, a former Israeli attorney general, rejects a key argument of Hoffe's lawyer with "a schoolmaster's manner, and with an air of omnicompetence about him." Eva tells Balint, as she awaits the verdict: "As far as I'm concerned, the words justice and fairness have been erased from the lexicon." Throughout the convoluted, exhaustively detailed legal saga, the author pays even-handed respect to opposing points of view, but we can tell which side he's on. In Chapter One, "The Last Appeal," he quotes from the novel: "A trial like this is always lost from the start."

Max Brod, a hyperproductive writer (80 books or so), worshipped his tall, skinny, and vastly more talented friend and famously disobeyed Kafka's instructions to burn all his manuscripts after his death, publishing them feverishly while editing them as he saw fit. The world thus owes the disloyal Max Brod an eternal debt.



***Esther Hoffe and Max Brod at his office in Tel Aviv in an undated photo. (From the Hoffe family archive.)***

In 1937, Brod came out with a schmaltzy biography of Kafka, painting him as a saintly prophet of Zionism. Walter Benjamin dismissed the book in a long letter of 1938 to his own best friend, Gershom Scholem. Kafka's friendship with Brod, he wrote, "is above all a question mark . . . I think I am on the track of the truth when I say: Kafka as Laurel felt the onerous obligation to seek out his own Hardy." Among Balint's many virtues as a writer is a keen ear for the great quote.

Brod was a ladies' man; Kafka famously feared women, lived with his parents, and never married. The Nobel laureate Elias Canetti, in a fascinating little book of 1969 entitled *Kafka's Other Trial,* endeavored to find the roots of *The Trial* in Kafka's voluminous correspondence with his fiancée Felice Bauer of Berlin, whom he first met in Prague through Brod in 1912. Over five years and two broken engagements, they barely saw each other, but he wrote to her obsessively. In his very first letter to Felice, he confirmed their promise to travel together to Palestine. Some Kafkologists have interpreted this pledge as evidence of Zionism, others as mere flirtation. In 1913, he attended the 11th Zionist Congress, in Vienna, and wrote her that he sat there "as if it were an event totally alien to me." The following year, he confided in a letter to Felice's friend Grete Bloch: "I admire Zionism and am nauseated by it."

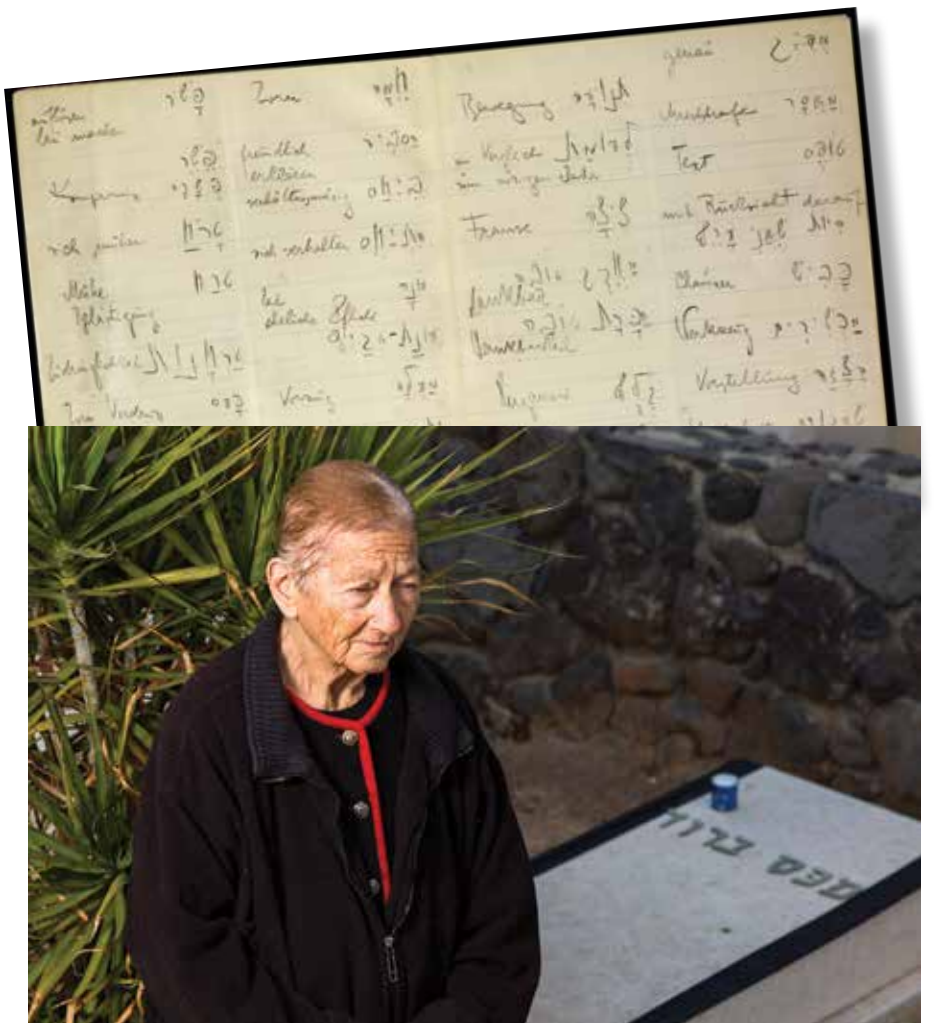
Indeed in his diary, notes Balint, "Kafka mocked *Palästinafahrer,* or those who journeyed to Palestine, who 'constantly mouthed about emulating the Maccabees.'" But he did learn Hebrew and even tried reading a novel by Y. H. Brenner. Near the end of his life he and his 19-year-old girlfriend Dora Diamant, daughter of a Hasid, fantasized about moving to Tel Aviv together and opening a restaurant. "But the dream of Zion would remain a dream unfulfilled," says Balint. "Kafka allowed himself to imagine moving to Palestine only when his illness was so far advanced as to make the move impossible."

To each his own Kafka. Canetti reads him as "the greatest expert on power," whose fixation on small animals makes him "the only writer of the Western world who is essentially Chinese." Be that as it may, Canetti also provides a tasty anecdote about the time Kafka went *spazieren* in Marienbad with the Belzer Rebbe. The Prague-born historian Saul Friedländer, in *Franz Kafka: The Poet of Shame and Guilt,* floats the notion of Kafka as a repressed homosexual (Orson Welles's thrilling 1962 film of *The Trial,* starring Anthony Perkins, implies likewise). Balint has ably synthesized scores of sources in three languages, ranging from an item by Kafka's gay Hasidic friend Jiri Langer ("*Mashehu al Kafka,*" 1941); to Martin Buber's *Drei Reden über das Judentum* (1916, based on lectures attended in Prague by Kafka, who was underwhelmed); to Cynthia Ozick, Judith Butler, and the German scholar Reiner Stach, whose monumental three-volume biography has lately appeared in a superb English translation by Shelley Frisch. Oddly, the first part came out last, as Stach waited for the Spinoza Street stash, which contained valuable information about Kafka's early years, to be made public (it also contained intimate letters between Esther and Max, reason enough for Eva's ferocious opposition).

Stach has also published a charming book of outtakes called *Is That Kafka? 99 Finds*, which reminds us that Kafka was an ardent swimmer, frequenter of brothels, and proponent of natural medicine. Stach's curiosities include Kafka's outline for the ideal polity of a kibbutz and a facsimile of a letter Kafka penned in Hebrew to his teacher Puah Ben-Tovim.

It's all fascinating stuff, but the big legal and cultural question remains: Who owns Kafka? Is he a Jewish writer or a German one? Balint's book ends with a famous quote from a letter to Felice: "Am I a circus rider on two horses? Alas, I am no rider, but lie prostrate on the ground." In January 1914, Kafka wrote an immortal line in his diary: "What have I in common with Jews? I have hardly anything in common with myself." Combing through his letters and diaries, scholars have found countless references to things Jewish. He became fascinated by Yiddish theater, to his assimilationist father's consternation, and owned M. Y. Berdichevsky's anthology of Jewish folklore. Gershom Scholem, Robert Alter, and others have detected kabbalistic, biblical, or talmudic overtones in Kafka's writings. "Kafka's world is the world of revelation," Scholem wrote to Walter Benjamin in 1934. "The key to Kafka's work," he clarified, is "the *nonfulfillability* of what has been revealed." Forty years later, in a lecture to the Bavarian Academy of Arts entitled "My Way to Kabbalah," Scholem said there were only three books he "read and reread with true attentiveness": the Hebrew Bible, the *Zohar*, and the collected works of Kafka.

Philip Roth, in a dazzling piece from 1973 called "'I Always Wanted You to Admire My Fasting'; or, Looking at Kafka," wrote of Kafka's "oedipal timidity, perfectionist madness, and insatiable longings for solitude and spiritual purity." Then he went on to imagine him in 1942 as a refugee in Newark, the Hebrew-school teacher of the nine-year-old Roth. Dr. Kafka (he did hold a law degree) begins dating Roth's Aunt Rhoda, which ends badly, of course. (In homage to Roth, Nicole Krauss, in her recent novel *Forest Dark,* ruminates on Kafka as a refugee in Palestine, living in obscurity as a gardener on a kibbutz.) And yet, as Balint writes, "in all of Kafka's fiction, there is no direct reference to Judaism. One searches in vain for Jews, or Jewish patterns of speech, in Kafka's placeless fiction . . . Kafka rigorously strips his characters of discernable ethnic identities."



*Top: A page from Franz Kafka's Hebrew vocabulary notebook. (Courtesy of the National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.) Bottom: Eva Hoffe at Max Brod's grave. (Photo by Tomer Appelbaum, courtesy of* **Ha'aretz**.*)*

There is one exception, which Balint mentions in an endnote: a "fragmentary story" written in 1922 and published by Brod in 1937 as "In Our Synagogue," about "a timorous animal who takes up residence in a synagogue." In A. B. Yehoshua's novel *Chesed Sefaradi* (*The Retrospective,* 2013) an Israeli film director named Yair Moses discusses an early film of his, based on that story, at a festival in his honor in Spain. (As in *The Trial,* there is a pivotal scene in a cathedral.) Kafka was an early and enduring influence on Yehoshua. In the words of the fictional Yair Moses: "But as opposed to those who interpret every line of his writings in light of his private life and sexual struggles, and celebrate every Jewish detail exhumed from his biography, there were many readers, myself among them, for whom Kafka's cryptic, radiant works transcended the specifics of his personality and inhabited the realm of the universal." W. H. Auden, in a 1941 essay on Kafka called "The Wandering Jew," also cast Kafka in a universal role: "Had one to name the artist who comes nearest to bearing the same kind of relation to our age that Dante, Shakespeare, and Goethe bore to theirs, Kafka is the first one would think of."

The point, in the end, is not how Jewish Kafka was or wasn't, but something much deeper: Is Israel a sovereign state of its citizens or the country of all Jews? "Throughout the trial," writes Balint, "Israel acted as though it can lay claim to any pre-state Jewish cultural artifact, as though everything Jewish finds its culmination in the Jewish state, as though Jewish culture has been driven by a teleological thrust toward Jerusalem." The irony is that Israel had never shown much interest in Kafka. "During the trial, the Marbach archive subtly portrayed Israel as a latecomer to the Kafka industry," Balint writes. No Israel city has a street named for Kafka. There is no Hebrew edition of his complete works, whereas a Serbo-Croatian version came out in 1978. His three novels were translated into English in the 1920s, into Hebrew only much later, *The Castle* not until 1967. The critical edition of Kafka's complete works in German, produced by an international team of scholars, was completed in 2004. The National Library in Jerusalem—"as of this writing," Balint is careful to specify—does not own a copy.

How can this be? The author considers the possibilities: an Israeli aversion to the weak, passive *galut* Jew personified by Kafka, coupled with a persistent antipathy toward all things German, not least the language in which the annihilation of the Jews was carried out. Balint himself is inclined otherwise: He clearly relishes the sound and logic of German and often goes out of his way to deploy such confections as *kulturkämpferischen Gestus* ("gesture of culture-war"), *Sprachunrichtigkeiten* (Brod's label for Kafka's "linguistic errors"), and *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past). The efforts by Germany to claim Kafka, a Czech Jew, as one of their own served an important historical purpose, writes Balint:

> Perhaps there was a recognition that to bring Kafka—precisely as a Jewish guardian of German prose, and as a Jew who died before he could fall victim to the Nazis—back into the German fold would be to erase the moral stain of the past, to regain a forfeited standing, and to recover a German language not yet defiled by the nihilistic bellowing of Hitler and Goebbels. Herein hides another irony with which the story of Kafka's last trial is salted: the attempt to use the writer who raised self-condemnation into art as a means of self-exculpation.

Then again, Balint notes, the same has been said of Israel:

> Judith Butler of Berkeley suggests that Israel, a small and insecure country, wishes to recruit Kafka for its increasingly urgent fight against cultural delegitimation. "An asset," she says, "is something that enhances Israel's world reputation, which many would allow is in need of repair: the wager is that the world reputation of Kafka will become the world reputation of Israel."

In August 2016, the Supreme Court ruled against Eva Hoffe, ordering her to hand over the Brod estate to the National Library of Israel, for which she would receive no compensation. Justice Rubinstein, quoting the talmudic tractate Gittin, concluded that this had been the wish of Max Brod and must be obeyed. "Like the man from the country in Kafka's parable 'Before the Law,'" writes Balint, "Eva Hoffe remained stranded and confounded outside the door of the law." Eva Hoffe died on August 4, 2018.

What is one to make of all this? "If the Israeli judges can be understood as the latest of Kafka's gatekeepers of interpretation," writes Balint, "then their verdict might be read as another telling reading—or misreading; as the latest page in the long history of the uses and abuses of Kafka's literary afterlife at the hands of those who claim to be his heirs." Fair enough, but let us give the final words to Kafka, who wrote in *The Trial,* with tantalizing obscurity: "The commentators tell us: the correct understanding of a matter and misunderstanding the matter are not mutually exclusive."

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# Man of Letters

BY ROBERT ALTER

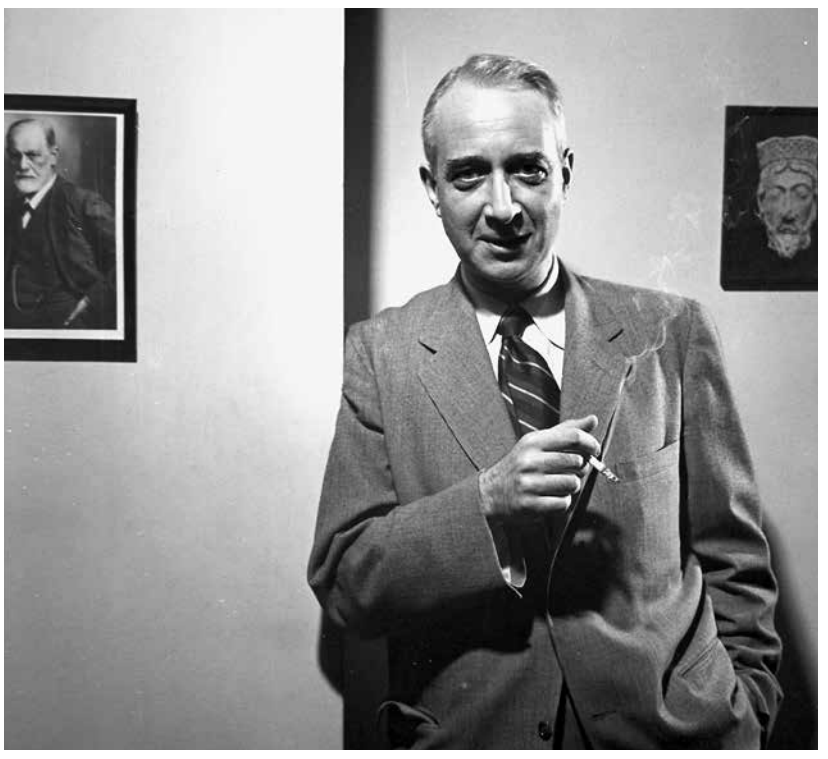
***Life in Culture: Selected Letters of Lionel Trilling***
edited by Adam Kirsch
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 464 pp., $35

Lionel Trilling was a dominant figure in American literary criticism in the middle decades of the last century, and Adam Kirsch's judicious selection of his letters throws instructive light on both Trilling's life and American intellectual culture from the 1920s to the 1970s. For anyone concerned with the many leading writers, critics, and thinkers with whom Trilling corresponded or curious about how the son of Jewish immigrants came to play such a central role in American literary life, it is a fascinating book.

Trilling's parents were by no means the Yiddish-speaking types one associates with the Eastern European immigrants of this period. His mother had actually grown up in England, and his father spoke perfectly correct English without a foreign accent. It is noteworthy that his parents would not consider sending him to City College, where so many children of the immigrant generation were educated, because they thought it was beneath him. Instead, they directed him to Columbia, the institution at which, after temporary teaching stints in Wisconsin and at Hunter College, he would spend his entire academic career. Trilling's affinity for British high culture was not surprising.

There were three great points of departure in Trilling's intellectual development, two of which he left entirely behind early on and a third that remained with him to the end: a somewhat vague and wholly secular Judaism, Marxism, and Freudianism. His consistent disengagement from all expressions of Jewish identity is a complicated issue to which I shall return. He and his wife Diana had a flirtation with Marxism in the early 1930s, as did so many New York intellectuals then, but they never joined the Communist Party, and he was soon horrified by the brutality of Stalinism and became a staunch anti-Marxist. In a contentious letter to the theater scholar Eric Bentley in 1946, he writes, "I live in deep fear of Stalinism" and goes on to observe aptly that in one respect Stalinism was more pernicious than Fascism because "it has taken all the great hopes and all the great slogans [and] has recruited the people who have shared my background and culture and corrupted them." On Freud, he wrote a number of finely reflective pieces through to late in his life, and this intellectual interest was no doubt strongly reinforced by the fact that both he and Diana underwent psychoanalytic treatment for decades.

The two of them were highly neurotic—a term Trilling does not hesitate to apply to himself in his letters—although their neuroses were quite different. There are some indications in Trilling's letters of corrosive self-doubt and of black moods that have the distinct look of depression. Diana, a critic and journalist Trilling sometimes chose to regard as his equal although she was not, was subject to panic attacks and was so hampered by phobias that she could not bring herself to enter an elevator, requiring the couple to live in a ground-floor apartment. Her grasp of factual matters was sometimes a little shaky, as I had occasion to personally learn. In 1978 I wrote an article on the critic Alfred Kazin in which I referred to Trilling, essentially defending him against Kazin. Although Kazin irritably imagined that I was a disciple of Trilling in his later-published journal, Diana saw my article as an attack on her husband. She then somehow picked up the notion that I was the son of the Polish Bundist leader Viktor Alter and hence hostile to Lionel because of his anti-Marxism. In fact, my father came from Romania and had no connection whatever with the Bund.



***Lionel Trilling, professor of English literature at Columbia, ca. 1950s. (Photo by Gjon Mili/The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images.)***

A somewhat unexpected aspect of the Trilling marriage emerges from these letters. The early phase of their relationship was intensely passionate and evidently involved keen sexual excitement, at least on his side. Trilling regularly addresses Diana in his letters as "Dearest" or "Beloved" and says she is the most extraordinary thing that has ever happened to him. In one letter, he even tells her everything he longs to do with her body in four-letter detail. Such things, alas, rarely last, and in the course of time sexual problems, according to the report of their intimates, emerged, along with occasional outbursts of vituperative rage by Lionel that compelled Diana to flee the room. But this was a marriage, whatever storms may have roiled it, that was made to last. Nearly a quarter of a century after they met, when Trilling was traveling abroad for the first time—to England, of course—he was still addressing Diana in his letters as "Dearest" and writing her with companionable kindness and consideration. To the end, he remained loyal to her, invariably praising or defending her writing in his letters to literary friends.

Trilling of course became famous primarily as a literary critic, and at the peak of his career he was read, one might say, religiously by most of the New York intelligentsia, as well as by many others elsewhere. One wag remarked at the time that young couples in these circles followed every Trilling essay the way good Anglicans read their pastor's weekly sermon. Trilling's own feeling about his work as a critic, the letters often show, was not of a piece with adulation it inspired.

He did not actually care to be a critic, he remarks several times in his letters, or to be thought of as one. (One must note, nevertheless, that he responded with alacrity to invitations to write critical essays and reviews; in the last year of his life he was working on an essay on Jane Austen.) He eagerly embraced a comment in a letter from the French philosopher Étienne Gilson that "he wasn't really a literary critic," although we are not told what Gilson imagined him to be. I would tentatively describe Trilling as a moral observer of society, culture, and politics, perhaps even a kind of improvisatory social theorist. He was not much interested in engaging the specificities of literary works, however intelligently he may have read them. In a letter to his editor Pascal Covici, he remarks of *The Liberal Imagination*, his most famous book, that "these essays, although essays chiefly in literature, all point beyond literature, to what we call life itself."

His characteristic mode of discourse works through generalizations about society, prevalent attitudes and values, and much else, and one can often see this disposition in the letters. It is both a powerful resource and a limitation. Writing to Norman Podhoretz, he observes, "Very true that sex has been corrupted by the will, very true that sex, by being made extravagantly conscious, has become scientized and mechanized." This is surely an interesting notion, but how could anyone know whether it is very true, or even true at all?

Trilling expresses a sense of camaraderie in writing to Edmund Wilson, noting that neither of them belongs to a school or trend or espouses a particular methodology: "Pleasant to think that someday an examination question will read: Name and discuss two general American critics who are not New Critics but

are not Old Critics either." He begins another letter to Wilson by invoking a famous phrase from Baudelaire, *"mon semblable, mon frère."* Years later, however, writing to a critic who had just published a piece that discussed Wilson, he asserts of Wilson's work, "I find it lacking in depth and breadth, and energy." This strikes me as unjust, but I would hasten to say that what characterizes a good many of Trilling's letters is a gnawing sense of dissatisfaction with everything that passes for criticism. Thus, he tells Isaiah Berlin, "I have become impatient with criticism in general and find it harder and harder to read it." At several points, he says much the same thing about contemporary literature and art. A similar dissatisfaction is present in many of his comments about the academic world, his colleagues, and all but a few of his students. My own experience as his student was that, even while offering subtle insights, he tended to be casual to a fault in the classroom and a bit disorganized. He seemed to want to be somewhere else, doing something else.

Above all, that something else was writing fiction, not criticism. His first publications, when he was in his early twenties, were short stories and a few articles and reviews that appeared in *The Menorah Journal*, a distinguished intellectual periodical launched in 1915. (Its brilliant managing editor, Elliot Cohen, would become the founding editor of *Commentary* magazine.)

He published just one novel, *The Middle of the Journey* (1947), whose principal character was based on Whittaker Chambers, an acquaintance of Trilling's at Columbia College who would later be exposed as a Soviet spy. The novel is thoughtful and nuanced but rather pallid, a judgment with which he himself came to concur. In a 1972 letter he confesses, "I prevailed on myself to read part of it, and found it not bad, although not what I would want a novel of mine to be." He repeatedly affirms in his letters the intention to produce a new novel, but it remained incomplete at the time of his death (it was published by Columbia University Press in 2008 as *The Journey Abandoned: The Unfinished Novel*).

Revealingly, in a letter aptly celebrating the achievement of Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* (he would later have problems with Bellow), he speaks of the "gift" it manifests "to see life everywhere" and notes that "the prose is really wonderful in its vivacity and energy." These qualities are precisely what is absent from *The Middle of the Journey,* and one wonders whether Trilling, with all of his inhibitions and inner conflicts, would ever have been capable as a novelist of the spontaneous surrender to the momentum of his imagination. His wife says something to the same effect in her autobiography, couching the point in orthodox Freudian terms.

*The Menorah Journal*, initiated in a Jewish student organization of that era, may seem an unlikely launching pad for the career of the critic who would become an expositor of such figures as Matthew Arnold, E. M. Forster, and Wordsworth. This ostensibly paradoxical beginning points to the general question of Trilling's identity as a Jew in his trajectory to prominence as an American man of letters. Trilling describes his parents as "Orthodox," although this entailed little more than a kosher kitchen and the lighting of candles Friday night, as Diana confirms. The rabbi who prepared him for his bar mitzvah was Max Kadushin, who would much later write a book called *The Rabbinic Mind* on the "normal mysticism" of the ancient rabbis. Trilling read it and was impressed. It helped him to revise the one, rather curious, essay in which he discusses Judaism, "Wordsworth and the Rabbis." Trilling proposes an analogy between the relation of the early rabbis to the Torah, as formulated by Kadushin, and Wordsworth's relation to nature. This episode apart, what is clear in any case from Trilling's letters is that growing up he was given barely any Jewish instruction beyond the ability to chant his *haftarah* by rote. The occasional comments he makes on Judaism and Jewish culture betray a total ignorance of their contents, and in a diatribe—a mode of expression quite uncharacteristic of him but a label entirely justified here—about Jewish sexual attitudes, he even refers to the ritual bath pious Jewish women go to after menstruating as "the *mitzvah*."

**One wag remarked at the time that young couples in these circles followed every Trilling essay the way good Anglicans read their pastor's weekly sermon.**

Trilling had briefly seen in the intellectual community around *The Menorah Journal* the possibility of a new secular Jewish culture that would suit his sense of life. Writing to Elliot Cohen in 1929—he was 24 at the time—he speaks of the aspiration "to construct a society that can consider its own life from a calm, intelligent, dignified point of view; take delight in its own arts, its own thoughts, the vagaries of its own being." Earlier in the same letter, he tells Cohen that he found he preferred his Jewish friends to his Gentile friends but that otherwise he "was not rebelling . . . merely ignoring" Judaism. He goes on to say that, "Implicit in my feeling about Judaism was that it was not unpoetic, but quite empty of meaning now and inclined to manifest itself stupidly."

Within a few years, he would put the cultural project of *The Menorah Journal* well behind him. After the publication of his book on Matthew Arnold in 1939, he was promoted to tenure in the Columbia English department through the edict of Nicholas Murray Butler, the imperious, longtime president of the university, who was motivated by his admiration of the book. In this period, departments of English were bastions of genteel anti-Semitism. Trilling was the first Jew to become a permanent member of the Columbia department and would remain the only one for many years. The chairman of the department, Emery Neff, came to see Trilling in his apartment (in itself a remarkable step) after the promotion was imposed by Butler. According to Diana, he told Trilling that he was glad to have him aboard but that he hoped he would not use his presence as a wedge to bring in others of his race.

Trilling nowhere expresses any discomfort with this fraught situation in these letters, and in several letters he asserts that he had never suffered from anti-Semitism. For all his Anglophilia, he was not what used to be called a facsimile WASP. He never made the slightest gesture to hide his Jewish origins, but they remained just that, origins, with only the most tenuous relevance to his mature identity. There is certainly something honorable in his stance as a Jew by extraction only. While a graduate student, he declined an invitation to join the Columbia Club because he had learned from a close friend that "the club usually does not take Jews" and hence, "Under such a circumstance, you will surely perceive, I cannot decently stand for membership." Understandably, he could not adopt this position a decade later when offered membership in an even more exclusive Columbia club, the English department, because his livelihood—quite precarious at this juncture—and his future career depended on his joining.

In a 1961 letter to Clement Greenberg, the eminent art critic and an editor at *Commentary* from 1945 to 1957, he recalls a bitter argument they had back in 1945 in which Greenberg accused him of Jewish self-hatred. At least according to Trilling's recollection, he was on the point of starting a fistfight with Greenberg because of the accusation. In fact, Trilling's letters show no real evidence of self-hatred but only a continuing ambivalence, a desire not to be chiefly identified as a Jew, as well as a few moments of vestigial respect for remembered familial values. When he learned of his mother's death in 1964 while he was staying at Oxford, he accepted a prompt from Diana that it would be appropriate for him to recite the Kaddish at least once, and, after consulting Isaiah Berlin, he attended a Jewish student service and was surprised to find it "an affecting occasion and helpful in a way that I would not have expected."

Many people, of course, behave differently at such moments than in everyday life, and Trilling's usual predisposition was to preserve a certain cautious distance from Judaism or any sort of Jewish collective expression. In 1945, when *Commentary* was founded, Elliot Cohen invited him to become a contributing editor. Trilling firmly declined, explaining to his old friend that, "A great many intellectual problems and projects . . . have recently begun presenting themselves to me . . . and when I get around to handling them I do not want to do so in the character of a 'Jewish writer' or a 'Jewish publicist,' which would be, in some part, my identification if my name were on your masthead." Trilling did from time to time contribute articles to *Commentary*, and his initial personal connection with the journal through Cohen would continue in another guise when his former student Norman Podhoretz assumed the editorship in 1960. But his resistance to any association with Jewish organizations and activities persisted. In 1959, when asked by the chaplain of the Seixas Society, Columbia's Jewish student organization, to address the group, he first says, perhaps quite reasonably, that he has nothing of interest to say on Jewish cultural topics, and then adds, in an impeccably discreet formulation, referring to Jewish tradition, "My own relation to it is private and personal and not susceptible of discussion on a public occasion."

Again, this seems perfectly honorable, given who Trilling was, but the disavowal of connection was accompanied by a sweeping dismissal of virtually all manifestations of Jewish culture, grounded in a nearly total ignorance of what those might be. Here is a ringing statement he makes in the course of still another refusal, in this case to cosign a report recommending the creation of what would become Brandeis University: "I know many Jews of large

mind and morality, but I do not know a single mind in Jewish life that speaks as a Jew and with any intellectual authority in the exposition of Jewish values."

Trilling had said much the same thing three years earlier in a symposium in the pages of the *Contemporary Jewish Record,* which was a kind of forerunner to *Commentary.* A group of intellectuals under 40 had been asked to speak to the question of American literature and the younger generation of American Jews. The symposiasts included such rising cultural stars as Delmore Schwartz, Isaac Rosenfeld, and Alfred Kazin. Trilling's contribution was perhaps the bleakest. He concluded it by declaring, "I know of no writers who have used their Jewish experience as the subject of excellent work." It seems he had not read, among other things, Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934).

In 1938, just six years before the contribution to "Under Forty," Gershom Scholem had come to New York to deliver the lectures that became *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, one of the masterworks of intellectual history written in the 20th century, but Trilling, unsurprisingly, seems entirely unaware of it. It was simply not a direction in which he was looking from the safe haven of Hamilton Hall, where the Columbia English department was housed. In 1957, Scholem returned to New York to read sections of his magisterial biography of Shabbtai Zevi, then about to be published in Hebrew. I was a senior at Columbia College and came to his readings on campus. Many of the luminaries of the New York intelligentsia, including such friends of Trilling as Hannah Arendt and Meyer Schapiro, were there, but he did not appear.

There were a good many other things going on in Jewish culture during these years about most of which, admittedly, Trilling could not have known. In 1945 S. Y. Agnon published in Hebrew *Only Yesterday,* one of the century's most original modernist novels. In New York, Jacob Glatstein was producing great poetry in Yiddish. I. B. Singer was writing remarkable fiction in Yiddish, which would begin to surface in English translation during the 1950s, the first notable appearance being Saul Bellow's vigorous translation of "Gimpel the Fool" in, of all places, one of Trilling's literary home bases, *Partisan Review.*

In this connection, I am led to ponder the attitude toward Irving Howe reflected in these letters, which, in the few mentions, is clearly dismissive or negative. Howe was part of the same *Partisan Review* and *Commentary* circle as Trilling. Like Trilling, he was neither a New Critic nor an Old Critic, and he, too, wrote for a general intellectual audience. But the two were in many ways antithetical.

Where Trilling wrote carefully measured, always sober prose, Howe inclined toward what he characterized in his celebrated 1969 essay, "The New York Intellectuals," as "the style of brilliance," which was lively, evocative, a bit showy, and sometimes wittily inventive. Howe's critical range went beyond America and England to Europe and, in his later years, to Israel as well, and he was more disposed to engage with the work of individual living writers than to frame broad statements about the moral tenor of society. Whether his evolution from an early involvement in Trotskyism to democratic socialism rather than centrist liberalism bothered Trilling is unclear. But in midcareer, Howe also made a notable turn to Yiddish literature, which amounted to a return to his roots because he had grown up in a Yiddish-speaking home. I suspect that Trilling would have viewed Howe's interest in Yiddish with puzzlement, if not skepticism. Why would the author of books on Hardy, Faulkner, and the political novel focus on the writers of a dying language, incapable as they must have been of speaking "with any intellectual authority"?

There is a dark side to Trilling's dismissal of Jewish culture. In his diatribe on sexuality and the Jews—in the course of which, incidentally, he takes issue with Howe—he denounces Jewish "superstition," "the compulsiveness and fear" of the Jews in regard to sex, and declares without qualification that "the antisexual impulse of East European Jews is extreme. . . . They think sex is dirty, that all the body is dirty." Instructively, he goes on from this excoriation to one of his more withering condemnations of Jewish culture in general: "I find I grow less and less sympathetic with all manifestations of the culture. (And the late secular culture is erroneously overrated.) Nor do I like the culture any better in its attenuated American forms. I think it has injured all of us dreadfully." These words were written toward the end of the decade when Bellow, Malamud, and then Philip Roth were coming into prominence. Trilling had in fact expressed keen admiration for Malamud's story "The Magic Barrel," but perhaps he thought it bore no relation to Jewish culture.

The "us" in the sentence just quoted, coupled as it is with the reference to being injured, is a usage that should give one pause. Is he speaking autobiographically or culturally? Is he in some way attributing his psychological struggles and in particular any sexual problems he may have had to growing up in a Jewish home? Such questions are, of course, speculative, but what does emerge from this and related passages in Trilling's correspondence is that his assimilation into the loftiest spheres of American and British culture may not have been as perfect or as effortless as it sometimes seemed.

Trilling was surely comfortable in the world of Arnold and Ruskin and Wordsworth and with the exquisitely civilized discourse in which it was enshrined, but he appears to have nursed the grievance that his Jewish origins had wounded him—and were bound to wound anyone. Becoming an authority on literary and intellectual life in the English language entailed for him an absolute rejection of the alternative of Jewish culture. At its worst, he saw it as a black hole, the very opposite of an authentic culture and incapable in any way of sustaining the life of the mind and the spirit. Being for so long the sole English department Jew could not have been quite so easy as he claimed.

Trilling was a remarkably discerning, at times brilliant, essayist who threw subtle light on contemporary culture and its antecedents and on the internal contradictions of political loyalties, liberalism first among them. These intellectual virtues clearly justified the admiration his work elicited. He was also, according to the testimony of his familiars, an urbane and charming social presence, a quality that is also present in many of these letters. Yet he never entirely escaped his inner demons, and a good many of them seem to have been Jewish.

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# Lost in America

BY MICHAEL WEINGRAD

***Zot ani, Iowa*** **(It's Me, Iowa)**
by Galit Dahan Carlibach
Graff, 126 pp., 70 NIS

***Ha-morah le-ivrit*** **(The Hebrew Teacher)**
by Maya Arad
Hargol, 248 pp., 88 NIS

*Zot ani, Iowa* (It's Me, Iowa) is a slim memoir of Galit Dahan Carlibach's residency at the University of Iowa's prestigious International Writing Program, during which she underwent a complete mental breakdown, commencing an affair with a local musician before murdering him and dumping his body in the Mississippi. That is, it's not an actual memoir at all but a very dark comedy taking wild fictional liberties in Philip Roth fashion with the happily married (and not homicidal) writer's real-life 2016 stint at the Iowa program.

Born in 1981, Dahan Carlibach grew up in a religious Moroccan family in Sderot and published her debut novel in 2010. She has had considerable success in Israel as a writer for both adults and children. Her fantasies, *Arfile'ah* (Fogland) and its sequel, are popular among Israeli children. Her 2017 novel *Sufah shel Alis* (Alice's Storm), longlisted for the Sapir Prize, is set in a fictional moshav populated by characters as charming and quirky as the ones who seem to inhabit comedies of small-town Scotland such as the film *Local Hero*. Yet none of this quite prepares one for her new book.

From the beginning, Dahan Carlibach's alter ego has irreverent fun with the political pecking order at the program, referring throughout to herself and the other participants by the names of their countries:

> My credit score in IWP-land was pretty low. Of course I'm not completely white and my mocha-colored skin—because of which many mistook me for someone of Latin origin—bought me a higher score, and then I'm a woman, but in comparison with Kenya, or gay Nepal, or occupied Palestine, my rating was meaningless, and I was stuck between Iceland and Sweden, countries thought to be inappropriately fortunate.

There is an encounter described in similarly wry and deadpan fashion between Israel and Palestine in an organic grocery store, where Palestine has forgotten his passport and so can't use his credit card. Israel offers to pay, but Palestine storms off, insulted. "The other countries looked at Israel as if I had personally invaded the territories in '67 and callously conquered each house and village myself."

Israel's literary agent encourages her to have affairs with enemy countries: A memoir about a tryst with Palestine or Iran would surely sell like hotcakes. Indeed, we are told that Israel's most successful book so far is a novel entitled *Love Without Borders*, "a love story between a Palestinian and a Jew against the background of the Second Intifada" that won accolades and got her the residency. One notes the sly wink here at Dorit Rabinyan's *Gader haya*, a novel with the same plot that was catapulted to fame when Israel's Education Ministry rejected it for inclusion in Israel's high school curriculum. Controversy sells.

**Dahan Carlibach's alter ego has irreverent fun with the political pecking order, referring to herself and the other participants by the names of their countries.**

Book sales notwithstanding, Israel has her eye on a local American musician named Dustin, on whom she projects all of her Middle Eastern fantasies about a wholesome life among the cornfields. Poor guy. In a reversal of Roth's Portnoy, the neurotic Jew in this book is the Israeli who has found her golden *sheygetz*. Dustin expects their relationship to be over after a one-night stand, but Israel is not put off so easily. Stalking him, she goes so far as to join his Methodist church, insinuating herself into a friendship with his parents based on her newfound passion for antiabortion activism. "I want to be your wife," she tells the alarmed Dustin. "To stuff you with Thanksgiving turkey."



***Galit Dahan Carlibach. (Courtesy of the author.)***

I loved the dark and politically incorrect humor of *Zot ani, Iowa*. It will not be to everyone's taste, though I suspect it will be funnier to American readers than Israeli ones, as the former are more easily able to see the comedy in Dahan Carlibach's cornfield fantasies. In any event, the book is fair warning that, jumping from moshav to fantasyland to the University of Iowa, Dahan Carlibach is good at defying expectations, especially those of self-definition. As her alter ego tells Dustin when he asks if her life story is true: "Based on a true story—magic words for a best-seller."

Another new book that, coincidentally, appeared earlier this year within a few weeks of *Zot ani, Iowa* and features Israelis wandering the groves of American academe is Maya Arad's *Ha-morah le-ivrit* (The Hebrew Teacher). Arad, as readers of the *Jewish Review of Books* will know (see Alan Mintz's "Reader, I Adopted Him" in the Winter 2016 issue), lives in Palo Alto and often takes the experience of Israelis residing in America as her subject. The three novellas that make up her new book all concern Israelis who live in the United States and make their living in connection with academia or high tech. If this sounds like a narrow sociological vein to mine, all the more credit to Arad, who is one of the most talented Israeli novelists of her generation and who here offers profoundly moving and universal vistas of experience, sorrow, and humor by observing her local reality with humane intelligence.

The first of these three tales focuses on Ilana, who has been teaching Hebrew language classes at a midwestern state university for decades. Born and raised in Israel, she is married to an American Jew and has made her home in the United States. She loves Israel, though. She loves sharing its language and culture with her American students—though, sadly, the number of these students has been declining in recent years. Still, she evinces a boundless eagerness to teach young Americans introductory Hebrew, to promote the reading of Israeli authors by the local Jewish community, and to spend Israeli Independence Day with Hillel students doing advocacy work at a campus table as Arik Einstein and Rita sing from her CD player. (Her sense of contemporary Israeli music expired along with her tech savvy sometime in the 1990s.) Ilana often notes that she was born the same year as the Jewish state, and this twinning is very much reflected in her sense of identity as a proud, if somewhat outdated, representative of Israel to the American community in which she lives.

And now successful fundraising among Jewish donors has led to the creation of a tenured faculty position in Hebrew literature at the university. At long last, Ilana will have a colleague who shares her love for Israeli culture! As a mere adjunct (albeit with four decades of service), she of course has no say in the hiring process. Still, she is thrilled at the prospect, even if Yo'ad, a recently minted PhD by way of Columbia and Berkeley, was not her preferred candidate. She gives him a warm welcome.

Alas, the warmth is not mutual. Yo'ad does not share Ilana's love of Israel. He supports BDS. He does not even like Hebrew much—his research is on "Heidegger as a Jewish writer," and he matter-of-factly

admits that he hardly reads literature (in contrast to philosophy and literary theory). He certainly prefers the company of his colleagues in comparative literature to the ethnically Jewish professors who have cobbled together a Jewish studies program. When the campus Hillel asks him to speak to students during Sukkot and the local synagogue asks him to lead a book club discussion, he not only declines but is insulted. "I'm a comparative literature instructor," he snaps, "not a summer camp counsellor in the Catskills." No Zionism or ethnoreligious provincialism for him, he has even changed his last name, Harari, to Harari-Bergman in order to "re-diasporize" his identity. If Yo'ad receives tenure, it is all but certain that Ilana's achievements, modest yet the work of years and a labor of love, will vanish like the *kibbutzim* of yore. Portrayed with coruscating authenticity, the conflict between Ilana and Yo'ad reveals fault lines running through both higher education and the Jewish world at large.

In the second story, an Israeli grandmother, Miriam, invades her son and daughter-in-law's comfortable life in Palo Alto for a three-week visit to spend time with her little grandson, Yonatan. Arad observes the responses of this Israeli of an older generation to the exotic and unfamiliar aspects of her son's Bay Area life, from yoga classes to the Costco in Sunnyvale to, more painfully, the long days Yonatan spends at his preschool instead of with his grandmother. The visit only highlights the gulf that has grown between Miriam and her family, though its poignancy is studded with humorous touches, as when Miriam is thrilled to meet who she thinks is another little Israeli boy in her grandson's preschool before realizing that the child's name is "Owen," not the (to her ears) identically sounding "Oren."

As I read the story, I could not help comparing it to an earlier novella dealing with Jewish immigrants, Americanization, and family conflict: *Yekl* (1896), by the writer and famed editor of the *Forverts,* Abraham Cahan. Arad takes Cahan's late 19th-century portrait of immigrant culture shock and flips it around for an early 21st century in which the old world—or is it the new world?—is Israel and the Yekl-become-Jake is a Yoram-become-Yuri. Shut out



*Maya Arad. (Photo by Sharon Bakhar Hirsch.)*

by her children and struggling to create a connection with her Hebrew-averse grandson, Miriam even sounds a parallel complaint. "A curse upon Columbus," says Cahan's rueful immigrant Gitl about the distance America seems to have put between her and her husband. Miriam, sitting in a Starbucks and reflecting on the loneliness she both feels and identifies in her American family, sighs: "That's the problem . . . There are no grandmothers here."

Yet there is nothing tendentious about Arad's stories. She touches, gently, on a range of sociological patterns—the shaky status of Hebrew among the American children of her Israeli characters, for instance, and the looser, sometimes nonexistent family ties in America as compared with Israel—but her purpose is not to offer critique but to observe her characters in their all-too-human complexity. In the third tale, a mother struggles to help her 13-year-old daughter navigate the cruel hierarchies and rituals of adolescence in the age of Instagram and Snapchat. The daily negotiations (and persistent sense of failure) surrounding screens and phones and earbuds will be familiar to many parents of teens today. The subject affords more than a few soapboxes, but Arad chooses not to stand on them, instead examining how parental concern can sometimes be a displacement of the parent's own insecurities.

Arad's stock-in-trade is a rare mix of intellect and warmth. Her previous book, *Me-ahorei ha-har* (Behind the Mountain, 2016), is a mystery novel that takes place over Thanksgiving in the snowbound California vacation home of a wealthy Israeli tech mogul. The "detective," as it were, is a failed academic whose métier is detective fiction and who has been invited to give a series of lectures on the subject. Arad's presentation of academic analyses of the mystery tropes she is simultaneously exploiting is exceedingly clever. Yet, as with *Ha-morah le-ivrit*, she first and foremost makes you care about the characters, Israelis making their way as best they can in America and in life.

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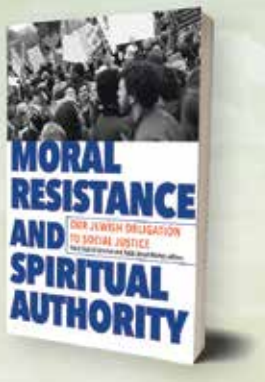
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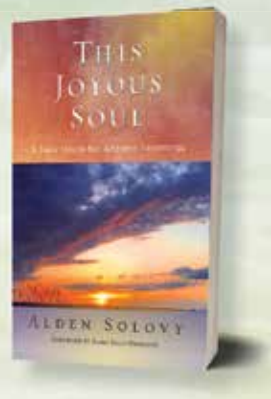

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# Torah U'Madda

BY DANIEL ROSS GOODMAN

***Modern Orthodox Judaism: A Documentary History***
by Zev Eleff
Jewish Publication Society, 570 pp., $40

Only 3 percent of American Jews are Modern Orthodox, but it's still an umbrella term. As Zev Eleff notes in the preface to his fascinating documentary history, *Modern Orthodox Judaism*, those now looking for matches on Modern Orthodox dating sites have the option of identifying as "'modern Orthodox-liberal' or 'modern Orthodox-machmir' (stringent)." I know from first-hand experience that these distinctions are real, even though I still have difficulty figuring out where the lines are drawn and where I belong. Some daters even identify themselves as "modern yeshivish" (a sort of hybrid between Modern Orthodox and yeshivish), others as "Carlebachian" (anyone's guess, but musical), and others as simply "*shomer mitzvot*" (observant).

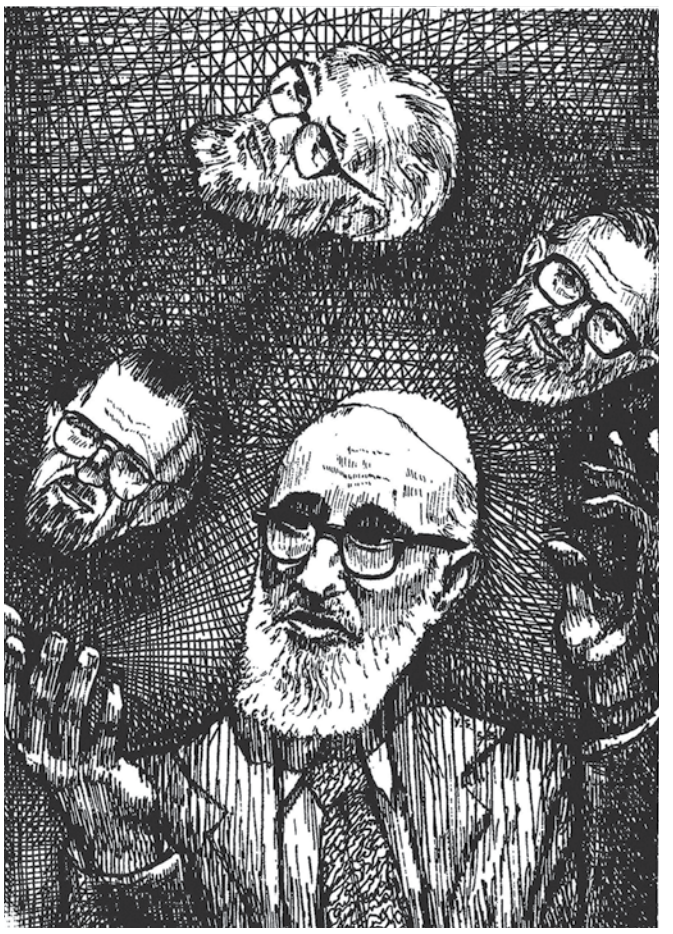
Turning from dating sites to sociologists (and ideologues), the crucial dividing line seems to be between the "centrist Orthodox" and the "Open Orthodox" camps, though religious lives and affiliations are often more complicated than such bright-line drawing suggests. Nonetheless, there is much variation in belief and practice (especially around women's roles in the synagogue and communal life) within Modern Orthodoxy.

Have things always been this way? Eleff's thick anthology is an excellent place to look for the answer. His book tells the story of Modern Orthodoxy in America—from the early 19th century up until the present—through a series of significant speeches, essays, article excerpts, and responsa from many of the key figures and shapers of the movement. He takes us on an all-encompassing, whirlwind tour of Orthodoxy in America, from its embryonic stages—it first emerged in 1825 in Charleston, according to Eleff, as a reaction to the local Jews who broke away from traditional Judaism to found the Reformed Society of Israelites—to its early struggles to differentiate and dissociate itself from Conservative Judaism, to its maturation as a movement, to the present day.

The history of self-consciously "modern" Orthodoxy is inseparable from the history of Yeshiva University, which is a product of the early 20th century. Eleff covers Yeshiva University's birth, development, and evolution, and provides a chronicle of reactions to it from both its conservative and liberal Orthodox critics. As an alumnus of both Yeshiva University and Yeshiva University High School for Boys, I emerged from this book with a much greater appreciation for Bernard Revel, the founder of both institutions. Without his vision of a unique educational institution that manifested a "harmonious union of culture and spirituality" and trained "the Jewish heart and will as well as the mind," my learning and my life as well as the lives of tens of thousands of other Orthodox Jews who have aspired to live up to Yeshiva University's motto of *Torah U'Madda* (Torah and [secular] knowledge)—would not have been possible.

**Despite Rabbi Lamm's eloquent and intellectually sophisticated elucidations of the Modern Orthodox world view, Modern Orthodoxy has failed to attract as many adherents as ultra-Orthodoxy.**

Of course, the definitions of both Torah and *madda* have been contested. In April 1966, Yeshiva College's student newspaper interviewed the school's popular professor of Jewish history Rabbi Dr. Irving "Yitz" Greenberg, who thought that Orthodoxy was losing ground because it was dodging "the challenge of contemporary civilization." Orthodoxy, he argued, had to update itself by coming to terms with, among other things, modern biblical scholarship and by developing "a new value system and corresponding new *halachot* about sex." In response, another young faculty member, Rabbi Dr. Aharon Lichtenstein, published an open letter to Greenberg, in which he admonished Greenberg to "ponder the wisdom of Fulton Sheen's remarks that 'he who marries his own age will find himself a widower in the next.'" Greenberg would, of course, become a leader of the left wing of Modern Orthodoxy, while Lichtenstein would go on to become the *rosh yeshiva* of Yeshivat Har Etzion, Israel's leading centrist Modern Orthodox yeshiva.



***A cartoon published by the Yeshiva College student newspaper in May 1985. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, who was about to retire, is depicted juggling possible intellectual heirs: Rabbis Moses Tendler, Yehuda Parnes, and Norman Lamm. (Courtesy of the* Commentator.*)***

The debate that began with the Greenberg–Lichtenstein exchange has now been raging for more than half a century. It continues throughout this volume, from Rabbi Shlomo Riskin's "Modern Orthodoxy Goes to Grossinger's" (1976), in which he asks whether "it is any wonder that with all of our yeshivos, American Orthodoxy has produced so few genuine *Talmidei Chachemim*," to David Singer's "A Modern Orthodox Utopia Turned to Ashes" (1982), in which he laments that "our children—my children—will grow up in an Orthodox world in which talk about 'synthesis' will seem totally alien." The anthology's last chapter brings things up to the present, with Dov Linzer and Avi Weiss's "Open Orthodox Judaism" (2003), which makes the case for "an Orthodoxy that is open intellectually and expansive and inclusive in practice," and Asher Lopatin's "Taking Back Modern Orthodox Judaism" (2014), which calls for retrieving a better "appreciation for what an engagement with modernity could do to make us better Jews and scholars of Torah." Eleff briefly touches upon the opposition that Open Orthodoxy and its rabbinical school Yeshivat Chovevei Torah have encountered on the right but does not include any documents rebutting Open Orthodoxy (of which the Modern Orthodox world has not been lacking in the past two decades). One thinks, for instance, of Avrohom Gordimer of the Orthodox Union, who has been pillorying Open Orthodoxy since 2013 in the *Cross-Currents* blog, describing it as "the rebirth of Conservative Judaism."

Of course, the book also contains several key statements from Modern Orthodoxy's most outstanding spokesmen: the great halakhist and thinker Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik and Rabbi Norman Lamm, who served as the president of Yeshiva University from 1976 to 2003. A distinguished congregational rabbi, Lamm, unlike Soloveitchik, clearly, albeit hesitantly, identified himself as Modern Orthodox, as a 1969 essay in this volume demonstrates. His 1990 book, *Torah*

*Umadda*, articulated his vision of a Maimonidean Judaism that is fully committed to the observance of Jewish law while being open to science, the humanities, and secular culture more generally. According to Lamm, such a synthesis could together accomplish what neither Torah nor *madda* could achieve separately.

Although Rabbi Lamm has been a central figure of inestimable importance in Modern Orthodoxy for nearly seven decades, graduates of Yeshiva University, and anyone even tangentially connected to the institution, are well aware of the fact that it has not been Rabbi Lamm but rather Yeshiva University's *roshei yeshiva*—authoritative halakhists and brilliant talmudists such as Hershel Schachter, Mordechai Willig, Meir Goldwicht, Mayer Twersky, and Zvi Sobolofsky—who have, arguably, had a more direct impact upon the lives of thousands upon thousands of American Modern Orthodox Jews. It is surprising, then, that a volume that features so many texts related to Yeshiva University all but completely excludes the figures who can be said to have been the university's most influential rabbis.

Despite Rabbi Lamm's eloquent and intellectually sophisticated elucidations of the Modern Orthodox world view, Modern Orthodoxy has failed to attract as many adherents as ultra-Orthodoxy—the American ultra-Orthodox population is currently twice as large as (and growing faster than) the Modern Orthodox population—a challenge to the movement that Eleff does not ignore. The ideology of Modern Orthodoxy, undergirded by Rabbi Soloveitchik's distinctive blend of existentialism and neo-Kantianism, is a difficult one to grasp. Most people prefer clear lines and black-and-white differentiations to living with complexity, and it doesn't help matters that even many of those rabbinic leaders who understand Soloveitchik's philosophy and embody its values, such as Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, do not identify themselves as Modern Orthodox. This, combined with growing pressure from its right and left flanks, the prohibitive cost of the Modern Orthodox life (the "tuition crisis" is consistently cited as the greatest problem of religious life by Modern Orthodox Jews), widespread theological uncertainty (the 2017 Nishma survey found that only 64 percent of Modern Orthodox Jews believe that the Torah was given at Sinai), and a continuous "brain drain" in which many of the most committed American Modern Orthodox Jews leave for Israel—Modern Orthodox Jews have the highest rates of aliyah among all American Jews—means that the movement's future will likely be as ambiguous and complicated as its complex, tension-filled philosophy.

According to demographic projections, within two generations the majority of American Jews will be Orthodox, for the first time in nearly 150 years. How large a part of that community will be "modern"? And in what sense? In charting Modern Orthodoxy's past and present, Eleff has given us tools that may help us foresee its future.




***The Yeshiva University team competing in 1963 on the nationally televised quiz show* College Bowl. *(Courtesy of Shifrah Jungreis.)***

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# Mending Walls

BY CHRISTOPHER DEMUTH

***The Virtue of Nationalism***
by Yoram Hazony
Basic Books, 304 pp., $30

What does the election of Donald Trump have to do with Brexit and the formation of EU-dissident governments in Italy, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic? Popular nationalism. The popular nationalists all combined grievances ranging across the traditional left–right political spectrum to form fervent antiestablishment movements. They all shocked the political experts by gaining the support of large pluralities, sometimes majorities, of national electorates. Finally, each movement was organized around the proposition that the local ruling class was really part of a transnational elite that ignored the interests and values of its own countrymen.

And those elites—politicians of left and right, government careerists, mainstream media and entertainers, multinational corporate executives, and academics and intellectuals—have struck back in something close to unison. The political arrivistes, they say, are ill-informed populists, xenophobic at best and racist at worst, with pronounced authoritarian tendencies. And yet there are dissenting intellectuals who sympathize with the essential motivations and many of the goals of the new national movements, though they may have reservations about particular leaders and tactics. Yoram Hazony is the first such thinker to provide a sustained theoretical argument for the revived spirit of nationalism. *The Virtue of Nationalism* is a brilliant achievement, at once learned and sharp, philosophical and politically engaged. It is also sure to be controversial. Not only is Hazony's style of argument bold and emphatic, but his ultimate subject—political virtue—is itself a challenge to the dominant forms of contemporary political discourse.

His argument may be summarized in three propositions. First, an order of independent, self-determining states advances human freedom more reliably, and is less susceptible to violent conflict, than a system of government by local tribes and clans—which is in any case not viable in the modern world—or by empires. Second, empires are not limited to historic ones such as the Roman Empire or modern monstrosities such as the Nazi Third Reich and the Soviet Union. They also include present-day "liberal imperialism"—embodied in the European Union and, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, in the America-led "new world order," espoused in differing formulations by both Presidents Bush, President Bill Clinton, and President Barack Obama. What all of these empires have in common is the effort to establish universal peace and prosperity under a single set of political principles that are defined, bestowed, and enforced by a single sovereign power. Third, since the end of World War II and with increasing force since the Soviet collapse, liberal imperialism has replaced national self-determination as the ideal world order in the minds of Western elites.

Hazony argues that liberalism, in both its "classical" and "progressive" varieties, regards individual freedom as the highest political principle. Its exalted position is based on the concept of a primordial social contract—individuals, who are free and equal in a state of nature, form governments voluntarily, by mutual consent, for purposes of securing greater liberty, safety, and property. This liberalism is a universal creed: It abstracts from, and comes to denigrate, the particular traditions, beliefs, and loyalties that are the foundation of actual nations. Moreover, Hazony argues, nationalism has been falsely blamed for World Wars I and II and the Holocaust, which were in fact caused by German and Nazi (and Japanese) imperialism.

**Individuals are social animals and, what is more, fraternal animals. We live our lives and learn how to exercise our freedoms as part of collective institutions.**



**The Ratification of the Treaty of Münster***, by Gerard ter Borch, 1648, depicting the 1648 Peace of Westphalia. (The National Gallery, London.)*

National states—this is Hazony's term—are not formed and sustained by the consent of individuals—that's the liberal "fairy tale" concocted by John Locke and other social-contract theorists. Rather, they are formed by the interaction of constituent groups, often under duress, in order to end warfare among clans, tribes, or factions, to defend against external enemies, and to provide public goods such as resource management and dispute resolution. They endure for these purposes and, eventually, to preserve and transmit inherited traditions.

Hazony is an empiricist, and he has the empiricist's disdain for those who think human reason can deduce universal truths. But when he singles out the sainted John Locke as a subverter of nationalism and then takes several swipes at libertarian icons Friedrich Hayek and Ludwig von Mises as purveyors of liberal imperialism, he is spoiling for fights with otherwise sympathetic readers. There are the makings here for some good, productive arguments, but they need to begin with an appreciation of what Hazony is trying to accomplish.

Hazony is a Burkean conservative with classical liberal sympathies. His book is about what political order best promotes *freedom*, and his views are close to those of John Stuart Mill, whom he invokes frequently. But it is senseless, he believes, to talk of individual freedom in the abstract. Individuals are social animals and, what is more, fraternal animals. We live our lives and learn how to exercise our freedoms as part of collective institutions of intimates from the family outward. We depend on them for our safety, welfare, and happiness, and we experience their successes and failures as our own. If I am free but my wife, children, or neighbors are unfree, then I am not really or fully free myself. There are elements of choice and consent within families, religions, and ethnicities, but, for the most part, individuals "join" such institutions by birth, inheritance, or circumstance and make the institutions' traditions, customs, and commitments their own through socialization and practice. Such groups could not survive the cost–benefit calculus of the market. Instead, they are built on mutual loyalty and group cohesion. Yet, Hazony insists, these institutions are sources of our freedom.

As I stand at a lectern, bristling with sharp criticisms and smart reforms, it is easy to take for granted the immense, invisible apparatus that has put me here. Now that you and I are successful citizens of 21st-century America or Israel or France, let me

lecture you on the many egregious and infuriating impositions on our freedoms that ought to be rectified forthwith. As the list of grievances grows, we may come to regard the national state as the enemy of freedom—overlooking the fact that, in the absence of some sort of state and institutional structure, there is no such thing as freedom. Hazony wants the freedom-loving reformer to focus not on individual freedom but on collective, national freedom, which "offers a nation with the cohesiveness and strength to maintain independence and self-government . . . an opportunity to live according to its own interests and aspirations." This is not the end of his argument, but even at this stage it should be clear that he is not trying to stack the deck in favor of collectivist outcomes. He is concerned that the institutional bedrock of Western freedom is in jeopardy and needs recognition and support.

Hazony is perhaps best known as a deep and ingenious reader of the Bible, and, as he persuasively shows, the Hebrew Bible is our first sustained history of the national state. The early Israelites inhabited a world of empires and were themselves slaves to an empire. Moses led them to national freedom and, eventually, to their own homeland. Critically, they were not to meddle in the affairs of other nations: Israel was to be governed of, by, and for Israelites themselves and to strive to live in harmony with other nations. This Mosaic dispensation did not immediately catch on. Christianity was a universalizing religion and soon allied itself with the Roman Empire and later with the Holy Roman Empire. But with the rise of Protestantism, the translation of the Bible into many national languages, and Henry VIII's establishment of an independent English Anglican nation, and then with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, a new political order took shape in Western Europe.

This early modern political construction was built on the Protestants' close reading of the Old Testament. First, national states were obliged to protect their people in life, family, and property; to dispense justice; and to maintain the Sabbath and public recognition of one God. This was the "moral minimum" of legitimate government, aimed at fostering individual freedom and dignity. Second, national states were free to govern themselves according to their own traditions, institutions, procedures, and ways of life, without interference from foreign powers. They were, in short, self-determined entities.

This was the political ideal for states in the European and English-speaking worlds for three centuries, but today, following the recent ascent of "liberal imperialism," it sounds defiantly retro. Take, for instance (my example, not Hazony's), President Donald Trump's address to the U.N. General Assembly on September 19, 2017, which was criticized as if it were an intemperate tweet despite the fact that it restated propositions that were widely accepted from the 17th century through Woodrow Wilson, FDR, and Churchill:

> We do not expect diverse countries to share the same cultures, traditions, or even systems of government. But we do expect all nations to uphold these two core sovereign duties: to respect the interests of their own people and the rights of every other sovereign nation. This is the beautiful vision of this institution, and this is the foundation for cooperation and success.

Now this classic Protestant political construction is not a prescription for perpetual peace, nor does it solve every problem of political order. Its two basic principles are obviously both open to interpretation and in some tension with each other. Nations will form their own ideas of moral legitimacy and self-determination and may come to blows over their differences. National states with no imperial ambitions have frequently been at war among themselves over territory and trade. They have flagrantly violated minimum obligations to their own peoples and even set up their own colonial empires.

What the Protestant construction does do is acknowledge the human impulse for collective freedom and offer it protection and encouragement. National self-determination and the "moral minimum" cannot be more than guidelines—for if they were detailed and prescriptive they would need an empire to enforce them. But the generality of the two precepts and the tension between them are strengths not weaknesses. They direct debate



*Yoram Hazony. (Courtesy of the author.)*

and action to the important questions that arise under an order of national freedom. They are ethical standards, left for their realization to prudence and judgment among and within nations and to the many forms of influence that civilized nations can exercise with each other and the pressures they can bring to bear on brutal and conniving nations.

Hazony offers a nuanced account of the Protestant construction's superiority to empire. National states are less violent because their wars tend to be limited to specific territorial disputes and tend to lack messianic or ideological fervor. Empires may bring peace and order to regions not yet prepared for nationhood—but at the cost of conquest. "[T]he disdain for wars of indefinite expansion, which is both a cause and a consequence of the political ideal of the national state," he writes, "is so great a benefit that it may, in itself, be sufficient to decide the argument."

National states have also been more prosperous, stable, and resilient because their policies are more responsive to citizens' interests and values and, in return, enjoy greater loyalty and support when the going gets tough. A national state's political leaders, drawn from the citizenry, will be familiar national types with a recognizable life story and a common heritage and loyalties. An empire's leaders will be more distant and less familiar. The leaders will regard their subjects' traditions and culture as secondary at best, and the subjects will be directed to be loyal to an abstract thing—to an ideology or icon or the glorious empire itself—rather than to their own history, sacrifices, and customs. In the face of reversals and hardships or at times when the government or its officials are unpopular, the bonds of loyalty will be weak or nonexistent.

But nationalism's outstanding virtues are, says Hazony, its affirmative ones. The notion that nations could chart their own distinctive courses, that there was no single model or hierarchy for government, "set the world free." It produced a decentralized, variegated, competitive political order—and one that in turn set the individual free: "The development of the tradition of individual rights and liberties arose only in national states." These were necessary conditions for the West's stupendous achievements in science, art, literature, commerce, and material welfare, which could not have happened in an empire ruled by uniform a priori principles.

Our latest empire, Hazony's liberal imperialism, is, so far, mainly an empire of such disembodied principles. It is a belief system embraced by many influential people but without a comprehensive state apparatus (it is American military might that makes faux multistate governments like the EU possible). Historic empires were based on some grand idea or ambition to which self-determining nations posed an obstacle or a management problem. In contrast, liberal imperialism's grand idea is opposition to national freedom itself. It is for global harmonization per se and, consequently, the Eurostyle, piecemeal dismantlement of national sovereignty.

To see how this works, begin with the liberal idea that people are free and equal and consent to government in order to secure their rights. That idea played an honored role in the American founding, in the preamble to the Declaration of Independence, but it was never a controlling ideology. The declaration's cause of action was instead a 28-point bill of particulars justifying the states' rebellion against a tyrannical king. America became a nation of highly particular and disparate localities, religions, ethnicities, traditions, and institutions, united by its own mystic chords of memory, at once fractious and patriotic and distinguished for pragmatic, nonideological politics. The liberal idea has been instrumental in the American political tradition, but as an ideal, akin to the moral minimum of the Protestant construction—a sort of continuing preamble that frames debate and application from issue to issue.

In contrast, liberal imperialism takes individual freedom and equality as an absolute criterion that renders the national state, and its idiosyncratic loyalties and commitments, suspect or worse. The most striking example, and the central cause of today's nationalist revivals, is immigration. In the United States, a significant number of activists on the progressive left now favor, more or less openly, the dismantling of border controls and unrestricted immigration ("abolish ICE!"). This position finds strong support among intellectuals and not only on the left. The estimable political theorist Jeffrey Friedman has argued that national restrictions on immigration are "irrational" and "morally indefensible" because they put the interests of fellow countrymen and -women ahead of the interests of people who happen to reside elsewhere. Some prominent political leaders have been moving toward this position, most dramatically German chancellor Angela Merkel. Liberal

imperialism is more than just Locke for moderns. It envisions a world of borderless humanity, with every individual possessing equal rights and brotherhood with every other, as the proper, moral order of politics and guide for right policy. This world view is a powerful force for ad hoc empire building, including of the antiliberal sort. Witness the many EU programs for harmonizing national tax, welfare, and regulatory policies, whose purpose is to suppress diversity, competition, and innovation. It is also a font of the growing orthodoxy and intolerance in EU and U.S. politics.

Hazony directly confronts the counterargument that nationalism fosters needless antagonism, easily rising to hatred, among people of different ethnic and religious groups and nationalities. His refutation is a variant of his argument about war and violence: Empires may suppress group hatreds that would otherwise gain traction in nationalist politics, but they are eventually "consumed by the hatred of the universal for the particular that will not submit." This is an argument that a political theorist sensitized by the experience of Jewish history is particularly well positioned to make. In fact, the centerpiece of Hazony's argument is a perceptive analysis of the European "shaming campaigns" against the state of Israel.

Although these campaigns are always focused on a recent alleged human rights violation, their true objection, as has become clear over time, is that Israel is an unapologetic national state—one that unhesitatingly defends its borders, reacts forcefully to military threats, and promotes the particular interests of its own people. Hazony was, as one would expect, a supporter of the recent passing of the Jewish State bill as a Basic Law. As he argued in a recent column, Israel's success as a "raucous liberal democracy . . . has not been in spite of Israel's character as the state of the Jewish people, but because of it."

Despite the recent electoral uprisings against the liberal imperium, Hazony is not sanguine about the prospects for a renewed nationalism. With the growth of markets, affluence, and technology, many of us (and not just elites) live most of our lives within institutions that are thoroughly contractual and frequently borderless. With the decline of family and religion, even the new opponents of liberal orthodoxy are often clueless about the traditional and institutional sources of their opposition. One result is that they routinely fasten onto one element or the other of the Protestant construction without realizing that effective nationalism requires both. Thus, for instance, "neo-Catholic" human rights activists want governments to observe traditional Judeo-Christian moral norms—but many of them are suspicious of national self-determination and sympathetic to coercive international law. Meanwhile, "neo-nationalist" political activists oppose the EU and other supranational restrictions on sovereignty—but many of them glorify the nation-state as an end in itself, oblivious to its religious foundations, moral obligations, and responsibilities to vulnerable minorities.

Indeed, reading Hazony against the background of 2018's hair-raising headlines, one is struck by the gulf between the theory and practice of nationalism. Of course, political practice is always rather stumbling and confusing in the moment, but today we seem to be facing larger problems. The new nationalist movements may be like landing parties—they have the single-minded intensity for gaining a beachhead but will need to be followed by steadier, more deliberate forces if there is to be a real nationalist reclamation. Or maybe we are witnessing the death throes of the national state itself. Two years after the national Brexit election, the British government has yet to begin disentangling itself from the EU and may never do so. In the United States, many in both political parties have come to regard the other party as fundamentally illegitimate. Almost everywhere, representative legislatures are losing authority to unilateral executive government.




*Pro-Brexit demonstrators protest outside the Houses of Parliament, November 23, 2016, London. (Photo by Jack Taylor/Getty Images.)*

It is against this background that one of the most impressive features of *The Virtue of Nationalism* comes into focus. Hazony's book is not only a work of scholarship but also a guidebook for virtuous nationalism. The order of national states, he tells us, is not a theoretical necessity; it is simply the order we know of from experience that is most conducive to human thriving. It requires, however, that national statesmen understand its principles and dedicate themselves to its maintenance. Thus, for example, the two elements of the Protestant construction are often complementary in practice—because the statesman who devotes himself to the inclusive interests of his own people will thereby promote mutual loyalty and cohesion, which are the essence of self-determination and the ultimate guard against foreign meddling. Moreover, the order of national states requires the statesman to protect his nation's traditions zealously and also to recognize the traditions of others—thereby fostering detachment, moderation, and respect for minority traditions in his own nation.

Many readers will wonder whether Hazony's analysis and guidelines leave room for American exceptionalism. He does not confront the question directly, but I will hazard a qualified "yes." He is, it is true, wary of large national states, because they tend to take an unduly expansive view of their own interests, and he does not hesitate to classify America's "new world order" ambitions of 1989–2017 as a species of liberal imperialism. However, he singles out the Anglo-American traditions of constitutionalism, separation of powers, and rule of law as among the greatest achievements of the Protestant construction, worthy of emulation and adaptation to other national circumstances. When America transplanted aspects of those traditions by force to Germany and Japan after World War II, it was pursuing both its self-interest and the interests of the wider world, not empire building. And there are many continuing examples, such as the protection of open sea lanes, where America's expansive self-determination produces critical public goods for other national states. Most of all, America is essential to maintaining a balance of power with China and Russia, which would undoubtedly run roughshod over smaller national states were it not for America.

Donald Trump's "America First" address to the U.N. General Assembly, which I quoted earlier, in addition to complaining about international free-riding on U.S. wealth and power, also praised the Marshall Plan, condemned North Korea, Iran, and Arab terrorist networks in strikingly blunt and threatening terms, and pilloried Venezuela as a catastrophically cruel regime that America and other nations should bring to account. I suspect that Hazony would regard this as hard-headed realism, not imperialism.

*The Virtue of Nationalism* is a deeply Jewish work. This is not only because it was written by a distinguished Israeli intellectual and Zionist who identifies the Bible as the source of nationalism. Judaism, as I understand it, is inward looking, not proselytizing. Yet this fenced-off culture has generated astounding benefits not only for itself but also for the wider world—in science and scholarship; in art, music, and literature; in commerce; in culture, pop to high. This sounds very much like Hazony's account of the dynamics of national self-determination. He does not draw the analogy explicitly, but he comes close in one eloquent passage, which will give him the last word in this review:

> [F]ierce concern for the material prosperity, internal integrity, and cultural inheritance of the collective makes every family, clan, tribe, and nation into a kind of fortress surrounded by high, invisible walls. But these walls are a necessary condition for all human diversity, innovation, and advancement, enabling each of these little fortresses to shelter its own special inheritance . . . Inside, the things that are said and done only in this family, clan, or tribe . . . are given time to grow and mature . . . until they are ready to make their way outward from the family to the clan, from the clan to the tribe and the nation, and thence to all the families of the earth.

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*Christopher DeMuth is a distinguished fellow at Hudson Institute and the former president of the American Enterprise Institute.*

# Zionisms, Old and New

BY ALLAN ARKUSH

***The Zionist Ideas: Visions for the Jewish Homeland—Then, Now, Tomorrow***
edited by Gil Troy
Jewish Publication Society, 608 pp., $34.95

***Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor***
by Yossi Klein Halevi
Harper, 224 pp., $24.99

I have been assigning Arthur Hertzberg's classic anthology *The Zionist Idea* to students on and off for more than 30 years, and I have been complaining about it for just as long. Hertzberg's collection of seminal writings by Zionist theoreticians from the days before Theodor Herzl to the founding of the Jewish state has many merits and no real peer. But, it's a little bit too focused on fin de siècle analyses of "the Jewish problem" and insufficiently attentive to the variety of Zionist solutions to it. It presents the ideas of the European originators of socialist Zionism but doesn't indicate how these ideas evolved, when put to the test, in early 20th-century Palestine. No doubt because he was embarrassed by it, Hertzberg also neutered Vladimir Jabotinsky's Revisionist Zionism, rendering it difficult to recognize.

Gil Troy, an American-born immigrant to Israel and a prolific author, has now done something to *The Zionist Idea* that bears a certain resemblance to the book I had wished for: As the cover of *The Zionist Ideas* proclaims, he has "renewed" Hertzberg's work. I am glad that someone has finally taken the initiative to do something of this sort, and I believe that Troy's volume, like Hertzberg's, has many merits. But I'm afraid that it doesn't represent much in the way of an improvement over its predecessor, and in many respects it fails to measure up to it.

Hertzberg's elegant and penetrating introduction to *The Zionist Idea* is one of the best essays on Zionist thought ever published. Troy, while acknowledging that it is "majestic," has replaced it with a rather pedestrian mise en scène of the Zionist movement, one that celebrates more than it analyzes and one that leaves out much that is crucial. And he makes a lot of mistakes. For instance, Moses Mendelssohn never uttered the words Troy directly attributes to him: "Be a cosmopolitan man in the street and a Jew at home." When the 19th-century Russian Jewish poet Y. L. Gordon wrote something similar, he was not, as Troy maintains, echoing Mendelssohn but at most channeling him.

Zionism is incomprehensible apart from the age-old yearning of the Jewish people for restoration to the Land of Israel, and Troy not surprisingly evokes it in the first paragraph of his introduction. But why did it take so long for the Jews even to try to go back to their land? One can't answer this question without taking into account the traditional Jewish belief that exile was the Jews' punishment for their ancestors' sins, a decree that they would have to endure patiently until God ultimately (and unpredictably) rescinded it by sending the messiah. Of this notion, however, there is scarcely any mention in Troy's text, either in his introduction or in any of the excerpts he has selected, though he does refer, vaguely, to the early 20th-century Religious Zionist leader Rabbi Meir Bar-Ilan's opposition to "rabbinic passivity" without explaining what that means. In fact, the only religious opponents of Zionism on whom Troy focuses directly are Reform Jews.

**Having reduced Hertzberg's more than 500 pages of documents predating Israel's independence to 138, Troy has room for a gallery of more recent Zionist thinkers and activists of all stripes.**




*Israeli stamp honoring Rabbi Meir Bar-Ilan, issued December 13, 1983.*

Troy's sidestepping of the question of Orthodox quietism makes it difficult to understand one of the first selections in his book, Rabbi Yehuda Alkalai's now-famous call in 1843 for the Jews to take the initiative and return to the Land of Israel on their own. In his short preface to his longer excerpt from the same text, Hertzberg reminded his readers that Alkalai's call for Jewish action to hasten redemption was "at variance with the usual pious notion that the Messiah would come by miraculous acts of divine grace." Hence, he notes, Alkalai had to argue that "self-redemption was justified by 'proof texts' from the tradition." Troy's selection includes one of Alkalai's proof texts ("Return, O Lord, unto the tens and thousands of the families of Israel," Numbers 10:36) but not the ensuing exegesis.

Like Hertzberg, Troy links Alkalai's Zionist awakening to the early 19th-century nationalist revival in the Balkans, where he himself lived, and refers to the 1840 blood libel in not-too-distant Damascus as a key turning point, the crisis that convinced him (in the words of both anthologists) "that for security and freedom the Jewish people must look to a life of its own within its ancestral home." Hertzberg apparently, and forgivably, doesn't seem to have read what was, back in 1959, Jacob Katz's only recently published article on messianism and nationalism in the teaching of Rabbi Yehuda Alkalai. The great Israeli historian showed that for Alkalai the lesson of the blood libel was not the vulnerability of the Jews but rather their new-found strength, as displayed by the Western Jewish saviors of the Jews of Damascus, Moses Montefiore and Adolphe Crémieux. This was, in Alkalai's eyes, a sign of divine favor, the beginning of redemption, which he optimistically expected to be launched by the new Jewish grandees' working their magic with Gentile potentates to obtain their assistance in returning the Jews to their land. The article in which Katz elucidates this subject has had a deep impact on relevant scholarship over the past 60 years.

If anti-Semitism didn't inspire Alkalai to become a Zionist (*avant la lettre*), the idea that it was a severe and ineradicable threat to the Jews was a fundamental tenet of Zionism, and Hertzberg was correct to devote substantial attention to analyses of its roots and potency in the writings of Moses Hess, Leon Pinsker, Theodor Herzl, Max Nordau, Nachman Syrkin, and others. But if Hertzberg perhaps allocates more space than necessary to this, Troy is certainly guilty of going too far in the other direction. He lets his readers know what Pinsker thought about anti-Semitism but includes in his selections next to nothing of what the others listed here—or any other Zionist founders—had to say on this subject. Nor does he in his introduction include anything useful about the nature and extent of anti-Semitism in late 19th-century Europe. While saying very little of the impact on Herzl of his experiences at home in Vienna or in Germany, Troy identifies his direct exposure to the French crowds crying "death to the Jews" following Dreyfus's conviction as the key factor in his transformation into a Zionist. This remains, as Shlomo Avineri has observed, "the common wisdom" on this subject, "but there is in fact no evidence of this, not in Herzl's voluminous diaries nor in the many articles he sent from Paris to his newspaper in Vienna." Avineri demonstrates that it was, on the contrary, "developments in the Austro-Hungarian Empire that led him to search for a Jewish homeland."

With respect to socialist Zionism, Troy remedies none of Hertzberg's deficiencies, but he does supply at least some of what the latter leaves out about Jabotinsky's Revisionism. Instead of displaying only the spokesman for a Jewish state as he appeared before the Peel Commission in 1937, he allows his readers a glimpse of the militancy that no doubt discomfited Hertzberg, including Jabotinsky's 1923 call for an "iron wall, that is to say the strengthening in Palestine of a government without any kind of Arab influence, that is to say one against which the Arabs will fight."

Another virtue of the first part of *The Zionist Ideas* is its inclusion of pre-1948 voices absent from *The Zionist Idea*, among them a few women (Hertzberg's volume was all male). This does not make up, however, for the drastic abbreviation of most of the selections he carries over from Hertzberg or for the errors he makes in the rewritten introductions to some of them, as well as in his introductions to the new excerpts. It is something of an overstatement, for instance, to say that Horace Kallen, who coined the term "cultural pluralism," is "recognized as the father of multiculturalism." More to the issue at hand, it is not true that Rabbi Meir Bar-Ilan "spearheaded the Religious Zionist opposition to Herzl's Uganda plan" at the first Zionist Congress he attended. Bar-Ilan did indeed oppose the Uganda plan, but in doing so he broke with the majority of Religious Zionists at the time, who voted in favor of it. That Troy does not know this shows how little he understands of the early ideology of the religious wing of Zionism.

Having reduced Hertzberg's more than 500 pages of documents predating Israel's independence to 138, Troy has plenty of room for a large gallery of more recent Zionist thinkers and activists of all stripes, from the diaspora as well as Israel. Overall, his choices are good. I was especially pleased to find excerpts from the eloquent letters of Alex Singer, an American immigrant to Israel who died in battle in Lebanon in 1987, four years after I had him as a student in a class at Cornell, the first one, as it happens, in which I assigned *The Zionist Idea*.

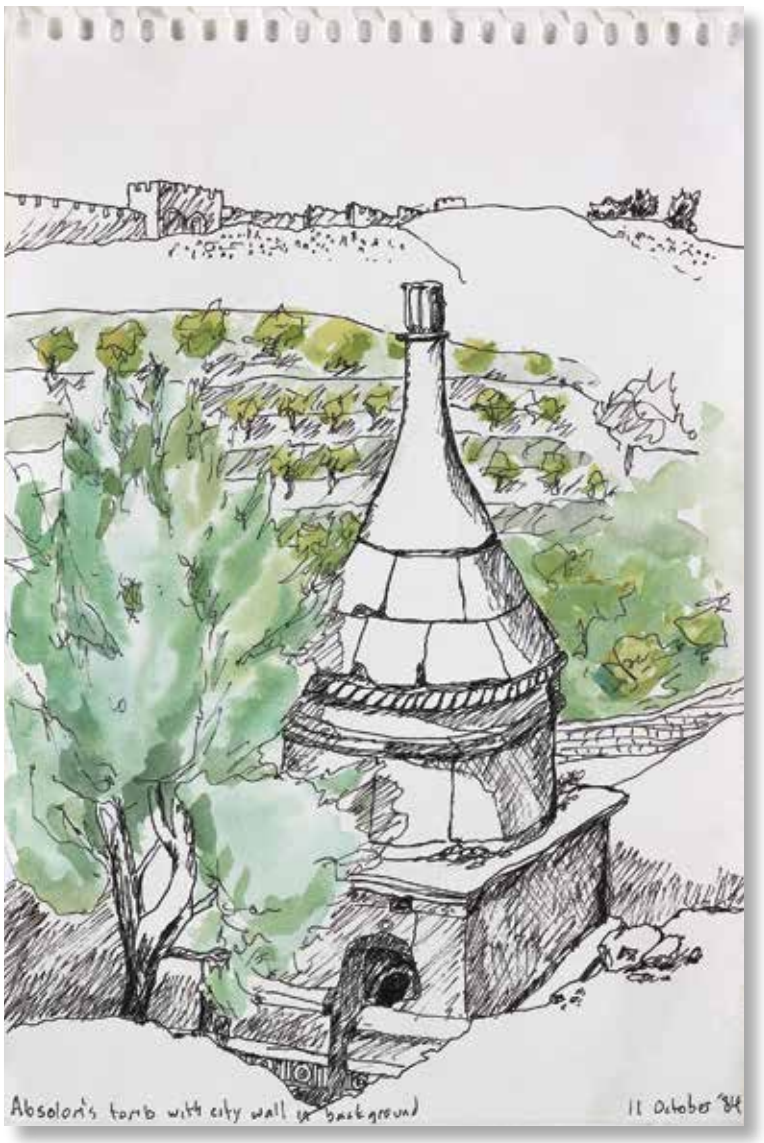
The large majority of the individuals Troy has assembled in the second part of his anthology are formidable thinkers, men and women whose allegiance to Zionism is the result of deep, nuanced reflection and wide experience. The problem is that Troy has squeezed over a hundred of them into less than 500 pages. You can't get very far into the complex arguments and ideas of Bernard Avishai, Chaim Gans, Ruth Gavison, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, Ze'ev Maghen, Simon Rawidowicz, Yael Tamir, or Ruth Wisse by reading a page (or three) of their work. In fact, at this soundbite length these very different thinkers tend to merge into each other, forming a vague, illusory consensus.

Troy, to be sure, wanted to include as broad a range of figures as possible while adhering to what he tells readers was the word limit imposed by his publisher, but he has also made it his goal to illuminate "the larger Zionist puzzle—an ever-changing movement of 'becoming,' not just 'being,' of saving the world while building a nation." He sought to assemble texts that would "help compare what key thinkers sought and what they wrought, while anticipating the next chapters of this dynamic process." In doing this Troy has been partially successful, but here, too, there are problems.

What happened on the ground in Palestine to the socialist Zionist ideas of Syrkin and Borochov is something that Troy does only slightly more than

**For Halevi, it is not suffering but dreaming that constitutes the real heart of the Jews' story.**

Hertzberg to illuminate (by excerpting a page from Rahel Yanait Ben-Zvi's *The Plough Woman* about the joys of agricultural labor). The endless theorizing among the Yishuv's Labor Zionists about the true meaning of socialism finds no echo at all in his volume. Troy does note that "David Ben-Gurion, Golda Meir, and their comrades were hard-nosed pragmatists more than pie-in-the-sky universalists. The early state's defining institutions reflected this Labor Zionist mix, especially the military elite unit, the Palmah; the agrarian commune, the kibbutz; and the mighty workers' union, the Histadrut. They got the job done." But where did this pragmatism come from, and how did its champions overcome the Marxist theorists with whom they had come to disagree? One has to look elsewhere to find out (start with Jonathan Frankel's *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism, and the Russian Jews, 1862–1917* and continue with Mitchell Cohen's *Zion & State: Nation, Class, and the Shaping of Modern Israel*).




***Sketch of Absalom's tomb with city wall in background by Alex Singer, October 11, 1984. (Courtesy of the Alex Singer Project.)***

Troy doesn't shed any more light on the decline of Labor Zionism's pragmatic socialism than he does on its origins. He does say a few vague words about "persistent problems" that made its leaders "look less effective and less romantic, especially as Marxist collectivism retreated globally," and he reproduces a paragraph from a statement by leading Israeli historian Anita Shapira lamenting its demise, but he presents no theoretical defenses of it and no critiques of it. His two chapters on post-1948 Labor Zionism focus on other matters, mostly its leaders' notions of how to attain peaceful relations with the Palestinians and the Arab world.

Troy provides ample evidence of the general readiness of Labor Zionists in recent decades for territorial compromise with the Palestinians. He makes it equally clear that the heirs of Revisionist Zionism have had very different ideas. He also allows his readers a glimpse of the Religious Zionist ideology that powerfully spurred the movement to settle and retain the territories captured in the Six-Day War—but only a glimpse. The sole example Troy presents of the thinking of the leading figure in this camp, Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook, is a one-page excerpt from his famous visionary oration in May of 1967, in which he spoke longingly of the parts of the Holy Land that still lay beyond Israel's borders. In his introduction to this text, Troy comments on Kook's "fiery nationalism" but says nothing about his messianism. Elsewhere, he comes closer to acknowledging the theological dimension of Kook's nationalism when he notes how Kook's students, the founders of Gush Emunim, considered their program to be somehow bound up with "the total redemption of the Jewish people and the whole world." Troy is of course correct, but that conviction is just the tip of the iceberg.

Troy mentions in passing religious nationalists such as Haim Druckman, Hanan Porat, Moshe Levinger, and Yoel Bin-Nun, all of whom adhered, at least for a time, to Kook's radically messianic ideology. But he does not otherwise admit them into his anthology. At least one of them should have been included in a volume devoted to the elucidation of what key figures "thought and wrought," given their impact on the last half-century of Israeli history. The best view that *The Zionist Ideas* offers of their ideas is an excerpt from a 2005 critique of their ideology by Rabbi Yehuda Amital, another student of Rabbi Kook who had once fully shared these ideas but later abandoned them. "The students of Rav Zvi Yehuda Kook," Amital writes, "explained that the 'beginning of the redemption' refers not to the Jewish nation dwelling in the Land of Israel, but rather to the absolute sovereignty of the Jewish nation over all parts of *Eretz Yisra'el*." This is instructive, but it is not enough. A better anthology would have given Rabbi Amital's very important one-time allies an opportunity to say this, and more, for themselves.

Of course, it is easier to find fault with an anthology like Troy's than to undertake one, and

I probably wouldn't do so now if *The Zionist Ideas* wasn't aimed at supplanting Hertzberg's (flawed) classic. I don't know if I'll teach another course on the history of Zionism, but it would be unfortunate if those who will can't continue to assign Hertzberg's book until something truly better comes along. It does, of course, need to be supplemented by other texts—including selections from the authors represented in *The Zionist Ideas*, albeit longer, richer, and more revealing ones than those that Troy has assembled.



***The Palestinian city of Tulkarem on the western edge of the northern West Bank, July 18, 2018. (Photo by Gili Yaari/Flash90.)***

Of the dozens of authors joined together in Troy's book, the most recent to publish a comprehensive statement explaining his own Zionism is Yossi Klein Halevi, the popular author of *Like Dreamers: The Story of the Israeli Paratroopers Who Reunited Jerusalem and Divided a Nation* and, just as relevantly, *At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden: A Jew's Search for Hope with Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land*. In his new small book, *Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor*, Halevi elaborates on the themes he outlined in 2015 in the "Jewish Centrist Manifesto," included by Troy in the last section of his volume. Halevi's book is not a treatise but a plea for understanding, an attempt to present the Zionist cause to unsympathetic ears in a way that would enable its adversaries to abandon their prejudices against it and seek to come to terms with it.

While firmly fixed within the Zionist tradition, Halevi does not have frequent recourse to it. His Zionism is religious, but he doesn't cite a single Religious Zionist authority, from Alkalai to Kook (or Amital). Indeed, he pointedly avoids affirming one of the most fundamental tenets of most versions of Religious Zionism. The "settlement movement" and others might hold that the Torah teaches that "God has given this land to the Jewish people," but Halevi prefers what he calls "another religious way" of seeing things, one that precludes any claim to exclusive Jewish ownership of the land.

Unlike Troy, Halevi spells out the traditional idea that exile was a punishment for the Jews' ancient sins, but only a temporary one, since ultimately "the prison sentence of exile would end and God would retrieve them from the most remote corners of the earth, as our prophets had predicted." Without professing in so many words that God has done what the prophets foretold, he declares, "We have returned to our place of origin, just as Jews have always believed would happen, to reconstruct ourselves from disparate communities back into a people." Just as? Perhaps that's a bit much. As the great scholar of Jewish thought Aviezer Ravitzky has often observed, no Jews prior to modern times ever anticipated an ingathering of the exiles that would occur without the appearance of a messiah and would result in the establishment of a state in which halakha was not the law of the land.

Jewish theologians disagree, of course, over the question of whether this unanticipated development reflects the behind-the-scenes movements of the hand of God. Halevi, for his part, does not adduce biblical proof texts that it was, according to God, time for the Jews to go home. Why should he? Unlike Alkalai and other Religious Zionist thinkers, he isn't primarily aiming to influence Jews here; he's reaching out, he tells us, above all to Arabs, the religious Muslims among them in particular. For them, what the Jewish scriptures authorize or do not authorize doesn't really matter, since, in their eyes (though Halevi doesn't note this), they are, after all, corrupted.

In any case, Halevi seeks to convince his main audience less with texts than with sentiments. "Most Israelis," he maintains, "are people of faith—if not necessarily in conventional religion, then surely in a life of meaning. Israelis sense that their very existence—speaking a resurrected language in a recovered homeland—is a miracle. 'When the Lord returned the exiles to Zion we were like dreamers,' wrote the Psalmist. Being Israeli is like awakening into a dream." But Halevi doesn't just invite his readers into his "spiritual home." Like most Zionist thinkers, he insists on the Jewish need for a state.


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Halevi speaks of the Jewish need for a state also in a less elevated sense, reminding his readers of the suffering that Jews have undergone on account of their statelessness. He is very reluctant, however, to point to the Holocaust as a justification for the creation of a Jewish state. He makes virtually no mention of Hitler or the Nazis until his last chapter, and then refers to the massacre of European Jewry (including his own grandparents) not to reinforce the Jewish need for a state but only to account for contemporary Israelis' "abhorrence for victimhood" and constant vigilance. For Halevi, it is not suffering but dreaming that constitutes the real heart of the Jews' story.

Halevi's own dream of Jewish revival is frankly ethnocentric, but it is a dream that need not come at the expense of the Palestinians' sacrifice of their own legitimate but conflicting dream with respect to the very same land. His religious Zionism is a conciliatory one, involving a readiness for territorial compromise with the Palestinians on the West Bank and in Gaza, provided it is compatible with Israeli security needs. He hopes that the Palestinians affected by his story will recognize that painful compromise is the only reasonable choice when right contends with right. More than that, he hopes that such Palestinians will find in Islam the resources for accepting such a resolution of their conflict with Israel.

At bottom, Halevi's new book is not so much an appeal from a Zionist to anti-Zionists as a call from a religious Jew to religious Muslims to accept the existence of a Jewish state on the grounds of a common faith in a beneficent God and humanity. Explicitly taking exception to the broader agenda of many faithful Jews, who see no room for compromise over the Land of Israel, Halevi hopes that his scaled-down, peaceable vision of coexistence in the Holy Land will find a ready hearing—or some hearing, anyhow—among the people whose calls to prayer regularly echo across West Bank neighborhoods to his own house, on the outmost edge of Jewish Jerusalem.

Of the well-known obstacles that Islam places in the way of recognition of the legitimacy of any kind of Jewish state Halevi says nothing. He does, however, provide us with several examples of broad-minded Palestinians with whom he has interacted in the past, and he clearly hopes that there are more such people just over the horizon. In his initial "Note to the Reader," he provides a link to a free downloadable Arabic version of the book, and it has elicited some interesting responses from Palestinian and Arab readers. Still, when reading this, I couldn't help thinking of the time capsules NASA sends into space to represent our civilization. Will Yossi Klein Halevi's book turn out to represent the hopes of a 21st-century liberal religious Zionist, or is it, rather, an early document of a new theological-political opportunity?

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# A Normal Israel?

BY SHLOMO AVINERI

***In Search of Israel: The History of an Idea***
by Michael Brenner
Princeton University Press, 392 pp., $29.95

Michael Brenner's erudite and elegantly written new book reminds us that his subject, the "idea" of Israel, has always been a contentious one, even among those who have upheld it. Throughout its history, the Zionist movement has been a collaboration between Jews who wanted a state like others and those who aspired to create something altogether unique. Zionism has long based its claim to sovereignty on the universal right to national self-determination, and the phrase "like all other nations" has been incorporated into Israel's Declaration of Independence, yet the goal of "normalization" has proven to be much more complicated than most early Zionists had thought.

As Brenner notes, the end of the 19th century witnessed the birth not only of Zionism but of a number of different attempts to "normalize" the status of Jews. In the *annus mirabilis* of 1897 Herzl convened the First Zionist Congress in Basel in August, the Jewish socialist Bund was founded in Vilna in October, and the leading industrialist Walther Rathenau published a haunting and somewhat neglected plea for radical assimilation, evocatively titled *Hear, O Israel*, in Berlin. Political Zionism argued that normalization could be achieved only if the Jews were to have a state of their own, like all other nations; the Bundists argued that Jews should strive for integration into the societies in which they were living through a universal socialist revolution that would nonetheless give them a distinct place in the new world order alongside other nations; and Rathenau suggested that Jews could attain integration into German society if they would redefine themselves as a German tribe, like Saxons, Bavarians, or Prussians.

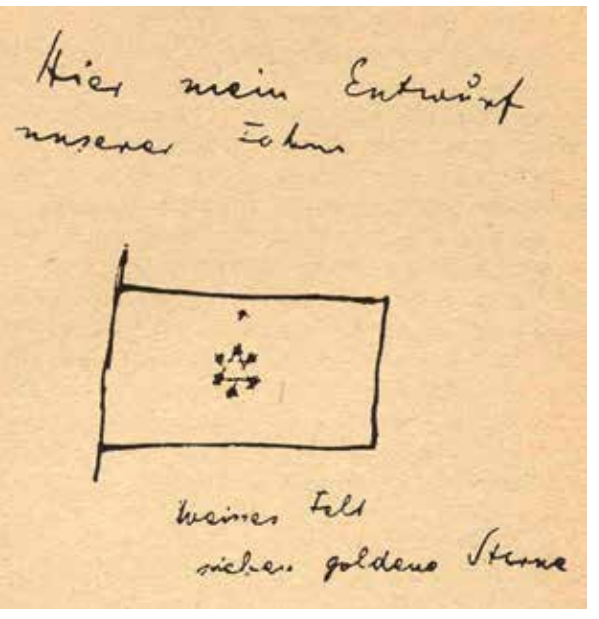
Herzl's vision of the future Jewish state, as presented in his utopian novel *Altneuland*, was straightforward: The Jewish commonwealth would be a Western European liberal democracy, with equal citizenship rights for its non-Jewish population and suffrage for all. He coupled this with a generous social—though not socialist—vision of a welfare state that guaranteed a seven-hour workday and other institutional arrangements that Herzl called "mutualism."

The Basel congress and the Vilna meeting could not have been more different from one another. Herzl's political instincts and flair gave the First Zionist Congress, with its almost 200 participants, a considerable measure of public visibility and international press coverage. After all, it was aimed at winning the support of the public, Jewish and non-Jewish, for the idea of a Jewish state in Palestine. The Vilna event was a clandestine, underground meeting attended by less than a dozen people who aspired to speak for the millions of Jews in the tsarist empire and, eventually, America. Rathenau, on the other hand, spoke for himself and did not represent or found a movement, but his ideas reflected the

**In order to solve the "Jewish problem," the Bund actually called for the dismantling of Russia.**

feelings of many members of the well-established German Jewish bourgeoisie.

Despite its efforts to reach out to the Jewish masses and to win over world public opinion, the




***Theodor Herzl's rough sketch of his proposed flag for the "Seven-Hour Land," from his diary, ca. 1896.***

Zionist organization established in Basel remained a very modest enterprise until World War I. It continued to hold annual congresses even after the early death of Herzl in 1904. It helped to inspire Jewish immigration to Palestine and the founding of a number of villages and towns, including Tel Aviv, but it remained marginal in Jewish life and world politics. The Bund, on the other hand, despite its small start in a Vilna basement, became a mass movement, at one time numbering more members than the general Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, with which it was affiliated. For a time after World War I, it was the largest Jewish party in the Sejm of independent Poland. Rathenau's call for radical assimilation did not ameliorate the position of German Jews. Rathenau himself, who helped more than anyone else to organize the German economic war effort and later became foreign minister in the Weimar Republic, was assassinated in 1922 by an ultranationalist, anti-Semitic German militia that accused him of treachery.

Yet it was only Zionism that ultimately succeeded in attaining its goal. Brenner does not explicitly try to explain this, but his description of both the Bund platform and Rathenau's ideas may provide a key. What both the Bund and Rathenau proposed was not just a change in the status of the Jews but a radical transformation of the whole structure of the societies and polities in which they were living. By claiming Jewish cultural and linguistic rights within the tsarist empire, the Bund was calling for a total overhaul of Russia, transforming it from a unitary state into a loose confederation of nations and ethnicities. Very few ethnic Russians, including members of the two major socialist parties (Marxists and Narodniks), were willing to accept this. In other words, in order to solve the "Jewish problem," the Bund actually called for the dismantling of Russia.

Something similar happened to the Bund in interwar Poland. After almost a century and a half of servitude to neighboring empires, ethnic Poles had little interest in making Poland into a multiethnic, multireligious, and multilingual society. And in Germany, few Germans would have accepted the idea that Jews are just another German tribe "like Saxons or Bavarians." Both the Bund and Rathenau had set off on impossible missions: They ran against the foundational ideas of the countries in which they lived. Herzl, at least, understood this. If there were a chance for Jewish normalization, it would have to be anchored *outside* of Europe, though it might, if it succeeded, have a positive impact on the status of the Jews who would remain in Europe.

After discussing these three very different paths to "normalization," Brenner devotes the rest of his book to the internal debates within the Zionist movement, and later Israel, with regard to the very same issue. He begins, naturally enough, with "the Odessa Jewish intellectual" Ahad Ha-Am's challenge to Herzl's political Zionism. Brenner agrees with Ahad Ha-Am's contention that the difference between his approach and Herzl's was rooted in the divergent experiences of Jews in Western and Eastern Europe: Western European Jews felt threatened as individuals; Eastern European Jews felt that their cultural identity was threatened.

Ahad Ha-Am is rightly remembered today for having warned that a Jewish state achieved through diplomacy—or force—might become so deeply entangled in preserving its existence that it would undermine the foundations of a Jewish cultural renaissance. As Brenner crisply puts it, "Herzl wanted a small Switzerland in the Middle East; Ahad Ha'am longed for a new Judea, in which Hebrew would be spoken." Even if his radical critique of Herzl's *Altneuland* as merely a kind of "collective assimilation" was unjust, Ahad Ha-Am did have a point. Certainly his moral sensitives made him prescient about the possibilities of the emergence in Palestine of an Arab national movement in response to Zionism and Jewish settlement. Yet Ahad Ha-Am's insistence

on the cultural dimensions of Zionism paradoxically led him to a highly ethnocentric approach to the meaning of a Jewish revival. Maintaining Jewish cultural identity in the diaspora is one thing, but when Ahad Ha-Am criticized Herzl for fashioning his *Altneuland* along the lines of the European Enlightenment, he opened the door for an exclusivist approach to both culture and politics.

To Ahad Ha-Am, everything in *Altneuland* that wasn't "Jewish" (or Hebrew) was out of place in the future Jewish society in the Land of Israel. For all his philosophical secularism, Ahad Ha-Am remained a shtetl Jew, a man obviously uncomfortable with anything that looked *goyish.* Today, many Israeli right-wingers, religious as they are, are in a way closer to Ahad Ha-Am's cultural ethnocentrism than they would care to admit.

Brenner gives ample space to the various socialist Zionist visions, some of them totally utopian and others more attuned to the complex realities of the Jewish national project. That the universalist ideology of socialist Zionists occasionally collided dramatically with their insistence on "Jewish labor" (*avoda ivrit*) as part of their construction of a Hebrew nation is just one of the tensions. David Ben-Gurion inevitably appears in this context as the pragmatic man for all seasons.

Vladimir Jabotinsky is a challenge to any dispassionate discussion of Zionism, and Brenner rises to the occasion. By any measure, Jabotinsky was the most nationalist of the major Zionist leaders, viewing the establishment of a Jewish state on both banks of the Jordan as the central aim of the movement. At the same time, he was, by education and inclination, the most European, cosmopolitan star in the Zionist firmament—advocating, under the inspiration of Atatürk, for the replacement of the Hebrew alphabet by a Latin one. As Brenner notes, Jabotinsky and the Betar youth movement he founded also "borrowed some elements from the nationalistic movements of Europe, including Fascist Italy," and there is no doubt that in the 1920s and 1930s being "European" stood for adopting more integralist and authoritarian ideologies than liberal ones.

Yet, at the same time, Jabotinsky was adamant that once Zionism reached the goal of statehood, the Jewish state would guarantee equal rights—both individual and collective—to its Arab population, going so far as to suggest that if the head of the government were Jewish, his deputy should be an Arab, and vice versa. Jabotinsky's ideal state would have been much more of a federal multiethnic polity than a nation-state, and this part of his vision was clearly inspired by the ideas of the Austro-Marxist socialists. More than anyone else, Jabotinsky exemplified the complexities of what it meant to adopt European ideas, since Europe itself was torn at the time by conflicting tendencies.

Following his review of the debate about partition in the 1930s and 1940s, Brenner focuses on the new state's attempts to address its relationship to the diaspora and come to grips with the existence of a large Arab minority within its borders. The latter dilemma was of course exacerbated by the fact that this minority was culturally and linguistically part of an Arab world that remained at war with the very idea of a Jewish political entity in its midst.

The major contribution of Brenner's book lies, however, elsewhere: in his argument that the Six-Day War was, next to the very establishment of Israel, the most defining moment in its history. "Six days in June 1967," he writes, "changed the very essence of the Jewish state." While most commentators in 1967 and since have focused on the way the war changed the regional balance of power and put an end to any Arab hope of destroying Israel, Brenner looks inside Israel and shows how 1967 changed Israel's internal discourse, its politics, and eventually its foundational myths and aims. Simply put, the current hegemony of the nationalist-religious parties in Israeli politics is the direct outcome of those six incredible days in June.

The most important of these changes was that the territorial conquests reopened debates about partition that had been considered to have been




***Socialist-Zionist poster created by Gabriel and Maxim Shamir for the General Federation of Workers in the Land of Israel (Histadrut), ca. 1937.***

concluded by the establishment of Israel in part of Palestine. During the years before 1967, Menahem Begin's Herut party (the heir of Jabotinsky's movement and the predecessor of the current Likud) never actively called for the liberation of the Old City of Jerusalem, the Western Wall, or Hebron because the regaining of sovereignty and the ingathering of the exiles were justly considered a sufficiently phenomenal success. The Six-Day War changed all this. All of a sudden, control over all of Eretz Yisrael became a reality. It is one thing not to initiate a war for the Old City of Jerusalem or the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron, and it is a totally different matter to give them up when they are already under your control. The Palestinian refusal to recognize Israel played into the hands of the Israeli right wing, and over time the feasibility of evacuating hundreds of thousands of Israeli settlers from the West Bank has come to appear more and more remote.

The control of the historical holy sites in the Old City and all over Judea and Samaria also changed the profile of the major Zionist religious party, the National Religious Party, which had been a part of the Zionist movement almost from its inception. Religious Zionists were traditionally careful to distinguish the pragmatic attempts of creating in the here and now a refuge for the Jewish people from messianic yearnings. This cautious approach made the NRP a logical coalition partner for governments headed by Ben-Gurion's Mapai Labor Party. In many respects, the NRP was Mapai with a kippa.

The astounding victory of 1967 transformed the NRP into the most nationalist group in Israeli society. A "new generation in the party turned it into the political mouthpiece of the settlers and the main political forum for a messianic interpretation of Zionism." The traditional religious wariness about pushing the end time (*dekhikat ha-ketz*) now yielded to the messianic visions of Rav Kook, which turned the party into the natural partner of the Likud.

Palestinian terrorism against civilians only exacerbated the situation, as did the demographic changes within Israeli Jewish society. Millions of immigrants from Middle Eastern countries came to Israel with memories of persecution under Arab Muslim regimes, and this obviously did not make them more willing to make concessions to the Palestinians. The one million immigrants who came from the former Soviet Union were mainly secular (and in many cases not halakhically Jewish or not Jewish at all), but they brought with them the characteristic Russian belief in a strong state. These tectonic changes have made Israel today much more nationalistic and religious than it once was. Netanyahu's dominance of Israeli politics is the consequence of these changes, not their cause.

As Isaiah Berlin is said to have quipped, Jews are like everyone else—only more so. This was forcefully brought out by Amnon Rubinstein and Alexander Yakobson in their seminal book *Israel and the Family of Nations: The Jewish Nation-State and Human Rights* (2009). They showed that Israel is by no means the only modern democratic nation-state whose national identity is linked to religious traditions and symbols and incorporated into legislation and political culture. Greek nationalism cannot be divorced from its Orthodox culture, nor can Polish nationalism be totally separated from its Catholic heritage; Jan Hus, a religious reformer, is viewed as the father of modern secular Czech nationalism. Even the radical secularist French Republic views Saint Louis as one of the founders of the French state and reveres Joan of Arc, a religious fanatic, as a martyr in the French patriotic struggle against England. And nobody objects that the flags of numerous democratic European countries (from the United Kingdom and Switzerland to all Scandinavian states) feature the Cross. Yet there is no doubt that the power and weight of religious elements, both as part of historical memory and as factors in contemporary legislation and behavior, are much stronger in the Jewish state than in most other countries.

As Brenner rightly points out, these religious elements in Israeli self-understanding have recently increased, and the fact that arguments from biblical sources and divine promises are used to counter Palestinian claims for statehood only underlines the impact of 1967 on Israeli society. This helps to transform the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from a clash of two national movements into a war of religion. Together

with the recent rise of xenophobic nationalist movements and leaders—from Orban and Kaczynski to Trump—this further removes Israel from the liberal, universalist version of Zionism. That this has happened before, in the 1930s when some offshoots of Jabotinsky's movement sought an alliance with extreme right-wing integralist and even fascist movements, is scant consolation and points to the dangers inherent



***Portrait of Zionist journalist and activist Ahad Ha-Am, the pen name of Asher Ginzberg, ca. 1910. Postcard published by Levanon. (© Lebrecht Authors/Bridgeman Images.)***

in every national movement—perhaps "only more so" in the Zionist case, if one may take Berlin's bon mot one step further.

And yet there is another, diametrically opposed, element in Israeli politics and society that is also "abnormal." Israel is one of almost a hundred new nations that have gained independence since World War II. Most of them, on obtaining sovereignty, tried to adopt democratic constitutions and forms of government. Today, most of them are one-party states, military dictatorships, or communist, semifascist, or personalistic authoritarian dictatorships—or a combination of the above.

By the Political Science 101 textbook, Israel should have long ago ceased to be a democracy. No post-1945 new nation was subjected to such a combination of extraordinary pressures after its emergence as Israel: invasion by all its neighbors, constant siege, mass immigration (mostly from nondemocratic countries), and economic underdevelopment in its early days. Because it needed to do so, Israel developed a strong and highly popular army, whose leaders figure as symbols of national consensus and identity. Yet it did not descend into a military dictatorship or an authoritarian one-party state. It continues to be a raucous and contentious multiparty, open society. No party has ever achieved—as in Hungary or Poland—a majority in parliament, so every government has been a coalition.

Some of these governments have been weak and open to internal pressures that greatly attenuated the power of even very popular prime ministers including Ben-Gurion, Golda Meir, and now, Netanyahu. The reasons for the resilience of Israel's democracy cannot be found in any religious texts or the experience of ancient Jewish commonwealths. Nor can the roots of Israeli democracy be found in the tradition of the countries from which the first immigrants came, most of which were not democratic.

Neither the Bible nor the Mishnah nor the Talmud advocated—nor could they advocate in their time—a democratic structure. David and Solomon were typical ancient oriental despots, and the Hasmonean kingdom quickly descended into a Hellenistic despotism. Yet there is a Jewish tradition that undergirds Israeli democracy: the tradition of self-governance in diaspora Jewish communities. In order to survive and guarantee Jewish life, Jews had to develop voluntaristic communities (*kehilot*). Whether in Cracow or Casablanca, in Berlin or Baghdad, if Jews wanted to have a synagogue, a school for their children, a cemetery, or a social fund for their destitute members, the only way to achieve their goals was to set up a community (*kehila*), elect officers, impose voluntary taxes on themselves, and appoint rabbis and teachers. The Jewish *kehila* was the equivalent of the New England township, which the Pilgrim Fathers brought with them from England.

And therein lies a paradox: The founding fathers and mothers of the Jewish Yishuv in Palestine in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were mostly secular and, in many cases, rebelling against the religious atmosphere of Eastern European shtetls. But when they came to Palestine and set up villages and towns—from Degania to Tel Aviv—they set up their local councils just as their grandfathers had set up their communities. After the British conquest of Palestine, in 1920, the less than 100,000 Jews living there set up the first Representative Assembly of Jews in Eretz Yisrael (Assefat ha-Nivharim). More than 25 parties contested the elections, and the assembly then elected the Va'ad Leumi (National Committee) that eventually became the de facto government of what came to be called *ha-medina ba-derekh* ("the state in the making").

In 1948 the nascent state of Israel did not have to reinvent the democratic wheel. The institutions were there. The self-governing authorities of the Jewish community in Mandatory Palestine, headed by David Ben-Gurion, became the provisional government of the independent Jewish state, which then held within a few months—in the middle of the War of Independence!—elections for the first Knesset. This is *not* normal—no new post-1945 nation had such a deeply anchored institutional representative and democratic infrastructure.

Brenner rightly brings out the challenges facing contemporary Israel, and not all that he has to say is encouraging. Yet despite everything, Israel is an Athens, flourishing, though embattled, not the Sparta it is sometimes alleged to be. Neither is it, nor will it become, God forbid, an Iran. Yet the challenges so aptly described by Brenner remain, and as it often happens in history, many of them stem, dialectically, from its own success story.

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# Talmuds and Dragons

BY ALAN VERSKIN

***The Inquisitor's Tale: Or, The Three Magical Children and Their Holy Dog***
by Adam Gidwitz, illustrated by Hatem Aly
Puffin Books, 400 pp., $9.99

*The Inquisitor's Tale* is not a typical "Jewish kids' book." It does not instill Jewish identity, and most of its characters are non-Jews. Nonetheless, having stumbled upon it in my capacity as my children's chief procurer of bedtime stories featuring magic and swordfights, I have come to view it as offering a singularly groundbreaking model, albeit a flawed one, for thinking about the possibilities of Jewish children's literature.

Written by Adam Gidwitz, the author of several children's novels ranging from adaptations of the Grimm brothers' fairy tales to *Star Wars* spin-offs, *The Inquisitor's Tale* tells the adventures of three children in 13th-century France through a cast of colorful characters gathered at an inn. Like the medieval literature to which it pays homage, it weaves in supernatural events and divine interventions, mythic beasts and wild peoples, and even entrées into medieval theology, all liberally peppered with puns and potty humor. It also features whimsical neomedieval marginalia by the Egyptian Canadian illustrator Hatem Aly. As I am not only a father but also a medievalist, I approached *The Inquisitor's Tale* with an ambivalent mixture of excitement and trepidation. Although I love to see the distant worlds I study made available to popular audiences, and especially to children, I also wince at manipulative misrepresentations of history.

Gidwitz's story begins with three children on the run. William, the preternaturally strong son of a crusading nobleman and an African Muslim mother, has been dumped at a monastery, where his humanism, love of theological debate, and skin color get him expelled. Jeanne, a peasant girl, has been forced to flee her village because her clairvoyant fits lead to an accusation of witchcraft. Jacob, a Jewish boy with a talent for miraculous healing, is looking for his parents, whom he hasn't seen since his neighborhood was burned down. And let's not forget their holy dog, whose grave became a site of popular worship and who now, having been resurrected, is wanted by the Inquisition. The children meet and, quickly overcoming their prejudices, strike up a firm friendship. Wherever the diverse trio go, they prove inspirational, leaving the reader in little doubt that they will be able to foster a harmony that their society lacks. Thus, at first glance, the story appears to be a fantasy of medieval tolerance, an edifying, anachronistic lesson on the pleasures of coexistence.

After a few chapters of this, I found myself trying to get my children to choose another bedtime story. Gidwitz's heavy-handed moralizing about overcoming religious, racial, and sexist bigotry threatened to weigh down the story, and I found its unwitting historical mistakes grating. The ancient Maccabees are said to have fought the Romans, rather than the Greeks (let alone the Seleucids), Rashi's scholarship is mischaracterized and shoehorned into the narrative (other rabbinic figures would have worked perfectly well), and so on. But my children wouldn't let me stop reading. They loved Gidwitz's humor. "Where in God's name is my ass!?" someone exclaims as he desperately searches for his missing donkey. Then there was the chivalric chapter about "the dragon of the deadly farts":

> Jacob said, "I cured the dragon. No more deadly farts."
> "Why not?"
> "See all that yellow goop down there?"
> We all nodded—while trying not to actually look at it.
> "That's Époisses . . . When I first smelled the dragon, I recognized it right away. It smelled like old, digested cheese. And didn't you say the deadly farting began when it passed through Burgundy? After attacking that inn? Cheese creates bile in some people. Makes them spend all night squatting on the dung heap. My mom is like that."
> "Does she fart fire, too?" Jeanne asked. We all laughed. Except for Georges and Robert, who actually wanted to know.

**The Talmud's survival is important to two non-Jewish children because it is precious to their Jewish friends and to the scribes who produced it—and that is enough.**



*The characters from* **The Inquisitor's Tale** *include William, a young monk, Jeanne, a peasant girl, and Jacob, a Jewish boy. (From the cover image, courtesy of Hatem Aly.)*

My children were also surprised and pleased to find that in a book intended for a mass audience—not one of their anodyne "Jewish books"—there was a Jewish character having Jewish experiences. This made me realize how remarkably few Jewish characters there are in books that are not expressly made and marketed for Jewish children (the exception being Holocaust literature, which, of course, is a different matter).

So, I continued reading *The Inquisitor's Tale* and discovered a plot twist that I had not expected. Halfway through the book, a powerful churchman inspires the children to embark on a dangerous mission to prevent an unusual tragedy. Thousands of copies of the Talmud are about to be burned, and only the children have a hope of saving them. The heroes set out on a quest to prevent the burning. As expected, wherever they go, they convert adversaries into unlikely friends, including the king himself. Then, remarkably, Gidwitz lets them fail in their task. Their new friends do like them personally but not enough to make them rethink their prejudices more broadly, and so the Talmud is burned despite all their efforts at multicultural friendship building. In response, the children's mission becomes not to stop evil but to sustain one another in the face of it.

The burning of the Talmud in Paris in the 1240s is, of course, a matter of historical fact. But what an odd one to choose as the centerpiece of

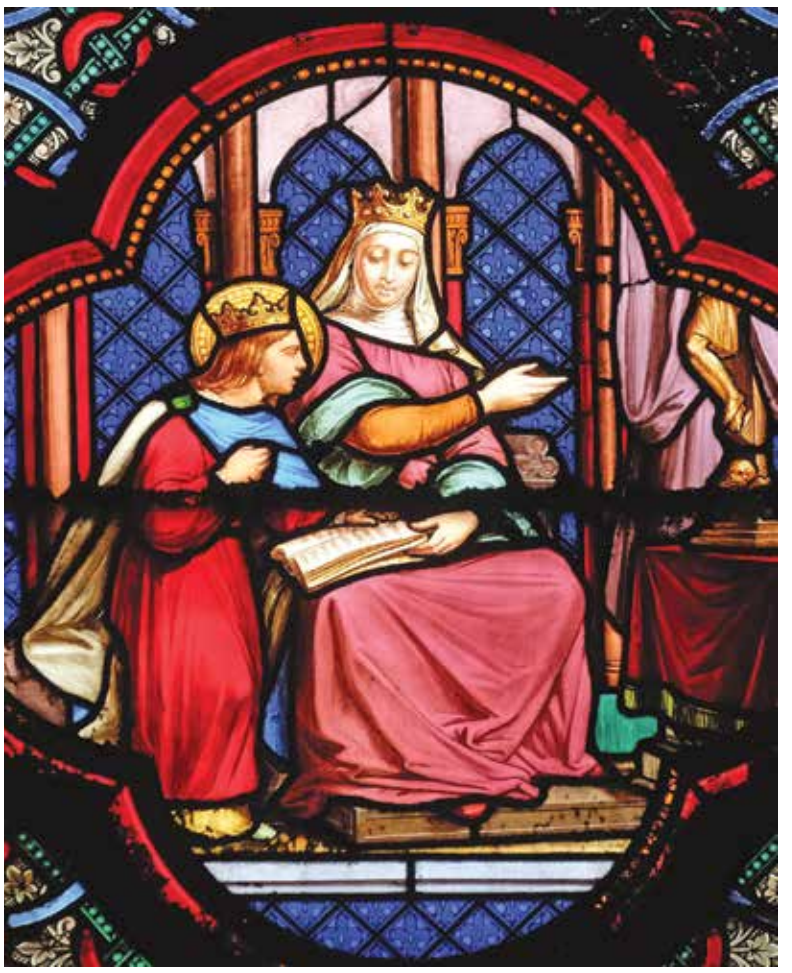
a mass-marketed children's book about tolerance! Medieval Ashkenazi Jews mourned the burning deeply, viscerally describing it like the death of a spouse (consider Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg's stirring dirge, which addresses the Talmud itself, "Oh you who are burned in fire, ask how your mourners fare"), but it is difficult for most 21st-century adults, let alone children, to understand their pain. Even if one wanted to write a book for children that broached the difficult-to-convey concept of cultural loss, why focus on the Talmud, a text largely inaccessible to all but dedicated scholars, which has been marginalized within the education systems of most non-Orthodox Jews?

As counterintuitive as Gidwitz's choice seems in theory, it turns out to be ingenious. The two non-Jewish children commit to saving the Talmud despite knowing nothing of its teachings, and it is only near the end, once their efforts have failed, that they ask what is in it. The Talmud's survival is important to them because it is precious to their Jewish friends and to the scribes who produced it—and that is enough. Their curiosity about its contents is secondary to their commitment to each other. Moreover, their sincere participation in their Jewish friend's grief over the destruction of his heritage prefigures their sharing in his grief over the death of his parents—and it deepens the consolation they are able to offer him. Gidwitz's narrative thus suggests a corollary to Heinrich Heine's famous adage about the burning of books and men: Where books are mourned, men will be mourned also.

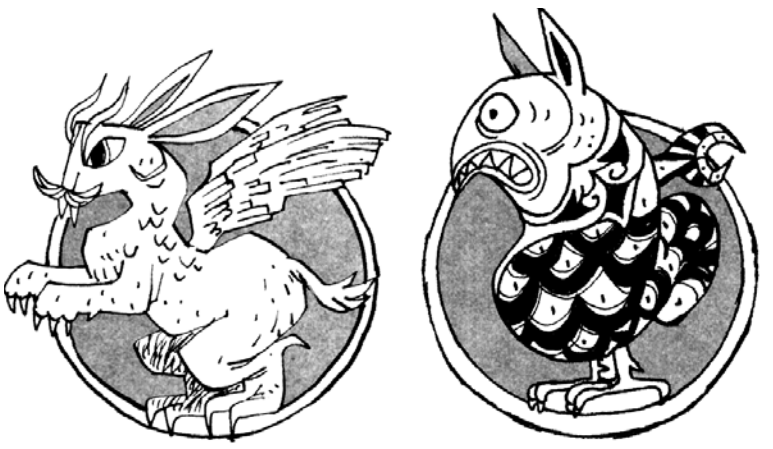
Yes, Jacob will eventually realize that his parents must have died in the fire from which he fled. However, Gidwitz's story is not about the horror of their death but about the living Jewish child, the support his friends offer him, *and* the strength he gathers from them. Together the three construct a hopeful, if sober, sense of beauty and love of life in a world that also features tragedy. The characters do not dwell on death itself. Instead, they experience Jacob's loss in the context of the burning of the Talmud, a loss indeed, but a safely distant and non-traumatizing one for American children to contemplate. This exquisitely executed choice shields Gidwitz's young readers (and their protective parents) from emotional overload.

What has been lost and what has been accomplished in Gidwitz's tale? The loss is primarily located in two matters: first, the mischaracterization of the Talmud and, second, the bowdlerization of this particular episode in Christian–Jewish history. The first is a flaw that detracts from the story. The second is, I believe, a price worth paying.

Unfortunately, when Gidwitz discusses the Talmud, he offers little insight into its study as a unique intellectual venture that sustained a culture. It is valuable and hence deserving of toleration, he suggests, because it articulates the same golden rule for which Jesus also advocated. This is bad both as religious history and as ethics. Tolerating a culture because it is no different from your own is not a good test of toleration. This justification is all the more inappropriate in the context of the trial of the Talmud, which was predicated on the mutually acknowledged differences between Judaism and Christianity. Contrary to its portrayal in *The Inquisitor's Tale*, the Talmud is grounded in a particularist discourse, not universalism. Jews do not make the imperialistic claim that all humanity ought to study it. The Talmud was no "Library of Alexandria": Its burning was tragic not because humanity as a whole was hurt by this loss of knowledge—Western thought emerged unscathed—but because it injured the Jews who lived by it. But perhaps such subtlety is too much to ask of an American audience whose belief in the necessity of religious harmony outweighs their interest in religious diversity.



**Education of Saint Louis IX by Blanche de Castille,** ***stained glass window in the Basilica of Saint Clotilde, Paris, France. (Zvonimir Atletić/Alamy Stock Photo.)***



***Marginalia from*** **The Inquisitor's Tale.** ***(Courtesy of Hatem Aly.)***

The liberties Gidwitz takes in reassigning responsibility for the burning of the Talmud are significant and must be considered in conjunction with the actual history. Although scholars debate the details of the burning, it clearly required considerable coordination. It began when Nicholas Donin, a disgruntled Parisian Jew, was excommunicated, then converted to Christianity and became a Franciscan friar. Donin made it his mission to denounce the Talmud, arguing that it had perverted Jews from biblical religion and impeded their conversion to Christianity. A fiery preacher, Donin spread his message widely, rousing the rabble, who burned synagogues and Jewish homes and lynched Jews. He also persuaded Pope Gregory IX to instruct authorities across Europe to impound the Talmud on the first Saturday of Lent while Jews were in synagogue. King Louis IX helped to organize an ecclesiastical trial of the Talmud at which rabbis were interrogated and the Talmud was condemned to destruction.

This history does not have the obvious makings of an American Jewish children's story. The attempted cultural erasure of Judaism cannot be explained away as fanaticism stemming from the margins of society. It was endorsed as Christian by the highest ecclesiastical authorities, it was facilitated by a king, who was eventually canonized, and it enjoyed broad popular support. More fundamentally, many contemporary Jews are concerned that if they focus on historical Jewish suffering, they risk alienating a younger generation. Consider the planned, multimillion-dollar Jewish history museum in Tel Aviv, which is to be devoted to the celebration of Jewish accomplishments rather than tragedy and victimhood, or the suppression of tragic, or "lachrymose," Jewish history that has for decades dominated Jewish studies in America. As Adam Teller, a critic of such approaches, has noted, it has become the norm to describe "medieval Jewish life in Germany . . . almost as a 'convivencia' of Jewish and Christian shared values and social experiences, the 1492 expulsion from Spain . . . as an example of Jewish migration, and the history of the Jews in late Tsarist Russia . . . largely without reference to antisemitism."

Perhaps in deference to these considerations, Gidwitz's story elides the most disturbing aspects of the historical record. The role of churches in impounding the books is only obliquely acknowledged, and the papal role is entirely omitted. Similarly, Gidwitz's King Louis, perhaps because he is still revered by Catholics, largely escapes blame. He does not instigate the burning but only allows it, and he is so moved by the children that he tacitly permits them to save a handful of books. In this retelling, it is Blanche, the cartoonishly wicked queen mother, who bears ultimate responsibility for the burning (a fiction that Gidwitz himself acknowledges in his afterword). As for the mobs aroused to violence by Donin, they too are absent. In their place, Gidwitz describes Jacob's Jewish neighborhood being burned but adds that the fire was the result of a "dare" by two "stupid boys" and that Christians were also hurt. Fanaticism, Gidwitz seems to say, is the property of unbalanced queen mothers and kids playing with matches.

Neither church, state, nor society at large can be implicated.

Nonetheless, while there is much censorship and invention in Gidwitz's retelling, there is also a poignant historical faithfulness. This is most devastatingly apparent in his description of the children's friendship with the fictional prior of the Saint-Denis monastery. This prior fights against all forms of medieval Christian fanaticism. He

**Fanaticism, Gidwitz seems to say, is the property of unbalanced queen mothers and kids playing with matches.**

rescues witches, befriends rabbis, and develops a plan to save the Talmud. He is the saving grace of Christianity, the paradigm of what a good Christian with power should be. It was this character that first struck me as taking the most liberties with history. But then, in a final twist in a book as full of miracles as the medieval literature on which it is based, we discover that this clergyman is not in fact a human product of his time but a manifestation of an archangel sent by God to *change* history. Thus, we learn that while Gidwitz felt at liberty to bend history to invent sometimes improbable interfaith friendships, he would not grant himself the liberty to create a human character who would anachronistically unite both Christian power and Christian compassion for persecuted minorities. Therefore, in an act that dazzlingly combines a devotion to historical fidelity and the exercise of authorial fantasy, Gidwitz intervenes with a celestial being who possesses those qualities.

The conventional wisdom of liberal American Jewish educators is that children (or at least their parents) need Jewish stories that feel relevant, speak to their own experiences, and reflect their values and goals. Too often, this attitude cuts Jewish children off from much of their heritage, which was, after all, forged in profoundly foreign environments, sometimes under terrifying pressures. It has also rendered many Jewish children's books boring and sterile. The brilliance of *The Inquisitor's Tale* lies in its use of familiar modern values as a bridge to unfamiliar historical situations. Its heroes may embody impeccable 21st-century ideals, but they inhabit a dazzlingly foreign landscape where the ideological struggles are as far removed from American life as its monasteries, taverns, and dung-heaps. Adam Gidwitz thereby shows that an obscure historical episode about a recondite text can indeed help children to thoughtfully, and even joyfully, engage with Jewish history. If it moves some older readers to do the same, so much the better.

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# Bellow, Broadway Billy, and American Jewry

BY RUTH R. WISSE

In late May of 1988, Saul Bellow and his soon-to-be-wife Janis Freedman went to a dinner party in Vermont. Bellow, Zachary Leader tells us in the forthcoming second volume of his excellent biography, had been brooding about Jewish history. At the dinner, he asked his friends whether they thought Jews should feel shame over the Holocaust. Was there "a particular disgrace in being victimized?" During the discussion, his host, Herb Hillman, told a story about a fellow chemist he knew who had been saved by the famous "Broadway" Billy Rose. Rose had somehow helped get the friend out of an Italian prison and then out of Europe entirely in 1939, but, in the decades that followed, Rose had never consented to meet the man he had saved. Within days, Bellow was working on the story that would become *The Bellarosa Connection*.

Bellow's extraordinary novella seems to have been the inspiration for Mark Cohen's new biography, *Not Bad for Delancey Street: The Rise of Billy Rose, America's Great Jewish Impresario*. And, in truth, I picked Cohen's book up as much to rethink Bellow's morally rigorous artistry as to learn about 20th-century show business.

For a quarter of a century Billy Rose was America's master showman. While Hitler was putting on mass rallies to consolidate power in Germany, Rose opened nightclubs, produced musicals, and organized extravaganzas to lift Americans from the woes of the Great Depression: His *Casa Mañana Revue* at the 1936 Texas Centennial featured the world's largest revolving stage, stripper Sally Rand, and lots of celebrities; *Billy Rose's Aquacade* was a swim, song, and dance show with Eleanor Holm and Johnny Weissmuller at the 1937 Great Lakes Exposition and then the 1939 New York World's Fair. For Rose, it was always about amassing personal fame and fortune, including social influence and trophy wives—he divorced Fanny Brice to marry Holm. But the contrast with Hitler is not entirely gratuitous: The Jewish boy from the Lower East Side paid attention to the news from Europe and applied some of his talents to fighting back even as he fought to get ahead.

Born in New York City on the second day of Rosh Hashanah 1899, Billy (registered as Samuel Wolf Rosenberg) was the firstborn and only son of a mismatched immigrant couple that soon separated. Mark Cohen suggests the boy got his entrepreneurial flair and his sense of himself as a Jew from his mother Fannie, who started a short-lived company to sell a laundry detergent she called Washquick and time after time raised money for fellow Russian Jews to get to America. His lifelong claustrophobia also dated from childhood, when bullies threatened to dig a hole and "bury the little shrimp," but he turned into one of those who compensated for small stature with gargantuan ambition.

Improbably, his first triumph was as a champion of the Gregg Shorthand method, which he learned in high school. This led him to a job at the War Industries Board (WIB) working for the American Jewish financier Bernard Baruch, and even earned him a meeting with President Wilson, who practiced the Pitman method of shorthand but wasn't as fast as Billy. As Rose virtually floated out of the White House and back to the WIB offices, he thought, "Not bad for Delancey Street."

## Ask not for whom the Liberty Bell tolls—it tolls for thee.

By the late 1920s, he was collaborating on the lyrics of popular songs like "Me and My Shadow" and "More than You Know," though his talent was always more in promotion and getting a piece of the action. Nonetheless, his intelligence and taste, later manifested in an excellent art collection, were often underestimated at least in part because he was a tough guy and acted the part. He fashioned and managed the details of his every venture, knowing that the tastes of an open, democratic culture could be satisfied equally through high patriotism and low fantasies of scantily clad women. When a young Gene Kelly choreographed a football-themed dance number, Cohen tells us, "Rose nixed it, saying, 'They don't come to the Diamond Horseshoe to see a fucking ballet.'" He wasn't so much a cynic as a showman who was genuinely eager to satisfy his customers.




***Billy Rose on the cover of* Time *magazine, June 2, 1947.***

Billy's rise coincided with the most critical period in modern Jewish history, when anti-Semitism in Europe called for massive response from American Jews. Although he was less than admirable in many ways, his refreshingly active response to the crisis compares favorably with that of the American Jewish leadership. Cohen describes but does not explore the uniqueness of Rose's association with all the otherwise contending sectors of the American Jewish community—the Left, the Right, and the establishment, in that order. In 1936, the Soviet Union temporarily suspended its war on liberal America and used the Popular Front, which Cohen describes as a "loose conglomeration" of antifascist groups, to exploit the concerns of Jews like Rose. We are not told whether Billy—himself a superb manipulator—realized that he was being played in funding Communist-inspired antifascist productions.

The Jewish American romance with the Soviet Union was suspended during the years of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, 1939–1941, and it was then that Rose was drawn to Peter Bergson, alias Hillel Kook (nephew of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, chief rabbi of British Mandatory Palestine). Bergson was raising support in America for a Jewish army in Palestine that would join the fight against Hitler and for a Jewish state. Opposed by the very cautious Jewish leadership, Bergson's tiny group gained the backing of writer Ben Hecht, and through him of Rose, who was attracted by their bold Zionist vision. Although he worked with Moss Hart, Ernst Lubitsch, Kurt Weill, and others, Rose deserves much of the credit for filling Madison Square Garden to the rafters for the 1943 pageant of protest and resistance *We Will Never Die*, an extravaganza that called for *action* on behalf of Europe's Jews, not pity.

Mark Cohen has helpfully tracked down the details of the story Herb Hillman told Bellow. Kurt Schwarz, an Austrian Jew who was arrested in Italy after seeking refuge there, did what thousands of other desperate refugees did—he wrote to a prominent American Jew pleading for help. Rose responded. In Bellow's dramatization, the rescue is a bit more mysterious. As the Schwarz figure (Fonstein) describes it:

> "I was in a cell by myself. Those years, every jail in Europe was full, I guess. Then one day, a stranger showed up and talked to me through the grille. . . . I went over and said, 'Ciano?' He shook one finger back and forth and said, 'Billy Rose.' I had no idea what he meant. Was it one word or two? A man or a woman? The message from the Italianer was: 'Tomorrow night, same time, your door will be open. Go out in the corridor. Keep turning left. And nobody will stop you. A person will be waiting in a car, and he'll take you to the train for Genoa.'"

All Fonstein has is the mysterious name "Bellarosa," as pronounced by the Italian intermediary. This little flourish would seem to be Bellow's conceit, but the rest is the same: The refugee receives passage to New York and then is, to his disappointment, sent to Cuba. While the surviving correspondence between Schwarz and Rose confirms these details, it also

provokes questions: Was Billy running a covert rescue operation as Schwarz believed, or did he undertake just this single case? Why, having originally offered Schwarz a job in bringing him to New York, did Rose refrain from meeting him and ship him off to Cuba instead? And, most fundamentally, why did he refuse to acknowledge his good deed?

In *The Bellarosa Connection*, Fonstein and his formidable wife Sorella try in vain to get the savior to acknowledge the person he saved. When I recently discussed Bellow's story in a seminar, several students didn't see the problem. Wasn't saving Fonstein's life enough? Not according to Bellow. His unnamed narrator is a septuagenarian (as was Bellow in 1989), the retired founder of the Philadelphia-based Mnemosyne Institute, who made memory into an international business—a technical skill (like Billy Rose's mastery of shorthand) that enhances efficiency without affecting substance. He teaches memory but would rather put out of his mind his long-standing neglect of the Fonsteins, to whom he is somewhat distantly related.




***A poster advertising Billy Rose's* Casa Mañana*, Fort Worth, Texas, which was billed as an extravaganza with the world's largest revolving stage. Rose produced the "Show of Shows" in 1936 for audiences of up to 4,000 a night.***

Billy Rose and the narrator are thus both specialists in retrieval—people and memories—who end up discarding what they had saved. The Billy Rose story frames the narrator's own moral accounting as a Jew whose success is summed up by his antebellum Philadelphia house, which his late Gentile wife furnished with 18th-century furniture. While Fonstein was working his way up, the American-born narrator, a generation ahead in acculturation, was becoming even more detached from their shared European Jewish origins. Ask not for whom the Liberty Bell tolls—it tolls for thee.

The dramatic center of *The Bellarosa Connection* is a scene set in the late 1950s at the heart of Jewish history, in Jerusalem. The narrator has come to see about setting up a branch of his Mnemosyne Institute and Billy Rose to set up his famous sculpture garden next to the Israel Museum. The Fonsteins are there too, but that's no coincidence. Sorella had deliberately arranged their visit to coincide with Billy's so that she could force him into meeting her husband. She is determined that Harry be respected as more than simply an object of rescue. To that end, she has obtained from

**That Billy Rose should once have responded to a Jewish stranger's call for help has come to seem as improbable as the parting of the Red Sea.**

Rose's former assistant—a woman as shrewd as herself—an incriminating journal which records



***Saul Bellow in Paris, France, September 9, 1982. (Photo by Ulf Andersen/Getty Images.)***

Billy's shady behavior. Sorella threatens to make the document public if Billy continues to refuse to meet the man he saved.

The antagonists in this confrontation in the King David Hotel are, to say the least, vivid: American-born Sorella is so outsized, "she made you look twice at a doorway." Such Rabelaisian remarks are bound to discomfit those trolling for signs of misogyny, but Bellow, whose characters' bodies often express their spirit, has something else in mind:

> Maybe Sorella was trying to incorporate in fatty tissue some portion of what [her husband] had lost—members of his family. There's no telling what she might have been up to. . . . Exquisite singers can make you forget what hillocks of suet their backsides are. Besides, Sorella did dead sober what delirious sopranos put over on us in a state of false Wagnerian intoxication.

She is also as witty as the narrator. She describes the fuss Billy Rose made on his arrival over his lost luggage: "If he had kept on hollering, I could see Ben-Gurion himself sitting down at the sewing machine to make him a suit."

As for Billy, he was "about the size of Peter Lorre: But oh! he was American. There was a penny-arcade jingle about Billy, the popping of shooting galleries, the rattling of pinballs, the weak human cry of the Times Square geckos, the lizard gaze of side-show freaks." Sorella finally manages to confront him in his hotel suite:

> "Mr. Rose, you haven't called me by my name," she said to him. "You read my letter, didn't you? I'm Mrs. Fonstein. Does that ring a bell?"
> "And why should it . . . ? He said, refusing recognition.
> "I married Fonstein."
> "And my neck size is fourteen. So what?"
> "The man you saved in Rome—one of them. He wrote so many letters. I can't believe you don't remember."
> "Remember, forget—what's the difference to me?"

Their confrontation ends with Sorella heaving the blackmail evidence out the window—and effectively out of the story—because she realizes the desired communion with Billy is not even desirable.

After telling him this story, Sorella asks the narrator, "How do you see the whole Billy business?" And then, dissatisfied with his answer, supplies her own:

> But if you want my basic view, here it is: The Jews could survive everything that Europe threw at them. I mean the lucky remnant. But now comes the next test—America. Can they hold their ground, or will the U.S.A. be too much for them?

This "basic view" of Sorella's is as close to a thesis statement as Bellow ever comes in his fiction.

The final third of the novella is set in the late 1980s, when the narrator is suddenly reminded of the Fonsteins by a call from Jerusalem looking for Harry on behalf of an aged, unbalanced survivor with the same surname who needs help. The book has come full cycle from the rescue of Harry to the call for Harry to rescue another Fonstein, another Jew. Far from resenting the appeal to him as an intermediary, our narrator welcomes the chance to reconnect with Harry and Sorella. He even toys with the idea of joining them in retirement. But he can't track them down. Unlike our memory man, Fonstein's other relations do not even regret having lost touch with him. The closest relative, a lawyer with impeccable phone manners, makes the narrator realize that in America, "One could assimilate now without converting. You didn't have to choose between Jehovah and Jesus." That Billy Rose should once have responded to a Jewish stranger's call for help has come to seem as improbable as the parting of the Red Sea.

Worse than this indifference to the Fonsteins is what our narrator learns when he at last gets through to their home number in New Jersey and reaches someone who identifies himself as the "house-sitter," a friend of their only son, Gilbert. Toying with the caller, the friend unhurriedly reveals that Gilbert, a mathematical genius, had applied his talents to blackjack, and that, on their way to Atlantic City to rescue him from some trouble

at a casino, the parents were killed on the Jersey Turnpike.

From the friend's manner and some dropped details about a bandana and crumbs in his beard, the narrator conjures up the person behind the voice.

> I formed an image of a heavy young man—a thick head of hair, a beer paunch, a T-shirt with a logo or slogan. *Act Up* was now a popular one. I pictured a representative member of the youth population . . . Rough boots, stonewashed jeans, bristly cheeks—something like Leadville or Silverado miners of the last century, except that these young people were not laboring, never would labor with picks. It must have diverted him to chat me up. An old gent in Philadelphia, moderately famous and worth lots of money. He couldn't have imagined the mansion, the splendid room where I sat holding the French phone, expensively rewired, an instrument once the property of a descendant of the Merovingian nobility. (I wouldn't give up on the Baron Charlus.)

This is the book's third mention of this baron (of whom more in a moment), and by this point Bellow seems to have stopped worrying about whether we can hear *his* voice behind the narrator's. To the caller's question whether Gilbert takes any interest in his Jewish background—"for instance, in his father's history"—the friend's slight hesitation is enough to suggest that he is Jewish himself, though he doesn't care much about it. "The only life he cared to lead," the Bellovian narrator muses, "was that of an American. So hugely absorbing, that. So absorbing that one existence was too little for it. It could drink up a hundred existences, if you had them to offer, and reach out for more." The narrator keeps hoping to make a connection with the young man on the other end of the line (the way Sorella presses Billy Rose to meet with her husband), there being so little else left for him to hang on to. The house-sitter signs off with "your timing was off. But don't pine too much."

In this concluding section of the book we feel the full weight of years. Our aging narrator forgets words and phrases he has known all his life: "Way down upon the —— River." His search for the Fonsteins is part of a larger attempt to recover things that are slipping away. This is Bellow's own compressed and idiosyncratically American *Remembrance of Things Past*. Every time the narrator makes a phone call using the art nouveau porcelain instrument that his wife had installed, he thinks not of her, nor of Proust, but of Proust's most perverse character, the thoroughly anti-Semitic Baron de Charlus, as corrupt as he is pathetic. Why does he associate his condition with so debauched a character? Why is he so hard on himself? One night he dreams that he is in a deep hole and cannot climb out despite his most strenuous effort. No need to interpret: He thinks he has dug his own grave.

In the late 1980s, I had dinner with Saul Bellow, his wife Janis, and my son Jacob at the Café des Artistes and finally got up the nerve to ask Saul a question that had troubled me for years. How could he have ignored what was happening to the Jews in Europe and Palestine in the late 1930s and most of the 1940s? I said I was asking as well about his whole cohort of Jewish intellectuals, who, in truth, had reacted nothing like Billy Rose, let alone Ben Hecht. Saul said, "America was not a country to us. It was the world." I might have wished for more, but this book, written a few years later, amplifies his answer. The only life Gilbert's friend cared to live was that of an American. "So hugely absorbing, that. So absorbing that one existence was too little for it . . ." Sorella's rhetorical question has been answered. The U.S.A. *has* proved too much for the Jews.

However, the old Jew is not yet quite done. It seems he is still standing after all not in the grave of his nightmare but before the Gates of Judgment. Wondering what he could say to make an impression on the kid at the other end of the line he recalls the first words of the prayer recited in memory of the dead, "*Yiskor Elohim,*" which asks God Himself to remember those who must pass away. This first mention of God, this first use of Hebrew, come almost but not quite too late for him, though they are unlikely to sway the fully absorbed American hipster. As for the Bellovian narrator, the best he can do is to record "everything I could remember of the Bellarosa Connection, and set it all down with a Mnemosyne flourish."

Mark Cohen believes that his biography shares the upbeat judgment of Billy Rose that is implicit in the title of Bellow's book. "Billy Rose, with all his flaws and pettiness and occasional brutality, is . . . *bella rosa*: 'beautiful rose.'"

> [He] met the challenges of American Jewish life on both fronts with all the intensity and joy and enthusiasm and caginess and wariness and toughness that his dual inheritances encouraged and required. As a savvy oddsmaker, Rose seems to have decided that the Jewish American project was a stacked deck. America is a huge country and the Jews are few, and even with all the ambition in the world, certain Jewish heights could be achieved only in Israel. Rose went there to scale those heights. But he came back, and he brought some Jewish artifacts with him to live, for the little time he had left, the mixed and rich and complex and confusing and thrilling experience of the American Jew. It is an identity he helped pioneer and invent, and it still can serve as a model for vital American citizenship.

This is a fine summation of Cohen's rightful claim of Broadway Billy Rose for the Jews, and a sunny answer to Sorella's question. He is not mistaken, either, in sensing that Bellow found some virtue in both the man and his type. Tough guys who could get things done like Billy often complement the introspective narrators of Bellow's fiction, and he appreciated Billy's Jewish fellow feeling and actions. "Billy," he wrote, "was as spattered as a Jackson Pollock painting, and among the main trickles was his Jewishness."




**Mother and Child II** ***by Jacques Lipchitz at the Billy Rose Art Garden, Israel Museum, Jerusalem. (Photo © Hanan Isachar.)***

Yet for Bellow, Rose's refusal to meet with the man he had saved is just as important. It is an augury of forgetting on the part of a people once renowned for its memory. Bellow actually saw Billy Rose in Jerusalem around the time that he set the Sorella-Billy showdown, where his own regret for having failed to act on behalf of the Jews would have been most acute. This may be why the Hillman story struck such a chord and why the Mnemonic narrator uses it to atone. The Bellow–Rose connection asks to be remembered.

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*Ruth R. Wisse recently retired from the Martin Peretz Professorship of Yiddish Literature at Harvard University. Her book* No Joke: Making Jewish Humor *(Princeton University Press) is now in paperback. Wisse is the creator of an online course about* Daniel Deronda, *George Eliot's novel of Jewish nationalism, offered by the Tikvah Fund, where she is currently a distinguished senior fellow.*

# Art Over Vitebsk

BY FRANCES BRENT

***Chagall, Lissitzky, Malévitch, l'avant-garde russe à Vitebsk, 1918–1922***
curated by Angela Lampe
March 28 through July 16, 2018 at Centre Pompidou

***Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich: The Russian Avant-Garde in Vitebsk, 1918–1922***
curated by Angela Lampe in collaboration with Claudia J. Nahson
September 14, 2018 through January 6, 2019 at the Jewish Museum

***Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich: The Russian Avant-Garde in Vitebsk, 1918–1922***
edited by Angela Lampe
Prestel Publishing, 288 pp., $60

In his poetic first autobiography, Marc Chagall called Vitebsk "My joyful, gloomy city." He was remembering the place of his birth and fin-de-siècle childhood, while simultaneously reflecting on discordant feelings about his departure. The Vitebsk of his early years was a provincial river city, a district capital in the northeastern corner of the Pale of Settlement. Rising off of river banks, it had worn and sloping cobblestone streets, electric streetcars, two large synagogues, 60 prayer houses, and 27 churches. A pedestrian bridge connected the stylish side of town with its neoclassical, Russian-style Governor's Palace and its fashionable stores, including a pastry shop, to the other side of Vitebsk, where there were warehouses for shipping, a railroad junction, and a scattering of squat brick dwellings standing adjacent to shabby log buildings. Domes and bell towers illuminated the low horizon.

At the turn of the century, Vitebsk had a population of about 66,000 people, more than half of whom were Jewish. Although memories of the Russian pogroms of the 1880s lingered, many Jews were becoming professionals or moving into the middle class, joining Russian intellectual and political (even radical) circles, or taking part in the Jewish cultural revival with its flourishing Yiddish literature and theater. In his memoir, Chagall combined irreconcilable feelings about this complex place, allowing them to hang in opposition to one another like the two halves of his subject's head, one reddish and the other blue, in his painting *Anywhere Out of the World* which he had completed a few years before.

From the start, Vitebsk had been a rich source of inspiration for Chagall's visual storytelling. He raided it for his earliest subject matter when he expressively painted his bearded father wearing eyeglasses and a working man's visor cap or, in contrast, his stylish emancipated fiancée with her hands covered in elegant black gloves. He reimagined it when he was a young man in Paris, creating a private iconography for what seemed a faraway and exotic setting, filling it with humanized cows and houses with peaked roofs that sometimes flipped upside down.

In 1914, he returned home for his sister's wedding shortly before the beginning of the First World War. When the border suddenly closed, Vitebsk became a refuge for the war wounded, as well as thousands of Jews expelled from their homes on the eastern front. He documented their suffering, drawing and painting soldiers and displaced Jews. The following year, in the fine Vitebsk home of his wife's parents, he was married, "under the wedding canopy, in the proper way," and Vitebsk became the city he immortalized in *Over the Town*, in which



**Anywhere Out of the World** ***by Marc Chagall, 1915. (The Museum of Modern Art, Gunma, Japan.)***

he and his wife float above doll-sized houses and fences, gliding together in a cloudy sky.

After the revolution and because of his Paris friendship with the intellectual revolutionary Anatoly Lunacharsky, Chagall—somewhat implausibly—became plenipotentiary for the affairs of art in the province of Vitebsk and chairman of the city's commission, entrusted with decorations on the first anniversary of the October Revolution. Buoyant with hopes for a more just and tolerant society, Chagall instructed both housepainters and art students to make wall murals, cloth banners, posters, wreathes, and red calico bows to adorn the city. An extraordinary 60,000 people took part in the events captured on a film commissioned by city authorities.

This summer, at Centre Pompidou, visitors were able to gaze at the still-impassive faces of cavalry soldiers in Vitebsk's festooned Freedom Square one hundred years after the festivities. Soon after the celebration, in January 1919, Chagall became the founder and director of the Vitebsk People's Art School. *Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich: The Russian Avant-Garde in Vitebsk, 1918–1922* revisits the phenomenon of postrevolutionary Vitebsk, where, against all probability, the avant-garde bloomed in a provincial Russian city dominated by Jewish culture. The exhibition ran from March 28 through July 16, 2018 at Centre Pompidou and traveled in a modified form to the Jewish Museum in New York, where it is on view from September 14, 2018 through January 6, 2019. The handsome accompanying catalog, edited by Angela Lampe, is available in both French and English.

Visitors should not be misled by the exhibition's name; it contains more than just the three artists listed, giving us a glimpse at the work of the many artists Chagall brought to the school's faculty, as well as the students, inspired by Kazimir Malevich, who became part of the UNOVIS collective (an abbreviation for what has been translated as "Affirmers for New Forms in Art"), which made public art for Vitebsk and other cities. The exhibit in Paris was lavish, with 250 objects, paintings, works on paper, books, ceramics, and sculpture, including a life-sized construction of Lenin's Rostrum, based on the design developed in the architectural studio of Lazar Markovich Lissitzky (he renamed himself El Lissitzky in homage to El Greco) at the Vitebsk People's Art School. It also displayed postcards, letters, photographs, and journal extracts, enlarging our ability to reimagine the spectacular collision between modernism and revolution that occurred in a provincial capital for a fleeting moment before it was extinguished by history.

Due to the multiyear Russian embargo on art loans to the United States, materials from the Tretyakov Gallery, the State Russian Museum in St. Petersburg, and the Pushkin State Museum cannot travel to the New York show, which will thus be missing several spectacular Chagalls, as well as Robert Falk's beautiful painting of Vitebsk. Falk, a Russian Jewish postimpressionist, depicts the city's white stone walls glistening in contrast to shadowed rooftops tinted in hyacinth, emerald, and vermillion. Though not all the artists were Jewish—Malevich, most significantly, was born into a Roman Catholic, Polish-speaking family in Ukraine—the story of Vitebsk emanates from the suffering, aspiration, and cultural vibrancy of Russian Jews whose creativity was entwined with the history and disturbed universe of modernism.

As the provincial plenipotentiary, Chagall encountered numerous difficulties from the start. This was the beginning of the bloody and chaotic period of War Communism, when businesses, factories, and food supplies were seized by the government, sending the country into economic chaos. With widespread shortages, events for the first anniversary celebration had to be limited. Though the festivities

were a great success, Chagall was reprimanded by authorities for extravagant wastefulness and criticized by skeptics who found the revolutionary art, with its unrealistic colors, lack of proportionality, and distorted perspective, unintelligible. While hardly any of the decorations, from the first celebration have survived intact, we can look at David Yakerson's sketch for *Panel with the Figure of a Worker* and imagine how it baffled spectators, with its sharp lines and architectonic angles depicting a laborer, in an Egyptian-looking pose, who seems about to move forward on impossibly large feet.

When the art school opened, it was simultaneously praised for the opportunities offered "for the working masses" while being disparaged for its "right-wing ways." Chagall, who was never dogmatic, invited a broad assortment of artists, painters, graphic artists, designers, and sculptors representing many different trends to become part of the faculty; some, like Falk, were still making more-or-less representational art, while others, like Ivan Puni and Vera Ermolaeva, were more avante-garde. Many of the artists Chagall brought from Petrograd, where he had formed many friendships in the arts, stayed for barely a semester, and replacements had to be found. It didn't take long for Chagall to feel overwhelmed by his administrative responsibilities. As early as April 1919, it was reported, "The artist Chagall appealed to the Center to release him from his duties as the Province Plenipotentiary on Matters of Art." A curt telegram instructed him to "remain in his post," but by May his request had been accepted, and another artist, Aleksandr Romm, took over as provincial plenipotentiary, with Chagall staying on as director of the Vitebsk People's Art School. But even this was no small task; during the first semester, the school took in about 120 students, mostly boys in their teens, Jewish children of laborers. Again in September 1919 he tried to resign, but an assembly of students appealed to him to stay on, and he relented.



**Over the Town** *by Marc Chagall, 1915–1919. (Courtesy of the Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. © Adagp, Paris 2018.)*



**Vitebsk** *by Robert Falk, 1921. (Courtesy of the State Museum of Fine Arts Pushkin. © Adagp, Paris 2018.)*



**Panel with the Figure of a Worker** *by David Yakerson, 1918. (Courtesy of the Regional Museum of Local History of Vitebsk. © Adagp, Paris 2018.)*

The real problems began when Lissitzky and, to a greater degree, Malevich joined the faculty. As in the culminating Passover song, Chagall invited Lissitzky to teach in Vitebsk and Lissitzky invited Malevich to join the endeavor, and Malevich brought disaster. In his official summary of the school's first year, Chagall described his intention to maintain artistic diversity in the studios, "within our walls, the leading artists and workshops of all trends—from left to 'right' inclusively—are represented and function freely." But the revolutionary and metaphysical arguments of Lissitzky and Malevich against figurative representations forced all of the teachers and students to take sides.

Lissitzky had known Chagall since childhood, when both were students at Yuri Pen's art school in Vitebsk. Chagall's magical expressionism strongly influenced his early work, which was also impacted by his training as an architect and his exposure to European art during travels abroad. Looking at the "Then Came a Fire and Burnt the Stick" page from his famous *Had Gadya* suite of colored lithographs, you see how Lissitzky integrated the new Cubo-Futurist style with everything that had come before for him: fire and firebird, Jewish tradition and Russian, word and image, Jugendstil and Chagall-like tumbling-over village houses, all conflated into the spiraling, red conflagration that symbolized revolution. But this balance was short-lived. After 1919, he dedicated himself to radical social utopianism and created the design for the Central Committee's first flag, as well as the now iconic Constructivist poster *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*, in which bold typography, a simplified palette, and symbolic geometry delivered the Bolshevik message with a jolt.

Malevich, the founder of Suprematism, had become the most famous of Russia's avant-garde artists by the time he arrived in Vitebsk in 1919. Even today, much about Malevich's artistic theory is impenetrable. Early on, he rejected the use of organic shapes in art and eventually even color vanished from his paintings. He thought of his 1915 painting *Black Square* as a "total eclipse," and when he progressed to his red phase and then to white on white, even color vanished from his paintings. During the years he was in Vitebsk, he almost completely stopped painting and dedicated himself to theorizing about a new system of art, developing ways in which Suprematism would be applied to the world

at large. In Vitebsk, he was armed with written rules, postulates, lectures, and a curriculum proclaiming the end of individualism in art. Under his influence, Lissitzky created a new, symbolic architecture on the painted surfaces of his canvases. Inventing the term "Proun," "project for the affirmation of the new," Lissitzky described his experiments using the new jargon from the factories; they were "the interchange station between painting and architecture."

the 1920 manifesto for the UNOVIS collective and the 1922 diploma awarded to the young Suprematist Lazar Khidekel. It didn't take long for many of Chagall's students to transfer to Malevich's studio.

Today the experience of viewing Malevich's *Black Square* or Lissitzky's Proun canvases, with their rough and splotchy surfaces, is similar to looking at antique weapons. The blades are still sharp, but the world they were intended to cut down has evaporated even as they

friends and foes. All their masks are piled up in my heart like lumber."

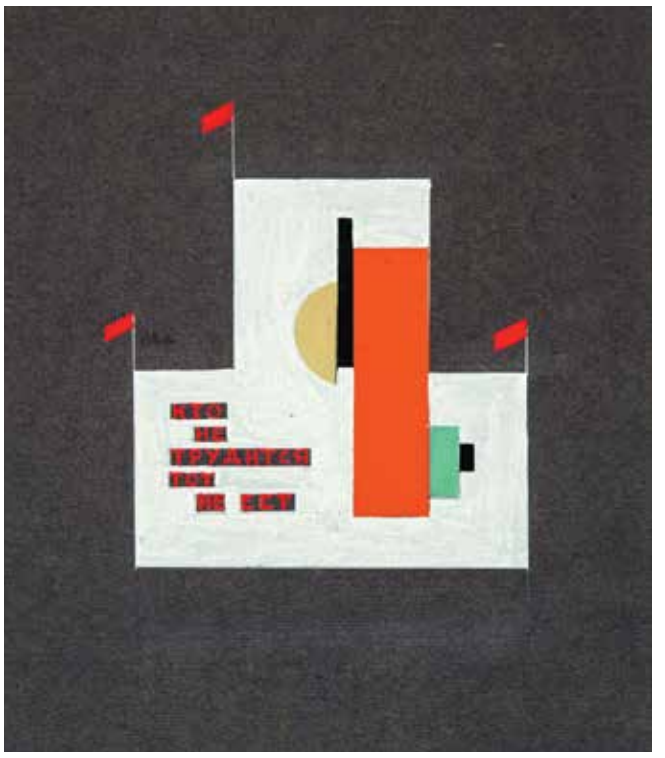
Despite the school's short life, for a time the work of the Vitebsk People's Art School overflowed into the city. Working together with local craftsmen, UNOVIS adorned offices and workshops of the Vitebsk Committee for the Struggle against Unemployment, the State Committee for Foodstuffs, and the Vitebsk City Theater with Suprematist panels, enormous signboards, and banners. One of the pleasures of the exhibit is to look at the rarely exhibited and spirited work of some these students, many of whom became artists in their own right. With its tiny flags, Nikolai Suetin's *Wagon with the UNOVIS Sign* looks like a fanciful boat or, perhaps, a spaceship. The Suprematist compositions by Ilya Chashnik and Lazar Khidekel show utopian artists rebalancing geometrical arrangements to usher in an ideal world.

Not long after Chagall left Vitebsk, Lissitzky followed. Malevich stayed on to see the first and last class graduate, but departed in the summer when local Soviet authorities closed the school down. Many decades later, Chagall wrote in *Memories*: "They thought that if they could take possession of my school and all the students, a black square on a white canvas could become a symbol of victory . . . But a victory over what? I personally found none of the enchantment of color in this black square on its drab canvas background." (With the rise of Stalin in the late 1920s, Malevich's ideas suddenly became bourgeois and counterrevolutionary, but he managed to remain a Suprematist to the end, and his ashes were buried under a grave marked with a black square in 1935. Lissitzky died a Stalinist exponent of Social Realism in 1941.)

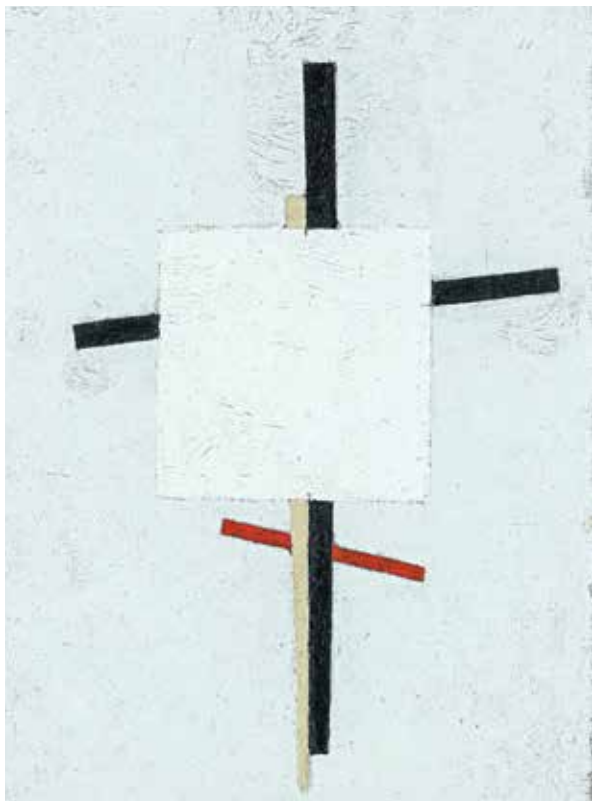
Chagall, who in 1915 had painted *Anywhere Out of the World* with those two red and blue halves of a single, if separated, head, was completely undoctrinaire. As a young artist in Paris, he had felt challenged by the brilliant experiments of Picasso and Braque's Cubism. Staking out his own idiosyncratic and eclectic style, he intuitively bathed his fragmented work in illogical colors, filling the framework of his canvas with fantastical figures and objects that pleased him. Part of the strength of his work in Vitebsk, and later for the Moscow Yiddish Theater, came from the way he integrated Suprematism, Cubism, and Constructivism while simultaneously pushing back against the ideological pressures. He spoke directly of the world vanishing under his feet, and so his characters fly over a city that is being stamped out by modernism, revolution, and history to come.



***"Then Came a Fire and Burnt the Stick,"* Had Gadya *suite by El Lissitzky, 1919. (The Jewish Museum, Gift of Leonard E. and Phyllis S. Greenberg.)***



**Wagon with the UNOVIS Sign *by Nikolai Suetin, Vitebsk, 1920. (Courtesy of the State Russian Museum. © Adagp, Paris 2018.)***



**Suprematism of the Mind *by Kazimir Malevich, 1919. (Stedelijk Museum Collection, Amsterdam.)***



**Composition with Circles and Goats *by Marc Chagall, 1920, the Jewish National Theater, Kamerny. (From a private collection. © Adagp, Paris, 2018.)***

The Vitebsk students were captivated by the commotion generated in the workshops and mesmerized by Malevich's charismatic, if not megalomaniacal, personality. The exhibits include photographs showing how they wore the emblem of the black square sewn on their sleeves to honor their teacher's "great discovery," and there's a trove of memorabilia such as persist as witnesses to its history. At the time, these weapons were strong enough to drive out Chagall and his quest for a pluralistic modernism. In June 1920, Chagall made his final resignation from the school. There's no doubt he experienced his colleagues' ideas as a personal attack; their Manichean tendencies were completely contrary to his own inclinations. In his autobiography, he wrote that he had been "expelled" from Vitebsk like the Jews who had been evacuated from the border towns in 1914 and found themselves homeless. He concluded his thoughts about the betrayal with a beautifully complex simile: "I shall be silent about my

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*Frances Brent is the author of* The Lost Cellos of Lev Aronson *(Atlas & Co.).*

# The Rebbe and the Professor

TRANSLATED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY ARIEL EVAN MAYSE

*Professor Salo Wittmayer Baron (1895–1989) was born in Tarnów (then Galicia, now Poland) and moved to Vienna, where he earned doctorates in philosophy, political science, and law from the University of Vienna and was ordained as a rabbi at the Jewish Theological Seminary there. After a short tenure at the Jewish Teachers College in Vienna, he was invited to join the faculty of the Jewish Institute of Religion in New York in 1927. In 1929, Baron was hired by Columbia University, where he became the first scholar to hold a chair in Jewish history at an American university. His* A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, which began as a series of lectures, was a landmark study of Jewish life and culture from ancient times through 1650. In its 18 volumes he sought to overturn what he famously called the "lachrymose" conception of Jewish history that focused on Jewish suffering rather than an integrated vision of social, religious, and economic history.*

*In 1936, Baron and the philosopher Morris Raphael Cohen founded the Conference on Jewish Relations in response to the rise of Nazism and the alarming rise of anti-Semitism in the United States. The Commission on European Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, founded in 1944, was one of the outgrowths of the conference. The commission was first conceived as an attempt to prepare for rebuilding Jewish life in Europe after World War II, but it came to focus on salvaging books, historical documents, manuscripts, and other cultural treasures and then distributing them to Jewish communities around the world. The commission sought the assistance of a wide range of prominent scholars, historians, and academics, as well as Jewish communal leaders and rabbis.*

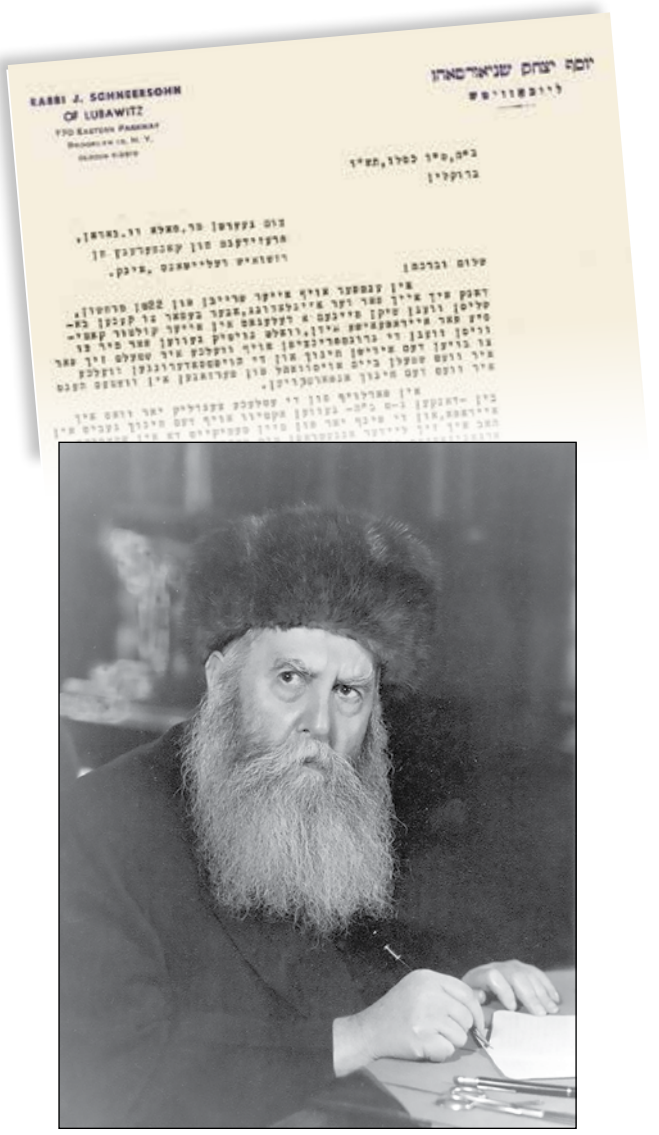
*One of the leaders to whom the Commission on European Jewish Cultural Reconstruction turned was Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn (1880–1950), the sixth leader of the Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidic community. Schneersohn had fought tirelessly in support of Jewish religious life under the tsarist and Soviet governments. Efforts to ensure Jewish religious education, often clandestine, occupied a special place in Schneersohn's project. He had visited the United States briefly in 1929 and returned after a remarkable escape from the eastern front in March of 1940, settling in Brooklyn. When advised that the old-world patterns of life and piety would not take hold in the foreign soil of America, he reportedly proclaimed,* "Amerika iz nisht anderish!" *(America is no different!). In the immediate postwar years, he established a national network of Jewish schools and* yeshivot *for men and women, as well as special "released time" classes for public school students. His charismatic successor and son-in-law, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–1994), continued many of these efforts and transformed Chabad-Lubavitch from a relatively small community into a large international organization.*

*Schneersohn's answer to Baron's initial invitation to take part in the Commission on European Jewish Cultural Reconstruction is respectful but sharp and uncompromising in its rejection of any cultural or educational enterprise that does not accept "Torah and the commandments" as essential. His tone is conversational and pointed: "the last 5–10 years must have opened the eyes of even the blind, and every person with any sort of logical mind must have discerned how deep the European civilization has sunk, what a great abyss lies between it and,* le-havdil*, the refinement of Torah-life." However, he does not dismiss the project out of hand.*

**The esteemed rabbi should forgive me for answering in Hebrew . . . the Yiddish language neither trips off my tongue nor flows from my pen.**

*Rabbi Schneersohn's letter was forwarded to Baron by Hannah Arendt, who, in November 1945, began working under Baron's supervision as a researcher for the commission, eventually serving as the successor organization's executive director. In her letter, dated November 27, 1945, Arendt writes, "I doubt very much that he will recognize us as a 'Kosher Chinuch'." Writing to Schneersohn, Baron addresses the Rebbe in the third person, as was common in letters to distinguished rabbinic figures. He describes the work of the Commission on European Jewish Cultural Reconstruction as an attempt to understand and quantify the devastation wrought by the Nazis, establishing what resources are left and deciding how they may best be used to ensure a Jewish future. As to whether the commission will commit to "kosher education," Baron wryly notes that "it is impossible to hope that this committee by itself will suffice to unite the entire Jewish people."*

*There is no evidence of further communication between the two men, but these letters are marvels of respect and civility, despite disagreement, at a moment of unparalleled historical crisis. The letters from Schneersohn, Baron, and Arendt are held in the Salo W. Baron Papers at the Stanford University Libraries. I wish to thank Mrs. Shoshana Baron Tancer and Mrs. Tobey Baron Gitelle for graciously allowing us to translate and publish Professor Baron's letter. My thanks to the Chabad-Lubavitch community for their permission to publish a translation of Rabbi Schneersohn's letter, which was first printed in* Iggerot Kodesh *(Kehot Publication Society). I thank Zachary Baker, the Reinhard Family Curator of Judaica and Hebraica Collections at Stanford University, for bringing these letters to my attention, and his successor Eitan Kensky for help with the translation.*




***Top: The original letter from Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn to Salo Baron. Bottom: Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe.***

B"H, 15 Kislev, 5706
Brooklyn

To the distinguished Mr. Salo W. Baron,
President of the Conference on Jewish Relations, Inc.

Peace and blessing!

In response to your letter from the 22nd of Marcheshvan, I thank you for the invitation, but before it is possible to decide whether to send a delegate on my behalf to your culture-commission for European Jews, it will be necessary for me to know something about the foundational principles upon which it seeks to build Jewish education and the principal requirements for the election of persons to whose hands it entrusts education.

Over the course of the past few decades, in which I have—thank God—been active in the field of education in Europe, and the five years of my involvement in America, I have unfortunately encountered more and more movements and organizations that

presented the goal of working for Jewish education, but, not having appropriate principles, they—as good as their intentions may have been—not only did not bring any positive results, but, just the opposite, they brought the greatest injuries to Jewish education.

The particular task of Jewish education is to prepare Jewish youth to implement the special tasks of the Jewish people as a whole, and of every Jew in particular, in their lives.

And the task of every Jew is to be a keeper of Torah and the commandments, and Jewish education must instill the youth with pure faith, love of God, love of Israel, love of the Torah, devotion to fulfilling the commandments, trust and perseverance.

If in the past century, one could still find among Jews those who were intoxicated by the outward brilliance of European culture, imagining that it would be worthwhile to exchange the Jewish Torah-life for it; and if many of them believed that, through assimilation, one could free oneself of Jewish sorrows; and if these same people have, therefore, found it possible to extract the soul from the essence of Jewish education—Torah and the commandments—without which the education remains utterly lifeless, in total opposition to the Jewish character; then the last 5–10 years must have opened the eyes of even the blind, and every person with any sort of logical mind must have discerned how deep the European civilization has sunk, what a great abyss lies between it and, *le-havdil*, the refinement of Torah-life, and how little one can depend on protection through assimilation . . .

And has there ever been a time such as today, when the Jewish youth, throughout the world as a whole and the Jewish youth of Europe in particular, were more in need of an education that not only protects them from the danger of despair, heaven forfend, but also the reverse, implants in them the greatest courage to sustain the construction of the Jewish people in a holy manner with utter devotion.

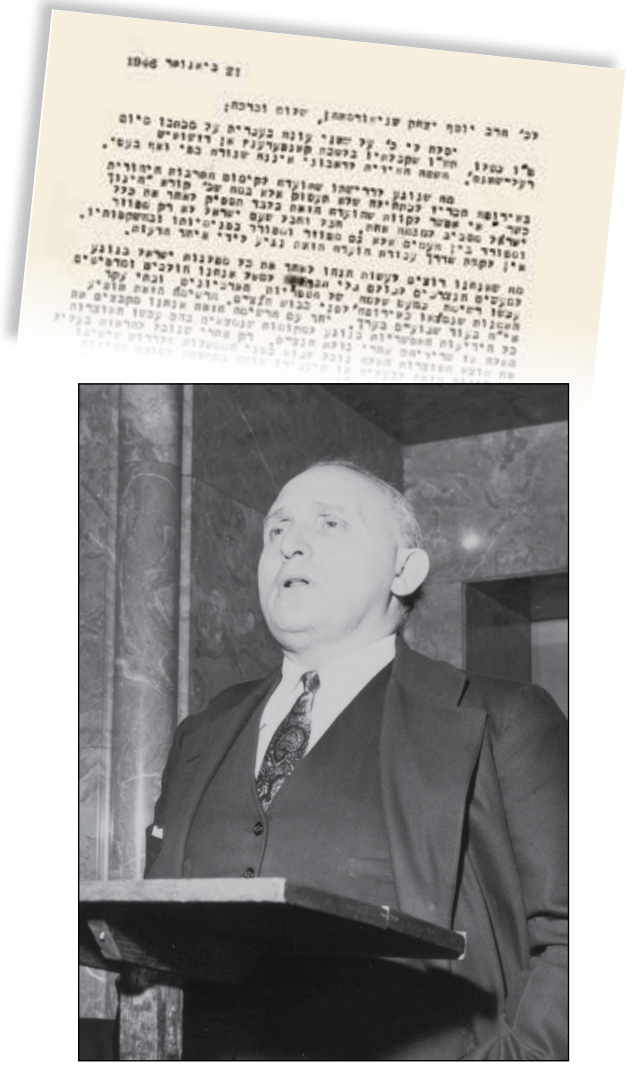
The essence of education is for us Jews not only a question of culture, but a question of life and existence, and it is self-evident that a Jewish child can only receive this sort of education through being taught by teachers who are Torah-and-commandments Jews, and are themselves inspired by all the things that they must implant in the Jewish child.

Only the sort of education that corresponds to the aforementioned conditions is *kosher* and may correctly be called "Jewish education."

I have—thank G-d—a staff made up of the greatest specialists in the field of Jewish education in general, who are very well acquainted with European Jewry and its particular spiritual needs; I and my entire staff always stand ready to help with all possibilities, in every undertaking that is for the sake of a kosher Jewish education.

I would therefore ask you to inform me of the extent to which it is assured that the activities of your culture commission for European Jews will be conducted according to the principles stated above of a kosher education, an education that should, with God's help, produce proud Torah-and-commandments Jews.

With respect and blessing,
Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn



***Top: Professor Salo Baron's reply to Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn. Bottom: Salo Baron speaking at the Jewish Theological Seminary in the 1940s. (Courtesy of the Ratner Center Archives at the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary.)***

January 21, 1946

To the Esteemed Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn,

Peace and blessings:

The esteemed rabbi should forgive me for answering in Hebrew his letter from the 15th of Kislev, 5706, which I received at the office for the Conference on Jewish Relations. To my chagrin, the Yiddish language neither trips off my tongue nor flows from my pen.

With regard to his request that Commission on European Jewish Cultural Reconstruction declare, from the outset, that it will only engage in what the esteemed rabbi calls "kosher education"—it is impossible to hope that this committee by itself will suffice to unite the entire Jewish people around a single aim. It is lamentable that the Jewish people are not only scattered and dispersed among the nations, but are also scattered and dispersed internally and in their views. There is no reason to hope that through the work of this commission we will achieve a unity of opinions.

What we wish to do is to unite all the parties of Israel in regard to things that must be done for all, without any distinction. For example, we are proceeding to publish a nearly-complete list of the libraries, archives, and art collections found in Europe before the Nazi conquest. This list will appear, God willing, in about two weeks.

Together with this list, we are gathering all possible knowledge regarding the places in which these collections are now found, or whatever is left after the theft on the part of the Nazis. Only after we can clearly prove the origin of these collections can we come before the governments and demand that they return the stolen property to its owners or transfer it, in part, for the good of other Jewish communities, particularly those in the land of Israel.

This is only one example of the research and intellectual work with which we are occupied. It would be truly worthwhile, in our opinion, if the esteemed rabbi and those who share his views would participate with us in these sorts of efforts. Afterward, the different educators in their various locations will decide what they will do with this knowledge in their respective schools. Of course, many of us hope that this may allow us to help, in some small way, to expand the Torah and restore it to glory in its old centers throughout Central Europe.

I hope that this explanation will set aside all of his doubts and that he can take part in our work, either directly or through his emissaries.

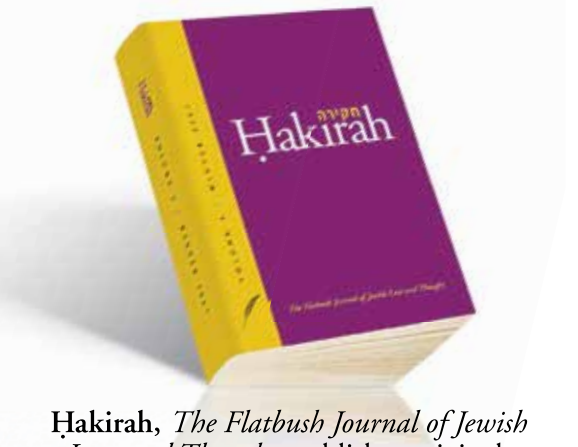
With respect and appreciation,
Shalom Baron

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*Ariel Evan Mayse is an assistant professor in the Department of Religious Studies at Stanford University. He is completing a book on the Maggid of Mezheritch's thought and theology of language.*

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# Tweets and Bellows

BY RICH COHEN

A man, having gone insane, regains control of his mind by writing letters—"to the newspapers," Saul Bellow writes in *Herzog*, "to people in public life, to friends and relatives and at last to the dead, his own obscure dead, and finally the famous dead."

A society, having gone insane—caught in a fever, lost in a revolution or war—regains control of its narrative, the closest thing it has to a mind, by creating literature. Novels, histories, poems. It's through writing and reading that a person or people can access the quiet part of their brain, the voice amid the chaos that explains who one is and what one must do. A person who reads has a different kind of focus and attention, a different kind of mind.

So, what happens when people stop writing letters? Or when books become less central to society—a tangential diversion or eccentricity—less important than movies, which are less important than the premium cable channels, which are less important than Netflix and Amazon Prime, which are less important than video games, all of which together are less important than social media? What happens when our writers and thinkers express themselves through Facebook, Snapchat, and Twitter instead of on the page?

*Herzog*, which might be Saul Bellow's greatest novel—published in 1964, it spent 42 weeks on the *New York Times* bestsellers list—is the story of a cuckold. College professor and intellectual Moses Herzog has discovered that his wife, Madeleine Pontritter, has been at it with his best friend, Valentine Gersbach, who, in a moment, has gone, in the mind of Herzog, from sage confidant to scumbag charlatan. The novel is also about women and men, sex, New York and Chicago, that great city, in all its weathers and glowering moods. The book is filled with characters. The childhood friends. The double-dealing psychiatrist. The shyster lawyer. The lingerie-wearing flower shop owner who steams up Herzog's nights.

In one of the book's most moving passages, Bellow recalls his mother explaining man's place in God's world, and it feels so true and so particular that it can have come only from Bellow's life.

> He remembered that late one afternoon she led him to the front-room window because he asked a question about the Bible: how Adam was created from the dust of the ground. I was six or seven. And she was about to give me the proof. Her dress was brown and gray—thrush-colored. Her hair was thick and black, the gray already streaming through it. She had something to show me at the window. The light came up from the snow in the street, otherwise the day was dark. Each of the windows had colored borders—yellow, amber, red—and flaws and whorls in the cold panes. At the curbs were the thick brown poles of that time, many-barred at the top, with green glass insulators, and brown sparrows clustered on the crossbars that held up the iced, bowed wires. Sarah Herzog opened her hand and said, "Look carefully, now, and you'll see what Adam was made of." She rubbed the palm of her hand with a finger, rubbed until something dark appeared on the deep-lined skin, a particle of what certainly looked to him like earth. "You see? It's true."

**The text, the tweet, the post—these hasty bits of content do not give access to the deep well of the hidden mind.**

Bellow had a name for this process of literary transformation: It was the "higher autobiography," not what actually happened but what it felt like and what it meant, a lost moment reanimated, recovered. The fictions of *Herzog* are the facts of Bellow seen through a glass darkly. He'd married Sondra Tschacbasov, his second wife, known as Sasha, in 1956. She was 16 years younger, beautiful and complicated. They'd met at *Partisan Review*, where Sasha had been a secretary. They moved to upstate New York and lived in a big house on the Hudson while Bellow taught at Bard College. He had a friend there, a professor with a bad foot named Jack Ludwig. Later, when Bellow took a job in the Midwest, he managed to bring their friends the Ludwigs along with them. It was only while working in Minnesota that Bellow learned that Sasha and Jack had been having an affair. She'd apparently been angry with Bellow, probably not without reason. He was self-involved and unfaithful, and the fierceness of his descriptions of Madeleine ("Will never understand what women want. . . . They eat green salad and drink human blood.") should be tempered with the knowledge that you're getting one, fictionalized side of a sad, complicated story. Bellow is not fair, but that's literature. (Just ask the Amalekites.) And it's the energy of the novel—the fury of the cuckold, a man driven insane not merely by betrayal or the break-up of a marriage but by humiliation, the sense that everyone knows and has known all along. "If I am out of my mind, it's all right with me, thought Moses Herzog" is the book's famous opening line.



*Illustration by Mark Anderson.*

Jack Ludwig, the bad friend with the bad foot, becomes Valentine Gersbach ("loud, flamboyant, ass-clutching brute") with one leg—that's how you amp it up; Minnesota becomes Chicago, because nobody knew that town, with its meandering river, "the sluggish South Branch dense with sewage and glittering with a crust of golden slime," like Bellow.

The letters, which wind through the book like that sluggish, slime-covered South Branch, can be read for mental moods as well as secondary meanings. "Dear Dr. Morgenfruh," Herzog writes to his old dead professor, "Latest intelligence from the Olduvai Gorge in East Africa gives grounds to suppose that man did not descend from a peaceful arboreal ape, but from a carnivorous, terrestrial type, a beast that hunted in packs and crushed the skulls of prey with a club or femoral bone."

The letters also serve a therapeutic function. As anyone who's spent serious time writing—hundreds of hours, enough to get outside the wake into the glassy water—can tell you, the pen (or keyboard) connects to a different part of the mind, or a different mind, than the one that chatters at you endlessly through the day. Bellow understood this, of course, and it's that hidden mind that he sees as the way to carry Herzog out of the bad time and into something different (though his next marriage was also a mutual, maddening disaster).

Herzog wrote letters to order his thoughts; Bellow wrote a book, the one you are reading. It's a dual operation that gives the novel a mysterious power. As the reader of the novel, you are the true addressee of Moses Herzog's mad correspondence. The book is a kind of Russian nesting doll. You're reading about a man purging his mind in a story written by a man doing the same. "Dear Dr. Bhave," Herzog writes Vinoba Bhave, the Indian philosopher and Gandhi

disciple, "I read of your work in the *Observer* and at the time thought I'd like to join your movement. I've always wanted very much to lead a moral, useful, and active life. I never knew where to begin."

But if the book was just about this one man—or these two men, Moses and Saul—it might be limited, interesting and small, but *Herzog* is oceanic, not just about one man, or one kind of man, but about America dealing with the terrifying unraveling of the postwar narrative ("Dear General Eisenhower. In private life perhaps you have the leisure and inclination to reflect . . . The pressure of the Cold War . . ."). Which brings us to the current moment. How would Moses Herzog react to his crisis if it were happening today? Not spending hour after hour bent over yellow legal pads, writing in longhand (no one, other than my father, who is 85 and working on a memoir called *Hello, I Must Be Cohen*, writes like that anymore).

Herzog would be hunched over a laptop or an iPhone, not writing letters but texts, emails, tweets, updates to his Facebook page, tagging friends and enemies, celebrities and the famous dead. Take, for example, the most famous letter in the novel—Herzog half-deranged but still spot-on in his challenge to Heidegger. "Dear Doktor Professor Heidegger, I should like to know what you mean by the expression 'the fall into the quotidian.' When did this fall occur? Where were we standing when it happened?" That's only 184 characters, which could actually be a tweet under the new Twitter dispensation. But with its proper diction and tightly controlled, philosophically channeled Jewish anger,



***Saul Bellow, Gregory Bellow, and Jesse Reichek in Tivoli, New York, Summer 1959. (Photo courtesy of Joshua Reichek.)***

Herzog's deep, aphoristic letter doesn't sound like one. A tweet, with its acronyms and ad hominem nonthought, sounds more like this:

> Hey Marty @Dasein you Nazi Spengler-Nietzsche wannabe! GMAFB Tell us we fell into QUOTIDIAN but never say where when who with or why. Was that the SH*T you fell into in '33? #Germanphilosophysucks #cannedsauerkraut

In other words, social media is not literature, and tweeting is not writing. The text, the tweet, the post—these hasty bits of content do not give access to the deep well of the hidden mind. They can't make you better, but they can make you worse. *Herzog*, in the era of the status update, would not be a story with a happy ending.

Moses Herzog, tweeting at, instead of writing to, presidents, philosophers, friends, and enemies, would, in 2018, go from terribly bewildered to completely nuts. No one is getting saner in the Twitter storms that sweep the landscape daily, these freak weather systems of a collapsing intellectual and moral environment.

The solution is, as it's always been, literature—a quiet room in back of the crazy house, a single light burning. But we can't get to that room because we no longer have the time or patience to read those books. We've lost the habit. And the books we don't read don't get written. Welcome to postliterate America, where we are all deranged Herzogs, blasting our moods into the ether.

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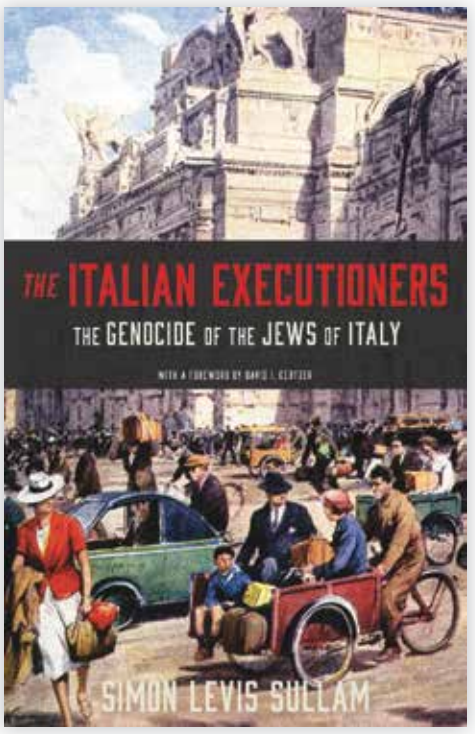
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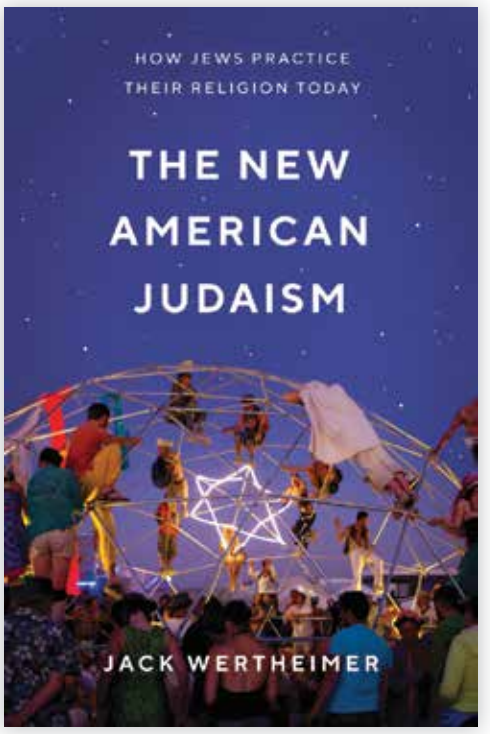
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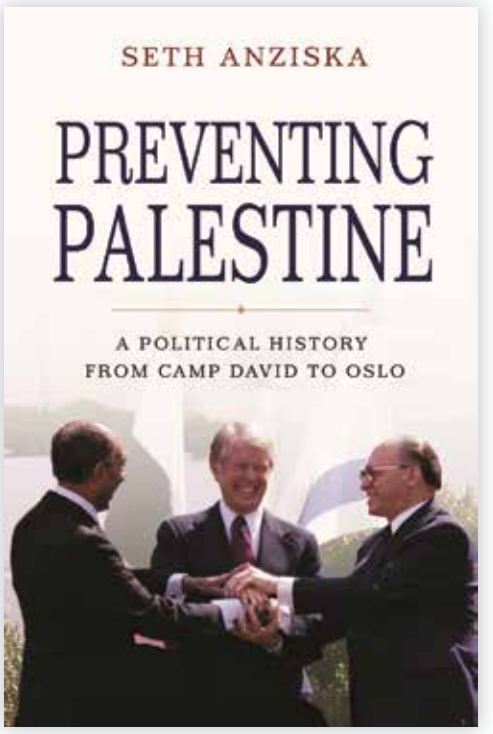

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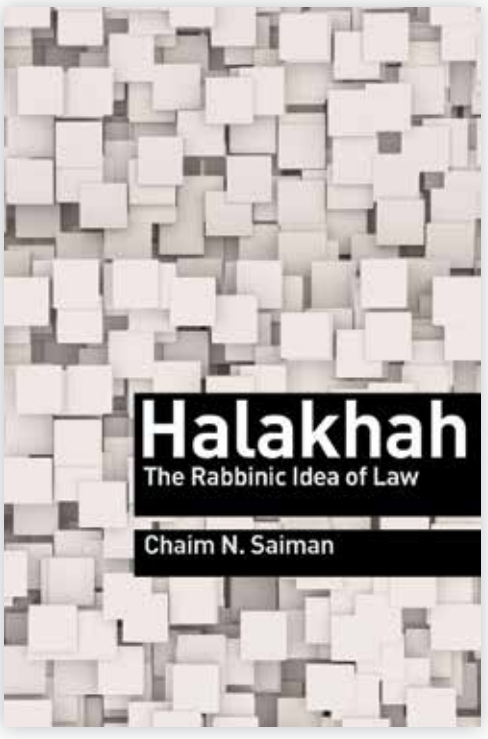

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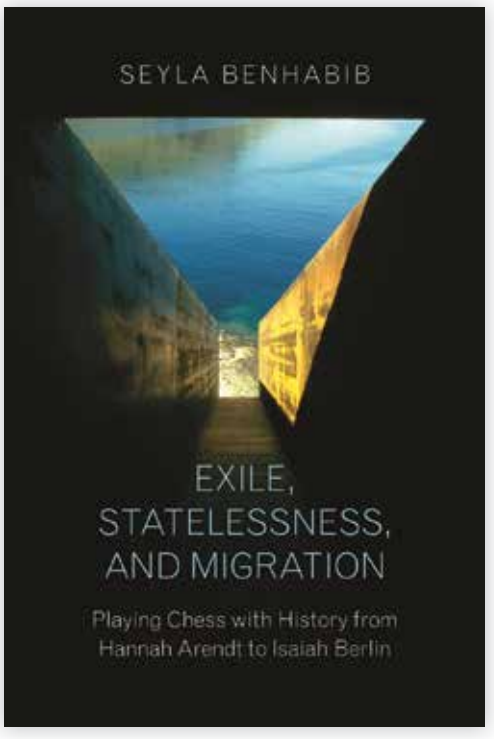

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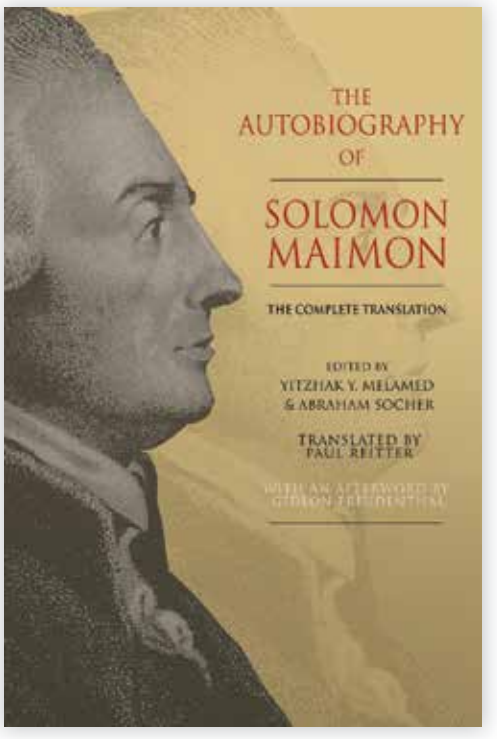

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