Eric Cohen on Ben-Gurion, Strauss, & Soloveitchik—at 29

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LETTERS

4 **Critical Powers, Pity the Poor Irisher, Evil Inkblots, Theologico-Political Query, Funny but Serious, A Day at the Races**

FEATURE

5 ERIC COHEN **Three Portraits of Jewish Excellence—at 29** *At the age of 29, David Ben-Gurion was speaking to empty halls across America for the Zionist movement and Leo Strauss was finding the "theological-political predicament" insoluble. As for Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, he was in Berlin worrying about epistemology and halakha. Three portraits of Jewish excellence in the making.*

REVIEWS

10 MICHAEL WEINGRAD **Brave New Golems** *Golem: Modern Wars and Their Monsters* by Maya Barzilai • *The Book of Esther: A Novel* by Emily Barton • *The Golem of Hollywood* by Jonathan Kellerman and Jesse Kellerman • *The Golem of Paris* by Jonathan Kellerman and Jesse Kellerman

14 ELIZABETH SHANKS ALEXANDER **The Lamp of Zion** *The Menorah: From the Bible to Modern Israel* by Steven Fine

16 ALAN MINTZ **What's *Yichus* Got to Do with It?** *The Marriage Plot: Or, How Jews Fell in Love with Love, and with Literature* by Naomi Seidman

18 BENJAMIN SILVER **Twilight of the Anti-Semites** *Nietzsche's Jewish Problem: Between Anti-Semitism and Anti-Judaism* by Robert C. Holub

22 ELISHA RUSS-FISHBANE **A Brand Rescued from the Fire** *On the Edge of the Abyss: A Polish Rabbi Speaks to His Community on the Eve of the Shoah* by Kalman Chameides, edited and translated by Leon Chameides

25 ADAM ROVNER **Back in the USSR** *Where the Jews Aren't: The Sad and Absurd Story of Birobidzhan, Russia's Jewish Autonomous Region* by Masha Gessen

27 ALLAN ARKUSH **Ike's Bet and Nasser's *Vasser*** *Ike's Gamble: America's Rise to Dominance in the Middle East* by Michael Doran

29 AMY NEWMAN SMITH **Our Kind of Traitor** *The Angel: The Egyptian Spy Who Saved Israel* by Uri Bar-Joseph, translated by David Hazony

32 JOSEPH EPSTEIN **Jokes: A Genre of Thought** *Die Laughing: Killer Jokes for Newly Old Folks* by William Novak • *Let There Be Laughter: A Treasury of Great Jewish Humor and What It All Means* by Michael Krasny

36 NEIL ROGACHEVSKY **The Genius of Bernard-Henri Lévy** *The Genius of Judaism* by Bernard-Henri Lévy, translated by Steven B. Kennedy

THE ARTS

38 SHAI SECUNDA **Bling and Beauty: Jerusalem at the Met** Jerusalem 1000–1400: Every People Under Heaven curated by Barbara Drake Boehm and Melanie Holcomb • *Jerusalem 1000–1400: Every People Under Heaven* (exhibit catalog) edited by Barbara Drake Boehm and Melanie Holcomb

40 JONATHAN KARP **A Foreign Song I Learned in Utah** *Despite all of Bob Dylan's subterfuges, disguises, and costume changes, he really was a child of the American heartland. Winning the Nobel Prize might actually be his most Jewish achievement.*

43 SARAH RINDNER **Waiting for Moshe Right** *Soon by You* created, written, directed, and produced by Leah Gottfried; co-written by Danny Hoffman; co-produced by Jessica Schechter

READING

45 DEVIN E. NAAR **Memory and Desecration in Salonica** *Memory and a vandalized memorial in a once-Jewish city on the Aegean Sea.*

LAST WORD

47 ABRAHAM SOCHER **What They Talk About When They Talk About Golems**

On the cover: *Brave New Golems* by Mark Anderson.

Critical Powers

Dara Horn's review of Cynthia Ozick's latest collection of essays ("Cynthia Ozick: Or, Immortality," Fall 2016) was wonderful—elegant and informative. It makes me want to read more of both Horn and Ozick. But please, tell me, what kind of powers does Cynthia Ozick have that she can determine anyone else's reading habits? Care to make a case for Bellow's significance? Go ahead, cite his ideas and the joy in reading his works, but to do so at the expense of his peers seems petty.

Joel Drucker
via jewishreviewofbooks.com

Pity the Poor Irisher

I greatly enjoyed Joseph Epstein's essay on Jewish prize fighters ("Jewish Pugs," Fall 2016) and would like to add an anecdote about Benny Leonard and Jewish boxers who changed their names to disguise their careers from their old-world families. Leonard was fighting someone with an Irish name and beating the hell out of him. When they fell into a clinch, the "Irisher" whispered "*Rachmonis. Rachmonis.*" Benny carried him for the rest of the fight.

Dan Rezneck
Washington, D.C.

Evil Inkblots

The meaning of the Rorschach tests administered to the defendants at the Nuremberg trials is and probably always will be ambiguous, but it is further obscured by Dr. Rothstein's decision (which may well have been that of the book under review, Dimsdale's *Anatomy of Malice*, too) to couch the problem in terms of the conflict between Douglas Kelley and Gustave Gilbert, who administered the exams. (See "Psychology at Nuremberg," Fall 2016.) Kelley's authority on the Rorschachs was hopelessly compromised, not only by the fact that he did not speak German well and had to administer the tests through an interpreter, but by the circumstances of his suicide, which revealed his appalling identification with Hermann Göring, whom he had described in his book as a "brilliant, brave, ruthless, grasping, shrewd executive."

Gilbert, for his part, though able to administer Rorschachs in German, was not well qualified to interpret them, and he made little use of them in his book, *The Psychology of Dictatorship*. He nonetheless regarded the Nuremberg records as his private property (even though he had obtained them as an officer in the U.S. Army) and they remained unpublished, despite their great historical value, for 30 years until Florence Miale and I incorporated them in our book, *The Nuremberg Mind*: *The Psychology of the Nazi Leaders*. Gilbert was so offended that we had published "his" records that he threatened to sue us and was only dissuaded from doing so when we offered to let him write the introduction to our book. Not long after our book was published, I received the text of Adolf Eichmann's Rorschach as well as his responses to a large battery of other tests (see my article, "The Murderous Mind," *The New York Times Magazine*, Nov. 27, 1977). These included many original drawings by Eichmann, which I deposited in the Library of Congress.

The broadening of the controversy over the meaning of these data was facilitated in part by the publication of Stanley Milgram's *Obedience to Authority* in 1974, which in turn had rekindled interest in Hannah Arendt's claims regarding the "banality" of Adolf Eichmann. The issue was never one of whether the Nazis were "insane," as Dr. Rothstein seems to suggest in his review. It was, rather, whether deeds of great evil are performed by "ordinary" people acting out of obedience to authority. Certain psychologists, among them Molly Harrower, whom Dr. Rothstein rather eccentrically refers to as "a revered Rorschach expert," found that the Rorschach



data, as well as Eichmann's responses to other tests, supported this viewpoint. On the other hand Florence Miale, who indeed was "revered" for her skill, found that the test data clearly led to a conclusion that the responses were those of markedly psychopathic personalities, many with extreme tendencies toward violence. The difference between these two sets of conclusions reflects in part the very different interpretive techniques employed. Harrower and her associates depended primarily on mechanistic, quantitative scoring techniques that obscure the often subtle idiosyncratic nuances that the assessment of a personality demands; Miale, on the other hand, regarded each response as a metaphor for the person who made it, and her analyses—often magnificent tours de force—consisted largely of the explication of these metaphors; they are vividly variegated portraits. Our book, which includes a chapter on Miale's technique, demonstrates her point that the correct interpretation of psychological test data depends above all on the skill of the interpreter.

Even 40 years ago, when we wrote our book, Miale and I recognized that the viewpoint advanced by Arendt and by Milgram (for all the blatant dishonesty of the former and the glaring methodological shortcomings of the latter) reflected the ideological conviction prevalent in the academic world that evil behavior is a form of social malfunction rather than the product of evil minds. It seems from Dr. Rothstein's review that this conviction remains entrenched today.

Michael Selzer
Colorado Springs, CO

Aaron Rothstein Responds:

I thank Professor Selzer for his thorough, thoughtful letter. We agree, it seems, more than we disagree. The problem of interpreting the Rorschach exams is not solely due to the conflict between Kelley and Gilbert, though that does certainly obscure matters. As I mention in the review, other confounding factors included the small sample size, the fact that the subjects were imprisoned and on trial for their lives, and the lack of common psychiatric vocabulary and standards at the time. Professor Selzer rightly points out that Kelley's use of an interpreter and his soft spot for one of the demonic giants of the 20th century played a role in obfuscating the truth, too. Setting aside the question of the validity of Rorschach tests (the evidence is tenuous and controversial), it is incredibly difficult if not impossible for a clinician to look back at these interviews and make diagnoses from them. The interviewers' biases necessarily distort our impressions—they chose to write down certain responses and, perhaps, ignore others; they asked certain questions but neglected others; and so on.

This further confirms the difficulty of locating a psychiatric trend among these monstrous Nazi *génocidaires*. Indeed, the only very clear trend is that of anti-Semitism, a product of evil minds (not just a form of social malfunction) as well as a pernicious disease which persists under various guises, creating a bizarre collection of ideological bedfellows.

Theologico-Political Query

I think that these two distinguished Orthodox rabbis are speaking past each other (see Shlomo Riskin, "Religion and Power," Summer 2016, and Shlomo Riskin and Jonathan Sacks, "Religion, Power, and Politics: An Exchange," Fall 2016). As Rabbi Riskin suggests, it appears that Rabbi Lord Sacks does not quite want to acknowledge the full implications of his insistence upon reading the separation of church and state into biblical and rabbinic Judaism so unequivocally. But has Rabbi Riskin really thought through his commitment to a Religious Zionist vision that views the state in a messianic light, however subtle, on the one hand, and his view of that same state as a liberal democracy on the other?

Talya Cohen
Tel Aviv, Israel

Funny but Serious?

With regard to Shoshana Olidort's review of the new novel by Jonathan Safran Foer, the fact is that Ms. Olidort does not want a funny novel ("There He Goes Again," Fall 2016). She wants serious. Fine, but everyone knows how unlikely it is for everybody in the room to get a joke. It seems, in fact, that Foer may be ambivalent about how comic or serious it is possible to be in our time. In that sense, his novel is a profound dramatization of ambivalence and its price. Perhaps it is more serious than even Ms. Olidort asks for.

rosenbergs1
via jewishreviewofbooks.com

A Day at the Races

During my several visits to Cleveland I have enjoyed davening at the Green Road Synagogue ("Marmorshers!," Fall 2016) without realizing the richness of its history. Its congregants certainly did not strike me as either "horse thieves" or their descendants. I have, however, davened with a minyan in my hometown of Toronto that took great pride in its unsavory heritage. It was said that each morning the men of that community in Poland would each leave their homes with a rope and come back at the end of the day with a horse attached to it. I was also told that the construction of the new synagogue building in the 1960s was financed by some particularly successful days at the racetrack.

Stan
via jewishreviewofbooks.com

Three Portraits of Jewish Excellence—at 29

BY ERIC COHEN

A few years ago, I spoke to a group of young men and women who were embarking on professional lives devoted, in one way or another, to Judaism and the Jewish people. It was a daunting task. Shuffling through their impressive CVs, I did a little math and found that their average age was 29. I began to wonder: What were some of the great Jewish figures of the last century doing at that age? In keeping with the various aspirations of the group—which were political, philosophical, and religious—I chose David Ben-Gurion, Leo Strauss, and Joseph Soloveitchik.

Of course, these were not the only plausible choices, but they were certainly among the towering figures of modern Jewry. Their achievements still reverberate far beyond the relatively small playing grounds of Palestine, or the Academy for the Science of Judaism, or Yeshiva University. And yet before they were great men, they were young men, finding their way, seeking and failing, and eventually embracing different visions of what Judaism demands of us. If these three Jews sat together in a seminar room, they would surely disagree on many things, including the most ultimate things. But they all led lives worthy of admiration. They all led lives of Jewish consequence. And my hope was that the young Jews in the audience might learn something meaningful from an encounter with Jewish excellence in the making.

The man who became Ben-Gurion was a Zionist from the beginning, as Michael Bar-Zohar recounts in the opening lines of his biography:

> David was barely eleven, a pale Jewish boy wearing a long black gown in the Plonsk synagogue, when he first heard that the Messiah had arrived. He was a handsome man, they said, with proud, burning eyes and a black beard. His name was Theodor Herzl, and he would lead the people of Israel back to the land of their forefathers. With the innocence of childhood, David believed the story and instantly became a fervent follower of the Zionism which was sweeping the Jewish world. The seeds of that Zionist faith had already been sown on his early childhood, when he sat on his grandfather's knee and learned the Hebrew language, word by word, from Zvi Aryeh Gruen; when he listened to his father, Avigdor Gruen, one of the local leaders of the Hovevei Zion ("Lovers of Zion"), a forerunner of the nascent Zionist movement. While still a child, David Gruen decided that one day he would make his home in the Land of Israel.

The young David Gruen joined his father in the activities of Hovevei Zion. Later, he recalled reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which inspired him "with a sense of horror at slavery, subjugation, and dependency." At age 14, he helped found the Ezra Society, which encouraged the young Jewish boys of Plonsk to speak with pride the Hebrew language that was their true birthright.

After his successful Cleveland speech, Ben-Gurion was sent out on a second North American tour. And while he still often spoke to half-empty rooms, there were flashes of a political force of nature in the making.

In what has to be one of the great unanswered letters of modern Jewish history, David's father wrote the following lines to Theodor Herzl in 1901:



Young David Ben-Gurion gives a speech. (Illustrations by Mark Anderson.)

> Leader of our people, spokesman of the nation, Dr Herzl, who stands before kings! I have resolved that I shall pour out my heart to his highness . . . [Though I am] the youngest of the thousands of Israel, God has blessed me with a superior son, diligent in his studies. Still in the prime of his youthful years, about fifteen, his belly is [already] filled with learning, and in addition to our tongue, the Hebrew language, he also knows the language of the state, the lore of mathematics, and more, and his soul yearns for study. But every school is sealed before him, for he is a Jew. I have resolved to send him abroad, to study science, and several people have advised me to send him to Vienna, where there is also a center for Jewish learning, a college for rabbis. Thus I have resolved to bring this account before my lord, that he may commend my son and [also that I may] enjoy the benefit of my lord's advice and sagacity. For who is a mentor like unto him, and who, if not he, can advise me what to do? For I am powerless to maintain my son, whom I love like the apple of my eye.

So how did this young Zionist, apple of his father's eye, end up in New York on May 16, 1915, just a few months before his 29th birthday? By way of Palestine, where he spent his late teens and early twenties working the land ("Hebrew labor on Hebrew soil," was his motto); then Jerusalem, where he became a young editor of *Ahdut*, the official journal of the Poalei Zion; then Salonica, where he went to study law, believing that the new Jewish homeland would emerge as part of the Ottoman empire. Along the way, he suffered various illnesses; he mastered many languages; and he read history, philosophy, and literature like a madman. Just as World War I broke out, he returned to Palestine on a "ramshackle Russian vessel" that was chased by two German warships, only to discover what his biographer describes as "a scene of despair and disintegration," with "the whole settlement project . . . in danger of destruction." He was soon deported from Palestine by the Turks, whom he still believed would eventually resume control of the land and under whose authority he believed he would soon return.

Shortly after his arrival in the United States, Ben-Gurion began his first tour through North America, trying to recruit a new wave of American Jewish pioneers—a "labor army"—to replenish and strengthen the Jewish communities of Palestine. This was, one might say, the future political founder of the Jewish State's first real political campaign—on the road, going from city to city, in search of followers. He did not find many.

Many of the branches of Poalei Zion elected not to invite him at all, more interested in speakers who could reminisce in Yiddish about life in the Old Country and thus help raise funds for their local work rather than trying to recruit away idealists to Palestine. In the cities he visited on his first tour—Buffalo, Detroit, Toronto, Montreal—he spoke to mostly empty rooms and managed to sign up only a few volunteers. The trip was a failure, and it showed how little Ben-Gurion understood the situation and sensibilities of the American Jews he was aiming to enlist.

In September 1915, Poalei Zion held its convention in Cleveland, where Ben-Gurion gave a long address setting forth his views:

> We shall receive our land not from a peace conference . . . but from the Jewish workers who shall come to strike roots in the country, revive it, and live in it. The Land of Israel shall be ours when a majority of its workers and guardsmen shall be of our people.

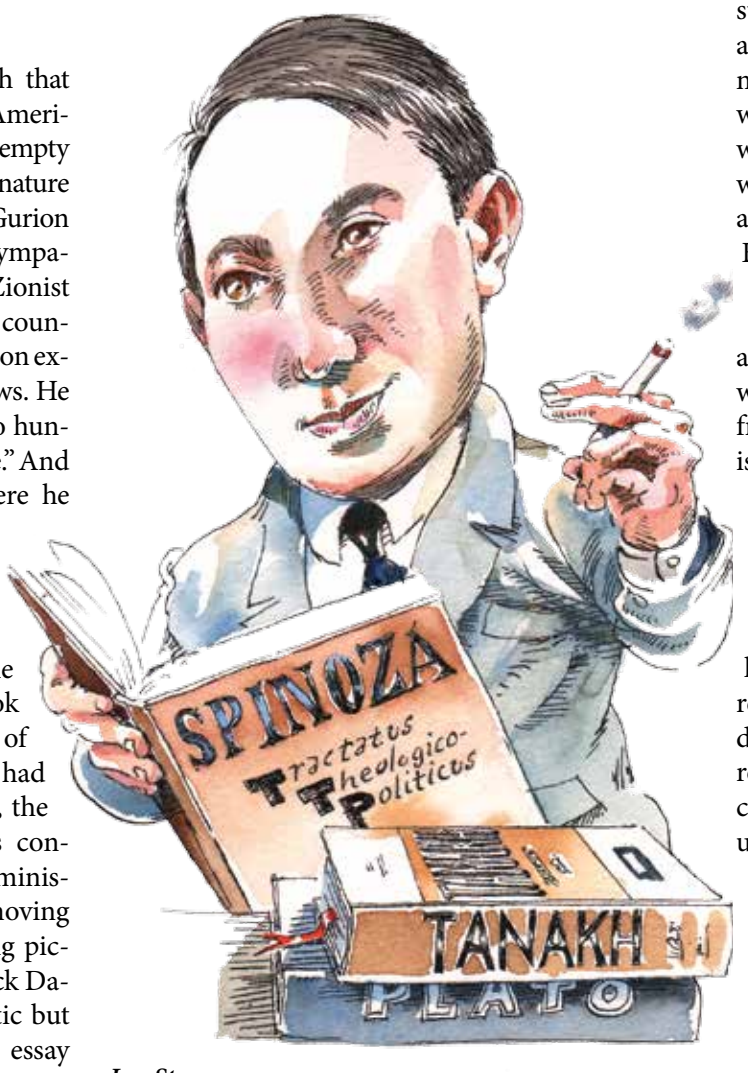
The Cleveland speech was successful enough that Ben-Gurion was sent out on a second North American tour. And while he still often spoke to half-empty rooms, there were flashes of a political force of nature in the making: in Minneapolis, where Ben-Gurion single-handedly beat back a faction of Bund sympathizers. In Galveston, Texas, where "an anti-Zionist took the floor and alleged that Palestine was a country full of graves, beggars, and idlers. Ben-Gurion exploded, and the audience almost came to blows. He managed, however, to gain control of the two hundred Jews present and win them over to his side." And finally, on his last stop in Milwaukee, where he met a young woman named Goldie Mabovitch, who later became Golda Meir. On March 24, 1916, the 29-year-old Ben-Gurion returned to New York.

While Ben-Gurion was on the road, the party was organizing the publication of a book in Yiddish, to be called *Yizkor*, "in memory of the works and watchmen in Palestine who had given their lives in the service of Hashomer, the Jewish defense organization." Ben-Gurion's contribution to the book, entitled "Selected Reminiscences—From Petah Tikva to Sejera," was a moving tribute to his comrades. It is also a revealing picture of how the young, pioneering, love-struck David Gruen transformed into the still idealistic but reality-chastened David Ben-Gurion. The essay opens with his arrival in Jaffa as a member of the Second Aliyah (1904–1914), and then his immediate departure to the colony of Petah Tikvah:

> We were all lively, bold, and unspoiled, full of enthusiasm, carefree and full of joy. We felt rejuvenated, reborn, having left the small dirty alleyways far, far behind us to live among gardens and orchards. Here everything was different—nature, life, and work, even the trees. . . . No more books and squeezing the benches and empty mental gymnastics—we work. We not only work, we conquer—the soil, life.

Ben-Gurion eventually left for Sejera (now Ilaniya), in the Galilee. "Here," he wrote, "I felt the Land of Israel." He continued:

> But here, too, the ideal was blemished because though the workers were all Jews, the watchmen were not. You didn't notice this in Judea, where things were quiet, but the Galilee was more dangerous, filled with envious and armed Arab neighbors. In these circumstances security depended entirely on our watchmen, and yet were we to behave here as we had in our exile [*goles*], hiring others to protect us and our property? We approached the administration and the Jewish farmers and tried to sell them on the principle of Jewish self-defense, but they rejected it as impractical and dangerous. "The dismissed Arab watchmen would not keep silent, but will attack and rob us. . . . We are few and weak, surrounded by strangers and enemies. Under these conditions, is it possible to arrest anyone?" But we demanded our national dignity, the honor of our ideal. Was our life and our honor to depend on others here as well?



Leo Strauss as a young man.

The concluding section of Ben-Gurion's essay—the most powerful and the most political—describes the events of Passover 1909. "Sejera, first to institute a Jewish watch, was also the first to experience its casualties." Tensions had risen all of the previous year over border disputes between the Jewish colony and the neighboring Arab village. The communal Seder was interrupted by a young man who reported having been attacked on his way. He and his companions had shot and killed one of their Arab attackers, who died the following day in the hospital in Nazareth. The expected repercussions were not long in coming.

Ben-Gurion was chairing a session of a Labor Zionist conference that was taking place during the weekdays of the festival when reports came of attacks on the settlement's herds and sabotage of the fields. The Jews fought back, leading to a bloody confrontation in which two members of Sejera were fatally wounded. As Ben-Gurion remembers:

> In the large hall, where we had conducted the Seder, the two men were laid out in sheets. There they spent the night. The next day we did not go to work. We had to dig a large grave for the two victims, for our two comrades. Silently we carried them on our shoulders from the hall to the Sejera cemetery and there, without eulogies, we laid them together in the grave. . . . Together they had lived in Sejera, in the Jewish village, with a single hope working for a single goal, and together they fell. So they will rest forever. One was a watchman, the other a colonist, both in Eretz Israel—precious and hallowed.

The book in which this essay appeared was a success, and Ben-Gurion's essay quickly made him a celebrity within the movement that just a few months earlier had mostly ignored him. And so it was, just a year later, that the empty halls of Buffalo were replaced by the Great Hall at Cooper Union, where Ben-Gurion addressed two thousand people at a November 29, 1917 conference celebrating the Balfour Declaration. There, he won passage of the following resolution, which he had personally drafted: "We solemnly pledge to follow in the path and continue the work of our courageous pioneers, workers, and watchmen who gave their lives for the freedom and revival of the Jewish people in the Jewish land." It was a pledge he would indeed fulfill.

In the mid-to-late 1920s, when Ben-Gurion was a Zionist leader on the rise, building the Histadrut and helping to found Mapai, a twenty-something intellectual named Leo Strauss was living in Germany, as he would later famously recall, "in the grip of the theological-political predicament." Strauss grew up in rural Germany in a religiously observant, if not theologically sophisticated, home—"sing[ing] [the *zemirot*] as a child in utter ignorance of their 'background,'" as he later remembered in a letter to Gershom Scholem.

The young Strauss was given a classical German humanist education. As he recalled:

> Furtively I read Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. When I was sixteen and we read [the Platonic dialogue] *Laches* in school, I formed the plan, or the wish, to spend my life reading Plato and breeding rabbits while earning my livelihood as a rural postmaster. Without being aware of it, I had moved rather far away from my Jewish home, without any rebellion. When I was seventeen, I was converted to Zionism—to simple, straightforward political Zionism.

In those early years, Strauss was especially drawn to the Revisionist Zionism of Jabotinsky, not the Labor Zionism of Ben-Gurion. He was involved in Zionist youth groups and wrote for various Zionist publications. Zionism was his political passion. But as he entered his twenties, Strauss's Zionism was also the occasion for reflection on the theological-political predicament—first and foremost, as a Jewish problem, and increasingly, as a

way of seeing the human problem in its modern face. What began as a search for "a Jewish center of gravity," in thought and in politics, led Strauss to a full-scale reconsideration of the divide between philosophy and faith, belief and unbelief, Jerusalem and Athens—and, as it originally appeared to him then, the stark choice between orthodoxy and atheism.

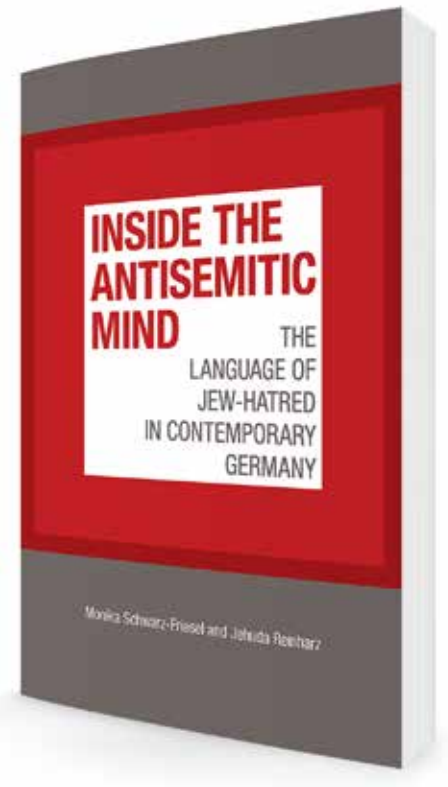
Strauss had discovered the terms of his mature philosophical life: to think in the tradition of Athens while being haunted by the claims of Jerusalem.

So what was Strauss's theological-political predicament? In Weimar Germany, at the supposed height of Jewish emancipation within German society and the assimilation of Jews to German culture, Strauss observed two problems: the continued force of anti-Jewish discrimination and the fact that assimilation seemed to require a Jewish betrayal of the Jewish past. For both these reasons, the most spirited young Jews—Jews who rejected the passive submission of orthodoxy and balked at the indignity of assimilation—turned to political Zionism as a superior answer to the Jewish problem. They sought the re-founding of the Jewish nation, and they aimed to restore Jewish pride.

But it was here that Strauss discovered the second layer of his theological-political problem—the fact that political Zionism was empty without a Zionist culture and that the only true Zionist culture—a culture that was authentically rooted in the true story of the Jewish people—was traditional Judaism. This realization led Strauss to ask a series of radical questions: Is orthodoxy, in fact, the only real answer to the Jewish problem, and is it still plausible or desirable in the modern age? Is political Zionism doomed to failure because it has no deeper roots in the divine call of the Jews? In a 1928 essay provoked by Sigmund Freud's recently published work *The Future of an Illusion*, the 29-year-old Leo Strauss lays this all out with great clarity and tremendous urgency:

> Given the inadequacy of Herzl's Zionism, which expressed itself most clearly in his *Old-New Land*, cultural Zionism had an easy position to defend. There was something convincing in the consideration that whoever affirms the Jewish people necessarily affirms its spirit, and therefore necessarily affirms the culture in which its spirit revealed itself. From the affirmation of national culture some proceeded to the affirmation of the national tradition of the Law; among these were certainly a few who did not fully realize that this law claims to be divine law. The believers cleared the way from their side. How often have we heard that what Judaism calls for is not belief but action, namely, the fulfillment of the Law. But what the believer praises as a hearkening and a believing that arises from doing is to the unbeliever a slippery slope into belief, a numbing of conscience, and self-deception. No one can believe in God for the sake of his nation;

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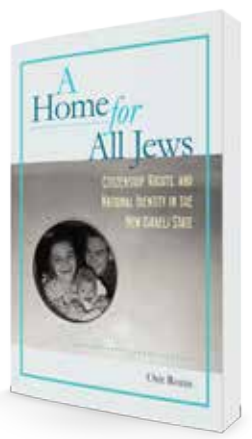


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> no one can fulfill the law for national reasons. It is bad enough that even today one must still waste words on the thoughtlessness that follows this path. But can one remain standing at the affirmation of national culture? Cultural Zionism leads up to the question that is posed by and through the Law, and then it capitulates, yielding either to resolute belief or to resolute unbelief. . . . This struggle is ancient; it is "the eternal and sole theme of the entire history of the world and of man."

Could the stakes be any higher? Strauss's main focus during his late twenties, from the years 1925 to 1928, was a book-length study of Spinoza's critique of religion, as it was crystallized in his *Theological-Political Treatise*. He was a young fellow of the Academy for the Science of Judaism, which expected him to write a conventional, value-free scholarly study of Spinoza as a biblical critic. This is not the book Strauss would write, much to the chagrin of his main patron, the historian of philosophy Julius Guttmann. Strauss sought, instead, to try to recover the original plain of battle between philosophy and revelation, belief and unbelief.

Provoked into the depths of thought by the combination of his political predicament and intellectual temperament, Strauss had discovered the terms of his mature philosophical life: to think in the tradition of Athens while being continually haunted by the claims of Jerusalem. The 29-year-old author of *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* argued that Spinoza had not in fact disproven orthodoxy at all, since the pious believer appeals to a source of authority, grounded in revelation, that reason has no right to judge, and to a set of beliefs about the divine creation of the world and the human need for redemption that reason cannot refute. Moreover, the enlightenment of Spinoza and his successors rested on a foundational premise—man's capacity to guide his own life by the light of human reason alone—that was itself highly questionable. It rested on a faith in man's capacity to conquer nature through science, a faith that seemed likely to achieve proximate successes but ultimate failure. All this led Strauss to wonder whether or not the new atheism—Nietzsche's atheism—perhaps showed us the world as it really was. In that same 1928 essay on Freud, he wrote:

> Long ago it was decided that the terribleness of belief is not an objection to belief; now unbelief has also matured enough to arrive at the insight that the probably desperate situation into which man has been brought by unbelief in no way justifies belief. Much is gained when the despair, the hopelessness, the helplessness of man, when "the misery of man without God," when the restlessness, the lack of peace, the staleness and shallowness of life without God are no longer an objection to unbelief; when it no longer seems impossible that truth and depth are opposites, that only illusion has meaning.

But Strauss did not accept that the only choice, the ultimate choice, was between biblical orthodoxy and modern atheism. He looked instead to ancient and medieval philosophy as a way to recover a more human search for the best way of life—a quest that began, as philosophy always begins, from reflection upon one's particular condition. As Strauss himself put it a few years later in his first important work on Maimonides:

> The situation thus formed, the present situation appears to be insoluble for the Jew who cannot be orthodox and who must consider purely political Zionism, the only "solution to the Jewish problem" possible on the basis of atheism, as a resolution that is indeed highly honorable but not, in earnest and in the long run, adequate. The situation not only appears insoluble but actually is so, as long as one clings to modern premises.

The 17-year-old Zionist had become a 30-year-old Athenian—yet always respectful of the claims of Jewish law that he himself could not bring himself to obey, forever awed by the claims of revelation that he himself could not accept, and deeply aware that, in choosing his path, he still could not transcend the terrors and responsibilities of Jewish history.

If Strauss was a philosophic "Jew who *cannot* be orthodox," can one speak of a philosophic Jew who *must* be orthodox? The young Joseph Soloveitchik was heir to a great rabbinic family, and already such a master of the talmudic tradition that his grandfather would supposedly rise when the teenaged Soloveitchik entered the room. And yet, even at this young age, he already seemed to have philosophical questions and doubts that led him to doctoral studies in 1920s Berlin. In *Between Berlin and Slobodka*, a fascinating account of the intellectual journeys of six modern Jewish figures, Hillel Goldberg introduces Soloveitchik as follows:

> Born in 1903 to Rabbi Moses Soloveitchik, Joseph Baer Soloveitchik . . . grew to manhood in a household whose supreme value was intellection and in which secular studies were, on the surface, both superfluous and anathema. For twelve years his father educated him rigorously in the critico-conceptual talmudic method of his grandfather, but his mother . . . surreptitiously introduced her son to Hebrew, Russian, and Scandinavian literature. Primarily at the urging of his mother he received a secular education in his latter teens under private tutors and then, when he was 22, enrolled in the University of Berlin—a transition that, because of his unusual talmudic talent, reverberated as a shock and betrayal in most of the Soloveitchik side of the family.

As Goldberg recounts, Soloveitchik was one of "a cluster of young intellectuals"—including Abraham Joshua Heschel, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, and Isaac Hutner—who converged in Berlin at the time and who struggled to define the relationship between "a discrete and complex religious tradition, proudly affirmed" and the ideas of modern, Western thought. "Not even Philo of Alexandria or Maimonides and Judah ha-Levi . . . had embodied so sudden and drastic a shift from an indigenous, affectively as well as religiously enveloping Orthodoxy to the heart of Gentile culture, as did these iconoclasts. Save Abraham Joshua Heschel, Rabbi Soloveitchik remained in Berlin longer than any of them."

Soloveitchik's decision to go to Berlin has remained mired in controversy within the Orthodox world, a controversy that mirrors the larger debate within that community about the worth of so-called "secular knowledge." Rav Soloveitchik still awaits his great biographer, but to make at least provisional sense of those years, and what they have to do with the thinker and teacher that Soloveitchik would become, two questions seem central: Why did he write an incredibly difficult, highly technical, philosophically abstract dissertation on Hermann Cohen's neo-Kantian epistemology? And who was Rabbi Hayyim Heller?

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I leave it to the professionals to fully characterize Soloveitchik's critique of Hermann Cohen, but at least part of the difference between them lies in how they understand what we experience in the world as actuality, as what is real, as what is lived. According to Soloveitchik, *thought* does not generate *being*, since being is the "original datum" for thought and thus transcends thought. For those who want the real thing—it has never been translated into English, by the way—here is a little taste of the 29-year-old's dissertation:

> That Being reaches only to the objects of judgment is, according to the consequent-idealistic conception, self-evident, but that does not justify us in equating the two concepts. The specific character of the object of judgment certainly exists in its posited reality but in order to form such an object the validity of the category of being must already be presupposed. Otherwise we would miss the unique and characteristic aspects of the object of judgment. The complete spiritual functions, not merely the cognitive judgments, are intentional acts, which are directed to the objects. Feeling and willing point to affective and volitional objects. Emotional thinking as an intentional act takes an objective form. That which is unique in the object of judgment insists on its full title to being. Being must count, therefore, as an original datum of thought, which first grounds the object of judgment and lends it dignity. In order to ground Being, the postulate of a transcendent component is unavoidable.

One way to interpret this phase of Soloveitchik's life and thought is to treat his doctoral work as a purely technical dissertation that might as well have been in mathematical physics—a branch of secular learning walled off from the heart of Jewish theological and moral teachings. This seems to me

misguided, though some in the Orthodox world make this move, when they aren't busy pretending that Soloveitchik only went to Berlin to avoid the Polish military draft. The other way is to treat the dissertation as Soloveitchik's effort to clear the philosophical brush—to write an "epistemological prologue," as the scholar Reinier Munk described it—so that he might go on to articulate a new philosophy of mind and man out of the sources of halakha that could hold its ground in the modern world.

And this, it seems to me, is the heart of the connection between the Berlin dissertation of the 29-year-old Soloveitchik and the more mature works—*The Halakhic Mind* and *Halakhic Man*—that he would complete in the mid-1940s: In his view, there is a unified phenomenon of being, in which subjective experience and objective reality become one. This unity of being is embodied in its highest form in the halakha, as a way of life that is lived and an order of reality that is both given and made, revealed and fashioned, through the apprehending-and-creating work of the halakhic mind. As Soloveitchik would later write:

> No worshipper has ever isolated the idea of God from the concrete world, and placed it in some immaculate transcendental sphere. The religious experience is a composite phenomenon involving not only God but the ego and the sensuous environment of the *homo religiosus*. He seeks direct contact and close companionship with God and perceives Him not in a transcendent glory, alien and sometimes hostile to the world, but in His full proximity and immanence. He views God from the aspect of His creation; and the first response to such an idea is a purified desire to penetrate the mystery of phenomenal reality. The cognition of this world is of the innermost essence of the religious experience.

As he boldly declares in the last sentence of this work, *The Halakhic Mind*, "out of the sources of halakha, a new world view awaits formulation."

While we know relatively little about Soloveitchik's life and routine during his years in Berlin, we do know that he continued to "learn" in the traditional Jewish sense of the word and that, in this, he found his guide in Rabbi Hayyim Heller. Heller was himself both a master talmudist of the Lithuanian school (like Soloveitchik he had been acclaimed as an *illui*, a prodigy) and a modern historical scholar. To see Rabbi Heller as Soloveitchik saw him is to understand the very nature of piety and tradition as Soloveitchik aspired to them. This world view is captured movingly in Soloveitchik's eulogy of Heller, who ended up teaching alongside Soloveitchik in the Rabbi Isaac Elachanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University and died in New York, at the age of 80, in 1960. It not only beautifully evokes the spirit of the man who so influenced Soloveitchik in those Berlin years, it captures the way of being in the world that Soloveitchik would devote his life to defending.

> When the [God-seeking] few must struggle against the [spiritually impoverished] many, the need to draw courage from the living tradition as it is reified in a real personality attired in the majesty of time—a mediation, a bridge between fathers and sons, between strength and weakness—becomes much greater. Under such conditions, the trembling, wrinkled hand-shake with its rhythm of generations; the fatherly or motherly glance in which abides the mystery of the past; the strains of a tremulous voice, in which is preserved the silence of Eternity; tales of strange and wondrous persons, of events wrapped in the mist of passing time—these can turn the balance in favor of the holy against the profane. . . . Only such a man, a prophet of God, a vestige of an ancient era, a remnant of the scribes of the past, could fortify weak knees and revive the hearts of the despondent.



Joseph Soloveitchik.

> Rav Hayyim [was such a man], a remnant of the scribes. A spark from the soul of Ahiya ha-Shiloni, who had clung to Moses as a child, sank into his soul. As long as Rav Hayyim was with us, among us, there existed a strong tie between us and earlier generations. When he went away, the knot was undone. . . . When I visited him at home, on the West Side of Manhattan, with its congeries of bustling, hollow, Jewish life; with its synagogues, societies, clubs, and their auxiliaries, I always felt as if I were entering another world, as if I had breached some border separating two realms of being—the domain of earlier generations, of Shakh, Taz, and Gra, and that of modern Orthodoxy, with its snipped wings and rootlessness, unable to fathom the depths of religious experience. . . . Moved by old, forgotten tales, he chuckled and sorrowed with his heroes. Images he described came to life, pushed their way into his modest room. Do you know where this power came from? Not from any art of speech or imagery! He never used a metaphor. He lived the events he recounted. He himself belonged to those generations, whose greatness he transmitted to us. . . . O he was a remnant of the ancient scribes.

What he said in Heller's name we can now say of Soloveitchik—"my eyes are to God and His *Shekhina;* I will not cease seeking; otherwise my life is frenzied and tempest-tossed. The distance enchants, captures my heart, dragging me onward, onward." Such is the soul of the lonely man of faith, *homo religiosus*.

There is, of course, much more to say about Ben-Gurion, Strauss, and Soloveitchik, both individually and in comparison with one another. Each of them was a deep and original reader of the Hebrew Bible; each of them grappled with modern philosophy; and each of them experienced early successes as well as early failures—be it Ben-Gurion in the empty halls of Buffalo, or Strauss when his Spinoza book was censored and delayed by his unhappy patrons, or Soloveitchik when he was offered and then refused a position in Jewish theology in Chicago. Yet to really understand the Jewish spirits of these men—and the differing marks they left on Jewish history—one should see them in the biblical light in which they saw themselves. And so permit me to conclude with a brief sermon, a *drasha*.

Although rabbinic tradition imagines him as much older, it is not implausible to think of Moses as a young man when he encountered the burning bush, if not precisely 29, not far from it. Seeing the bush aflame yet unconsumed, Moses does what philosophers and scientists have always done: He asks a question and seeks by his own powers to find an answer. "I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn't the bush burn up?" This is Spinoza's Moses, who treats God's call as an invitation to thought. But the story, of course, does not end there. The second Moses in this short passage is the Moses who "hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God." In his piety, he lies prostrate before the Almighty, creator of all, whose ways are not his ways and whose powers he cannot fully fathom but to which he knows he must submit. This is Soloveitchik's *homo religiosus* par excellence.

The final Moses is Moses the liberator, a politicial leader in the best and highest sense of the word, who comes to see the suffering of his people not as a reason to ask, or a reason to submit, but as a commandment to *act*. "Come, therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh, and *you* shall free My people, the Israelites, from Egypt." So God demands, and eventually Moses accepts the responsibility of leading his nation.

We can admire—and we should—Ben-Gurion's statesmanship, Strauss's wisdom, and Soloveitchik's piety. But perhaps only Moses—the greatest Israelite of all—knew all three facets of Jewish excellence from the inside, and so he remains the enduring exemplar for Jewish leaders of every age, on whose shoulders and ours the Jewish story continues.

Eric Cohen is the executive director of The Tikvah Fund and author of In the Shadow of Progress: Being Human in the Age of Technology *(Encounter).*

Brave New Golems

BY MICHAEL WEINGRAD

Golem: Modern Wars and Their Monsters
by Maya Barzilai
New York University Press, 288 pp., $35

The Book of Esther: A Novel
by Emily Barton
Tim Duggan Books, 432 pp., $27

The Golem of Hollywood
by Jonathan Kellerman and Jesse Kellerman
Jove, 688 pp., $9.99

The Golem of Paris
by Jonathan Kellerman and Jesse Kellerman
G. P. Putnam's Sons, 528 pp., $9.99

There is a good chance that a golem is lurking near you at this very moment. You won't see it, though, unless you're viewing your surroundings through your smartphone's Pokémon GO app. As over 100 million players know, the game challenges one to capture virtual creatures stationed in physical locations across the globe. True, the Pokémon golem looks more like a dinosaur than the foreboding, helmet-headed colossus that has dominated visual portrayals of the golem since Paul Wegener's famous silent film of 1920. But that's the way of golems these days. As pop culture monsters they don't have the cachet of zombies or vampires, but they are all over the place: in film and television, video games and comic books, and a continuous stream of novels both highbrow and popular. And while in most cases these golems are explicitly connected with Jews, in some of the recent incarnations the relation to the golem legend, or to anything Jewish at all, is, at best, tenuous.

Of course, what we usually think of as the golem legend in its classical form—a magically created humanoid who does the bidding of a kabbalist—does not have especially deep roots in Jewish tradition. The word itself occurs only once in the Bible, and refers to the unformed state of the human being before being shaped into life by God:

> My frame was not hidden from Thee, when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Thine eyes did see mine unformed substance [*golmi*], and in Thy book they were all written. (Psalms 139:15–16)

In the Talmud we first encounter the idea that magical or divine energies can be used to create artificial life. "Rava created a man," we read, "and sent him to Rabbi Zera" (Sanh. 65b) who returns the unspeaking automaton to dust, but it's a one-off story and hardly a focus of interest in later rabbinic literature. Among the Jews of medieval France and Germany there are references to the magical creation of artificial beings, but, according to Gershom Scholem, even in this period the creation of a golem was primarily a mystical exercise that, significantly, did not involve making an animate servant. Rather, in forming a human shape from clay the ritual allowed the mystic to enter into ecstatic contemplation of God's creative powers. According to Scholem, "the golem, no sooner created, is dissolved again into dust: with the initiation of the Talmudist it has served its purpose, which is purely psychic."

We begin as golems, before God and the sorrows of history etch their letters onto our brows.



Paul Wegener in* The Golem: How He Came Into the World, *directed by Carl Boese and Paul Wegener, 1920. (AF Archive / Alamy Stock Photo.)

The familiar version of the golem story takes place in Prague, where the creature is brought to life by the Maharal, the 16th-century rabbi Judah Loew, in order to protect the Jewish community from Christian violence. In some versions of the tale, the Maharal animates the golem by placing a scroll in its mouth; in others, he inscribes Hebrew letters on the golem's forehead. Having either served its purpose or gotten out of control, the golem is later deactivated by removing the parchment from its mouth or by erasing one of the letters on its brow, turning the word *emet* (truth) into *met* (dead). And yet this story does not take shape before the 17th century, well after the death of the Maharal who, in historical fact, never claimed to have created a golem despite these latter-day legends and the current enthusiasm of the Czech tourist industry.

Indeed, the modern popularity of the story owes far more to non-Jewish writers in the 19th and early 20th centuries than to any Jewish preoccupation with golems. Important milestones are the 1808 publication by Jacob Grimm of a golem legend as part of his researches into European folklore; the Austrian writer Gustav Meyrink's best-selling novel of a sinister and otherworldly Prague, first published in serial form beginning in 1913; and Wegener's captivating film, which was actually one of three golem movies he produced between 1914 and 1920, the first sci-fi trilogy in cinematic history (though the first two films were lost).

The most popular rendition of the golem story by any Jewish creator during this period was a collection of tales first published in Hebrew in 1909 by the Polish rabbi Yudl Rosenberg, who claimed that his book was based on a rare early-17th-century manuscript in his possession. In fact, there was no such manuscript and *The Wondrous Deeds of the Maharal of Prague* was largely Rosenberg's own invention, a cycle of adventure stories in which Rabbi Loew and his sidekick, the golem Yossele, repeatedly defeat the nefarious schemes of the anti-Semitic priest Thaddeus to frame the Jewish community of Prague with blood libel accusations. And so, while the golem is taken as a metaphor for Jewish authenticity and folk tradition itself, its actual history is rather modern and Christian.

To these observations, I would add a further, perhaps controversial point. As monsters go, golems are pretty boring. Mute, crudely fashioned household servants and protectors, in essence they're not much different from the brooms in the "Sorcerer's Apprentice" story best known today from Walt Disney's *Fantasia*. Appropriately, in Yiddish the word means a blockhead or dunce. Since the beginning of the 20th century, there have been attempts to see in the golem story an image of technology run amok: a precursor to robots, computers, weapons of mass

destruction, clones, and genetic engineering. Yet these metaphorical connections, while suggestive, leave the simple clay of the golem story itself far behind. Similarly, it is sometimes imagined that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was inspired by the golem story, but the juxtaposition is itself telling: Shelley's monster became an icon of romanticism because of its rending self-consciousness, its loneliness and eloquence—in short, everything that the golem typically lacks. It is not surprising that the most famous golem novel, Meyrink's *The Golem,* and the most brilliant modern literary work to feature the golem, H. Leyvik's Yiddish play of the same title, each tend to ignore the classic golem story and focus on other themes.

We have, then, a bit of a puzzle. Golems are dull and Judaically marginal. Yet they continue to proliferate in popular culture and, moreover, are taken to be the quintessence of Jewish fantasy. Why?

One reason for the attraction of the golem is that it has served as a charged metaphor for Jews and Judaism themselves, reflecting the biases of Christian writers who first took this obscure story and popularized it in the course of the 1800s, as well as attempts by later artists, Jewish and Christian alike, to reframe the figure in more positive terms.

Golems, after all, are ugly, crude, lumbering clods of earth. They are of limited utility, cannot think for themselves or can do so only in the most literal-minded fashion, and must not be allowed to get out of hand. They are, in short, a classically negative Christian imagining of Judaism itself: unlovely, slightly threatening, and hopelessly literal and earthbound. The golem is a perfectly Pauline figure for Judaism as crude and unimaginative materialism, the dominance of the letter (in this case, the Hebrew letters famously inscribed on the golem's brow) over the spirit.

Further, as Cathy Gelbin notes in her 2010 study *The Golem Returns: From German Romantic Literature to Global Jewish Culture, 1808–2008*, the 19th-century emergence of the golem story in European literature resonated with questions that were being asked about Jews at the time, in particular how fully human (and thus worthy of citizenship) they were. Or, in the context of romantic nationalism, whether Jews were capable of true artistic creation, or whether, like makers of golems, they could produce only weak, soulless artifacts. Jewish writers responded in turn by presenting the golem legend as proof of Jewish national creativity and the possession of a popular folk culture.

This is not to suggest that Pokémon GO is a meditation on the Jewish Question, but the golem still crops up in interesting, sometimes unsettling ways. Take, for instance, the 2004 novel *Iron Council* by the celebrated British author China Miéville. Miéville, thought by many to be one of the most significant fantasy writers working today, is a socialist, and *Iron Council* is a meditation on the dream of violent revolution, rendered in a steampunk sci-fi idiom. Interestingly, the main character and leader of the revolution is a golem-maker named Judah Low—though this one inhabits the labyrinthine megalopolis New Crobuzon rather than Prague.

In fact, *Iron Council* seems to be awash in Jews—the novel's revolutionaries refer to each other as "chaver," Low's main disciple is named Uri, and the novel's villain is named Jacobs. Yet Miéville himself is an outspoken anti-Israel propagandist. The novel may therefore tell us something not only about revolutionary politics as Miéville sees it, but about the place of Jews in the progressive imagination today, especially in the context of the ongoing metastasization of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism within the British Left. Miéville's Judah Low is the last, best hope of the revolutionaries, yet at the end of the novel he betrays the revolution. Fearing that his comrades on the barricades will be massacred by the bosses and their militia, Low "saves" them by enveloping them in a "time golem," to be forever frozen a split second before the present. Low protests that he was only trying to rescue those he loves, but his outraged comrades indict him:

> [W]e were never yours, Judah. We were something real, and we came in our time, and we made our decision, and it was *not yours*. Whether we were right or wrong, it was *our* history. You were never our augur, Judah. Never our saviour.

Thus radical fantasy in the 21st century returns us to the tropes of Jew as savior and Jew as traitor, Christ and Judas; the modern golem reminds us of its origins in European unease regarding Jews ("it was *our* history").

A second factor in the popularity of the golem is its use as a figure for meditations on Jewish power, violence, and vengeance. The theme of the golem as a household servant that malfunctions dates from the 17th century, and by the end of the 19th century the golem becomes the protector of the Jews against Christian violence, a protector that sometimes grows so indiscriminately violent that it must be destroyed by those whom it protects. In 1893 I. L. Peretz penned a brilliantly satirical version of the golem story in which the golem successfully defends the Jews of Prague from being massacred by their Christian neighbors. Peretz's Jews then plead with their rabbi to deactivate the golem since if it continues its rampage "there won't be any Gentiles left to heat the Sabbath ovens or to take down the Sabbath lamps." Committed to the status quo of diasporic powerlessness, the Jews allow the golem to be locked away in the synagogue attic under cobwebs—a symbol for dormant Jewish vitality.

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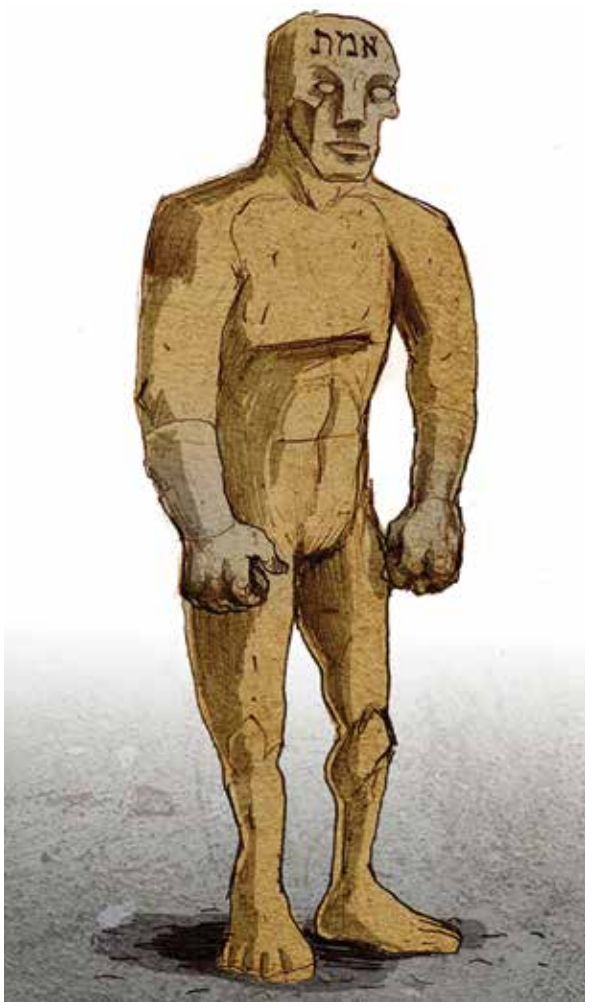


Illustration of a golem, January 2009. (Courtesy of Philippe Semeria.)

By contrast, in a number of 20th-century American iterations the golem is a figure for what Peretz in his own time was satirizing: Jewish discomfort with violence. From Marvel comics to Michael Chabon's novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, the golem becomes a figure for Jewish vengeance against Nazis, about which the stories express deep ambivalence. On the other hand, the non-Jewish film director Quentin Tarantino cheerfully embraces the golem without any ambivalence whatsoever. In his film *Inglourious Basterds*, an unapologetic fantasy of revenge by Jews on Nazis, an exasperated Hitler whines to his generals about the Jewish American GI, played by Eli Roth, who likes to brain Nazi soldiers with a Louisville Slugger:

> How much more of these Jew swine must I endure? They butcher my men like they were flies! . . . Do you know the latest rumor they've conjured up, in their fear-induced delirium? The one that beats my boys with a bat. The one they call "the Bear Jew" . . . is a golem.

As long as Jews fantasize and worry about power, and as long as non-Jews ponder the relationship between Jews and violence, it seems the golem will continue to be revived.

In her wide-ranging new monograph, *Golem: Modern Wars and Their Monsters*, Maya Barzilai argues that the myth of the golem tells us something about humanity more generally. It teaches us about what she calls "the golem condition," in which "the fantasies of expanding our capacities and transgressing our natural boundaries are always curbed by the inborn limitations of human existence." In five chapters she discusses, respectively, Wegener's golem films, their reception in the

United States, the changing use of the golem motif in Israeli writing in the 1940s and 50s, the golem as an ambivalent figure for post-Holocaust Jewish revenge in American popular culture, and the intersection of the golem with writing about cyborgs and artificial intelligence. Barzilai sees the golem as a metaphor for the evils of war, militarism, and destructive technology.

Barzilai's interpretation of Marge Piercy's 1991 golem novel *He, She and It* in this context is illuminating, as is her discussion of the golem motifs in S. Y. Agnon's novel *To This Day*, which treats the relationships between Jews and Christians in Berlin. In other cases, her emphasis on war and technology is less convincing, as when she argues that the golem's clay in Wegener's film is akin to the mud of the trenches in World War I. Indeed, there is a tension running through this study between Barzilai's desire to analyze a figure that has become so deeply embedded in modern Jewish culture, on the one hand, and on the other a subtly polemical impulse to reframe the golem in terms that seem to her more usefully subversive. She is, she writes, "concerned with the living-dead golem as a transgressive monster that enabled artists to call into question national narratives, as opposed to nostalgically portraying a Jewish minority and its desire for protection," and so the texts she chooses to treat—and the theoretical authorities, including Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, to whom she nods—often reflect that interest.

Yet neither the questioning of national narratives nor the dread of militarism and technology really work as an explanation for the ongoing popularity of the golem. The fact is that, more than ever, the golem is today the archetypal point of connection between Judaism and popular culture itself, a way for Jewishness to be introduced into the worlds of fantasy and other genre fiction. In this sense, the golem is popular because it represents a Jewishness that is global, virtual, and entertaining.

It is no accident, for instance, that golems feature centrally in Emily Barton's recent attempt to fashion a Jewish fantasy novel. *The Book of Esther*, Barton's third book and first attempt at fantasy, conjures an alternate-history 1942 in which the Nazi war in Europe comes to the borders of Khazaria, the fabled medieval Jewish kingdom that still exists in the 20th century of Barton's imagination. (For an overview of the actual Khazar kingdom and the way it has been recently dragooned into pseudoscientific theories about Jewish origins, see Shaul Stampfer's "Are We All Khazars Now?" in our Spring 2014 issue.) The book's eponymous heroine is the teenaged daughter of Khazaria's vizier. Seeing the danger posed to her country by the Germans, yet prohibited because of her sex from taking a role in battle, Esther sets out to find a village of kabbalists who will transform her into a man. The plan doesn't go entirely as expected, but she does learn how to make an army of golems, and she collects, in Wizard of Oz fashion, an eclectic range of companions (gender-bending kabbalists, Karaites, Uyghurs, Yiddish-speaking Ostjuden, etc.) to add to her valiant troop.

Barton's golems, it turns out, are not the docile servants of legend, but their rebellion takes an unexpected form: They want to be accepted as Jews and pray side-by-side with their masters. Though the question of whether a golem can count in a minyan is actually a classic halakhic dispute, the more traditionally minded members of Esther's company are scandalized by the very thought: "it goes against nature," says one. Nevertheless, the golems' petition triggers more familiar questions: Why shouldn't women be allowed to count in a minyan? Why aren't Karaites accepted as fellow Jews? Can't the non-Jewish Uyghurs participate in prayers? Esther comes to a realization: "I can't imagine it pleases Hashem if some who desire to worship Him are forbidden to." In short, Barton's novel is a liberal Jewish allegory about perceived inequalities within traditional Judaism. Her golems are less constructed than Reconstructed.



The legendary golem, part of a brick pathway, Prague, Czech Republic. (Photo by Godong/UIG/Bridgeman Images.)

The real enemy in *The Book of Esther*, one soon grasps, is not the Nazis, but the traditionalists who rule Khazaria. One can't help but compare Barton's Jewish kingdom with the one in Michael Chabon's adventure tale *Gentlemen of the Road*, a book which also features a cross-dressing Khazarian heroine and characters trying to repel an invasion. Surprisingly, Chabon's 12th-century Khazaria is a far more cosmopolitan and freewheeling place than Barton's insular, stiflingly traditionalist 20th-century realm. Barton's characters therefore spend far more time arguing about egalitarianism and gender status than the safety of their homeland. As Esther, in the face of the immanent Holocaust, mentally prioritizes: "So she was alone, her mind wheeling through the possibilities of foreign domination, enslavement, mass murder, and above all else, who she would be if she became a man."

The novel's contemporary priorities and Jewish polemics aside, how does *The Book of Esther* stand up as fantasy? Unfortunately, not very well. There are weaknesses in plotting and characterization, but most fatal is Barton's failure to create either a believable alternate reality or a compellingly strange fantasyland. The novel undercuts its attempts to introduce a sense of the marvelous by having the characters accept some wonders as perfectly ordinary and others as cause for amazement. Golems are presented as extraordinary, yet the Khazarians ride far more impressive mechanical horses without much comment. More problematically, the Judaism of this Jewish fantasyland is not woven into the fabric of the novel's reality, but instead belabored as a problem for the characters, who constantly explain and question basic Jewish practices to themselves and each other. Not a page goes by without some character asking which blessing to make over a type of food, or delivering a mental exposition on the significance of *mikvah* or eruv, and the result feels more like a conversion class than a fantasy novel.

Sabbath rules are especially perplexing to Esther and her army, who argue over halakhic questions (whether one can march and fight on Shabbat) that were resolved in the time of the Maccabees. At points this verges on self-parody, as when Esther takes her concern to remain modest to unprecedented lengths as she fights a group of German soldiers: "A man grabbed hold of her foot and she kicked him before thinking to fire the pistol. So much for the injunction not to touch a man outside one's family." Had Barton trusted her Jewish materials to speak for themselves without trailing explanatory apparatus the result might have been more magical.

If Barton's fantasy world feels disappointingly familiar, *The Golem of Hollywood* and *The Golem of Paris*, two paperback potboilers written by the father-and-son team of Jonathan and Jesse Kellerman, introduce supernatural elements into our own world with results that are, at least, successfully weird. That last adjective may sound vague, but how else does one describe a pair of thrillers in which the Los Angeles Police Department has a special unit staffed by the descendants of the biblical *nephilim* (the gigantic offspring of "the sons of God"—traditionally understood to be angels—and "the daughters of men," see Genesis 6)? These giants are charged with the apprehension of the golem, who is actually the reincarnated spirit of Cain and Abel's sister and now takes the form of a giant flying beetle that hunts serial killers on both sides of the Atlantic.

Female golems like the Kellermans' don't often get their due, though there is a long enough tradition of them, running back through Cynthia Ozick's Xanthippe to author-politician Walther Rathenau's fin-de-siècle story about a golem-wife to 19th-century romantic antecedents. This one acts as the protector—and a sexually jealous one—of the Kellermans' protagonist, a hard-drinking police detective named Jacob Lev, a Robert Ludlum character lost in a Kafkaesque universe. The first novel introduces Lev, his mysterious bond with the golem, and his conflicted relationship with his parents. It also gives us a wildly original backstory for this female golem through an apocryphal book of the Bible treating the secret history of Cain and his doomed love for his sister.

Book two fills in the backstory of Lev's mother. In contrast to the uncertain use of Judaism in *The*

Book of Esther, the Kellermans place its discovery by Lev's mother front and center, portrayed with moving authenticity, as when the non-observant Jewish teenager attends her first Shabbat dinner:

> The singing began—noisy, joyously out of sync. People swayed, people stood still. There seemed to be no rules, yet Barbara felt she was breaking one simply by existing. A little white booklet appeared in front of her. She stared at Hebrew, blocks and blocks of incomprehensible Hebrew. For all she knew, she was holding it upside-down.



Illustration from* Ha-golem: sipuro shel komiks yisraeli *(The Golem: The Story of an Israeli Comic) by Eli Eshed and Uri Fink, 2003.

Later, Barbara—now named Bina—is imprisoned and tortured behind the Iron Curtain, which shatters her sanity (and makes for extremely gruesome reading). Throughout, the Kellermans lay on the literary references from the Bible to moderns like Kafka (that beetle) and Bulgakov, numerical and name play (clocks, for instance, tend to display Jewishly symbolic numbers like 6:13), and the occasional odd bit of Kabbalah.

The sum of these unlikely parts doesn't always make sense—many long-time readers of the Kellermans were understandably baffled—yet is compelling nonetheless and not least because the thriller genre actually fits the Kellermans' understanding of Judaism. Their golem is a figure for Judaism's drama, for a tradition that is itself a kind of potboiler, pulsatingly alive if not always conventionally pious or easily consoling. To be Jewish is, for the Kellermans, to be forced to confront forces both celestial and demonic, to struggle against external and internal evil. The Kellermans' description of one of the golem's flights (she can turn into a beetle, remember) sums up the books and their Jewish message as a whole: "It's the same as always: for one terrifying moment, gravity overpowers faith, and she plunges toward the earth. Then she remembers who she is, and she begins to rise."

The golem, then, can be used in many different ways. A particularly delightful instance of this plasticity is the book *Ha-golem: sipuro shel komiks yisraeli* (The Golem: The Story of an Israeli Comic, 2003) by the cultural historian Eli Eshed and Uri Fink, Israel's most successful comic artist. The book purports to be a scholarly history of Israel's most popular superhero comic, *The Golem*, from its beginnings in the 1930s to the present. In fact, the comic book and its entire history are the invention of Eshed, who uses the figure to dramatize the history of Israeli popular fiction, and Fink, who forges perfectly executed "samples" of the nonexistent comic book in various styles of Israeli popular illustration from the last 80 years. The book sends up Israeli national tropes and patriotic shibboleths, with the golem joined in various panels by David Ben-Gurion, Ariel Sharon, and others. One of the things that allows the book to work so convincingly is the blank face of Fink's golem, featureless save, usually, for a Star of David. The golem is a contentless cipher, so Eshed and Fink can stick the caped super-Israeli in any decade and render it in any style they want.

So while I would just as soon let most of the new golems remain hidden under cobwebs in the attic, some writers and artists are clearly capable of molding the dull clay of the golem tale into new forms. A surprise is always possible. Take, as a last example, a scene in the French graphic novelist Joann Sfar's bittersweet *Vampire Loves* (English translation 2006). Sfar first introduced his golem in the 1990s. In *Vampire Loves*, the golem now belongs to a Holocaust survivor named Eliyahu whose wife and daughter were murdered. At one point Eliyahu is moved to sing Sfar's invention of a Hasidic tune, including the lyrics:

> Thank you for misfortune, which makes us all unique.
> We enter the world dumb as golems.
> And misfortune molds us. Thank you, Lord, who gives us all a history.
> Thank you, Lord, who did not make us golems.

In suggesting that we become human inasmuch as we are shaped by the misfortunes of the world, Sfar daringly returns the golem back to its first mention in the book of Psalms. We begin as golems, before God and the sorrows of history etch their letters onto our brows. Sfar compounds the touching irony as the scene ends, when Eliyahu's golem, who can only repeat robotically what its master says, responds with something between an affirmation and a lie. "Thank you, Lord," says the golem, "Who did not make us golems."

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The Lamp of Zion

BY ELIZABETH SHANKS ALEXANDER

The Menorah: From the Bible to Modern Israel
by Steven Fine
Harvard University Press, 304 pp., $29.95

According to Steven Fine, the menorah's 3000-year history makes it "the longest continuously used religious symbol in Western culture." Unlike the cross, the crescent, or the Star of David, which are each composed of a few clean lines, it's a busy image. Images of the menorah, even minimalist ones, seem more like representations of an object out there in the real world than the abstract symbol of a people, its religion and its aspirations. How did the visually complex menorah come to be such a symbol?

For Fine, the answer is deeply entwined with the image of the menorah carved into the Arch of Titus two thousand years ago. Following Rome's military victory over Judea in 70 C.E., the city honored its returning heroes with a triumphal procession, the highlights of which are depicted in bas-relief inside the arch. On one side, a panel running the length of the arch's interior depicts the victorious general (and future emperor) Titus in his chariot, being crowned with a wreath by a winged god of victory, Nike. On the other side, Jewish humiliation is represented by the plundered vessels of the Jerusalem Temple carried into Rome on the shoulders of strapping Roman soldiers, who are likewise crowned with wreaths. The golden seven-branched candelabrum, jostling above the heads of the Roman soldiers, stands out among the Temple vessels.

No matter how lifelike or faithful to its model the arch menorah may have been, it is not a neutral or objective rendering of this celebrated Temple artifact. Etched into a monument memorializing the recently deceased Roman emperor, the arch celebrates Roman majesty by telling the story of a triumphal parade. Fine helpfully explains that the Romans would have understood the Temple vessels being carried in the triumphal processional as "cult images" of the God of Israel, brought to Rome to join other subjugated deities in the Roman pantheon. The arch menorah stands at the intersection of conqueror and conquered, exalting the triumphant Romans and laying low the vanquished Jews and their humiliated God.

Built to lift up one nation while laying low another, the arch requires its visitors to take a side. Will they exult with the triumphant Romans (as the Roman builders and artists intended) or will they sympathize with the Jews captured for all eternity at the moment of their defeat? As a 21st-century American Jew, Fine faces little to none of the humiliation endured by the Jewish slaves marched into captivity, but he is drawn—almost compulsively—to identify with their subjugation. He writes the following of his face-to-face encounter with the menorah while leading an international team of researchers there in 2012:

> I stood, imagining the parade before me, with triumphal Romans, Jewish slaves—their mangled bodies and festering wounds hidden beneath fine Roman garments, and "our" holy vessels passing by.

The Romans bearing Jewish gold were transformed into unbroken Jewish captives carrying their national treasure into exile.

A few pages later, Fine writes "I found myself fidgeting and thinking about the humiliations that my ancestors had felt here." He contrasts this "flesh-and-blood" response to the cooler irony of the 19th-century Jewish visitor imagined by Percy Bysshe Shelley in a famous prose fragment. Shelley's Jew sees the Arch of Titus "mouldering to its fall." This "monument of the power of our destroyer's family," he wrote, is "now a mountain of ruins."

For many years the arch menorah was inaccessible to the majority of the world's Jews. It was in Rome, and they were elsewhere. But images of the menorah proliferated in the centuries following the arch's construction. Visual representations of the menorah are found in synagogues, "on mosaic floors, wall paintings, lintels, 'chancel' screens, oil lamps, and fixtures for hanging glass lamps . . . Jewish tombs, Jewish jewelry and even household goods," such as gold-decorated glass. The rise of the menorah in late antiquity, however, was not inevitable. During the late Second Temple period, several cult objects had been associated with the Temple. The menorah appears with the golden table that held the showbread on reverse sides of a Hasmonean coin, Josephus mentions the showbread table, the menorah, and the incense altar, and, of course, the showbread table, silver trumpets, and a Torah scroll are featured on the arch along with the menorah. Interestingly, coins minted during the Bar Kokhba revolt (60 years after the Temple's destruction) depict the showbread table, but not the menorah.



The Spoila Panel, bas-relief, Arch of Titus, ca. 81 C.E. (Photo by Unocad, courtesy of the Arch of Titus Digital Restoration Project.)



Jewish gold glass, Rome. (From the collection of Dr. David and Jemima Jeselsohn, Zurich. On loan to the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.)

But in late antiquity, the showbread table fades from view and the seven-branched menorah emerges as the premier symbol of the lost Temple. It's hard to know exactly why. One wonders if it's related to the familiar nine-branched candelabra of post-destruction Hanukkah celebrations. Fine doesn't address this, but he supplements the visual record with literary depictions of the Temple menorah. The 6th-century poet and liturgist Yannai mourns the extinguished flames of the menorah, all the more so because the lights of Rome burn ever brighter:

> The lamps of Edom [Rome] strengthened and increased.
> The lamps of Zion were swallowed up and destroyed.

The lamps of Edom prevailed and glittered.
The lamps of Zion were crushed and extinguished.
The lamps of Edom prance over every pitfall.
The lamps of Zion receded.
The lamps of Edom their brightness shines.
The lamps of Zion were darker than soot.
The lamps of Edom were filled and they dripped [oil].
The lamps of Zion were lowered and broken.

Fine astutely notes that "the extinguished menorah represented far more than just the extinguished lamp of the Temple. It symbolized the Jews themselves." Yannai's liturgical menorah may have been conjured from the imagination, but it expresses many themes conveyed by the arch menorah, albeit from the perspective of the conquered rather than conqueror. Drawing on Yannai's poem, we might speculate that the menorah draws interest in late antiquity because it recalls a glorious past that is no more.

One danger of a book like this is the temptation to include every menorah one has found in the course of one's research. While interesting insights can be found throughout, at times the book takes on an encyclopedic quality as it catalogues one menorah after another. What is missing at those points is an absorbing narrative thread to pull the reader along. The book is at its strongest when Fine tells a story about his visual data. Especially helpful are the numerous illustrations and vivid color photographs, many taken by Fine himself or his research team. Positioned alongside the relevant prose, the images help the reader grasp Fine's insightful interpretations of the evolving iconography.

The 19th century brought a wave of European tourists to the sites of classical civilization, among them the Arch of Titus. In this context, the menorah morphs from a nostalgia-evoking relic of the past to a nation-inspiring symbol pointing forward:

> [V]isits to the arch are well documented from the late nineteenth century onward, and it seems that it was a standard stop on the Jewish pilgrimage route. . . . Jews ranging from Boris Schatz, founder of the Bezalel Academy of Art in Jerusalem, to noted rabbis, politicians, and simple Jews—Zionists, culturalists, Hassidim, and reformers—often made (and make) their way to the arch in a kind of ritual, reciting to themselves, one way or another, "Titus you are gone, but we are still here, the people of Israel lives."

Foremost among modern Jewish reactions to this site was a resolve to transcend the degrading circumstances depicted there. The new Jewish take on the arch emphasized that, as Shelley had already noted in 1819, Rome stands in ruins, while the Jewish people endure. It was during this period that the "now well-known Jewish 'tradition' of not walking under the arch took hold—a kind of ritualized negation of the arch 'so as not to give honor to Titus.'" The arch invites Jews to act out resistance to Rome's overwhelming might (as well as that of Rome's contemporary successors!).

The modern period witnessed an interesting reversal in interpretation of the arch's marching figures. Modern Jewish viewers superimposed their own aspirations onto the figures carved into the panel. Where earlier viewers (like Yannai, if he had had an occasion to visit the arch) would have seen despair on history's captive Jews, these viewers saw Jewish resilience. And lo and behold, the panel's triumphant Roman soldiers, the ones bearing plundered Jewish gold, were transformed into unbroken Jewish captives carrying their national treasure into exile with pride. In a fascinating reversal of iconography, figures who were carved as Roman victors become symbols of Jewish resistance.



Mosaic pavement, Hammath Tiberias Synagogue, 5th century C.E. (Courtesy of the Photography Department, Government Press Office, Israel National Photo Collection.)



Illustration for the letter* mem *by Ze'ev Raban and Levin Kipnis in* Alef Bet/Alphabet, *Berlin, ca. 1923. (Bezalel Collection of Yeshiva University Museum, Gift of the Jesselson Family.)

In the 20th century the arch became a locus of Jewish self-determination. A striking example involves using the arch as the site of two major demonstrations in the immediate aftermath of World War II. In one, in 1947, Roman Jews and Holocaust survivors from across Europe gathered at the arch to celebrate the United Nations vote in favor of the partition plan allowing for a Jewish state in Palestine. In a clever use of the arch's iconography, the crowd marched through the arch from west to east, reversing the direction that the "Jewish captives" pictured on its wall had marched some 2,000 years ago. Another 20th-century expression of Jewish aspirations for autonomy involves depicting the long dormant flames of the arch menorah rekindled. The image of the relit arch menorah appears, for instance, as the hat insignia of the British Jewish Legion during World War I and in a 1923 children's alphabet book illustrating the letter *mem*.

Fine's book is filled with many more of history's menorahs, those of Maimonides, Chabad, and Israel's state seal, to name only the most well-known. And while I have focused here on the menorah as symbol, the book tells an equally fascinating story about the menorah as object. What was it made of? (Different materials at different times, bronze, silver, and gold depending on economic conditions.) What did it look like? (The curved branches of Second Temple depictions are more authentic than the straight branches that Maimonides posited.)

What can we learn from the biblical instructions for its construction? (Not much. Contemporary artisans would have understood the detailed technical specifications, but we don't.) Why are there conflicting images of the menorah from the Second Temple period, especially the base, when it was accessible for all to see? (Exodus doesn't provide instructions for the base, so successive generations constructed it in the image of contemporary Greek and Roman lamp bases.) Was there more than one menorah? (Yes! The idea that there was a single authentic menorah is a myth.) If so, how many? (At any given time, at least two, sometimes three, were in circulation; Josephus actually says that two (!) were exiled to Rome.)

What happened to the Jerusalem Temple's menorahs after they were brought to Rome? One was on display at Vespasian's Temple of Peace. The record runs dry after a major fire there in 192 C.E. If the menorah survived the fire, then it was likely melted down for its gold value during the Sack of Rome. In any event, it is long gone. It is not submerged in the sands of the Tiber River, nor is it sequestered in the Vatican basement. These myths are promulgated because of the very human fascination with relics. We want to be able to touch the past, to assure ourselves that it really happened. In the meantime, the menorah etched on the Arch of Titus will have to suffice. As Fine eloquently reminds us:

> It is a tangible object—an ancient relic that has outlived the "real" menorahs of antiquity. Unlike the Ark of the Covenant and the Holy Grail—the most significant "lost" artifacts of Western culture—it can be touched and measured, and has been for centuries. In the end, however, the arch menorah is just an approximation—so close to the original, but not it.
>
> And we'll have to be okay with that.

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What's *Yichus* Got to Do with It?

BY ALAN MINTZ

The Marriage Plot: Or, How Jews Fell in Love with Love, and with Literature
by Naomi Seidman
Stanford University Press, 368 pp, $29.95

The heart wants what it wants. Or so we moderns—from Emily Dickinson to Selena Gomez—think. For most of us living in the Western world, Jews and non-Jews alike, it would be unthinkable to have our marriage partners chosen for us by our families. True, in haredi communities, as among educated Indian families, arranged marriage persists as a practice. But even in those circles it is rare for young people today not to be allowed to meet each other and exercise a veto before the deal is done. The era when it was only under the chuppah that the groom and the bride glimpsed each other for the first (or perhaps second) time belongs to the benighted past. But that past, it turns out, was not very long ago. For the whole history of Jewish society, until less than two hundred years ago, love and attraction played little or no role in the making of marriages, which were arranged and contracted according to the interests—commercial, religious, and social—of the families involved.

What is truly stunning is how little time it took for this millennia-old practice to collapse. With the advent of the Enlightenment and emancipation—in Western Europe in the 18th century and a hundred years later in the East—it became self-evident almost overnight that young Jewish people should wed out of romantic feeling and shared values, and that their union should, at least ideally, be a companionship based on love. To create such a union, it would be wrong, even perverse, for boys or girls to be forced to marry before their individual characters had taken shape and they had the capacity to choose. As with many cultural changes, this shift in marriage practices, which evolved gradually in European society over the course of centuries, took place among the Jews in less than a generation or two. If you were born in the latter part of the 19th century in Eastern Europe, it is likely that your parents' marriage was entered into as an agreement between two families, while you insisted upon choosing your spouse for yourself. And all the more so if you emigrated to America.

Naomi Seidman's learned, insightful, and witty new book *The Marriage Plot: Or, How Jews Fell in Love with Love, and with Literature* tells this story, but with a twist. Although she amply documents the vertiginous swing away from traditional marriage, she goes on to demonstrate that there was nothing smooth or total about the adoption of the new ideal of romantic love. Behind the public triumph of the new order, Seidman argues, just those components of the ancien régime that had been most vilified — family interest, pedigree, the separation of the sexes, matchmakers—ended up making a surprising reappearance. It was not that they had simply managed to survive the revolution; rather, as Seidman shows, it was a subtler and more interesting process: the emergence from within the space of secularity of new ideas and practices that drew from energy and wisdom of the old system. Literature—Hebrew, Yiddish, and American Jewish literature—is Seidman's primary terrain. As the subtitle of her study indicates, Jews fell in love not only with love itself but also with literature. The attitudes and expectations about how life should be lived on the part of modernizing Jews were shaped by their avid devotion to the new secular scripture: the novel. Seidman operates adroitly in the territory between literature's role in representing the realities of Jewish society and its role in forming the ideals and sentiments through which a new generation of that society would seek to live their lives.

It became self-evident almost overnight that young Jewish people should wed out of romantic feeling and shared values.



"Examining the groom," an undated postcard by Hayyim Goldberg. (From the William A. Rosenthall Judaica Collection, courtesy of The College of Charleston Libraries.)

But before showing us how things were turned upside down and then put right-side up (at least partially), Seidman revises our received conceptions about the old marriage system. The glory of traditional Ashkenazi Jewish society, argued the great social historian Jacob Katz, was the wedding of commerce to learning. Wealthy families sought out young Talmud prodigies for their daughters. Through such a match, a boy from a modest background with scholarly talent could hope to raise his fortunes, just as the mercantile family hoped to raise its prestige. Typically, the marriage would take place around the onset of puberty, although the match might have been made, with the help of a shadchan, long before then. The juvenile bride and groom would likely come from different towns and would never have met or seen each other. In a practice called *kest*, the young couple, hardly teenagers, would board with the bride's family while the young bride began to bear children and the groom studied in the *beit midrash*. The dowry money would be invested with a close relative, and at the end of the *kest* period, which lasted several years—the greater wealth the longer the time—the funds would be used to set up the young man in business or to purchase a rabbinical post.

Relying on the recent research of Hebrew University historian Shaul Stampfer, Seidman urges us to realize that this idealization of the Jewish marriage system fitted only the top one percenters of the day, the *lomdim* class, the scholarly elite, and their mercantile counterparts. The children of the great majority of Jews tended to marry later and locally—so the bride and groom were likely to have known each other—without the services of a shadchan. And those exceptional Talmud students who made brilliant matches in the late 18th and 19th centuries had tales to tell about the emotional costs of their success. In a stream of autobiographies written by Salomon Maimon, Moshe Leib Lilienblum, Mordecai Aaron Günzburg, and others, former prodigies bitterly describe how it felt to be merchandised by the fathers, ripped from their homes, placed under the thumb of shrewish mothers-in-law, and then, while barely past puberty, expected to perform sexually.

The old marriage system, it turns out, was felled by a book. This is an exaggeration, of course, but Seidman is not far wrong in pointing to Abraham Mapu's 1853 historical novel *The Love of Zion* (*Ahavat Tzion*) as one of those extraordinary moments in which a literary text served as a flashpoint for a far-ranging shift in social attitudes. Set against the Assyrian threat to the Kingdom of Judah in the 8th century B.C.E., *The Love of Zion* tells the story of the attraction of the high-born Tamar for a valiant shepherd named Amnon. The lush biblical cadences of Mapu's Hebrew prose, redolent of the Song of Songs, and the romantically evoked geography of the Holy Land made *The Love of Zion* an instant best-seller that went through more than 40 editions in a dozen languages. What was revolutionary in the book, in Seidman's telling, is its showcasing of sexual attraction and romantic yearning as a natural basis for marriage rather than as a transgression against social and religious norms. For young men trapped in early arranged marriages or for even younger men over whom that fate loomed, Mapu's novel was an exhilarating discovery. "The ethnographer and playwright S. An-sky," Seidman tells us, left "his hometown of Vitebsk in 1881 in search of enlightenment with four books in his satchel, one on them Mapu's romance (Lilienblum's autobiography was another). In 1895, at the age of 14, the future poet and literary critic Ya'akov Fichman ran away from home with just a change of clothes, some food, and his copy of *The Love of Zion*."

In the Hebrew and Yiddish novels that followed later in the 19th century, a new conception of marriage emerged. It held that young people themselves, not their parents, should decide about their suitability for each other, and that decision should be based on mutual attraction and a shared outlook on life, not *yichus* (family descent). Because the decision-making was now up to the young couple, a space of acquaintanceship *before* marriage opened up for the first time and ushered in unprecedented rituals of courtship. And women, instead of being merely homemakers and mothers, were now seen as bearers of culture and finer sentments capable of taming their husbands' masculinity. Or so we thought.

It is just here that Seidman's brilliant contrariness makes its mark**.** The Jewish adoption of the enlightened, European model of companionate marriage, she argues, was always "partial and ambivalent."

> In the twentieth century, for reasons both literary and sociological, Jewish literature came to embrace what writers saw as traditional Jewish attitudes toward love and marriage, viewing tradition . . . as a source of erotic power. What began as a process of Jewish modernization and Europeanization was transformed into the literary discovery of "authentic" Jewish Eros.

Seidman's argument has two parts. First, she submits that there are components of the old system that were retained because they express sources of Jewish wisdom about human behavior. Dissatisfied with the overly domesticated nature of the modern European model, Jewish writers were attracted to these submerged survivals of tradition. Her second point is far more ambitious. The 20th-century Jewish writers who were alienated from Judaism found sources of real erotic energy within the tradition, and this discovery had the effect of doing nothing less than Judaizing world literature. The writers she has in mind are Sigmund Freud, Bernard Malamud, Grace Paley, Lenny Bruce, Erica Jong, Philip Roth, and Tony Kushner. These authors, she writes, "contributed to the formation of a modern sexual counter-narrative to the Christian-chivalric models of love."



Rosh Hashanah postcard with a Yiddish poem: "The maiden becomes a bride soon/A chuppah is put in place/'Behold! You are . . .' whispers Motel/And happy is his world!" (From the William A. Rosenthall Judaica Collection, courtesy of The College of Charleston Libraries.)

The second of the claims, that it was the Jews who helped Western literature get back its moxie, is a wonderfully grandiose speculation that Seidman has time to float but not fully substantiate. The weight of her interpretive ingenuity is spent on fleshing out the first argument, which she accomplishes by revisiting some of the classic works of the Hebrew-Yiddish canon and demonstrating the persistence of elements of the old marriage tradition amidst the ostensible embrace of modernity. Even in *The Love of Zion*, that font of rebellion, Seidman discerns behind the evils of arranged marriage the operation of a higher principle of fatedness in which the bride and the groom are destined for each other from birth. (It also helps that Amnon turns out to be a high-born shepherd and thus is not without *yichus*.) Although Amnon and Tamar may be ignorant of this plan and be drawn to each other by mutual attraction alone, ultimately their union is *bashert*. This principle is also at work in An-sky's foundational masterpiece, *The Dybbuk*. The reason Khonen haunts Leah is because the two of them were promised to each other before their births when their fathers were yeshiva students together. "These arranged marriages *are* in fact love matches, even if the love is between two fathers," Seidman writes. She takes particular delight in showing how the intense male-to-male bond echoes the passion of the heterosexual lovers:

> By setting the marriage arrangements among just-married young men and infusing the oath with mutual friendship as well as erotic attraction, An-sky recasts the generational opposition as a suppressed parallelism, in which fathers and their children are, quite literally, kindred spirits, expressing the same loving impulses in only apparently dissimilar ways.

Also making a surprising return to the stage is the reviled, comic figure of the matchmaker, the embodiment of marriage as a commercial transaction. Yona Toyber, a matchmaker in S. Y. Agnon's novel *A Simple Story,* is a figure much beloved in the town of Szybusz on the part of both parents and young people. He differs from his grotesque predecessors because of his intuitive psychological subtlety and the near-invisibility of his actions. Young people fall in love with each other and marry without suspecting that Yona has a role in choreographing their attraction to one another. The fact is that they *have* fallen in love with each other and would be scandalized by any suggestion to the contrary. Nevertheless, a hidden hand has guided them to make an attachment that will be good for the community as well as for them.

Seidman discovers more varieties of the persistence of tradition in new guises in the works of Moshe Leib Lilienblum, Yehuda Leib Gordon, Sholem Yanken Abramovitsh (Mendele Mokher Seforim), and many others before she proceeds to 20th-century American Jewish writers and her argument about the Jewish influence on world literature. The provocative ambitions of Seidman's project might lead one to suspect a critical mind given to rash and tendentious generalizations. But the opposite is the case. Seidman is a nimble, curious, omnivorous reader, with whom it is a pleasure to spend time. She moves freely among Hebrew and Yiddish texts and is well-versed in social history. We are prepared to extend credit to her big ideas because we trust the quality of her exegesis of small examples. She uses critical theory rather than being used by it, and she always writes with a clarity that signals a genuine desire to communicate with her readers. She is, moreover, among the small number of scholars who are happy to acknowledge that their original insights have been built upon the research of others.

The Marriage Plot joins a growing number of literary, historical, and philosophical investigations of our post-secular age. It is, in many senses, the story of all of us. We have come of age in a time when traditional religion has long been discredited by the Enlightenment and modernity, yet we construct our lives out of materials repurposed and reinterpreted from that banished tradition.

Alan Mintz recently edited (with Jeffrey Saks) A City in Its Fullness*, a translation of S. Y. Agnon's stories about his Galician hometown of Buczacz. His critical study of those stories is forthcoming from Stanford University Press.*

Twilight of the Anti-Semites

BY BENJAMIN SILVER

Nietzsche's Jewish Problem: Between Anti-Semitism and Anti-Judaism
by Robert C. Holub
Princeton University Press, 296 pp., $35

"Whoever believed he had understood something of me," Nietzsche writes in *Ecce Homo*, "had made me . . . after his own image—not infrequently the antithesis of me." He went on to say that to misinterpret his books was to commit a "sin" against them. The chapter in question is audaciously titled "Why I Write Such Good Books," but shining through the conceit is Nietzsche's awareness that his cryptic and often contradictory writings could lead interpreters in wildly divergent directions. Indeed, he had no way of knowing just how variegated his interpreters would be: Everyone from fascists to liberal democrats, nationalists to cosmopolitans, peaceniks to warmongers would use Nietzsche's works in support of their causes.

But on one topic in particular—Jews and Judaism—Nietzsche has been particularly puzzling. This is, after all, a man who praises the Jews in *The Antichrist* as "a people gifted with the very strongest vitality" while decrying the "evil-smelling mess of Jewish rabbinism and superstition" only a few pages later. The Nazi intelligentsia almost unanimously understood statements in the latter vein to express an authentic anti-Semitism, and they believed that other Nietzschean ideas—authenticity, striving, value creation, and so forth—laid the philosophical foundation for fascism. If Heidegger was to be the living philosopher of the Third Reich, then Nietzsche would be his forbear, the man who had rooted the regime in the twin ideals of fascism and "racial hygiene."

And yet, to others, Nietzsche was viewed very much the other way around. Although it would be an overstatement to call them Nietzscheans, many of Zionism's earliest thinkers were deeply influenced by him. Herzl, who was said by his cousin to have "absorbed [Nietzsche's] style," got ahold of every Nietzsche volume available. A young Martin Buber set out to translate *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* into Polish. And Micha Yosef Berdichevsky, who envisioned a Zionism born out of Jewish exceptionalism and empowerment, drew on Nietzsche's praises of early Judaism's supposed attachments to life and action; he even made a pilgrimage in 1898 to the fledgling Nietzsche-Archiv in Weimar, where the by-then-insane philosopher was still living with his sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche. And after the war, the German-American Jewish scholar Walter Kaufmann—who was almost solely responsible for making Nietzsche accessible to English speakers—made a lifelong project out of showing that Nietzsche was, in fact, a philo-Semite.

That Nietzsche's reception has been so sharply divided between anti-Semitic and philo-Semitic readings—and that both positions can be supported in his scattered remarks about Jews—is the problem that motivates Robert C. Holub's new book, *Nietzsche's Jewish Problem*. For Holub, both sets of interpreters are mistaken because they read their own positions into Nietzsche's work, rather than understanding the philosopher on—and in—his own terms.

Although it would be an overstatement to call them Nietzscheans, many of Zionism's earliest thinkers were deeply influenced by Nietzsche.

Walter Kaufmann, Henning Ottmann, R. J. Hollingdale, Weaver Santaniello, and others have argued that most of the anti-Semitism in Nietzsche's works should be attributed not to Friedrich, but to Elisabeth, who was influenced by her anti-Semitic husband, Bernhard Förster, and their mentor Richard Wagner. If this consensus view were true, or even largely true, there wouldn't be much of a problem in the first place. But in his very first chapter Holub acquits Elisabeth of these charges. Not only did she not doctor her brother's work in any substantial way, she didn't even hate Jews. Drawing upon her biography of her brother as well as her private correspondence, Holub argues that Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche adopted anti-Semitic views only in deference to her husband. But after Bernhard died, which was before she began caring for her unstable brother and publishing his work, she "disavowed her former convictions" and became "free from overt, biologically based notions of racism." The case might not be quite as clear as Holub makes out (he admits that she tampered with Nietzsche's correspondence at least once, striking a paragraph in which he had blamed anti-Semites for his failure with the critics), but Holub makes a strong argument which is bound to surprise those familiar with the standard account of Nietzsche and his sister.



Cosima and Richard Wagner, Vienna, 1872. (Photo by Fritz Luckhardt.)
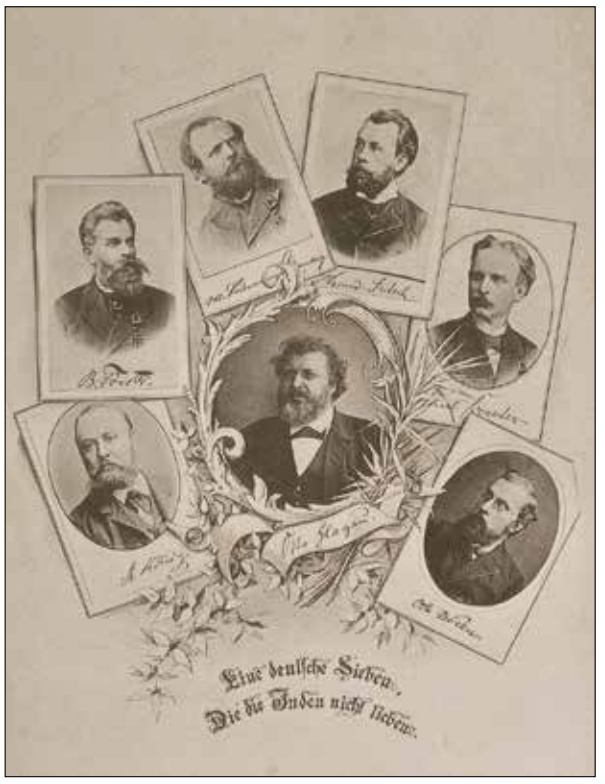
If Elisabeth did not tamper with her brother's papers, then Holub has grounds to demand that we take Nietzsche's public writings both for and against the Jews as authentic. But where did previous scholars go wrong, and where can we learn from their mistakes? Almost all previous scholarship on this matter, according to Holub, either ignored or overlooked the language that Nietzsche used, and the specific "historical and personal circumstances" in which he used it. Therefore, Holub spends the better part of his book tracing Nietzsche's attitudes toward Jews from his youth up until the loss of his sanity in 1889. In doing so, Holub turns to Nietzsche's private papers, his marginalia, and, especially, his correspondence.

Nietzsche grew up in Röcken and Naumburg, small Saxon towns with few if any Jewish residents. While it's true, Holub says, that the "absence of personal contact with Jews often goes hand in hand with irrational fears and prejudice," the Jewish Question that roiled Germany's cities was of apparently little relevance to these rural communities. It is not surprising, then, that the papers and correspondence from Nietzsche's first 20 years contain only a single (though quite vile) mention of a Jew, a fictional one named Itzig, who is thrown out of a "raven-black cantor house," in a poem Nietzsche wrote when he was 17 or 18.

It was when he entered university, first at Bonn and later at Leipzig, that Nietzsche first encountered both anti-Semitism among his peers and professors, and living, breathing Jews at the Leipzig Fair. The attitudes of his friends and teachers rubbed off, and the Fair Jews repulsed him. He also came under the influence of the works of Arthur Schopenhauer—who reviled Jews despite arguing for their emancipation and assimilation. In short, it is not surprising that he began to disparage Jews in his correspondence, but the anti-Jewish comments from this time consist more, as Holub writes, in "thoughtless

decoration" of his prose than in deep antipathy. The important point, however, is that Holub has shown that Nietzsche was influenced by his anti-Semitic milieu from the outset of his adult intellectual life.

This last point turns out to be of more than passing interest, because it shows that Nietzsche had



Leading German anti-Semites of the late 1800s. Otto Glagau is at center. Around him, clockwise from lower left: Adolf König, Bernhard Förster, Max Liebermann von Sonnenberg, Theodor Fritsch, Paul Förster, and Otto Böckel. (Courtesy of Klassik Stiftung Weimar, Goethe-und Schiller-Archiv.)

been introduced to anti-Jewish prejudice before he ever encountered Richard Wagner, whom he met in 1868, when he was 24. Nietzsche's famously close friendship with Wagner and his wife, Cosima, is, for Holub, significant because it transformed the casual anti-Jewish attitude of his university years into full-fledged anti-Semitism, complete with suspicions that Jews had too much power and an inborn "sense for money," both of which they used against non-Jews. At the peak of Wagner's public influence, in 1870, Nietzsche delivered a lecture on "Socrates and Tragedy" in which he insisted that the "Jewish press" would have deleterious effects on German art in the same way that Socratism had destroyed authentic Greek tragedy. Nietzsche seems to have believed that connecting his academic work on philology and aesthetics to Wagnerian anti-Semitism would impress his new friends. But, to the contrary, the Wagners thought that Nietzsche had taken a step too far. While agreeing with the main point he was making, Cosima wrote to Nietzsche that his lecture was "much too new to be understood by the audience" and that it could jeopardize the Wagners' entire "program." He dutifully removed the anti-Semitic spur in the published edition of the lecture.

In 1876, Nietzsche broke with Wagner and his circle, though, according to Holub, it "had nothing to do with Wagner's attitude toward Jews." Rather, Nietzsche was nursing an interest in French thought and culture, to which Wagner took Germanic umbrage, while Wagner was experimenting with Christian motifs in his forthcoming opera *Parsifal*, which Nietzsche found contemptible and would go on to ridicule in his *Genealogy of Morals*. Nonetheless, the result was that Nietzsche stopped viewing the subjugation of the Jews (which he had endorsed as a part of Wagner's project of German cultural renewal) as part of his politico-philosophic project. He no longer thought that a return to "natural values"—values founded on strength and vitality—required Jews to be excluded from the community.

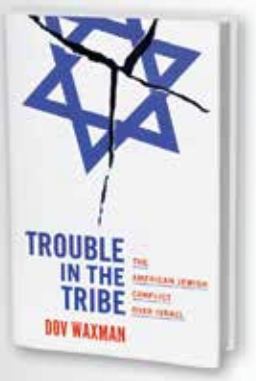
Drawing almost exclusively on Nietzsche's private papers, Holub goes on to show that Nietzsche still believed Jews to possess certain stereotypical traits, like the "sense for money." In contrast to his Wagnerian days, though, Nietzsche refused to join the burgeoning movement of political anti-Semitism of the 1880s. Instead, having become popular with Jewish students in Vienna, and having developed a close friendship with an assimilated German Jew, Paul Rée, Nietzsche began to view intermarriage as the solution to the Jewish Question. "The Germans should breed a ruling caste," he wrote in a note from 1885, and since Jews "possess inherent abilities that are essential ingredients for a race conducting world politics," it seemed better for Jews and Germans to be united by blood rather than divided by politics. It is from comments like these, together with detailed accounts of Nietzsche's brushes with three notable political anti-Semites (his publisher Ernst Schmeitzner, his brother-in-law Bernhard Förster, and the publisher Theodor Fritsch), that Holub comes to his final assessment of Nietzsche's view of the Jews and Judaism.

Nietzsche, Holub concludes, was not an anti-Semite in the late-19th-century sense of the term. After briefly flirting with that ideology during his Wagner years, Nietzsche "recoil[ed] from the crude excesses" of such political anti-Semitism, finding it vulgar and, probably, unphilosophical. But Nietzsche, Holub is quick to qualify, was no friend to the Jews, either. Even his seemingly positive remarks "often amount[ed] to a validation of existing stereotypes." Moreover, Nietzsche held views that "we would categorize today as biased and perhaps even racist." Contextualizing Nietzsche turns out to mean that he was not an anti-Semite *then*, but that he would be *now*.

Near the end of *Nietzsche's Jewish Problem*, as we draw biographically closer to the philosopher's period of insanity at the end of his life, the book is taken over by the sense that the examination thus far has been insufficiently philosophical. Its final chapter, in contrast to every preceding chapter, is devoted to examining Nietzsche's published works rather than his private letters, in particular the *Genealogy of Morals* and *The Antichrist*.

Nietzsche's basic philosophical project—encapsulated by the title *Der Antichrist*, which could be translated as "The Anti-Christian" just as well as "The Antichrist"—is to purge the world of Christian values and return to one in which "natural" values guide human life. "Christian[ity]," he writes, "is all hatred of the intellect, of pride, of courage, of freedom, of intellectual *libertinage*; Christian[ity] is all hatred of the senses, of joy in the senses, of joy in general." To understand (and defeat) Christianity, though, one must understand the "soil from which it sprung": Judaism.

Biblical Judaism, according to Nietzsche, slowly developed "slavish" values and, in so doing, eventually launched a Christian revolution. The significance of Nietzsche's schema here must not be overlooked. At first blush, Nietzsche's view would seem to put him just as much at odds with Jews as he is

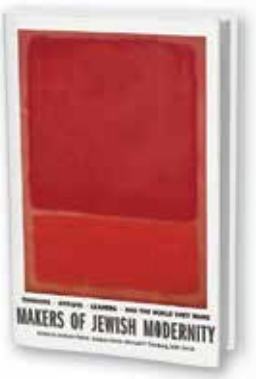


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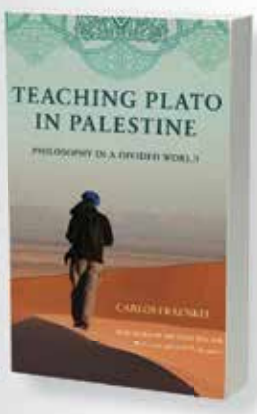


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with Christians. For him, Christianity is the "one great curse" visited upon humanity, and it was visited upon humanity by the Jews.

But if Jews are ultimately responsible for Christianity, why does Nietzsche say things such as "The Jews are the most remarkable people in the history of the world" since they chose national survival "*at any price*"? How can the Jews simultaneously "attempt to *denaturize* all natural values" via the birth of Christianity while also maintaining the "natural attitude" of affirming communal life? Such remarks—and the fact that the Jewish religion persevered for two millennia after the establishment of Christianity, no small feat even in the eyes of Nietzsche—show that Nietzsche's seemingly simple genealogy of morality is, in truth, not simple at all.



Friedrich Nietzsche with his sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, 1899. (Photograph by Hans Olde, courtesy of Klassik Stiftung Weimar, Goethe-und Schiller-Archiv, Nietzsche-Ikonographie.)

Moreover, Nietzsche's sense of the historical relationship between ancient Jews and modern Jews is less than clear. Are the modern Jews responsible for the curse of Christianity, too? And, if so, how are we to understand Christian anti-Semitism? Nietzsche leaves such questions unanswered, but does not leave his readers guessing as to whether he harbors any disdain for modern Jewry: "One would as little choose 'early Christians' for companions as Polish Jews . . . Neither has a pleasant smell."

There is a great deal to be sorted out here, but Holub makes little effort to do so. Rather than venturing to understand Nietzsche's conceptual history of religion, how the Jews fit into it, and how it all squares with his private attitudes, Holub shows only that Nietzsche relied upon an ultimately false and prejudiced theory that the Jews and other Semitic tribes originated with a slavish underclass (the "Chandalas") in ancient India. In pointing this out, and in going no further in trying to understand Nietzsche's work from a genuinely philosophical point of view, Holub risks trivializing Nietzsche. There is no doubt that the philosopher's private prejudices taint his image, but do they help to explain, or undermine, his arguments, and, if the latter, how interesting can he have been as a thinker?

Academics and amateur enthusiasts alike have always wondered what a writer really thought, as opposed to what was put out for public consumption, and sometimes such curiosity bears fruits. The sober investigation of unpublished documents, an endeavor Holub conducts with enthusiasm, is surely a great service to the historical literature, and *Nietzsche's Jewish Problem* will likely become the definitive work on its subject. But in seeking to unmask Nietzsche, Holub pushes his published works—the core of his philosophy—out of view.

On the one hand, Nietzsche's philosophy is itself of interest, and his project of "revaluating all values," by tearing down the "slave morality" of Christendom, is necessarily connected to Judaism. But for those concerned with that issue, Holub's study is of little help. It's very hard to see how Nietzsche's refusal to remain within the Wagnerian fold, in combination with his employment of certain anti-Jewish stereotypes, helps us make sense of his philosophical-historical understanding of the Jews as "gain[ing] satisfaction from [their] enemies and conquerors only through a radical revaluation of their values . . . an act of *the most deliberate revenge*."

And, on the other hand, Holub's study does not help us much in understanding how Nietzsche was received in the 20th century. Anti- and philo-Semitic scholars alike were not provoked by the private correspondence that Holub dutifully wades through. Indeed, they hardly had access to it. Rather, 20th-century readers of Nietzsche found his philosophical work to be compelling. We cannot determine why Nietzsche's interpreters have disagreed so sharply until we understand how Jews and Judaism fit into his philosophical project.

Holub's real question turns out to have been whether Nietzsche was, as Nazi intellectuals insisted, one of their own. Though he equivocates a bit—of course we can never *really* know whether or not Nietzsche would have been persuaded, as Heidegger was, to join the Nazi Party—he shows that there is sufficient evidence to read Nietzsche as "violently antagonistic" to the early political anti-Semitism that gave rise to Nazism. This is a significant conclusion—one that should perhaps help Jewish readers of Nietzsche rest a little easier. And yet, it should be remembered that the temptation to peek behind the veil of Nietzsche's published work comes with a danger: It is easy to lose sight of why he remains worth reading.

Benjamin Silver is a graduate student in the Committee on Social Thought at The University of Chicago. Previously, he was an assistant editor of National Affairs.

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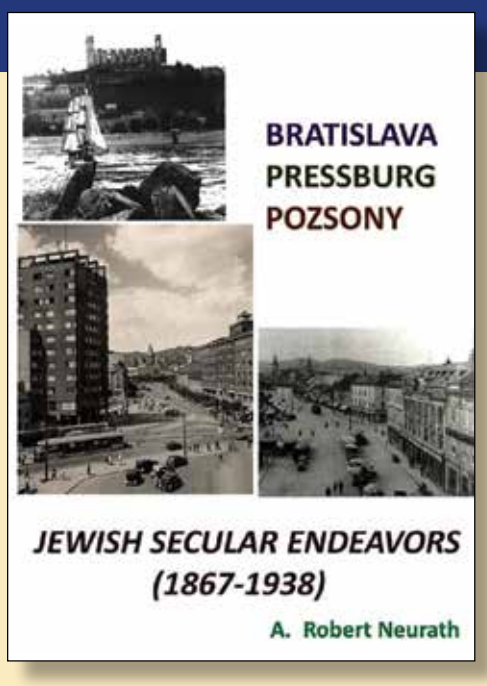
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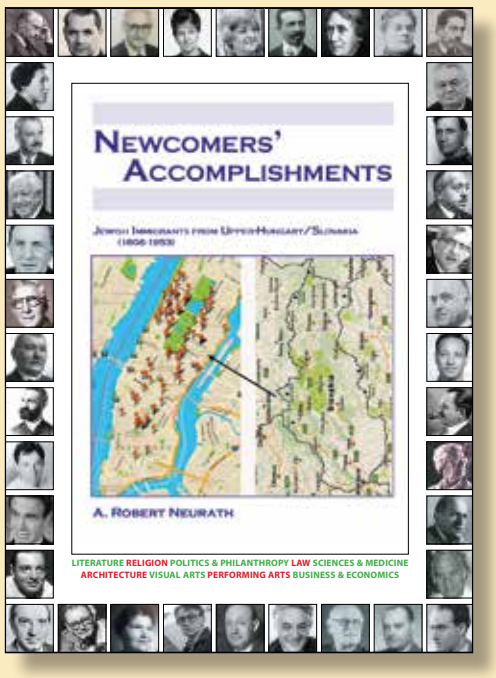
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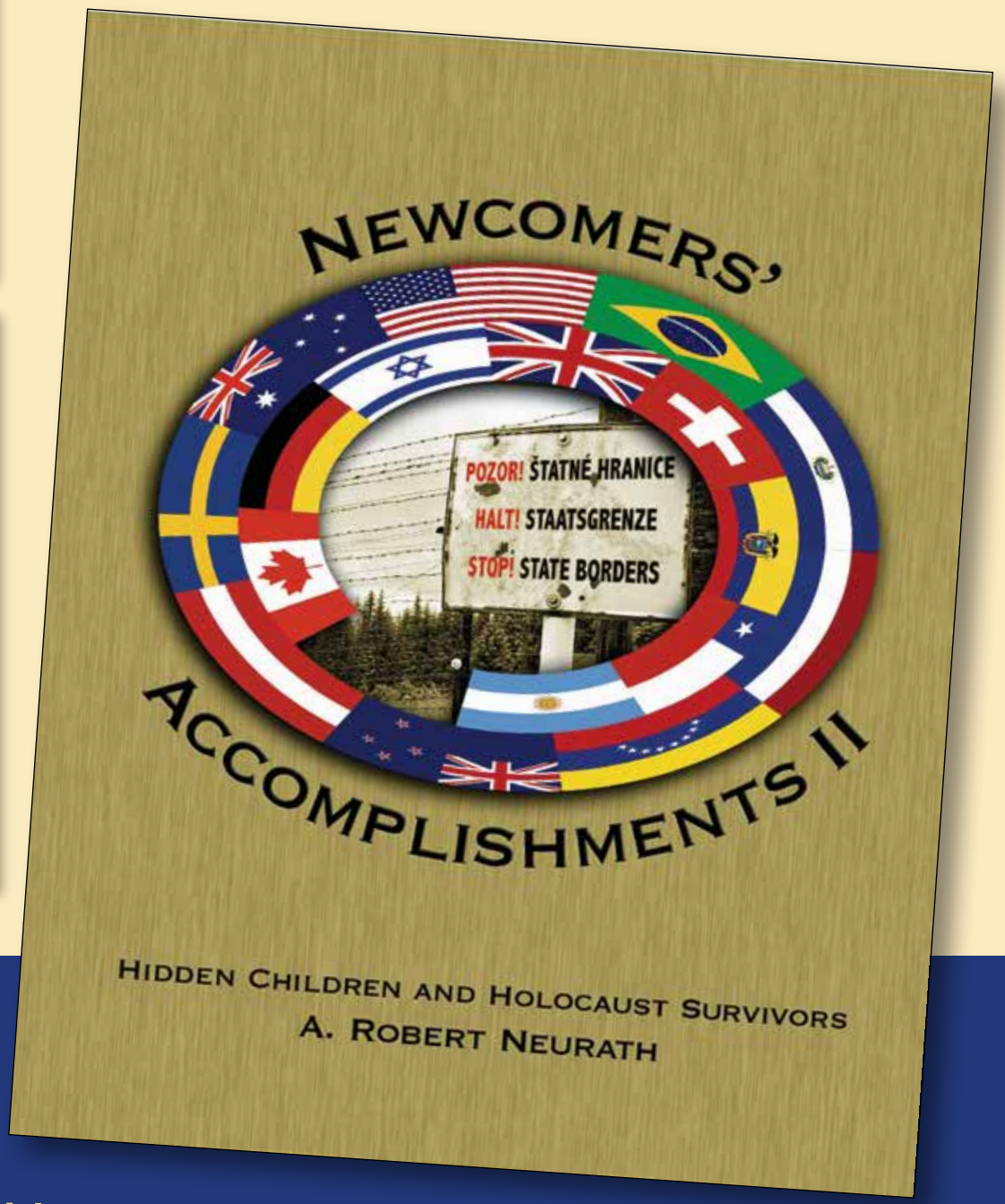
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A Brand Rescued from the Fire

BY ELISHA RUSS-FISHBANE

On the Edge of the Abyss: A Polish Rabbi Speaks to His Community on the Eve of the Shoah
by Kalman Chameides, edited and translated by Leon Chameides
Chameides Press, 360 pp.

As the skies began to darken over Nazi Germany, Martin Buber, who remained in the country to teach and support his community until 1938, was one of the first to give voice to the suffering of Jewish children. Writing in the main Jewish paper, the *Jüdische Rundschau,* in 1933, Buber appealed to parents and educators to address the special needs of the child:

> The children see what is happening and are silent, but at night they groan in their dreams, awake, stare into darkness. The world has become unsafe . . . the soul no longer finds its way into the world. It becomes hardened and callous . . . Parents, teachers, how can this be avoided?

Buber called upon parents and teachers to do all in their power to preserve some semblance of stability in the lives of the children under their care. But what is the responsibility of adults when this sacred task is no longer possible, when the world has become unsafe for children and parents alike? While most Jewish parents under the Nazis had no control over the ultimate fate of their children, some were confronted with the painful choice of whether to entrust their children's lives to Gentile neighbors (those few souls, relatively speaking, willing to risk their own lives to save others), with the real likelihood that they would never see them again. The trauma of the child was inextricably linked with that of the parents, at times forced to choose between one form of unspeakable sacrifice and another.

On the Edge of the Abyss: A Polish Rabbi Speaks to His Community on the Eve of the Shoah is the product of two men, a father and son, working independently of each other and separated by some 80 years. The father, Rabbi Kalman Chameides, did not survive the war. Had he not had the foresight and courage to hide his two sons in a monastery, his children would almost certainly have shared his fate. Eight decades later, the younger son, Leon, is still haunted by memories of the day his father surreptitiously brought him, at the age of seven, to the monastery and left him there, without a word of explanation, in the care of the metropolitan of the Uniate church, Andrey Sheptytsky. The silence of his father's agony will never be filled, but Leon Chameides has now painstakingly collected his father's writings from the fateful years of 1930s Polish Jewry, before the break-up of his family and the collapse of Jewish life in Nazi Europe.

On the Edge of the Abyss consists of 75 essays in German and Polish written by Kalman Chameides between 1932 and 1936 for his community of Katowice, Poland. The essays were cut short when Kalman was tapped to serve as a Jewish chaplain in the Polish army and was forced to divide his rabbinical duties between Katowice and Będzin prior to the German invasion of September 1939. Fleeing German forces, the Chameides family took refuge in eastern Poland (then under Russian control) before it, too, was conquered by the Germans in the summer of 1941. Shortly after Kalman and his wife, Gertrude, successfully hid their two sons along with other Jewish children disguised as Christian orphans, they were transferred to the Lwów Ghetto, where they and nearly all of those who were not evacuated to concentration camps perished.

Eight decades later, Leon Chameides is still haunted by memories of the day his father surreptitiously brought him to the monastery and left him there.



Rabbi Kalman Chameides of Katowice with his wife, Gertrude, ca. mid-1930s. (The Ghetto Fighters' House Museum, Israel/The Photo Archive.)

Leon Chameides, who was brought to England and then the United States after the war, went on to become founding director of pediatric cardiology at Hartford Hospital and a clinical professor of pediatrics at the University of Connecticut. In his later years, he began to reconstruct his family's story, which resulted in his earlier book *Strangers in Many Lands: The Story of a Jewish Family in Turbulent Times*. This, in turn, led to *On the Edge of the Abyss.* (As with many family histories and memoirs from these years, both books are self-published.)

These essays, written in a soaring and often prophetic pitch, are a rare testimony of Orthodox rabbinic leadership during these critical years and, not surprisingly, have much to say on the state of Europe, the future of its Jews, and (especially poignantly) the prospects of its children. In an essay from August 1935, entitled "Jewish Children as Martyrs," Rabbi Chameides urged his community to prepare their children for the deep-seated hatred that soon awaited them and for which they would have to pay a heavy price in their own lives.

> Today, a Jewish child sees a world of enemies confronting him like once little David faced the giant, Goliath. His martyrdom begins in his earliest school days, where the first principles of racial prejudice are taught. He knows nothing of golden childish dreams since the childhood of a Jewish child is filled with great anxiety about the future. Jewish children have hardly become conscious of life and joy, when they realize that they are surrounded by enemies; encircled by hatred and distrust . . . Today, the Caesar is no longer trying to win over Jewish children's hearts. He no longer tries to convert them to his own faith. He wants to annihilate them. He knows no pity… And because of this, Jewish children must once again become heroes . . . Teach them to bear humiliation with pride; to accept denigration in peace; and teach them, in suffering, never to deny; in an assault from hostile forces, never to lose hope . . .

The Jewish children of 1930s Europe were indeed to bear a heavy burden for the hatred propagated by inveterate enemies of the Jewish people. If Israel's foes in a former age sought their souls for conversion, the Caesar of the day wanted nothing less than their physical destruction. Yet still the child is taught to never lose hope, to never give up. As we know, Chameides himself, some seven years later, responded to the very real threat of physical destruction with the determination to save as many children as possible from this fate. But this, too, came with the terrible sacrifice of separation.

When Chameides wrote of Jewish martyrdom in 1935, it is tempting to read this as a prescient vision of the fate of European Jewry. There was, of course, no way for anyone to know what lay ahead, and certainly no one could have dreamed of the scale of mass murder that was in store. The historian David Engel has pointed out to me that the word for physical destruction (*Vernichtung*) used by Chameides took on the connotation of "annihilation" as a direct outcome of the Holocaust. Nonetheless, Chameides' vision of the future of European Jewry in 1935—framed in terms of the future martyrdom of Jewish children—was indeed prescient and exceedingly dark. That same year, he wrote of the "scientifically embellished" anti-Semitism prevalent in Germany: "First, they proclaim a sentence of death for our spirit in order then, with a clear conscience, to bury our physical existence."

Chameides had sounded a similar note of foreboding two years earlier, in September of 1933, when he issued a lament over the current crisis facing German Jewry and its inevitable decline. The exile (or *golus,* as he put it) of German Jewry had already begun:

> Discharged from employment, deprived of all legal rights, their dignity humiliated and disgraced, thousands of our brothers in Germany have had to flee their native country, to which they pledged their loyalty and dedicated their lives, and to wander like vagabonds seeking refuge in neighboring hospitable lands or in our new national home. . . . 'They, that were brought up in scarlet, embrace dunghills' (Lamentations 4:5)—not long ago German Jews were the leaders of world Jewry, enriching the treasure of their nation with their material and spiritual wealth. Today they stand on the edge of a precipice, holding a wanderer's staff. That is the *golus* of our times!

Chameides' assessment of German Jewry eerily echoes that voiced by Rabbi Leo Baeck, the one-time believer in German-Jewish symbiosis and the beloved pastor of Theresienstadt, who famously declared in September 1933, that "the thousand-year history of German Jewry is at an end." It bears repeating that neither Baeck nor Chameides could have imagined the extent of the nightmare that was soon to unfold in Germany and Poland. Yet both (and, we must imagine, they were not alone) were seemingly convinced that the end of a viable Jewish life on German soil was drawing inexorably closer.

If German Jews were reduced to vagabonds and refugees, there was still a bright spot, as Chameides saw it. Many found the refuge they sought in "our new national home," the envisioned Jewish state in the Land of Israel, of which Chameides wrote with profound optimism. The contrast between this optimism and his prognosis for European Jewry is on full view in several of these essays. In one, Chameides writes of the twin plagues of anti-Semitism and poverty afflicting the Jews of Europe. "Our youth is wasting away. Hope for a better future is melting away. Our only joy is blooming in the East . . . Let us believe and work for it!" In another, entitled "Hero and Martyr," Chameides writes that the only heroic activity for which Jews may aspire is "in areas of Jewish productivity connected with the restoration of the Jewish national home," whereas in Europe, "we have been and, unfortunately, continue for the time being to be martyrs. Here, we must be prepared to suffer for our Judaism."

There is, surprisingly, one prominent exception to Chameides' bleak assessment of a Jewish future in Europe: his native Poland. His relative optimism for the future of Poland was evident in an essay from September 1933, when he expressed his gratitude for Polish support of Jews in international affairs. This was probably a nod to official Polish approval of the Bernheim Petition in the League of Nations during the spring and summer of 1933, a petition challenging Germany to reverse its discriminatory policies toward Jews in German Upper Silesia in accordance with the Geneva Convention of 1922. Chameides did not let even such modest support go without proper recognition. Next to England and France, he wrote, "Poland deserves the highest praise among civilized nations for defending our rights in the international arena . . . The only relief and joy amidst the sadness is the fact that we are not alone; that in our misery we have friends…"

His outspoken defense of the Polish state won Chameides admirers within the Polish establishment. Sought out by government officials to lend his support for the strengthening of national defense, Chameides spoke forcefully in the name of all Polish citizens. "Who among us," he asked in May of 1934, "does not sense that peace in Europe rests on a flimsy foundation? That any day now, we may be facing a new world catastrophe…? Our efforts are directed solely at fortifying and consolidating our State." Chameides warned that, in the event that peace is unattainable, "we cannot imagine the magnitude of the devastation and destruction; of

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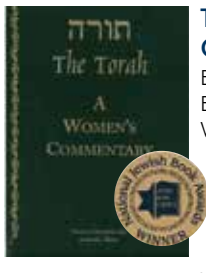

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the suffering and catastrophes, which such a war would cause with today's technical development in modern warfare . . . We must prepare ourselves, become educated, and adapt ourselves for this terrible battle." The uncanny realism of these predictions echoes Chameides' appeal—on the 15th anniversary of the founding of the Second Polish Republic—for Jews and Poles to work together against "a common enemy who lies in wait for our destruction," the Nazi racist venom that contains "the spark of a new, bloody world war."

Yet it is entirely possible that Chameides' plea for common cause in defense of the Polish homeland was intended more to convince Polish authorities of the loyalty of the Jews than the other way around. The Jews of Poland had reason to be concerned. On January 26, 1934, war minister Jósef Piłsudski led Poland to sign a non-aggression pact with Germany. At the same time, sporadic physical assaults against Jews on the street and targeted attacks on Jewish shops and homes that had occurred since the rise of the student-led Green League in 1931 intensified with increased frequency by the summer of 1934. On June 7, four prominent Polish rabbis made a formal appeal to Cardinal Kakowski in Warsaw, "in the name of the Rabbis and Jews of this illustrious Republic," to exert his moral authority in suppression of violence against innocent Jews. The cardinal viewed the violence as "regrettable" but inevitable given the role of Jews in the corruption of religion and morals in the country.

In the midst of this period of Jewish anxiety, a representative acting on behalf of the British Joint Foreign Committee, the American Jewish Committee, and the Joint Distribution Committee visited Warsaw to meet with local Jews and to beseech the Polish government to protect its Jewish minority, as required by the Minorities Protection Treaty it had signed in 1919. Instead, Poland formally repudiated the treaty, leaving Polish Jewry in a precarious position. Rabbi Chameides' essays reflect the growing apprehension on the Jewish street while maintaining a determined optimism in the ultimate triumph of humanity (and Poland). In November 1933, he could still give voice to the centuries-old Jewish belief in historic Polish tolerance: "Poland remembers its old traditions. Poland, the noble and chivalrous, has remained faithful to the principles of its men of vision, to the ideals of its tolerant kings." By September of 1934, however, he found himself looking back on the events of the previous year with deep concern:

> *Ein rega bli pega*—there is not a moment without another misfortune. Our destiny is spinning like a vortex, and the earth is shaking under our feet . . . But even more painful and tormenting than the constant blows and wounds, which Providence has not denied us, is the uncertainty and instability of our circumstances; our concern and feelings of insecurity about the future . . . Who could possibly recount all the incidents of humiliation of Jewish honor, of disgrace and slander of the Jewish name, or of denigration of the Jewish faith?

Yet in the midst of the mob violence, the racist propaganda, the religious vilification, now compounded by political instability—Chameides reminded his congregants of the Jewish duty to see God's goodness even in misfortune, as when we hear "of individuals who, with heroic generosity, endangered their own lives in order to help and save others; of feelings of partnership and brotherhood, which enveloped everyone; of instances when Christians were saved by Jews and Jews by Christians. Tragically, this misfortune has destroyed human life and property. But it has saved our faith in man." In Chameides' abiding faith in a common humanity among fellow Poles that rises above "artificial divisions" and religious creed, one hears echoes of Emanuel Ringelblum, who, as late as June 1942, viewed the frequent occasions when Poles and Jews continued to interact in spite of the Warsaw Ghetto barrier as "a symbol of the unbreakable commonality of the Polish-Jewish fate."

To those who are quick to forget the loyalty of Jewish citizens to their adopted countries, Chameides recalled the magnanimity of the biblical patriarchs toward their neighbors. "May we, despite this ingratitude, always feel the blissful feeling which permeated Joseph's whole being . . . May the words, which God spoke to our patriarch, Abraham, always light our way and, despite disappointments, always keep human goodness and a willingness to help alive in us: 'Be a blessing—and all the family of man shall be blessed because of you.'" The commitment to human decency in the face of indignity was, for Chameides, the enduring message of Judaism in all places and in all times. In the broken tablets of the law that the Israelites carried with them in the wilderness, Chameides saw the shards of human ideals crushed under the weight of barbarism yet continuing to shine in their brokenness. "We have never undermined our ideals when, abandoned and alone, they have been smashed against the cliffs of life. On the contrary, we have collected the remnants and carried them with us." The smallest act of decency, surrounded by so much pain, could be imbued with heroic dignity. "In such a difficult time," he wrote in July 1935, "we turn our gaze into the past. We remember our holy ones, our heroes and martyrs . . . Let their lives be a model for us!" In describing the suffering of his community within the context of its national destiny, Chameides constructed a fragile but real spiritual barrier against the madness raging outside.



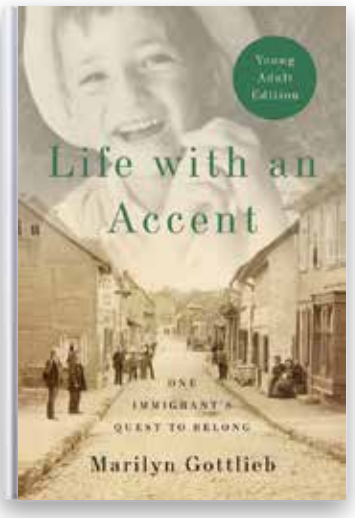
A photograph taken in the monastery in Ugnev (near Lwów). The three Jewish children in the photograph are, in the second row, second and third from the right, Oded Amerant and Daniel Adam Rotfeld. Leon Chameides is standing above and between them.

Kalman Chameides died of typhus in the Lwów Ghetto on December 25, 1942. According to the testimony of a survivor, Gertrude carried her husband's body to the cemetery on her back and marked the grave to ensure the plot could be identified after the war. Despite her heroic efforts, his family has not been able to locate it.

According to a tradition recorded in the Jerusalem Talmud, one need not construct a monument at the grave of the righteous, for "their words are their remembrance." In restoring his father's testimony and teachings to their rightful place, Leon Chameides has more than fulfilled his duty as a son. His father's words are a powerful repudiation of despair in favor of a magnanimous affirmation of life and human dignity. In the words of the prophet Zechariah, they are a precious brand rescued from the fire.

Elisha Russ-Fishbane is an assistant professor in New York University's Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies. He is the author of Judaism, Sufism, and the Pietists of Medieval Egypt: A Study of Abraham Maimonides and His Times *(Oxford University Press).*

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Back in the USSR

BY ADAM ROVNER

Where the Jews Aren't: The Sad and Absurd Story of Birobidzhan, Russia's Jewish Autonomous Region
by Masha Gessen
Schocken, 192 pp., $25

In 1949, each family arriving in Birobidzhan, the Soviet Union's Jewish Autonomous Region, was promised a cow. But since no cows could be procured, the miserable arrivals were instead granted "certificates of cowlessness." Now officially cowless, these Jewish settlers were entitled to Soviet economic aid. But there was no aid to be had, just as there were no cows, just as there was no autonomy in Birobidzhan. Today there are barely any Jews. The title of Masha Gessen's latest, *Where the Jews Aren't: The Sad and Absurd Story of Birobidzhan, Russia's Jewish Autonomous Region*, thus aptly reflects the truth behind the chimera of Stalin's cynical remedy for Jewish homelessness. Yet Gessen's slim volume offers up its own phantom presence: Birobidzhan, that end-of-the-world place in far eastern Siberia, is not really at the center of her book.

Gessen instead uses the bizarre history of Birobidzhan to outline the biographies of Yiddish author David Bergelson and historian Simon Dubnow. That Bergelson emerged as Birobidzhan's most significant literary advance-man despite living there only briefly makes the farce of the Jewish Autonomous Region and the fate of its Jewish supporters that much crueler. Gessen, a journalist, made her reputation as a bold writer who pulls no punches. Yet in *Where the Jews Aren't* she reveals a surprising patience for the fickleness of Bergelson and the failures of his later work.

Renowned as one of the premier stylists of Yiddish modernism, Bergelson has received a great deal of scholarly attention in the last two decades. The story of his execution along with several other important Jewish authors (including poets Leyb Kvitko and Peretz Markish) during a brutal 1952 purge of Stalin's "enemies" has become a touchstone for Jewish academics and writers. Nathan Englander, in his short story and play "The Twenty-Seventh Man," and Elie Wiesel, in his novel *The Testament*, reimagine this horrific chapter of Soviet Jewish history that has come to be called "The Night of the Murdered Poets." Rather than a cautionary tale of the costs of compromised principles, of obeisance to power, and of dreams founded on denial, it has become a contemporary Jewish intellectual's martyrology, a roll call of the destruction of Yiddish culture.

Yet Gessen's book oddly offers little incentive to those unfamiliar with Bergelson or his work to actually read his novels, or even to sympathize with his shifting allegiances. She describes him "filing lovely happy dispatches on life in the Soviet Union" that were "long on red banners and grand pronouncements and short on the detail that had once marked Bergelson as a great writer . . . as though Bergelson had been writing with his eyes and ears shut." Readers learn that Bergelson feuded with *Forverts* editor Abraham Cahan over money, abased himself before Stalin's minions in preparation for his Soviet homecoming in the 1930s, and stumped for the workers' paradise despite leading a comfortable middle-class life. Bergelson was well-rewarded for services rendered to the state. He lived in the center of Moscow in a roomy apartment and was granted special permission to own property. Peretz Markish noted at the time, perhaps with some jealousy, that "Bergelson lives like a count . . . and he is growing as broad as he is tall from the proud pleasure of it!" Gessen appears bemused rather than outraged by Bergelson, a man who "had willingly and willfully stayed in the propaganda service of a state that had not only murdered some of his friends but was now, through its new alliance with [Nazi] Germany, enabling the murder of his people."



Ticket of the fourth OZET lottery for the support of the Jewish Autonomous Region, 1932. (Photo by Fine Art Images/Heritage Images/Getty Images.)

Gessen refrains from an analysis of Bergelson's character, preferring elliptical observations. She writes that Bergelson went "to his death . . . trying to square the circle of Jewishness in a world that did not want Jews, protecting the seeds of a religion he did not practice, and insisting on his right to keep alive a dying language." Should readers be awed by Bergelson's complexity? Frustrated by his opacity? Puzzled by his inconstant nature? The refusal to judge one's characters may be a strength for novelists, but for biographers of men, women, and ideas such delicacy scans as reluctance, or worse, incapacity. For all the details we get of Bergelson's life, he remains strangely peripheral as the chronicler of Birobidzhan. As a protagonist, he is never much in focus, nor for that matter is the physical landscape of Birobidzhan.

Perhaps her lack of vivid description of Birobidzhan today allows Gessen to demonstrate that the actual place—climate, vistas, topography—was never as important as its symbolic value.

A third of the way through the book readers finally encounter Birobidzhan through Bergelson's eyes. "All around chains of mountains rose up, high and rounded, their summits mantled in peaceful blue clouds," he exulted in 1932, "[and] myriad rivers [were] gleaming in the sun, valleys narrow and wide, expanses of taiga and mixed fields, and all of this taken together was the land that the authorities had allocated for the working Jews." Gessen offers scant reportage of Birobidzhan herself. She contrasts Bergelson's wide-eyed praise for the region's natural beauty with descriptions of her travels along empty avenues, through decrepit buildings, and into the depths of dusty libraries housing Yiddish volumes that no one can read. Perhaps the lack of vivid description of Birobidzhan today allows Gessen to demonstrate that the actual place—climate, vistas, topography—was never as important as its symbolic value.

Another major character in *Where the Jews Aren't*, Simon Dubnow, receives less attention than Bergelson yet appears as the more sympathetic figure. Dubnow emerged in the late 19th and early 20th century as the most important advocate of diaspora nationalism, an ideology that promoted the reinvigoration of Jewish social and cultural institutions as a means to consolidate minority national identity within multinational states. He was equally well-known for his comprehensive history of the Jewish people, scholarly studies of Hasidism, and inspiring his pupils to form the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. Gessen writes that she recognized Dubnow's "concept of a secular Judaism as the basis for national identity . . . as the foundation of my own Jewishness." Scholars may quibble with Gessen's reductionist

appropriation of Dubnow's positions, but she performs a notable service for her general readership in bringing Dubnow into contemporary conversations about Jewish peoplehood.

She identifies Dubnow's formulations of diaspora nationalism as the ideological genesis of Jewish settlement in Birobidzhan. While this may be correct in outline, Gessen overlooks a more concrete point of origin. Anarchist theorist Petr Kropotkin conducted path-breaking surveys of the geography and geology of the Birobidzhan region in the 1860s. Years later, during his long exile in England, Kropotkin told Israel Zangwill that the area could be transformed into a Jewish territory. Kropotkin had suggested the region to Zangwill as early as 1906, just after the prominent Anglo Jewish writer had abandoned the Zionist Organization and launched the competing Jewish Territorial Organization (ITO). Zangwill then echoed Kropotkin in the immediate aftermath of the 1917 revolution, insisting that Siberia contained a "mighty land of the future" suitable for Jewish self-government. Surely this documented connection between Kropotkin, the early Soviet Union, and Jewish nationalist efforts in the diaspora deserves some mention in a discussion of the origins of Birobidzhan.



David Bergelson in an undated photo. (The Ghetto Fighters' House Museum, Israel/The Photo Archive.)



Simon Dubnow, Odessa, 1896. (Courtesy of the Schwadron Portrait Collection, The National Library of Israel.)

This is not to say that Birobidzhan should be considered a Territorialist project. Territorialist sympathizers remained skeptical of the Jewish Autonomous Region even as the first false, glowing reports of Birobidzhan emerged in the 1930s. They were right to remain aloof. As Gessen notes, apparatchiks promoted the region for Soviet economic and security reasons, not for the sake of Jewish welfare or Yiddish culture.



Lifelong residents in front of the Birobidzhan station, October 2011. The men have lived here since childhood, when their parents, fleeing from the pogroms of western Eurasia, decided to settle here. (Photo by Thierry Esch / Paris Match via Getty Images.)

Here Gessen misses an opportunity to contrast the sad and absurd story of Birobidzhan with failed Territorialist schemes of the 1930s and 1940s, not to mention the success of Zionism in this period.

Dubnow, whose appraisal of Zionism was never more than lukewarm and whose rejection of Marxism was unequivocal, emerges early on as Gessen's hero. He seems to have had a knack for knowing when to emigrate during the dislocations of the first decades of the 20th century, much as Gessen's parents, and later the author herself, had known when it was time to flee the Soviet Union and Putin's resurgent Russia. But Dubnow, the learned historian, could not outrun the savagery of modern history. He was shot and killed at the age of 81 by German soldiers on the outskirts of Riga in 1941. Bergelson lived into the postwar era thanks in part to his propagandizing for Birobidzhan, then he too was murdered. Losing "any sense of home," Gessen writes, "is essential for developing an instinct for knowing when it's time to run." Then again, the lack of a sense of home did not spare the heroes of Gessen's book from meeting violent deaths.

In a book so concerned with geography as fate, it is unfortunate that readers travel with Gessen to Birobidzhan only in the last 20 pages of her book. There we follow the author in 2009 as she paces through "brutally cold" museums, navigates Kafkaesque archives, wanders slums populated by "inebriated creatures of indeterminate age and gender," and stumbles through culinary misadventures: the schnitzel à la Birobidzhan is a pork cutlet and the gefilte fish is served reheated. Gessen's journalistic style becomes strikingly vivid when she introduces readers to the last voluntary Jewish settler of Birobidzhan, 90-year-old Iosif Bekerman. The pugnacious Bekerman, "his lower lip . . . permanently rolled out, shiny and purplish," refuses to cover his head to enter the one synagogue in the Jewish Autonomous Region. He praises his granddaughter for marrying a non-Jewish man and for changing her name to obscure her origins. A "tiny shell of an old man," Bekerman was the only native Yiddish speaker then residing in Birobidzhan, and Gessen finds only a single Yiddish volume in the "national collection" of Birobidzhan's Sholem Aleichem Library.

In the book's Epilogue, Gessen describes her émigré family's final day on Russian soil in 1981. She recalls her apprehension and excitement as their plane waits on the tarmac, and as she stares out the window she asks herself: "Did the West actually exist?" Those who know the story of the Jewish Autonomous Region may ask themselves whether it too ever really existed except in the imagination, whether cynical or noble, of its proponents. How could so many people believe that Jewish culture would flourish in the harsh, easternmost reaches of the Soviet Union? Bergelson's Yiddishland never came to pass, nor did Dubnow's vision of diaspora nationalism. Given the fate of Dubnow and Bergelson—and of Birobidzhan itself—one can conclude that for Gessen home is not where they have to take you in; rather, the idea of home is what Jews must not be taken in by.

Adam Rovner is the author of In the Shadow of Zion: Promised Lands before Israel *(NYU Press) and associate professor of English and Jewish literature at the University of Denver.*

Ike's Bet and Nasser's *Vasser*

BY ALLAN ARKUSH

Ike's Gamble: America's Rise to Dominance in the Middle East
by Michael Doran
The Free Press, 320 pp., $28

In the middle of the last century, a grim, bilingual pun circulated among American Jews: Hitler fell into the *vasser* and came out a Nasser (*vasser* is water in Yiddish; *nasser* is wet). It's hard to see the Egyptian leader as a Middle Eastern führer when one finds him, near the beginning of Michael Doran's exciting new book, hanging out in the apartment of a junior American diplomat in Cairo, eating hot dogs and watching Hollywood movies. Yet even at that time, in 1953, the 34-year-old lieutenant colonel, behind-the-scenes leader of the military junta that had just taken charge in Egypt, appears to have been a master manipulator. He had no trouble convincing key American diplomats that Egypt would be a reliable ally, if only the United States would help it break free of the shackles of British imperialism.

This was something that America's leaders were more than willing to do. Not only Secretary of State John Foster Dulles but President Eisenhower himself was eager to shatter, as the latter put it, "the obsolete Colonial mold" in order "to win adherents to Western aims." *Ike's Gamble* shows just how prepared the Eisenhower administration was to bully Great Britain into doing what Gamal Abdel Nasser wanted. It forced the British to abandon their huge military base in the Suez Canal Zone in exchange for nothing more than an Egyptian promise to let the West back in if there were a war. Eisenhower thought that this 1954 agreement had "laid the foundations for an Arab-Western alliance in the Cold War." He soon learned, however, that he had made the British give much more than the West got and that, as Doran writes, "Nasser's appetite only increased with eating."

In 1953, even before the British-Egyptian deal had been struck, Dulles paid a visit to the Middle East that induced him to give up the "preconceived idea of making Egypt the key country in building the foundations for a military defense of the Middle East" against the Soviets. His subsequent attempt to construct a regional alliance in which Iraq was the principal Arab player outraged Nasser. When the Egyptian president railed against the American plan, Dulles belatedly recognized the depth of Nasser's ambition to be the undisputed leader of the Arab world—and went about trying to satisfy it.

One way to do that was to let him take a bite out of Israel, a country that the anti-Zionist Dulles already regarded as an impediment to smooth relations with the Arab world. Together with Great Britain, the United States devised the "Alpha Plan," which would have internationalized Jerusalem and required Israel to cede a large amount of territory in the Negev to Egypt and Jordan in exchange for peace. This proposal was far from good enough for Nasser, who was still too infuriated by the American plan for the region to pay any attention when he was first given a preview of it. By continuing to push the Alpha Plan, however, the Americans demonstrated that they were perfectly willing to strengthen "the regional actor who saw greatest advantage in perpetuating the conflict with Israel and who was also working to undermine the Western position in the Middle East."

Dulles recognized Nasser's ambition to be the undisputed leader of the Arab world—and went about trying to satisfy it.

Things went from bad to worse. Nasser got closer and closer to the Soviet Union, while successfully deceiving many American bureaucrats into believing "that he, personally, was pro-Western but surrounded by more extreme elements" that he had to placate. Doran is at his best when he demonstrates precisely how Nasser manipulated senior CIA official Kermit Roosevelt and others into undermining Dulles's first attempt to institute a more hardline policy toward Egypt. Convinced, the secretary of state offered, among other things, to help finance the Aswan High Dam, then still in its planning stages.



Israeli soldiers guarding the demarcation line after a ceasefire along the Suez Canal, 1956. (Photo by ullstein bild/ullstein bild via Getty Images.)

The courtship finally came to an end the following year when the Egyptian leader slapped Washington in the face by recognizing the People's Republic of China. When the administration, responding in part to congressional pressure, rescinded the offer to help finance the dam, Nasser "countered," as Doran puts it, "with the single greatest move of his career: nationalization of the Suez Canal," brilliantly transforming "the disagreement with Dulles over the dam into a contest between Arab nationalism and European imperialism."

Did things have to deteriorate to this point? Doran quickly dispenses with historians who have accused Dulles of unnecessarily offending Nasser. Above all, he writes, "the Dulles-lost-Nasser thesis ignores the utterly irresistible appeal to Nasser of the nationalization scheme," which yielded "[j]ustice, glory, gold, and vengeance." If there was any "single 'triggering' moment for the nationalization," it was actually the evacuation of the last British soldiers from the Suez Canal Zone on June 13, 1956. "Why did Nasser nationalize the canal in July 1956?" Doran asks, "Because he could."

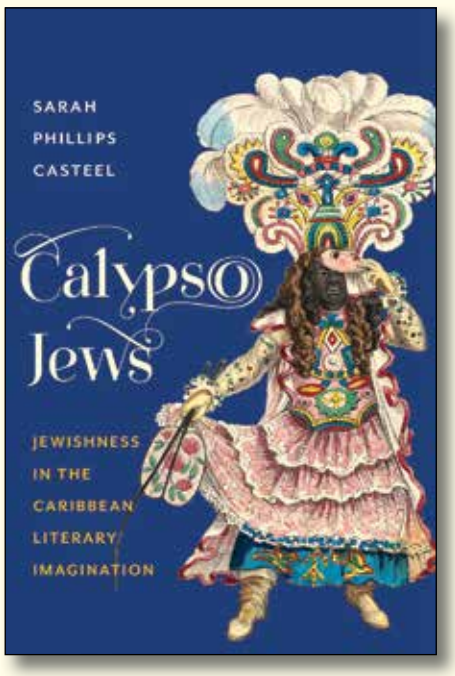
Nasser's move led, of course, to war. Doran retells the familiar story of the British-French-Israeli assault on Egypt three months later quickly. His interest is not the conflict itself but the American role in terminating it. Eisenhower, as he sees it, sided with the besieged Nasser not to win friends in the Middle East, as he had hoped a couple of years earlier, but to prevent creating more enemies, throughout "the whole Arab world." To keep that from happening Eisenhower virtually forced the British to withdraw unconditionally from Egypt. Their quick compliance provides the occasion for one of Doran's trademark witticisms: "The British Empire had come to its definitive end—first with a bang, then a whimper." Less rapidly, but no less completely, Eisenhower forced the Israelis out of Sinai, though not before guaranteeing American support for Israel's freedom of shipping through the Straits of Tiran and a UN buffer force between Israeli and Egyptian forces in Gaza.

Doran's sketch of immediately ensuing developments in the Middle East demonstrates just how little America received from Nasser for its

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diplomatic endeavors. The Egyptian leader's continuing efforts—some successful, some not—to subvert American allies in the region led Eisenhower and Dulles to re-evaluate their whole stance toward the Arab world. By 1958 they understood how senseless it was to treat Nasser as if he were the leader of the entire Arab nationalist movement and explicitly supported a strategy that "called for using the innately fissiparous character of Arab politics to weaken Nasser's power indirectly." They had, in short, "discarded the basic assumptions about the Middle East that had led them to drive the British, French, and Israelis out of Egypt in 1956."

Could the hot dog-munching, movie-going young colonel have become our man if we had tried harder to accommodate him?

Eisenhower now saw Israel in a different light too. Building on the decades-old but insufficiently known work of Israeli scholar Abraham Ben-Zvi, Doran highlights the degree to which the president had come to think of the Jewish state as an asset in defending American interests in the Middle East. After he left office, Doran shows, Eisenhower regretted his dalliance with Nasser. "You know, Max," he told the prominent American Jew and Republican fundraiser Max Fisher, "looking back at Suez, I regret what I did . . . I never should have pressured Israel to evacuate the Sinai." And in 1988 Richard Nixon divulged that Eisenhower had told him that he considered Suez to have been "his major foreign policy mistake."



President Dwight D. Eisenhower meets with President Gamal Abdel Nasser during Nasser's visit to the United Nations, New York, September 1960. (Courtesy of Bibliotheca Alexandrina and Gamal Abdel Nasser Foundation.)

"If the Ike of 1958 had appeared earlier," Doran asks toward the end of the book, "would he have really made a difference?" This is an excellent question, but I wish that he had preceded it with a couple of others: What would have happened if Dulles had determined on his 1953 visit to the Middle East that Egypt, as the most populous and strategically located country in the Arab world, should not be subordinated to Iraq but simply had to be the lynchpin of any regional defense organization? Could the hot dog-munching, movie-going young colonel have become our man if we had tried harder to accommodate him at the very outset?

These are questions that Doran doesn't ask, and what he does tell us early in his book about Nasser's articulation of a neutralist and pan-Arab outlook in 1954 does not quite suffice to answer them. There is, in fact, little reason to think that anything the United States could have done the previous year would have altered things. But the argument of Doran's book would have been stronger if he had provided his readers with a more complete view of Nasser's fully shaped anti-imperialistic outlook, even before he came into contact with American officials, and shown that his views were always incompatible with any participation in a Middle Eastern coalition orchestrated by them.

The journey that Doran actually does take into the land of "what if" does give us a glimpse of a possible mid-century Middle East in which the United States has turned Nasser into a loser instead of allowing him to become a winner. It is one in which Eisenhower makes it possible for the British, French, and Israelis to refuse to evacuate Egyptian territory until Nasser makes concessions that would not only "have prevented Nasser from plausibly claiming that he had won an historic victory," but might also have prevented the development of the conditions that led to the outbreak of the Six-Day War. It is one, moreover, in which forces inspired by Nasser would not dare to overthrow the pro-U.S. Hashemite regime in Iraq.

Doran is too sophisticated to think that a sounder American policy would necessarily have guaranteed that things would turn out this way. A hard-headed strategic thinker, he is not trying to make us dream about what might have been but teach us—or, more precisely, the policymakers who will and should read his book—how to think about fundamentally implacable and dishonest adversaries with whom the United States has to deal. (Interested readers may want to reread his recent and already prescient criticisms of President Obama's Iran deal with this history of Eisenhower's failed gamble in mind.) Doran's diplomatic lesson is clear (if hard to follow): Don't let them con you. Even those who might quarrel with his analysis of the past ought to see the wisdom in such advice.

Allan Arkush is the senior contributing editor of the Jewish Review of Books *and professor of Judaic studies and history at Binghamton University.*

Our Kind of Traitor

BY AMY NEWMAN SMITH

The Angel: The Egyptian Spy Who Saved Israel
by Uri Bar-Joseph, translated by David Hazony
Harper, 384 pp., $29.99

"I am not a fan of spy thrillers," Uri Bar-Joseph said recently. "The only good spy novel author is John le Carré." That gives readers fair warning not to expect exploding wristwatches and car chases from the Haifa University professor and former intelligence analyst's latest book, *The Angel: The Egyptian Spy Who Saved Israel*. Even the subtitle might be a bit inflated, he said, since there's no way of really knowing what the outcome of the Yom Kippur War would have been without the spy code-named The Angel. What Bar-Joseph does offer is a comprehensive account of how a well-placed Egyptian became Israel's most valuable intelligence asset, and how disagreements between Israeli spymasters over the information he provided ultimately led to his death.

When Bar-Joseph, then a young reserve soldier in the IDF, was called up at 2 p.m. on October 6, 1973, he had no way of knowing that an Egyptian spy's early warning was what triggered his mobilization. It was only in 1988, when he was asked to serve his reserve duty by writing a study of the Yom Kippur War, that he became aware that some of the intelligence could have come from only a very high-level Egyptian source.

Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser was, the Israeli secret agent Wolfgang Lotz once wrote, "like a giant intelligence bazaar," in which "half the Egyptian civil service and government were infiltrated" by intelligence organizations, both foreign and national, "at one time or another." But of all the intelligence to come from Israel's efforts at penetrating its neighbor to the south, the most valuable came from Ashraf Marwan.

Born into a "typical middle-class home in Cairo," the young Egyptian was a diligent student with a sharp mind that gained him entrée into a position in the "army's elite academic reserve" and a bachelor's degree in chemistry. Just as importantly for his future, he was "tall, attractive, and friendly, someone who knew how to get the most out of life." Those qualities attracted the eye of his future wife Mona, who, according to Bar-Joseph, was neither the smartest nor the prettiest girl at the Heliopolis Sporting Club where they met, but she had something the other girls didn't: She was President Nasser's youngest daughter.

When Mona told her father she wished to marry Marwan, Nasser was anything but encouraging. When his chief of staff had the would-be groom investigated, his concerns were not allayed. "The report [Sami] Sharaf sent to Nasser was not flattering. It emphasized Marwan's ambitiousness and his love for the high life, while doubting the sincerity of his feelings for Mona." Nonetheless, the couple was given a spectacular wedding in 1966, and Marwan was placed in a low-level job under the hostile eye of Sharaf. Perhaps even more irksome to Marwan were the small civil service salary he was paid and his inability to enrich himself through his new family ties because of Nasser's high standards of personal integrity.

The Americans, the British, and the Soviets had all been burned by double agents, but the value of a spy within the Egyptian president's family and administration was irresistible.

Restless, Marwan went to England to continue work on his master's degree in chemistry. His frustrated ego, combined with a gambler's need for risk, led him to pick up the telephone one day in 1970 and call the Israeli embassy in London to offer his services as a spy. As fortune, and his own political skills, would have it, Marwan became a key aide to Anwar Sadat not long thereafter. He would continue to pass Egyptian secrets to Israel until 1998, long after he had become a wealthy and powerful man.



Egyptian president Nasser and his wife, Tahia, with their second grandson, Gamal Marwan, born to their daughter Mona, April 27, 1967. The baby's father, Ashraf Marwan, looks on at left. At right is Nasser's youngest son, Abdel Hakim. (AP Photo.)

More than 40 years after the Yom Kippur War, some of its battles rage on, including the debate over Marwan's true loyalty. In naming his book *The Angel*, Bar-Joseph firmly plants his flag with the camp that believes Marwan to have been a genuine Israeli asset. Others, as we shall see, continue to disagree, believing him to have been a double agent all along whose misdirection was at least partly responsible for the devastating Israeli losses in the 1973 conflict.

Such suspicions began with Marwan's first contact with the Israelis. The Mossad, Bar-Joseph writes, "had kept tabs on [Gamal Abdel] Nasser's son-in-law from the moment he had first arrived in London. They knew he was strapped for cash, even if they didn't know the details, and they knew he had been forced to return to Egypt," in disgrace after a wealthy friend paid off his gambling debt, returning to London only to take exams. But the agency believed that despite his money troubles, his closeness to Nasser made it improbable he could ever be turned traitor. Because he was "a 'walk-in'—someone from the enemy's side who just shows up one day offering his services," they remained skeptical. By 1970, the Americans, the British, and the Soviets had all been burned by double agents, but the potential value of a spy placed within the Egyptian president's family and administration was irresistible. And as Marwan passed information to his case officer Dubi,

including items that could be verified against intelligence from other Egyptian sources, the Mossad's confidence in him swelled.

Bar-Joseph's decision to identify the spy's handler only by his first name, noting that his family name is even now withheld by Israel, is illustrative of the still-heated dispute over the Marwan affair. Far from being a secret, Dubi's last name is reported in *The Spy Who Fell to Earth: My Relationship with the Secret Agent Who Rocked the Middle East* by Ahron Bregman, an Israeli expat who publicly unmasked Marwan in 2002. Bregman and Bar-Joseph have fought their own running battle over the years. Bar-Joseph castigated Bregman for his part in Marwan's death in *The Angel*, originally published in Hebrew in 2011. Bregman's published reply is a thin, unconvincing attempt at self-exculpation. (One would need a wall of whiteboard to map out all the blame and finger-pointing surrounding Marwan that has played out in the press.)

The argument about who Marwan was actually working for cannot be untangled from the one surrounding Israel's unpreparedness for the Yom Kippur War and the devastating casualties that resulted. (Relative to population, the roughly 2,500 Israeli soldiers killed during the 20-day conflict would be approximately 250,000 American deaths.) Bar-Joseph's attempt to write both a mass-market spy story and detailed analysis of a complicated man, with a convoluted life, involved in a complex chain of events, results in a somewhat uneven book. The story is a sprawling one with an extensive cast of characters, and the former analyst's thorough explanations bog down in places. Readers would do well to keep their eye on two men throughout the book:



A destroyed radar missile-guiding unit on the West Bank, October 24, 1973. (Photo by Avraham Kogel, courtesy of the Government Press Office, Israel.)

Eli Zeira, head of military intelligence in 1973, and then–Mossad chief Zvi Zamir.

In July 1972, Anwar Sadat expelled the Soviet troops who had been stationed in Egypt since 1970. The move came after the Soviets failed to deliver weapons systems Sadat felt he needed to take back the Sinai. Based largely on information from Marwan, by then Sadat's emissary for special affairs, the Israelis had developed what they called the *konzeptzia* (the concept), an intelligence paradigm that held that Egypt would not launch a war without "weapons of deterrence," primarily anti-aircraft batteries and missiles capable of hitting Israeli cities. But by the fall, plans were coming together to partner with Syria and engage in a limited war to take back only the eastern bank of the Suez Canal. Marwan passed along information on the developing war plans to Dubi. The paradigm had changed, but not everyone in Israel felt the shift:

> [Zeira] estimated that . . . the likelihood that Egypt would actually try to cross the Suez Canal [was] "close to zero." At the core of Zeira's error stood a misunderstanding of Sadat's expulsion of the Soviet troops just a few months earlier: Instead of seeing it as a preparation for war, he took it as a dramatic setback to Egypt's defensive capability.

Zeira and his organization continued its allegiance to the *konzeptzia* despite Marwan's warnings



as well as data from other sources showing that the paradigm no longer applied, and Nasser had other concepts in mind. When Egypt pushed out the date Marwan had initially passed on for the attack, Zeira used that to discount all the information, rather than seeing changes in plans as an inevitable feature of war planning. Fortunately for Israel, IDF Chief of Staff David Elazar thought the chance of war

The traumatic encounter between Israel and allies Syria and Egypt that began on Yom Kippur in 1973 could have been much bloodier than it was.

was "low but not low enough to ignore," and fought plans to cut back the IDF's budget, "tooth and nail," with teeth sharpened by Marwan's warnings. The traumatic encounter between Israel and allies Syria and Egypt that began on Yom Kippur in 1973 could have been much bloodier than it was.

Zeira's mistakes led the Agranat Commission, which was tasked with investigating the IDF's failures, to recommend that he be dismissed from his post. He resigned but he was never able to accept the blame heaped on him. He maintained that Marwan was a double agent whose early false warnings had lulled Israel into complacency when they didn't pan out. This was in marked contrast to Mossad Chief Zamir, who once faced down a direct order from



Major General Eli Zeira, Israel's director of military intelligence during the Yom Kippur War, exposed Ashraf Marwan as an Israeli spy. (Courtesy of the IDF Archive.)

Golda Meir to pass information to the Americans because he feared it would expose Marwan.

After years of coy hinting that led to the outing of Marwan by Bregman and other writers, Zeira finally named Marwan on an Israeli television show and claimed that he was a double agent in 2004. A week later on the same program, his old rival Zamir said Zeira must "stand trial for having revealed sources . . . when *he* reveals a source, he breaks the first of the Ten Commandments of the Intelligence Corps." Zeira sued Zamir for libel and lost; attempts to have Zeira charged were stymied. None of that mattered to Ashraf Marwan: Three weeks after Zamir was cleared of having slandered Zeira—the truth being an absolute defense—Marwan was dead from a fall from his fourth-floor balcony in London on June 27, 2007.

After an investigation, Scotland Yard could not, or would not, label Marwan's death either suicide or murder. Nor did investigators weigh in on the possible murderers: angry business rivals, the Israelis, or the Egyptians. Almost 10 years later, the evidence remains only circumstantial, though Bar-Joseph appears fairly certain it was the Egyptians, who could no longer deny that Nasser's son-in-law and Sadat's top-level aide had been a traitor.

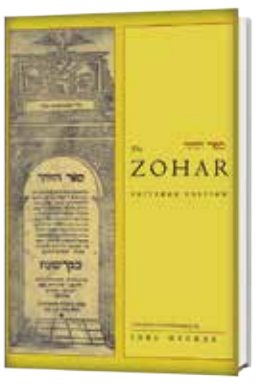
"The Angel" was given a hero's funeral in Cairo. President Mubarak, who was abroad, released a statement calling Marwan a "true patriot of his country." The president's son and heir apparent, Gamal Mubarak, comforted his widow and their two sons at the funeral.

Amy Newman Smith is the managing editor of the Jewish Review of Books.

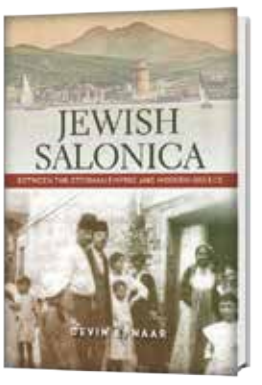
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A History of the Grandparents I Never Had
Ivan Jablonka



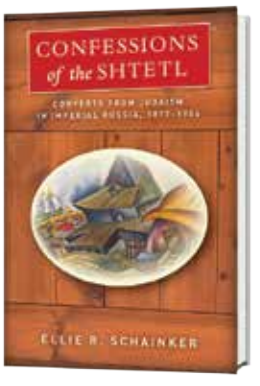
The Zohar
Pritzker Edition, Volume Eleven
Translation and Commentary by
Joel Hecker



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Or, How Jews Fell in Love with Love, and with Literature
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Confessions of the Shtetl
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Ellie R. Schainker



Money, Power, and Influence in Eighteenth-Century Lithuania
The Jews on the Radziwiłł Estates
Adam Teller

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Jokes: A Genre of Thought

BY JOSEPH EPSTEIN

Die Laughing: Killer Jokes for Newly Old Folks
by William Novak
Touchstone, 256 pp., $19.99

Let There Be Laughter: A Treasury of Great Jewish Humor and What It All Means
by Michael Krasny
William Morrow, 304 pp., $19.99

Epicurus (341–270 B.C.E.), the Greek philosopher and founder of the school of Epicureanism, may also have been the world's first shrink. Along with a cosmology and an ethics, Epicurus had a program for stemming anxiety, a four-step method for achieving serenity. Here are the steps:

1. Do not believe in God or the gods. Most likely they do not exist, and even if they did, it is preposterous to believe that they are watching over you and keeping a strict accounting of your behavior.
2. Do not worry about death. Death is oblivion, a condition not different from that of your life before you were born: an utter blank. Not to worry about heaven or hell; neither exists—after death there is nothing, nada, zilch.
3. As best you are able, forget about pain. Two possibilities here: Either it will diminish and go away, or it will get worse and you will die. Should you die, *hakuna matata*, for death, as we know, presents no problem, being nothing more than eternal dark, dreamless sleep.
4. Do not waste your time attempting to acquire luxuries, whose pleasures are certain to be incommensurate with the effort required to obtain them. From this it follows that ambition generally—for things, money, fame, power—should also be foresworn. The game, quite simply, isn't worth the candle.

To summarize: Forget about God, death, pain, and acquisition—and your worries are over. I've not kitchen-tested this program myself, but my guess is that, if one could bring it off, it might just work. "Live the unnoticed life," as Epicurus advises, and serenity will be yours—unless, that is, you happen to be Jewish.

I have known brilliant, stupid, flashy, dull, savvy, foolish, sensible, neurotic, refined, vulgar, wise, nutty Jews, but I have yet to meet a serene Jew, and I'm inclined to think there may never have been one. Marcus Aurelius, on visiting Palestine in 176 C.E., remarked: "O Marcomanni, Quadi, and Sarmatae, at last I have found people more excitable than you."

Jewish habits of thought, featuring irony, skepticism, and criticism, taken together, further preclude serenity. These habits derive from Jewish history and personal experience. An Irish friend then in his nineties once asked me if there were any Yiddish words that weren't critical. I told him there must be some, though I did not know them. Even words that might seem approbative, like *chachem* for wise man, with the slightest turn take on an ironic twist. "No great *chachemess*, Hannah Arendt," my friend Edward Shils used to say when Ms. Arendt's name came up.

I, upon hearing what I take to be a good joke, am more like the yeshiva boy running through the village exclaiming, "I have an answer. I have an answer. Does anyone have a question?"

The quest to grasp Jewish character, both on the part of Jews and on that of others, has been endless and is probably unending. Might Jewish humor offer a helpful clue? What is it about the kind of jokes Jews tell and appreciate, and about jokes featuring Jews as well as their appetite for humor, that is notably, ineluctably Jewish?



Saul Bellow during 1990 National Book Awards in New York City. (Photo by Ron Galella/WireImage.)

Great though the Jewish penchant for jokes is, Jews are of course not alone in joke-telling. In one of her essays the classicist Mary Beard cites the joke anthology *Philogelos* (Laughter Lover), a 4th-century work written in Greek but widely promulgated in Rome. Included in the *Philogelos*, according to Professor Beard, are "jokes about doctors, men with bad breath, eunuchs, barbers, men with hernias, bald men, cuckolds, shady fortune tellers, scholars and intellectuals and more of the colorful (mostly male) characters of Roman life." Keith Thomas, in a lecture titled "The Place of Laughter in Tudor and Stuart England," notes that "jokes are a pointer to joking situations, areas of structural ambiguity in society itself; and their subject matter can be a revealing guide to past tensions and anxieties." About past—also present—tensions and anxieties, Jews know a thing or two.

The English philosopher Simon Critchley, in his book *On Humour*, writes that jokes help us to see our lives "as if we had just landed from another planet." Critchley adds that "the comedian is the anthropologist of our humdrum everyday lives," who helps us to see them in effect from the outside. He calls every joke "a little anthropological essay." I have myself long thought of jokes, at least the more elaborate and better ones, as short stories.

Here is a joke told me by Saul Bellow:

> Yankel Dombrovsky, of the shtetl of Frampol, is 42 years old, unmarried, shy generally, frightened of women in particular. Recently arrived from the neighboring shetl of Blumfvets is Miriam Schneider, a young widow. A Jewish bachelor being a *shandeh*, or disgrace, a meeting is arranged between Yankel and Miriam Schneider. Terrified, Yankel turns to his mother beforehand for advice.
> "Yankel, darling son, please not to worry. All women like to talk about three things. They like to talk about family, about food, and about philosophy. Bring these up and I'm sure your meeting will go well."
> Miriam Schneider turns out to be 4'8", weighs perhaps 230 pounds, and has an expressionless face.
> Oy, thinks Yankel, oy and oy. What was it Mama said women like to talk about? Oh, yes, food.
> "Miriam," he asks in a quavering voice, "Miriam, do you like noodles?"
> "No," says Miriam, in a gruff voice, "I don't like noodles."
> *Veh es meer*. What did Mama say? Family, that's right, family.
> "Miriam," he asks, "do you have a brother?"
> "Don't got no brother," Miriam replies.
> Worse and worse. What was the third thing Mama said? Philosophy. Oh, yes, philosophy.
> "Miriam," Yankel asks, "if you had a brother, would he like noodles?"

Three people are required to perfect a joke: one to tell it, one to get it, and a third not to get it. For those who might have missed it, the object of this joke, of course, is philosophy, especially contemporary academic philosophy. Saul Bellow told me this joke when we were discussing the career of an Oxford philosopher. Bellow had a strong taste for jokes, but, unlike me, he had the patience to hold back telling them until the occasion arose when they made or underscored a point. His wit was generally more free range, sparked by the occasion.

Once, walking together through the Art Institute of Chicago we passed Felice Ficherelli's painting *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*, about which Bellow remarked, "That's what you get for fooling with a Jewish girl." I, upon hearing what I take to be a good joke, am more like the yeshiva boy running through the village exclaiming, "I have an answer. I have an answer. Does anyone have a question?" I need to tell the jokes to friends as soon as possible. Freud, about whose thought there cannot be too many jokes—the best is Vladimir Nabokov's characterization of it as "Greek myths hiding private parts"—once said that a fresh joke is good news. The good news is that someone is thinking. Jokes, superior ones, are a genre of thought.

As such the genre is best maintained in the oral tradition. When I tell the "if you had a brother, would he like noodles?" joke, I do so, when speaking in Yankel's voice, in a tremulous greenhorn English accent, and, when speaking in Miriam's voice, in a tone of gruff insensitivity. I like to think performance improves the joke by perhaps 20 percent. Without voice and gesture to accompany them, jokes on paper, or as is now more common on a computer or cell phone screen, are a distant second best.

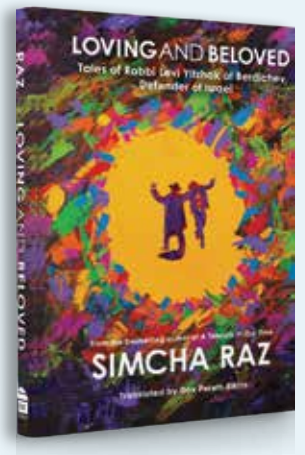
The first joke in S. Felix Mendelsohn's *The Jew Laughs: Humorous Stories and Anecdotes* (1935) is about the result of telling a joke to a muzhik, a baron, an army officer, and a Jew. In different ways the first three fail to understand the joke, and the Jew, who alone gets it, replies that "the joke is as old as the hills and besides, you don't know how to tell it." Michael Krasny, early in his *Let There Be Laughter: A Treasury of Great Jewish Humor and What It All Means*, notes that "there is an old saw about how every Jew thinks he can tell a Jewish joke better than the one who is telling the joke." Old saw it might be, but one with a high truth quotient. Alongside several of the jokes in Krasny's collection, I noted, "my version is better."

I made similar markings in the margins of William Novak's *Die Laughing: Killer Jokes for Newly Old Folks*, a collection of jokes about aging and about being older generally. Many of these, in the nature of the case, are variants of gallows humor. They touch on too-lengthy marriage, what the French call the *desolation generale* of the body, sexual diminishment, physicians, the afterlife, and more. In 1981 Novak had produced, along with Moshe Waldoks, a collection called *The Big Book of Jewish Humor*. The jokes in *Die Laughing* have, perhaps out of fear of redundancy with his earlier book, been dejudaized, some to less than good effect. The punchline of the joke about the fanatical golfer who returns home late from his regular golf date because his partner and dearest friend died on the golf course early in the round is a case in point. In his explanation to his wife for his tardiness in returning home he explains that for several holes after his friend's death "it was hit the ball, drag Bob, hit the ball, drag Bob." The joke is much improved if Bob is named, as in the version in which I originally heard the joke, Irving. Novak tells the joke about the parsimonious widow who, learning that the charge for newspaper obituaries is by the word, instructs the man on the obit desk to print "O'Malley is dead. Boat for sale." The joke is better, though, in the Jewish version, as "Schwartz dead. Cadillac for sale," and is even one word shorter, thereby saving Mrs. Schwartz a few bucks.

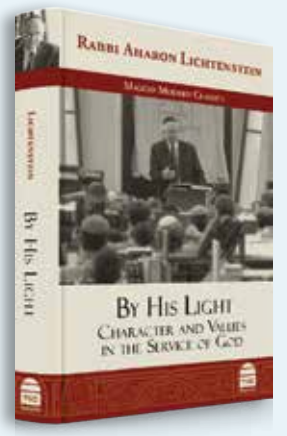
Michael Krasny has a popular radio interview show on the NPR affiliate in San Francisco and is a university professor of English and American

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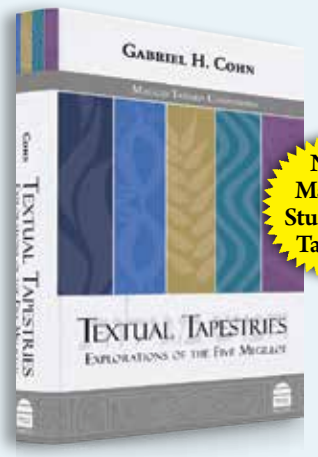
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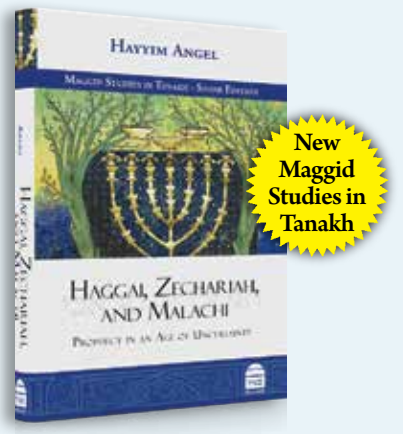
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Gabriel H. Cohn

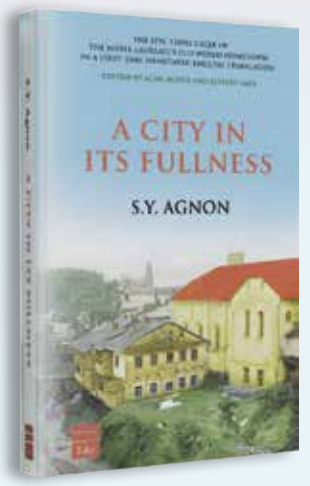


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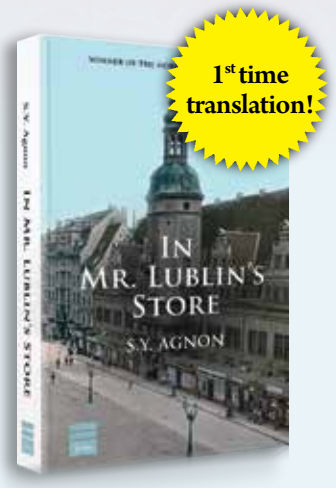
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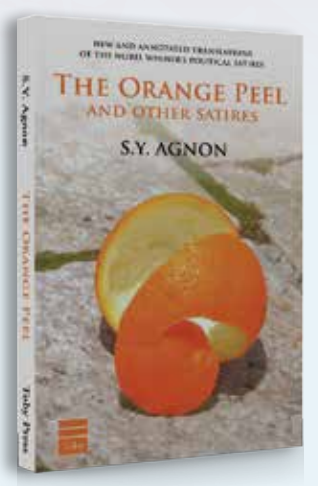
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literature. Out flogging books of my own, I have twice been on his show and know him to be highly intelligent, cultivated, and good at his job. I've also met William Novak, who, along with being a collector of jokes, is, if an oxymoron be allowed, a well-known ghostwriter. He wrote the autobiographies of, among others, Lee Iacocca, Nancy Reagan, Oliver North, and Magic Johnson. Around the time I met William Novak I mentioned to my editor Carol Houck Smith that he was working on the autobiographies of Tip O'Neill and the Mayflower Madame. "Dear me," she said, "I hope he doesn't get his galleys mixed up."

Both Messrs. Krasny and Novak's books are filled with excellent jokes. I might wince slightly at the rare oral sex joke in *Die Laughing*, but, as Novak remarks after telling one such joke, "Too crass? You should see the ones I left out." Michael Krasny has a weakness for name-dropping. He mentions, among several other drops: "Steve Jobs was someone I liked"; "my sweet friend Rita Moreno"; "my friend the novelist Isabel Allende"; and recounts an afternoon on which he kept Dustin Hoffman in stitches with Jewish jokes at a meeting with him and the director Barry Levinson. Myself the author of a book on snobbery, perhaps I am unduly sensitive to name-dropping, as I remarked over lunch the other day to my good friend Francis, you know, the Pope.

Michael Krasny and William Novak are men of good sense who wish only to bring pleasure to their readers, and both do. Novak doubtless shares with Krasny the latter's wholly commendatory conservatory hope that the jokes and humor he loves "will remain an ongoing part of many lives for, well, you know, at least the next few thousand years."

The problem is in the nature of their enterprise: the recounting of one joke after another. Krasny, to be sure, interlards his jokes with anecdotes from his personal experience and offers occasional interpretations of his jokes. Novak introduces his separate joke categories with brief and unfailingly amusing essays. Still, as a character in an Isaac Bashevis Singer story says, "You can have too much even of kreplach."

In our meetings I have no recollection of exchanging jokes with Michael Krasny or William Novak, and I'm glad of it, for as Jokey Jakeys, as I think of habitual Jewish joke-tellers, things might have gotten competitive, and hence mildly abrasive. Jokey Jakeys like to hear a swell joke, but not as much as they love to tell one.

Here is a joke that appears in neither Michael Krasny's nor William Novak's book:

> Sam Milstein is told his wife, now in the hospital, is dying. When he arrives, she asks him, in the faintest whisper, if he will make love to her one last time. He mentions the unseemliness, not to mention the awkwardness of his doing so—the wires, the tubes, and the rest—but she insists, and so he goes ahead.
> Lo, that same evening, mirabile dictu, Sylvia Milstein's vital signs rise; the next day she is taken off her respirator; and three days later she returns home in full health. Her family throws a party to mark her miraculous return to normal life. Everyone is delighted and immensely cheerful, except her husband Sam, who is clearly depressed.
> "Sam," a friend says, "your beloved wife has returned from near death. Why so glum?"
> "You'd be glum too," Sam replies, "if you could have saved the life of Eleanor Roosevelt and you never even lifted a finger."

"A thief stole my wife's purse with all her credit cards. But I'm not going after him. He's spending less than she does."

That joke is immitigably, irreducibly, entirely Jewish. Sam cannot be Bob, nor the Milsteins the O'Malleys. As for what is so Jewish about it, I should answer, in a word, everything: the politics, the depression, even the sex.

A question Michael Krasny asks but doesn't quite fully answer is, Why are Jews so funny? Jews are like everyone else, of course, only more so. They



Edward Shils. (Courtesy of the author.)

have what Henry James called "the imagination of disaster." Optimism is foreign to them. They find clouds in silver linings. If they do not court suffering, neither are they surprised when it arrives. They sense that life itself can be a joke, and one too often played upon them. They fear that God Himself loves a joke.

> Adam, alone in the Garden of Eden, brings up his loneliness to God.
> "Adam," the Lord says, "I can stem your loneliness with a companion who will be forever a comfort and a consolation to you. She, this companion—woman, I call her—will be your friend and lover, helpmeet and guide, selfless and faithful, devoted to your happiness throughout life.
> "But Adam," says the Lord, "there is going to be a price for this companion."
> When Adam asks the price, the Lord tells him he will have to pay by the loss of his nose, his right foot, and his left hand.
> "That's very steep," says Adam, "but tell me, Lord, what can I get for a rib?"

That joke is of course entirely unacceptable today; it is anti-woman, misogynist, politically incorrect. Michael Krasny brings up political correctness in passing, but in our day political correctness, in its pervasiveness, is the great enemy of joke-telling and of humor in general. Consider a simple joke Henny Youngman used to tell: "A bum came up and asked me for 50 cents for a cup of coffee. 'But coffee's only a quarter,' I said. 'Won't you join me?' he answered." Today there are no bums, only homeless people. As soon as one sanitizes the joke by beginning, "A homeless person came up to me . . ." the joke is over and humor has departed the room.

Pervasive though political correctness has become, it, like affirmative action, does not apply to the Jews or to Jewish jokes. Anti-Semitic jokes abound, not a few told by Jews. All play off Jewish stereotypes, some milder than others. The four reasons we know Jesus was Jewish, for example, are that he lived at home till he was past 30, he went into his father's business, he thought his mother was a virgin, and she (his mother) treated him as if he were God. Fairly harmless. But then there are the world's four shortest books: *Irish Haute Cuisine, Great Stand-Up German Comics*, *Famous Italian Naval Victories*, and—oops!—*Jewish Business Ethics*.

What we need is not more anti-Semitic jokes, but more jokes about anti-Semites:

> A Jew is sitting in a bar, when a man at the other end, three sheets fully to the wind, offers to buy drinks for everyone at the bar, "except my Israelite friend at the other end of the bar." Twenty minutes later, the same man instructs the bartender to pour another round for the house, excluding, of course, "the gentleman of the Hebrew persuasion at the end of the bar." A further 15 on, the man asks for one more round for everyone, "not counting, of course, the follower of Moses who's still here, I see."
> Finally exasperated, the Jew calls down to the drunk, "What is it you have against me anyway?"
> "I'll tell you what I have against you. You sunk the *Titanic*."
> "I didn't sink the *Titanic*," the Jew says, "an iceberg sunk the *Titanic*."
> "Iceberg, Greenberg, Goldberg," says the drunk, "you're all no damn good."

Michael Krasny remarks that the standard source ascribed to Jewish humor is "located in a kind of masochism but also in suffering. It is self-deprecatory and self-lacerating, and it sees Jews as outsiders, marginal people, victims." A good definition, that, of the comedy of Woody Allen, with psychoanalysis jokes added. But Krasny also sees in these Jewish jokes "a strain of celebration" and cites Jewish American princess, or JAP, jokes as an example. A brilliant JAP bit I know is that performed by the comedian Sarah Silverman, impersonating a faux Jewish American princess, in which she invents a niece who claims to have learned in school that during the Holocaust, 60 million Jews were killed. In her best ditzy JAP voice, Silverman corrects the child, saying that not 60 but six million Jews were killed, adding, "60 million would be something to worry about."

A few categories of superior Jewish jokes failed to find their way into the Krasny or the dejudaized Novak volume. Jewish waiter jokes are, for one, missing. Allow me to supply merely the punchlines

of a few: "Vich of you gentlemen vanted the clean glass?" "You vanted the chicken soup, you should've ordered the mushroom barley." Another missing category is jokes about German Jews, or *yekkes*, as they are known, for the formality that did not allow them to remove their suit jackets in public. "What's the difference between a *yekke* and a virgin?" one such joke asks. The answer is, "A *yekke* remains a *yekke*." And in the category of out-of-control Jewish wifely extravagance the winner is Rodney Dangerfield's "A thief stole my wife's purse with all her credit cards. But I'm not going after him. He's spending less than she does."

Jewish jokes are a victory over thoughtlessness.

Of the endless category of synagogue jokes, Michael Krasney tells the superior joke about the rabbi who rid his shul of mice by luring them onto the *bimah* with a wheel of cheese, and while there, bar mitzvahing them all, whereby they never returned. I wonder if he knows my friend Edward Shils's favorite joke in this, the synagogue category:

> A peddler, just before sundown, arrives at the study of the rabbi of the shtetl of Bobrinsk. Three men are in the study at the time. The peddler asks the rabbi if he will keep his receipts over Shabbat, when an observant Jew is prohibited from having money on his person. The rabbi readily agrees.
> Next day, after sundown, the peddler appears in the rabbi's study to collect his money. The same three men are there.
> "What money?" the rabbi asks.
> "The money I gave you to hold for me last night," the peddler says. "These men were there. They will remind you."
> The rabbi turns to the first man. "Mr. Schwartz, did this man leave any money with me yesterday?"
> "I have no recollection of his having done so, rebbe," Schwartz says.
> "Mr. Ginsberg," the rabbi asks, turning to the second man, "do you recognize this man?"
> "Never saw him before in my life," Ginsberg says.
> "Mr. Silverstein, what do you think about this?"
> "The man's a liar, rebbe," says Silverstein.
> "Thank you, gentlemen," says the rabbi. "Now if you will excuse me I shall deal with this man alone."
> After the three men depart, the rabbi goes to his safe, removes the peddler's money, and hands it to him.
> "Rebbe," says the peddler, "why did you put me through all that?"
> "Oh," answers the rebbe, "I just wanted to show you the kind of people I have in my congregation."

When Edward told me this joke, which he much enjoyed, I assumed that he had in mind, as analogues to Messrs. Schwartz, Ginsberg, and Silverstein, his colleagues on the Committee on Social Thought at The University of Chicago.

In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud wrote, "I do not know whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character [as do the Jews]." I myself cannot think of any. Who but the Jews joke about their mothers, their religious institutions ("Reform Judaism, isn't that the Democratic Party platform with holidays added?"), their own attitudes of compromise and resignation, their nouveau riche, their domineering wives, their uxorious husbands, the way their enemies think of them, and more? The Irish joke about themselves—an Irish friend not long ago told me that the famous Irish charm is inevitably lost only on the Irish themselves—but nowhere near so thoroughly as do the Jews, who find almost everything about themselves a source of humor.

"How odd of God to choose the Jews" runs a ditty composed by an English journalist named William Norman Ewer, to which various responses have been offered, perhaps the most amusing among them being "because the goyim annoy him." Chosen the Jews may have been, but the everlasting question remains: chosen for what? If pressed to come up with a single theme playing through the Old Testament, I should say that theme would be testing, the relentless testing by God of the Jews from Abraham through Saul, David, and Solomon to Job and beyond. God submits the Jews to tests and trials of a kind that no other religion, so far as I know, puts its adherents through, including, some in our day might say, unrelenting anti-Semitism. Might it be, to revert to an earlier point, that a key reason there are no serene Jews is that every Jew somewhere in his heart knows that, no matter how well off he is or how righteously he has lived, further tests await.

Freud felt all jokes at bottom had for their purpose, however hidden, either hostility or exposure—all jokes, in other words, for him are ultimately acts of aggression or derision. I don't happen to believe that. Michael Krasny quotes Theodor Reik, in *Jewish Wit*, remarking that all Jewish jokes are about "merciless mockery of weakness and failing." I don't believe that, either. What I do believe is W. H. Auden saying that the motto of psychology ought to be "Have you heard this one?"

Jewish jokes are richer and more varied than any single theory can hope to accommodate. In *No Joke*, her excellent study of Jewish humor, Ruth Wisse notes that "Jewish humor at its best interprets the incongruities of the Jewish condition." That condition has imbued Jews with a style of thought when faced with received opinions and conventional wisdom. Among their grand thinkers, and their everyday ones, are, or ought to have been, those trained by life to think outside the box—or, as the Jew in me, having written out that cliché, needs to add, outside the lox. Jewish jokes are a victory over thoughtlessness.

> Maury Skolnik tells his friend Mel Rosen, "Two Jews, each with a parrot on his shoulder, meet outside their synagogue, when . . ."
> Rosen interrupts: "Maury, Maury, Maury, don't you know any but Jewish jokes?"
> "Of course I do," Skolnik replies. "It's autumn in Kyoto, two samurai are standing in front of a Buddhist temple. The next day is Yom Kippur . . ."

Joseph Epstein's latest books are Frozen in Time: Twenty Stories *(Taylor Trade) and* Wind Sprints: Shorter Essays *(Axios Press).*

mo•sa•ic
/mō zā' ik/

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

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

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



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ADVANCING JEWISH THOUGHT Mosaic

The Genius of Bernard-Henri Lévy

BY NEIL ROGACHEVSKY

The Genius of Judaism
by Bernard-Henri Lévy, translated by Steven B. Kennedy
Random House, 256 pp., $28

The French have called Bernard-Henri Lévy simply by his initials, BHL, since the 1970s. They also call him a *philosophe*, which, even today, is no ordinary thing. In America, a philosopher is someone explaining that "Socrates is a man; all men are mortal; so Socrates is mortal" to an audience of bored 19-year-olds scrolling through their iPhones. In France, a glossy color magazine called *Philosophie* appears on news-stands—which France has in abundance. A *philosophe* is heir to the great figures of the Enlightenment, expected to be possessed of effortless learning and culture, a part of the country's rich literary tradition, who is "engaged," as well, in public affairs.

When BHL first appeared on the scene, more old-fashioned *philosophes* envied or looked down upon him for his big, broad, flexible approach to public affairs, not to mention his very public private life. To this day, BHL is as likely to appear in the glamorous pages of *Paris Match* as in *Philosophie*. In his new book, *The Genius of Judaism*, he recalls the lesson an old, rich, and cultivated Jew of his acquaintance once gave him about how to combat anti-Semitism: "have nicer teeth than they do; get their women to love you . . . Live in castles as big as theirs." A promise kept.

At the prestigious École Normale Supérieure in Paris in the late sixties, Lévy studied with Derrida, Foucault, and others, imbibing the revolutionary fervor that compelled some of his fellow students to don commando uniforms and go off to East Asia. (By the time I studied at ENS, in 2011, the revolutionary students were mostly concerned with ensuring there were no cuts to France's generous pension system—though a few, "*Trumpiens-avant-Trump*," sought to disentangle France from its international treaty obligations.) In *The Genius of Judaism*, a work sometimes insightful, often charming, and frequently ludicrous, he states that it was in fact a fresh encounter with Judaism in these years that led him to question the Maoist politics of his peers. It was, he says, the faith of his fathers—a religion that he admits he barely knew—that taught him to question the faith in history of his contemporaries. As he puts it in one of the work's loveliest passages: "Far from being condemned by Hegelianism, this [Jewish] people, by its existence, by its obstinacy in being, its endurance, its trial, condemns Hegelianism."

The *nouveaux philosophes*, or new philosophers, among whom BHL was one of the most prominent (others included André Glucksmann and Pascal Bruckner), rejected the radicalism of elders like Jean-Paul Sartre, and preached something close to liberal sobriety and moderation. Lévy's writings from these early years, particularly *Barbarism with a Human Face* and *The Testament of God*, are generally taken to be his most serious. In a famous public confrontation with Derrida at the end of the decade, Lévy sarcastically asked whether it was "philosophy professors who were the first to denounce the Gulag." A confrontation followed and, by his own account, BHL was thrown out of the hall onto the Rue de la Sorbonne.

In more recent years, BHL has thrown in his lot with human rights, or "engagement with the other," which he derives, at least in part, from another French Jewish thinker-philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas:

> Well, here it comes, that ethic, announcing itself, filling itself in, revealing itself like heat-sensitive ink, except that in this case it is the heat of the concept, drawn from Levinas, of a subject obligated to the Other, shaped by others, one whose subjectivity takes on and retains its form only through contact with the face of the other man.

He prefers his trademark Charvet white shirt, unbuttoned lower than the spirit, if not the letter, of Jewish law would permit.



Bernard-Henri Lévy and third wife, Arielle Dombasle, after her performance for the release of her album* La Riviére Atlantique*, October 2016, Paris, France. (Photo by Bertrand Rindoff Petroff/Getty Images.)

BHL's calls for liberal internationalism and, often, liberal intervention have been, he writes, in this spirit. They have also been offered in just enough of a "Gaullist-national-interest" key to make them palatable at home, at least until recently. Even when traveling to global hot spots, BHL has never donned the guerilla uniform. He prefers his trademark Charvet white shirt, unbuttoned lower than the spirit, if not the letter, of Jewish law would permit.

In the 1990s he traveled to Bosnia. Recently it has been Ukraine, where he advocated for the anti-Russian side while urging Ukrainians to acknowledge their part in the atrocities of World War II. And, of course, there is the part he played in the intervention in Libya, a story well-documented, particularly by him. While his role in the Franco-British decision to help topple Gaddafi was perhaps not as central as he himself claimed, it was significant. After plunging into Benghazi in March 2011, at the height of the Libyan revolution, he returned to France with a delegation of rebel leaders to meet with President Sarkozy (and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who was in Paris at the time). Both the rebel leaders, in their meeting with the president, and Lévy (on the radio), urged Sarkozy to take military action. When Sarkozy decided to take their advice, he called BHL *before* he announced it at the UN.

Lévy's support for Israel has been entirely in keeping with his liberal internationalism. If you ask him about the Israeli-Arab conflict, he'll say that he supports two states for two peoples, opposes the settlements, and has held the same position since 1967. He devotes the first third of *The Genius of Judaism* to a nice, conventional defense of Israel and an attack on the reasons contemporary anti-Semites

invoke to justify their passions. Fine stuff, but dated. This kind of moderate liberal, pro-Israel argumentation has been just on the boundaries of acceptability in Europe for some time now, and one wonders whether it remains viable—both politically in Europe and analytically in the Middle East.

That someone named Bernard-Henri Lévy, born in 1948, could have lived a so European life in post-war Europe is, let us hasten to say, a miracle. Nearly shattered in the Holocaust, the French Jewish community recovered mightily after the war, thanks in no small measure to an influx of French Algerian and Mizrahi Jews, including Lévy *père*, who made a pile in the timber industry, and his family. As has been well-documented in these pages, Jewish life in France is now in insuperable decline. Whatever the vain excesses of baby boomers like BHL, their lives were enabled by a certain underlying vitality that is now very much weakened. Have they equipped the next generation to cope with what comes next?

Does BHL's human rights activism really look different than that of any other late-20th-century global actor who is famous for being famous—and righteous?

To read BHL is in part to read the life of BHL as told by BHL. *The Genius of Judaism*, very well translated by Steven B. Kennedy, is his most personal book. It attempts, in part, to reconcile his writing, politics, and activism with Judaism as he understands it. His amour propre, while immense, does not quite extend to regarding his life as exemplary in its Jewishness, nor to tying all of his political actions to Judaism. Yet the work does have an apologetic feel to it, in the religious sense of that word, and he looks for the "Jewish thread" of his life. The "genius of Judaism," according to BHL, is its rejection of dogmatism in favor of hard thought. He goes on to claim that precisely this genius has been constitutive in the moral and literary outlook of France, even if few Frenchmen today would acknowledge its source.

Like Jonah, the Jews are called to go to the "great" city-states such as Nineveh, to open "breaches and channels through which can pass words that, once accumulated, committed to memory, and more or less aligned, will, at the end of time, add up to redemption." BHL's own recent interventions in the "modern Ninevehs" of Libya and Ukraine are of a piece with this open, universal, and universalizing Judaism, which is underwritten by Levinas's imperative to take responsibility for "the other."

Lévy freely admits that he is not the greatest knower of Jewish things. He barely knows Hebrew, though he offers a few fairly interesting readings of classic texts in the book. But he displays no knowledge of the Judaism of everyday life. His preference for a universalist Judaism is obviously not unrelated to this ignorance, and indeed lack of curiosity, about the ritual life and the practices that are observed by Jews and no others. He thus gives no further thought to how the participation in such practices might prepare the way for a certain kind of "universal though still Jewish" reflection of which he might approve. While Maimonides, whom BHL cites, sought to turn his intelligent readers to universalistic thoughts, he tried to do so through the cultivation of particular practices proper to the Jews. BHL knows nothing of this Maimonides.

What of his major historical contention? Has the genius of Judaism—and not merely individual Jews, including BHL—marked the development of France? There has been a new and revitalized focus on Jewish ideas in the formation of modern political thought and the Western democracies. The late political theorist Daniel J. Elazar, Harvard historian Eric Nelson, Rabbi Meir Soloveichik, and others have charted the influence, sometimes subtle but real, of Jewish political ideas on Anglo American republican writers in the 17th and 18th centuries. One can stipulate that there has been some important influence of the Hebrew Bible on Puritan America, as well as on John Milton and English Republicanism. How important is open to debate. But *France*?

BHL has three major cases for the Jewish influence on France. The first is the great medieval biblical commentator Rashi's translation of difficult Hebrew and Aramaic terms into Old French. "Rashi's writings," BHL writes, "are a memorial to French at its beginnings." While true and fascinating (it gives historians of the language a window into its use in the 11th-century Rhineland), it is also mostly irrelevant, though one understands why BHL is charmed to know that the greatest Jewish commentator was a master of vernacular French.

BHL's second case sketches (or at least gestures at) a historical argument along Nelsonian lines by arguing that the 16th-century political thinkers known as Les Politiques, the most famous of whom was Jean Bodin, crucially drew upon the Hebrew Bible. According to BHL, Bodin in particular was influenced by his reading of the Old Testament in his attempt to articulate a republican theory of government. Unfortunately, says BHL, the protagonists of the French Revolution were intoxicated by Rome rather than Jerusalem, and the Hebraicizing tendency in French political thought disappeared in the Jacobin terror. And yet, BHL argues, this is a hidden dimension of French thought, a resource that might be recovered.

Finally, he cites Marcel Proust, as a Jewish writer. Proust's "foreignness" (his Jewishness), BHL writes, permitted the "French language to free itself from itself" and therefore become again "the cutting-edge laboratory of intelligence." That Proust's Jewishness had something to do with his artistic accomplishment, no one would deny, but at this point BHL appears to be grasping at straws.

The origins of France as we know it stretch back eight hundred years, and the examples BHL cites and others he might have, while interesting, are hardly constitutive of the character of the country or its various political forms. Over those eight hundred years of an on-again off-again official presence in France, Jews have sometimes played an important role. But "Judaizing" the body politic? I certainly do not see it in the move from medieval Catholic France to modern France. Can one compare the role that Jean Bodin played in French history to that of John Milton in England? Suffice it to say that "Jewish France" is something of a stretch.

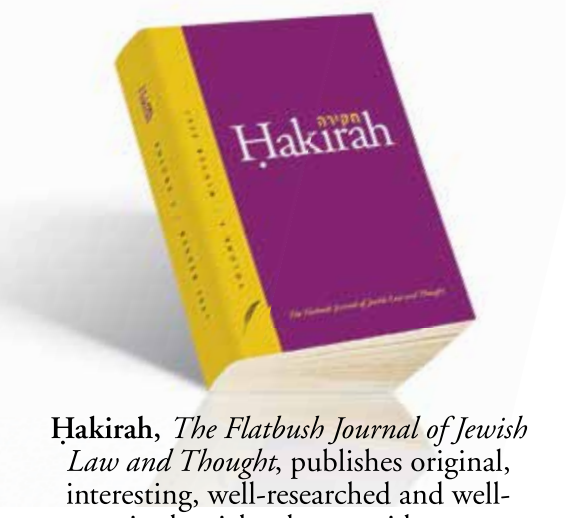
About BHL's own activism and his "trips to Nineveh," readers must judge for themselves. But what, really, is Jewish about BHL's pro-Libyan "freedom fighter" activism, his pro-Ukraine work, and so on? These actions may or may not have been politically prudent, but what was Jewish about them? Does BHL's human rights activism really look different than that of any other late-20th-century global actor who is famous for being famous—and righteous?

BHL's life has been defined by the desire to go out amongst the nations. Many people of his generation, Jewish and Gentile, have shared that aspiration. As the more-than-human replicant says in the movie *Blade Runner*, he has "seen things you people wouldn't believe." And yet one comes away from *The Genius of Judaism* wishing that this gifted man had spent more time thinking about the necessary limits of the voyage rather than its possibilities.

Neil Rogachevsky holds a doctorate in French history from Cambridge and is currently a Tikvah postdoctoral fellow at the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University.

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Bling and Beauty: Jerusalem at the Met

BY SHAI SECUNDA

Jerusalem 1000–1400: Every People Under Heaven
curated by Barbara Drake Boehm and Melanie Holcomb
through January 8, 2017 at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Jerusalem 1000–1400: Every People Under Heaven
(Exhibit companion guide)
edited by Barbara Drake Boehm and Melanie Holcomb
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 352 pp., $50

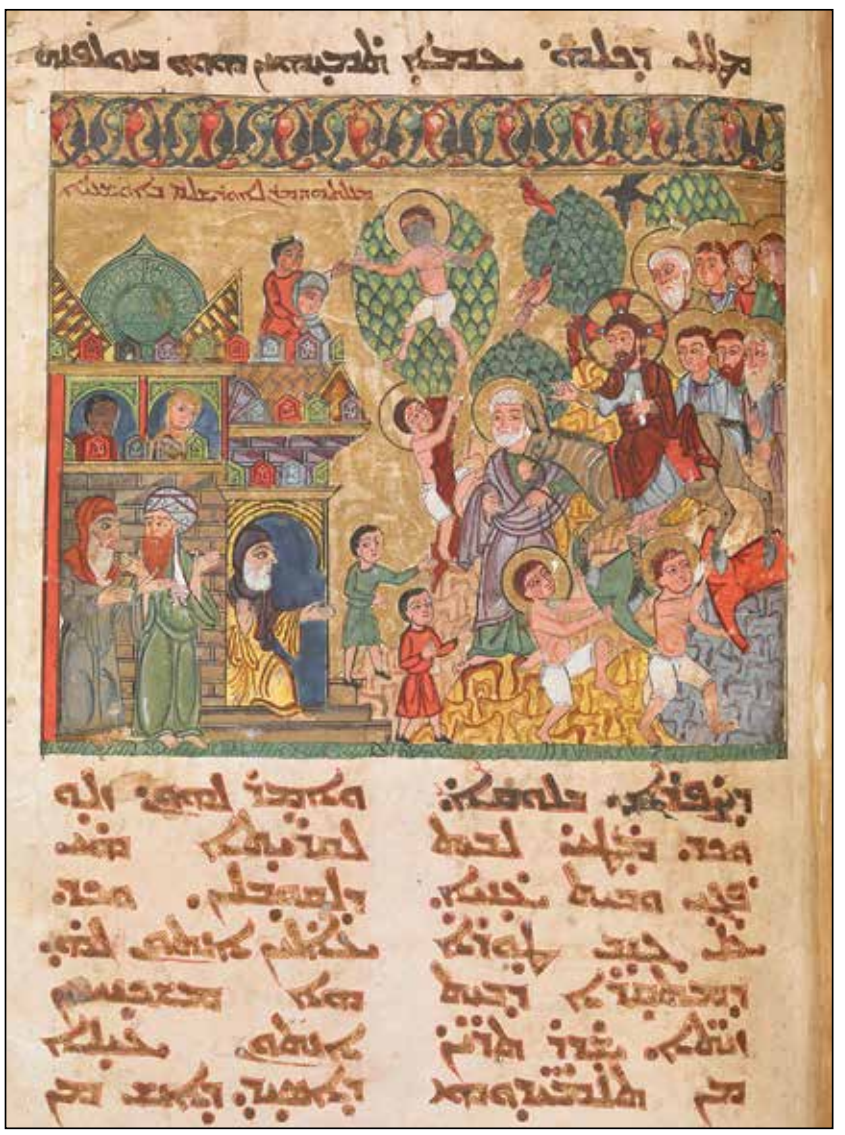
Long before Jerusalem's skyline was punctuated by high-rises and cranes, the Holy City was already a crowded place. One of the wonders of Second Temple Jerusalem, as the rabbis tell it, was that despite the throngs of pilgrims, "No one ever said to his fellow: 'The place is too cramped for me to lodge in Jerusalem.'" Jostling for space among a sea of visitors one recent Sunday afternoon at the Met's fall blockbuster, Jerusalem 1000–1400: Every People Under Heaven, I could have benefited from just such a miracle.

The front cover of the museum catalog is an eschatological Jerusalem scene that paints a diverse, dense urban space: Black, brown, and white people sporting turbans, togas, gowns, or just their underwear sit on stoops, converse on street corners, and cavort in the trees. The 13th-century lectionary (a selection of the Gospels to be read in church) from which the image is taken was composed in Syriac, one of many languages and scripts used in polyglot Jerusalem. Medieval eyewitness accounts frequently commented on the town's confusing babel, and multilingual phrasebooks gave visitors the confidence to ask locals anything from "how much does it cost?" to "woman, let me sleep with you tonight."

One of the places flooded by medieval Jerusalemites was the city's famed vaulted marketplaces. The exhibit opens with a pile of glittering Fatimid coins surrounded by a gallimaufry of everything that money could buy: metal cooking sets, complete with pestle and mortars; serving platters inscribed in Arabic and customized with European coats of arms; medieval "selfies" with tourists' own visages painted onto icons alongside Virgin and Child; and plenty of bling. (I overhead an enthusiastic conversation between a well-coifed mother and daughter in front of a pair of precious bracelets that could just as well have taken place down the street, in one of the luxury stores lining Fifth Avenue.) Opening an exhibit on the Holy City with a mock shopping expedition may seem like an unusual choice, but it is well-grounded in archeology and anthropology. Even Roman Jerusalem, with its colonnaded Cardo, was a shopper's paradise, while alternating binges of prayer and procuring has always been part of religious pilgrimages.

Indeed, the crowded diversity of life in medieval Jerusalem was nothing short of remarkable, and the contemporary cliché of "Jerusalem of three faiths" does not do justice to its multiplicity. Apart from ancient tensions with the Samaritans, the city's Jews were sharply divided into Rabbanites and Karaites—a sect of Bible "readers" (hence the name *kara'im*, from the Hebrew word for reading) whose sages rejected rabbinic interpretation and drafted penetrating biblical commentaries, some of which are expertly presented at the Met. From the opposing Jewish camp, major rabbinic figures came on pilgrimage. In the early 1200s several French and English rabbis actually moved to Jerusalem, and later in the century towering Catalan exegete Moses Nachmanides helped to re-establish Jewish life in the city, founding the synagogue that still bears his name. During the exhibition's timeframe, Jerusalem was ruled by the Ismaili Fatimids, won back from the Crusaders by a Sunni of the Shafi'i school named Saladin, and led by the Sunni Mameluks, all while Sufis and other Islamic groups passed through the city gates. Christian communities were still more numerous and fractious, counting Greek, Armenian, and Syriac Orthodox, Copts, Ethiopians, and Roman Catholics, along with a large array of pilgrims, some of whom took up residence in the city. This splendid assortment, as the audio guide concretizes, was crammed into a space no larger than midtown Manhattan.

Christians called the Islamic Dome of the Rock "Solomon's Temple," Jews fittingly referred to it as *Midrash Shelomo* (King Solomon's Study Hall).



The Entry into Jerusalem ***from a Syriac lectionary, Iraq, possibly the Monastery of Mar Mattai, 1216–1220. (© The British Library Board, London.)***

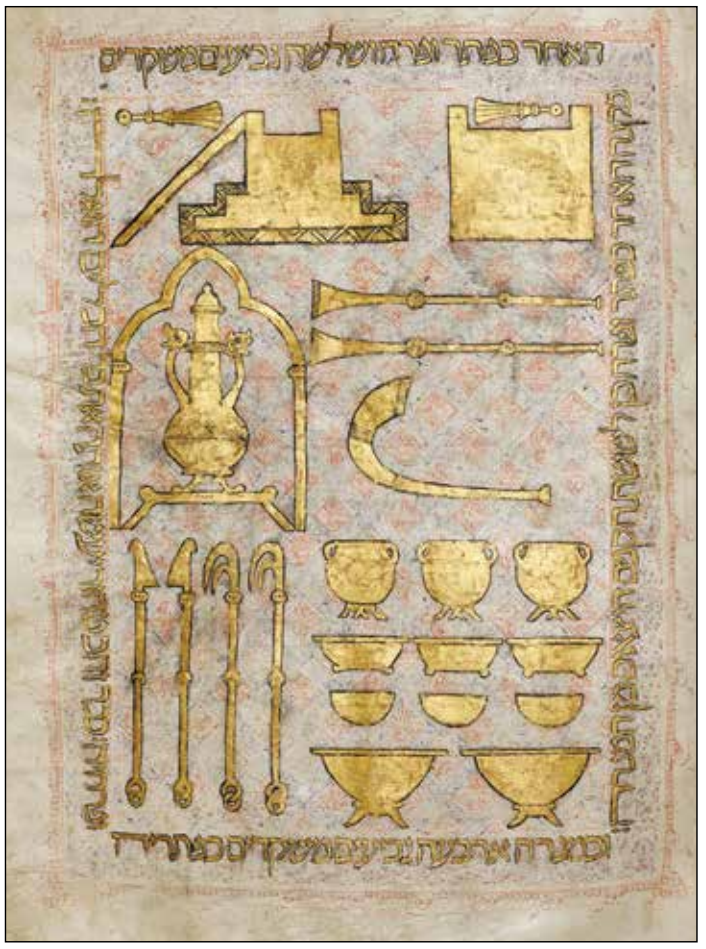
What are we to make of Jerusalem's multitudes? Curators Barbara Drake Boehm and Melanie Holcomb wear their liberal hearts on their sleeves, imagining that the city's crowds might yet be resurrected as a convivial medieval pluralism. There is indeed evidence of cooperation and even genuine caring across ethnic and religious borders. Muslims introduced Jewish pilgrims to some of the area's less-known holy sites and, in an enactment of Abraham's hospitality, dished out hot lentils from gargantuan soup pots to hungry pilgrims, regardless of persuasion. Symbols of other traditions were acknowledged and sometimes appropriated in surprisingly ecumenical ways: Christians called the Islamic Dome of the Rock "Solomon's Temple," Jews fittingly referred to it as *Midrash Shelomo* (King Solomon's Study Hall). Even when a religious community was forcibly banned from the city, there was almost always a saving grace. Saladin's expulsion of Christians from Jerusalem was incomplete, as he decided to allow Eastern Christians to remain. Some years later,

Jerusalemites even saw a power-sharing arrangement between the two otherwise clashing faiths. And yet, the fundamental set of dynamics during the four centuries on display was one of bloody conquest, banishment, repossession, and reconstruction.

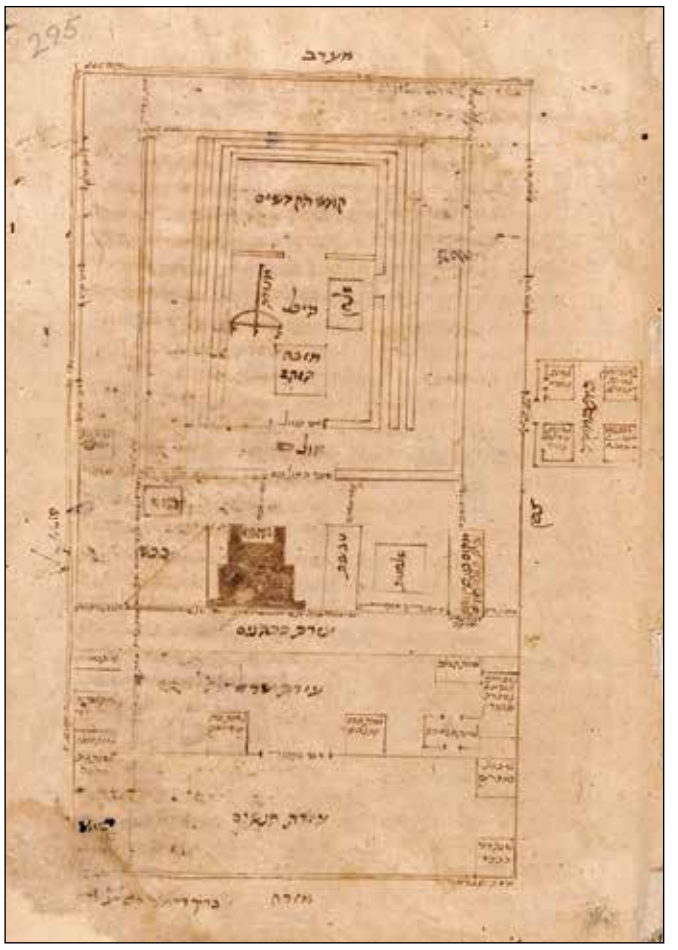
Boehm and Holcomb are trained medievalists and certainly not naïve about the brutish carnage wrought by crusade and counter-crusade. But as aesthetes, they insist on looking beyond interreligious violence toward the dazzling beauty of artifacts. The catalog makes a point of the exhibit's arrangement, which is not chronological, confessional, or geographical, but thematic, mingling the objects of different times and faiths. It is also no coincidence that museum-goers must snake through fully five rooms before arriving at the disconcertingly beautiful "Drumbeat of Holy War" gallery.



Pair of precious bracelets from Egypt or Greater Syria, 11th century. (© The al-Sabah Collection, Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah, Kuwait.)



Hebrew Bible from Catalonia, early 14th century. (Courtesy of Jay and Jeannie Schottenstein, Columbus. Photo by Ardon Bar-Hama.)



Temple diagram by Maimonides from **Commentary on the Mishnah.** *(Courtesy of the Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.)*

dim; the actual city's famously blinding light is essentially blacked out. This allows Boehm and Holcomb to project stirring shadows from Latin and Ethiopic crosses, but it also makes the exhibition rooms feel like an aquarium. Consistent with these aesthetics, the exhibition does not use present-day maps to explain the topography of the city, nor are there models—old-fashioned or digital—that might give viewers a peek inside a church, synagogue, or mosque.

The presentation of a crowded, medieval Jerusalem banished from time and space is disorienting as well as paradoxical, for what is a crowd if not too many people crammed into too tight a space at the same time? Isolating the city chronologically and geographically is still more awkward, since the story of Jerusalem and its art is essentially a tale of a luminous place striving to overcome the depredations of time.

The exhibit is strongest in a gallery labeled "The Absent Temple," which confronts the city's unique time-space conundrum by focusing on Jewish imaginings of the destroyed Second Temple. Here viewers are treated to some of the finest illuminated Hebrew manuscripts in the world, where perfectly symmetrical city gates balance on the backs of sinuous lions, and precise drawings of Temple implements push against the margins of the page. For Jewish scholars, perhaps the highlight of the entire show is Maimonides' sketched-out visualization of the Temple plan in his own handwriting; for the more literarily inclined, an interview reflecting on the "present absence" of the Jewish Temple with Reuven Namdar, whose Hebrew novel *Ha-bayit asher necherav* (The Ruined House) won the Sapir prize last year, is inspiring.

Crowds don't just mean pluralism, they mean competition—for space, resources, legitimacy. The day I attended the exhibit I passed two women in Muslim head coverings lovingly examining some of the show's enormous Qurans, a bareheaded bearded man devoutly explaining the significance of some scenes carved onto gilded reliquaries, and an older couple complaining about the underrepresentation of Jews in the exhibit, as if debating the coverage of CNN or *The New York Times*. Given the relative population sizes and, to be frank, differing levels of artistic aptitude, I actually think the curators represented medieval Jewry and their cultural output honestly and respectfully. But of course, that is beside the point, since the couple was expressing the most natural of sentiments when it comes to Jerusalem. By ignoring the mysterious, profound, almost physical pull of Jerusalem *the place*, this expertly arranged assemblage of beautiful things never completely succeeds in explaining why crowds flocked to Jerusalem in the Middle Ages and why they continue to gather there today.



Top: Châsse of Ambazac from the Treasury of Grandmont, Limoges, ca. 1180–1190. (© Region Aquitaine-Limousin-Poitou-Charentes, Service de l'Inventaire et du Patrimoine Culturel; photograph by Philippe Rivière, 1993.) Right: Incense box, Egypt or Syria, 14th century. (Courtesy of The Museum of Islamic Art, Doha.)

Having worked for years in an office that overlooked some of Jerusalem's most recent violent spasms, I am sympathetic to this act of prayerful fancy. Yet wresting medieval Jerusalem from troubling contemporary events, the city's complex history, and, most problematically, its very physical presence in the world is purchased at the price of showing a place that is not this-worldly or other-worldly, but in no world at all. Although the show is creatively illumined by "windows" of classic Jerusalem views projected on exhibition walls, the overall lighting is

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A Foreign Song I Learned in Utah

BY JONATHAN KARP

What could be more Jewish than winning the Nobel Prize? According to a recent accounting, of the 850 recipients since the prize's inception, 181 (or 21.294 percent) have been Jews. If the Nobel Prize were the electoral college, Jews would be the state of Wyoming, represented way beyond their actual size in the population.

So when Bob Dylan became the surprise winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature on October 13, 2016, it could be seen as further proof of his Jewishness. And in fact, just about every Jewish newspaper, magazine, and website, from the left-leaning *Forward* to the right-careening *Jewish Press*, dutifully noted the ethno-religious connection. The association was more or less reflexive. Everybody knows that Dylan is a Jew—even if he did once convert to evangelical Christianity. And gone are the days when an Elderhostel lecturer might try to simulate hipness by revealing to his assembled class of *alte kakers* that the now septuagenarian enfant terrible of rock was actually born Robert Allen Zimmerman.

Still, what beside his birth name is really Jewish about him? Ask that and you'll get a standard array of answers. It's his questioning pose, some say, which echoes the interrogative Jewish sensibility (Dylan's first hit, "Blowin' in the Wind," is comprised of nine unanswered questions). Or it's his prophetic voice, others insist, perpetually challenging authority in lyrics drenched in Old Testament imagery (his "All Along the Watchtower," for instance, strongly evokes Isaiah 21). Or—in an argument that's as hard to refute as to prove—it's his very constructed identity, his Bob Dylan-ness, an intricate garb of concealment behind which the modern-day Marrano occasionally winks in bemused acknowledgement of his authentic Semitic self.

Singer Dave Van Ronk, a mentor to many younger folk performers in the Greenwich Village scene of the early 1960s, relates a charming story of young Dylan's inadvertent self-exposure while relaxing after a gig in the Gaslight Cafe. "Dylan was telling everyone in New York that he was from New Mexico, an orphan who had been on the road for years." In fact, this was only one of Dylan's fabrications. By that time he had already posed as the Okie replicant of his early musical hero Woody Guthrie; as a hobo who'd shared a boxcar with the likes of blues singer Big Joe Williams; as a "circus hand, carnival boy, road bum, musician, and many other roles in what have come to be called the Dylan myths," as early biographer Anthony Scaduto catalogued. Of course, such subterfuges were hardly alien to the contemporary folk scene that Dylan had noisily barged in on. Guthrie himself, though certainly an Okie, was no peasant but the scion of a well-off and politically connected family. Woody's disciple and another of Dylan's mentors, the cowboy singer Ramblin' Jack Elliott, is a more telling precedent. As Van Ronk notes, Dylan had no idea that Ramblin' Jack's father was a Jewish doctor from Brooklyn who shared the name Abraham with his own father. "As far as Bobby knew, Jack Elliott was absolutely gold-coin *goyisha* cowboy. In the course of the conversation it came out somehow that he was Elliott Adnopoz, a Jewish cat from Ocean Parkway, and Bobby fell off his chair. He rolled under the table, laughing like a madman." To Van Ronk, Dylan's (over)reaction provided clear proof of his own Semitic origins. "We had all suspected Bobby was Jewish, and that proved it."

Despite all of Dylan's subterfuges, disguises, and costume changes, he actually was a child of the American heartland.

If Dylan's Jewishness was an open secret, at least within his close circle, he still insisted on maintaining the pretense of being a Gentile cowboy, or poor farmer, or hillbilly. This was not merely a ruse born of an assimilatory impulse; it was a professional necessity, since the type of folk music the early Dylan performed was very much in the vein of Guthrie, and Williams, and Elliott. Dylan is often described as a revolutionary, but in fact his early records were surprisingly conservative, sticking largely to an Anglo American conception of folk song with occasional forays into Negro blues—though distinctly of the country rather than the urban variety. What captivated early listeners was, first, his apparent total mastery of that style, veritably embodying and not merely emulating the Okie persona (to a remarkable extent he managed this even physically, as the cover of his record *The Times They Are a-Changin'* attests, *despite* a visage that would later be categorized as "obviously" Jewish); and second, the convincing manner in which he extended and updated that same Anglo folk form when he began writing his own songs. The remarkable compositions on his 1963 breakthrough album, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, updated American folk music's traditional practice of topical social commentary, replacing 1930s images of striking workers and dust bowl migrations with fresh ones of freedom rides ("Oxford Town"), nuclear destruction ("A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall"), and the military-industrial complex ("Masters of War"). Dylan's convincing embodiment of a rural Appalachian persona lent these performances a powerful if oddly anachronistic flavor—as if the musical sensibility of the New Left derived from the middle American heartland.



Bob Dylan and Ramblin' Jack Elliott in Greenwich Village, New York, 1964. (Courtesy of Jack Elliott and Anti/Epitaph Records.)

Certainly, there were other roads he could have walked down. Contemporary folk artists like Theodore Bikel were known exponents of Yiddish and Hebrew song. Jewish song, in fact, comprised a more or less standard component of the American folk music scene dating back to Paul Robeson's 1940s performances of "The Hassidic Chant of Levi Isaac of Berditchev" and the Yiddish "Partisan Song" of the Warsaw Ghetto. In 1950 The Weavers enjoyed a two-sided hit with Lead Belly's "Goodnight Irene," backed by a rousing version of the Zionist tune "Tzena, Tzena." And even as late as the early 1960s, the black singer and civil rights activist Nina Simone (who would later record a number of Dylan compositions) continued the tradition by recording and then performing live "*Eretz Zavat Chalav u'Dvash*" at Carnegie Hall. The closest Dylan came to dabbling in this "folk songs from many lands" tradition was his parodying of the subgenre in the comical "Talkin' Hava Negeilah Blues," performed as early as 1961 in a style so deliberately un-Jewish that it really sounded like "a foreign song I learned in Utah" (replete with yodel), as Dylan's tongue-in-cheek introduction would have it.

Otherwise, Dylan seemed to completely bypass the ethnicizing component of traditional American folk performance. When he did finally leave his Woody Guthrie pose behind it was not to adopt a Jewish or other national style but rather to shift his orientation from rural to urban, from acoustic to electric. The episode in which this transformation fully crystallized—Dylan's (partly) electric performance at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival—has been so frequently rehearsed, not to say mythologized,

that it hardly bears repeating. Suffice it to say that many of Dylan's fans really did see his coming out electric as a fully fledged betrayal, a sell-out to the market for shallow youth pop music. And some of those fans really did scream "Judas!" Jewish Dylanologists (almost a redundant term) are not entirely wrong to hear the Judas charge as an ugly outing of Dylan's Jewishness. While the distinctly Judaic references in his subsequent vast musical output remain paltry, it could even be argued that the metamorphosis from hick to slick and clod to mod did entail the disclosure of a more authentic hipster Jewish self behind the pose of country rube, with lyrics now marked less by earnest youth protest ("your sons and your daughters are beyond your command") than by the surreal subversion of American middle class normality ("you never understood that it ain't no good to let other people get your kicks for you").

Still, this argument overlooks the fact that despite all of Dylan's subterfuges, disguises, and costume changes, he actually was a child of the American heartland. Why, one might wonder, should his definite Jewish origins contradict his rural Midwestern ones? While biographers routinely invoke his backwater hometown of Hibbing, Minnesota, the difference it made in defining his kind of Jewishness or his musical identity is typically ignored.



Bob Dylan performing at the Hop Farm Festival, Paddock Wood, United Kingdom, June 30, 2012. (Photo by Gus Stewart/Redferns via Getty Images.)

Hibbing was a mining town in the Minnesotan far north. Like many such places it had its smattering of Jews that constituted the bulk of its shopkeeping class (Abe Zimmerman, Dylan's father, owned a furniture and electronics store with two of his brothers, Maurice and Paul). Yet the wartime booms Hibbing experienced could not overcome its sheer physical and cultural isolation. Enveloped by hills and dense forest, the town felt paralyzed during long winter months ("in the winter everything was still, nothing moved," Dylan recalled). Hibbing's small Jewish community was similarly forlorn. Historians have focused heavily on 20th-century big-city Jews; small and isolated settlements like Hibbing rarely make it onto their maps. Life in such places seems to have had a dualistic quality: a high degree of social segregation combined with high levels of cultural assimilation.

Bobby Zimmerman had a bar mitzvah, attended Wisconsin's Herzl Camp, and was surrounded by an extended yet close-knit Jewish family. But the kind of reference points and ethnic connections that city Jews, no matter how alienated, possess as a birthright were largely absent from his youth. He developed a strong sense of his distinctiveness from his environs but lacked the consolation or crutch of an ethnic cohort to cushion his estrangement. Part of this estrangement was expressed, as several acquaintances during these early years attest, by a discomfort with his Jewish origins. Bob's difficult relationship with his father, Abe, derived in part from the latter's stern and disapproving demeanor but also from his mercantile values as a small shopkeeper, ones his son apparently found distasteful. Highway 61, the setting for the *akedah* redux in his 1965 song "Highway 61 Revisited" ("God said to Abraham, 'Kill me a son'"), runs right through the songwriter's Duluth birthplace.

It is not a romanticization to say that the Jewish vacuum of his adolescence was filled not just with the country and western music that Dylan imbibed on AM stations throughout those frozen Hibbing months, but by a genuine body of American folk imagery absorbed from his surroundings. "The madly complicated modern world was something I took little interest in," he recalled in his arresting memoir *Chronicles: Volume One*:

> It had no relevancy, no weight. I wasn't seduced by it. What was swinging, topical and up to date for me was stuff like the *Titanic* sinking, the Galveston flood, John Henry driving steel, John Hardy shooting a man on the West Virginia line. All this was current, played out and in the open. This was the news that I considered, followed and kept tabs on.

Folk songs, Dylan remarked, "transcended the immediate culture." They represented "a reality of a more brilliant dimension" comprised of "archetypes," of "life magnified" and "metaphysical in shape."

So it's often forgotten that while Dylan went electric in 1965, he went acoustic again in 1967. Two years later he recorded a country and western album with megastar Johnny Cash, and he has continued to record country, folk, blues, and other heartland musical forms right up through the present. While in the eyes of many critics the mid-1960s "electric" years mark Dylan's artistic peak, this phase's entwining of surrealist poetry with heavy amplified rock doesn't typify his musical career as a whole. If there is any truth to the notion that Dylan's mid-60s urban shift represents a Judaization (or Judas-ization) of his sensibility and allegiances, it remains a fact that he wasn't a big-city Jew for very long.

There is another "Jewish" ambiguity—this one in regard to Dylan's relationship to the mainstream tradition of American pop music songwriting. Generically labeled Tin Pan Alley, the cream of which has come to be called the Great American Songbook, this monumental body of work includes the contributions of such figures as Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, George Gershwin, Harold Arlen, Cole Porter, Duke Ellington, Hoagy Carmichael, and Fats Waller. Half the names on this list are Jewish ones, an over-representation that extends from the Alley's turn-of-the-century origins to its later Brill Building incarnation of the early 1960s, where almost all of the writers—including Jerry Leiber, Burt Bacharach, Carole King, Jeff Barry, and Neil Diamond—were Jews. When Dylan first started making his mark as a songwriter, at the very moment Brill was bustling, he made it clear that his goal was nothing less than to demolish this commercial hit-making machine. He spoke disdainfully of the "milk and sugar" and "empty pleasantries" of contemporary American pop that was manufactured by "workhorses," cogs in the songwriting "factories" of midtown Manhattan, and juxtaposed its saccharine concoctions to authentic expressions of indigenous rural, blues, and country folk.

How much of Dylan's dislike of the Alley reflected the small-town Midwestern Jew's suspicion of his city cousins? Well into the 1980s he boasted of having "put an end" to Tin Pan Alley, and even when he was honored in 1986 by ASCAP, its professional association, he accepted the lifetime achievement award, he insisted, on behalf of the excluded folk musicians like Hank Williams, Jimmy Reed, and Muddy Waters. "We never claimed to be as good as Johnny Mercer or Hal David or Jerome Kern or any of those people. We just used that medium to write what we were feeling," he said. Nevertheless, in an interesting late-career twist Dylan finally began to explore the Great American Songbook for himself, releasing two albums of his affecting if scratchy-voiced renditions of such chestnuts as "Autumn Leaves," "Some Enchanted Evening," and "Polka Dots and Moonbeams." He wasn't covering these songs, he insisted, but rather "uncovering" them, exposing them not as "standards" to be preserved but as genuine folk songs to be interpreted. In this remarkable gesture, was Dylan finally laying claim to the songs of his people, the Tin Pan Alley tunesmiths writing songs on commission? Perhaps, but as with every effort to penetrate Dylan's Jewish soul, in this case too there is no clear direction home.

No one has better analyzed Dylan's "Jewish question" than the historian David Kaufman. His unfairly neglected 2012 book, saddled with the unfortunate title *Jewhooing the Sixties,* is comprised of four stimulating essays on the early 60s Jewish celebrity of Sandy Koufax, Lenny Bruce, Barbra Streisand, and Bob Dylan. (See Eitan Kensky's review in the Spring 2013 issue of this magazine.) The Dylan chapter is a particularly subtle and astute performance. Kaufman begins by addressing the question of how important Jewishness is to Dylan's role as an artist and public figure. His answer—given the actual dearth of positive evidence—is: not very. But Kaufman then moves on to a far more interesting question: Why then have so many Jews (and some non-Jews) invested such remarkable energy in uncovering Dylan's Jewish core? The answer, according to Kaufman, is that Dylan's prestige and mystique as a preeminent contemporary artist—especially if misleadingly understood as an artist of the counterculture—his very opaqueness, in fact, make him the perfect

target for our muddled pursuit of modern Jewish identity. "In the end," Kaufman asks, "might it be that Dylan's assimilation *is* the Jewish behavior of his with which so many have identified?"

Kaufman suggests that the astonishing vitality of Jewish Dylanology exposes its function as seeking in Dylan's work and life a usable Jewish present. This pursuit, bordering at times on obsession, a veritable Zimmermania, was not marginal to the shaping of the baby boom's Jewish self-image but actually lay close to its core. It penetrated to some of the generation's leading scholars of Jewish modernity, while also reaching Jews far beyond America's borders, in Europe and especially in Israel where Dylan's infrequent concert visits have been anticipated with near messianic expectation.



Leonard Cohen.

Yet in recent decades there has emerged a serious competitor to the status of our century's premier Jewish icon and poetic sage. For this role, the recently deceased Leonard Cohen possessed many assets that Dylan himself lacked. More obviously learned in Jewish texts and far more effusive about his identification with the tradition, the rabbinic allusions found in a number of Cohen's songs, from his famous "Hallelujah" to his own *akedah* song "You Want It Darker," released just weeks before he died, do not require any extraordinary forensic-exegetical ingenuity to ferret out. Those who know really do know.

Unlike Dylan, moreover, Cohen came from the center not the periphery of Jewish life, raised in a place almost as cold as Hibbing but, from a Jewish perspective, its polar opposite. A scion of the Montreal Jewish establishment, Cohen's family was an industrious mix of *makhers* and scholars. And if Cohen's five-year seclusion in a Buddhist monastery parallels Dylan's temporary Christian conversion, Jewishly speaking it's a hell of a lot more palatable. The outpouring of eulogistic tributes from learned Jewish admirers lamenting the passing of Eliezer ben Nisan ha-Cohen (referring to him by the Hebrew name he liked his friends to employ) makes him appear at times like a great tzaddik who—to quote a Dylan lyric—"crossed over from another century" into our blessed present.

While Cohen's reputation as a poet has been widely acknowledged, labeling Dylan one still raises eyebrows and even eye rolls from literary *feinschmeckers*. No wonder the Swedish Academy's naming of Dylan as its 2016 laureate for literature was greeted with so much hand-wringing, discomfort, even outrage. Some grumbled that if a songwriter had to be granted the prize, it should have gone to Rabbi Cohen rather than to Reb Bob. This debate too will not be soon resolved. We can leave it then to the deceased to pronounce a final word on the living. When asked about his friend and fellow Jewish "rock poet" receiving the prize, Cohen, with characteristic grace, simply hinted at its redundancy, saying it was like "pinning a medal on Mount Everest for being the highest mountain."

Jonathan Karp is a professor of history and Jewish studies at Binghamton University, and the author of The Politics of Jewish Commerce: Economic Thought and Emancipation in Europe, 1638–1848 *(Cambridge University Press). He is currently completing a book entitled* Chosen Surrogates: Blacks, Jews, and the Making of Twentieth-Century American Culture.



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Waiting for Moshe Right

BY SARAH RINDNER

Soon by You
created, written, directed, and produced by Leah Gottfried
co-written by Danny Hoffman
co-produced by Jessica Schechter

The phrase "soon by you" is one that every unmarried Orthodox person has heard uttered by well-meaning married adults, perhaps in its quasi-Hebrew incarnation: "*Im yirtzeh Hashem* by you" (God willing, for you too). Heard most often at weddings and engagement parties, it is, basically, a blessing, but often comes across as condescending, with the implication that being single and Orthodox is a problem that needs solving (soon). This would have been as obvious ("a truth universally acknowledged") to Jane Austen as it is to lead character Sarah Feldman's annoying Aunt Dini in the charming new web series *Soon by You*. But Sarah (played by Sarah Scur) and her friends are not only Modern Orthodox Jews but 21st-century Manhattanites who live in a larger world where this is anything but obvious.

This is the ambiguous space that *Soon by You* inhabits. It is indebted to ensemble comedies such as *Friends* and *Seinfeld*, which feature a group of urbanite friends who have romantic intrigues and undergo everyday mishaps with no particular telos other than the indefinite continuation of their camaraderie and zany shenanigans. But its characters are religious Jews who still practice old-fashioned courtship rituals with the express, though often unspoken, goal of marriage.

The first episode opens with David (Danny Hoffman, also the co-writer of the series), a formally dressed wholesome young rabbinical student, racing to meet a young woman named Sarah Jacobs for a "*shidduch*" (arranged) date at the (real-life) kosher restaurant Eighteen. Late, but considerate to a fault, he is slowed down by a compulsion to help an elderly lady up the subway stairs, fix a traffic cone he's knocked down, and so on. It turns out that the matchmaker was spectacularly misguided in setting up David with the vain and aggressively conventional, though ultimately rather appealing, Sarah Jacobs (played to comic perfection by the creator of the series, Leah Gottfried). But the hand of fate, and the meet-cute dictates of romantic comedy, intervene to have David initially sit down at the wrong Sarah's table. This Sarah (Feldman) is a soulful young artist who is herself waiting for what will turn out to be a very bad date. In the few moments before things are sorted out, David and Sarah (the right Sarah) discover that they have the kind of instant flirty, fizzy rapport for which everyone in the dating scene pines. The comedy of errors that follows over the next two episodes, a lost phone number, a poorly chosen seat at the Shabbat table, prevent the couple from connecting in a serious way. As in all marriage plots at the midway point, coupledom remains deferred. In the meantime, a group of four friends coalesces around them: the other Sarah, a progressive activist named Noa (played by co-producer Jessica Schechter), and

As in all marriage plots at the midway point, coupledom remains deferred.

Danny's bewildered, perhaps slightly too Krameresque roommate "Z."

A release party for the third episode of the series, "The Shabbat Meal," took place on one of the interim days of Sukkot, this past October. Appropriately, it was held in the basement of Congregation Ohab Zedek (O.Z.) on the Upper West Side. O.Z. is the synagogue of choice for hundreds of young men and women who meet there to pray and then socialize before dinner on Friday nights. Attending the release party turned out to be a surreally self-referential experience, since most of the actors and the viewers gathered for the screening were precisely the kind of Modern Orthodox singles depicted in the show. The fictional awkwardness on screen, combined with the actual awkwardness in the room, created a mixer that was almost electric in its, well, awkwardness.

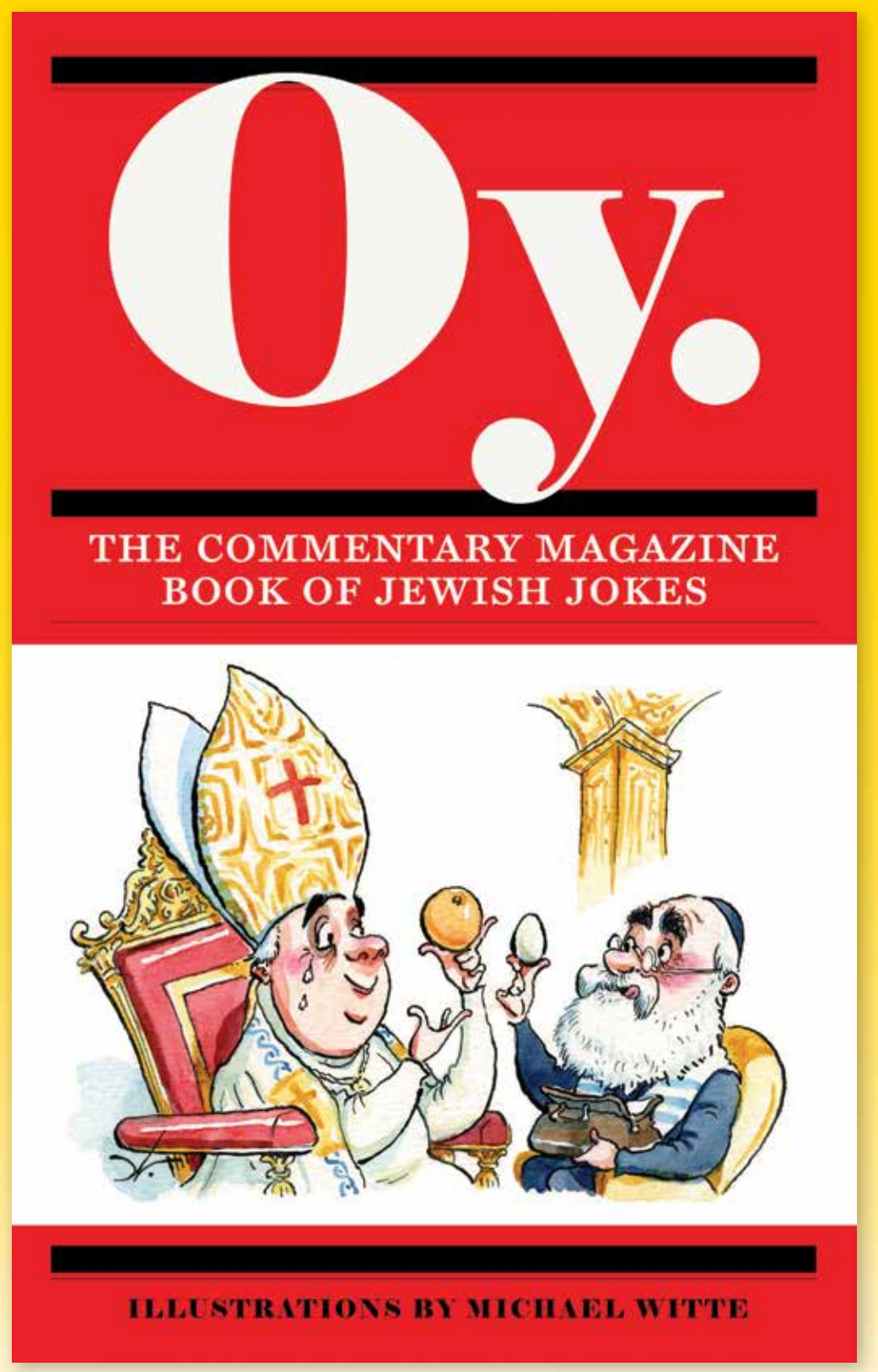
Two clean-cut Modern Orthodox comedians opened the evening with a series of quips about dating on the Upper West Side, Jewish holidays, and the political situation in Israel. One of them, who seemed to be in his early thirties, reflected upon the point at which he started to think he was ineligible. There was a turning point, he explained, when people stopped reacting to his single status as an exciting opportunity to set him up and instead began to treat him as if he had contracted a terrible disease. "If it's an illness," he quipped, "it's the only one with symptoms that include being able to do whatever you want, whenever you want." It was a funny line, but not everyone laughed wholeheartedly.

Before the credits roll on episode three, Sarah Jacobs and Noa are on a couch streaming episodes of the groundbreaking Israeli television show *Srugim*, which followed the romantic ups and downs of a close-knit group of five religious singles living in South Jerusalem. (It ran from 2008 to 2012 on Israel's Yes TV.) "Somebody should just make a show like this but in New York," says Sarah. "That would be *epic*," says Noa. "I know, I don't know why nobody's done it—it's not like it's hard." *Srugim*, it should be noted, was



The cast of* Soon by You.** ***(Photo by Judah S. Harris, courtesy of Dignity Entertainment.)

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the brainchild of Eliezer "Laizy" Shapiro, the son of American immigrants to Israel who was himself inspired by sitcoms like *Friends*. (The show was reviewed in these pages in Spring 2010 by Yair Rosenberg under the title "No Sex in the City.") *Srugim*, however, was not merely a series about a particular form of courtship; it dug into the spiritual and emotional lives of its characters. *Soon by You* occasionally attempts this, as when it depicts a Friday night dinner in all of its minute ritual and social detail, or dramatizes Ben's quandary over leaving an important meeting at the law firm at which he's interning in time for Shabbat.

The release party turned out to be a surreally self-referential experience, since most of the actors and the viewers gathered for the screening were precisely the kind of Modern Orthodox singles depicted in the show.

Ultimately, however, the American show features very little of Jewish intellectual substance. Although David is seen holding a volume of the Talmud at one point, his rabbinical studies are mainly used to emphasize his personal sensitivity. On the one hand, it is understandable that the creators of *Soon by You* would want to make the show as accessible as possible, even at the expense of a more nuanced exploration of the world it depicts (the first episode has had almost 100,000 views). On the other hand, maybe American Jewish religious life just isn't as culturally thick and unique as its Israeli counterpart, even in the New York Modern Orthodox world. One would hate to think, though, that this is the case. In the future it would be nice to see Leah Gottfried and her team move the series into deeper, more particular territory, without, of course, losing the laughs.

As a web-series on a shoestring budget (each episode seems to be funded through online crowdfunding and unsubtle product placement), it is unclear how long *Soon by You* is going to last. Gottfried, Hoffman, and others will likely use it as a stepping stone to future projects, so it will be interesting to see what they work on next. Modern Orthodox courtship itself may be endangered in a broader society where the "marriage plot" makes less and less sense. Awkward for most, and painful for some, it seems clear that traditional courtship is out of place in the modern world of which Modern Orthodoxy, by definition, aspires to be a part. Yet the alternative, a situation where boundaries are relaxed beyond recognition and no one is urging for marriage to happen "soon by you" is at least as problematic.

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

Memory and Desecration in Salonica

BY DEVIN E. NAAR

A year after I published an article in these pages about the Jewish past of Salonica (now Thessaloniki) and its citizens' ambivalent attempts to recall that history, I found myself speaking at Aristotle University, the largest institution of higher education in Greece. (See "Jerusalem of the Balkans," Spring 2013.)

I was accompanied to the podium by an armed guard provided by the American consulate to ensure my safety. After thanking the university and the consulate for the invitation, I told the audience, in Greek, that my grandfather had been born here in Salonica just before the disastrous fire of 1917, and that my family had lived in the city for four centuries, going back to the years after the Spanish Expulsion. Then I told them something much more difficult: that members of my family had also died there and were buried there:

> Not just in the city in general, but exactly *here*, beneath our feet, beneath this university campus. The campus was once a vast Jewish necropolis, a cemetery. It is difficult for me to stand here because it is as if I have come to visit the eternal resting place of my loved ones, but I know that their rest is without peace, and I don't really know where to go or what to say. I congratulate the Jewish community and the university for the new monument, which recognizes this fact for the first time.

Then I went on in the Judeo-Spanish my grandfather had taught me, which, as I reminded them, was at one time the mother tongue of about half of the city's inhabitants, and was spoken and understood by Orthodox Christians and Muslims as well. (My grandfather simply called it *espanyol*, but others call it *djudeo-espanyol*, *Judezmo*, or Ladino.)

> When I stroll through the campus, with every step I think: Who was once laid to rest here? And who there? The surnames of family members who were once buried here, in this *Beth Ahaim* [house of life], include: Naar, Nifoussi, Fais, Auyash, Nehama, Saltiel, and more. They remain voiceless. But now, the silence is coming to an end; the doors—very slowly—begin to open. As is said in Judeo-Spanish: *Deshame entrar, me azere lugar* (Let me enter, and I will make a place for myself).

In fact, there had been 72 years of silence since the cemetery was destroyed, but the memorial that had just been erected to recognize this fact was somewhat less than clear about who had been responsible for the destruction. It featured a large menorah and accompanying plaques with text in five languages—Greek, Hebrew, Judeo-Spanish, English, and French—that attribute the cemetery's destruction to the "Nazi occupation forces and their collaborators."

Salonica's vast cemetery, which held more than 350,000 Jewish graves over some 86 acres, was razed when the city was occupied by the Germans, but the destruction was the idea of the local Greek authorities. In fact, they had been planning to take the land for more than a decade, and a Greek law had already expropriated part of it in 1937. As the teacher and historian Michael Molho recorded, the Nazi military administrative director actually decided that less of the

Five hundred workers with pickaxes laid waste to the Jewish cemetery in December 1942.

cemetery could be expropriated, but "anticipating . . . German approval for any increased, harsh anti-Jewish measures," local Greek authorities ignored his orders.

At the municipality's expense, five hundred workers with pickaxes laid waste to the Jewish cemetery of Salonica in December 1942. Marble flooded the market, and its price plummeted. Jewish tombstones were stacked in masons' yards. With the permission of the director of antiquities of Macedonia and under the supervision of the metropolitan bishop and city officials, they were used to line latrines, pave roads, repair the Church of Saint Demetrius, lay the courtyard of National Theater of Northern Greece, construct the cafeteria of the Yacht Club of Thessaloniki, and, of course, build the university itself, whose medical students used leftover tombstones for their dissection tables.

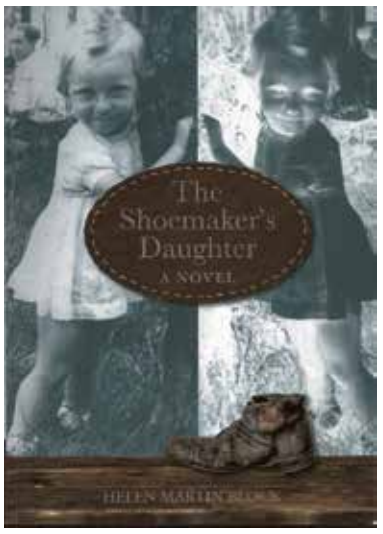
Fragments of tombstones inscribed in Hebrew can still be found throughout the city. A local Jewish pharmacist Iosif Vaena (one of fewer than a thousand Jews now living in Salonica) recovers them in his spare time, storing them in his pharmacy before taking them to the city's Jewish museum. When I asked a leader of the Jewish community how he could agree to a memorial that laid the destruction of the cemetery at the feet of the Nazis, he explained that he was a politician, not a historian.

As it turns out, even the monument's equivocal acknowledgment of how the university campus had been built was too much for some. In November 2016, someone tried to pull the branches off the monument's menorah and damaged the accompanying plaques. The Jewish community—not the university—has begun the repair work at its own expense. This is one of many anti-Semitic incidents over the last few years in Greece, a country with only 5000 Jews but an active neo-Nazi party. That party, Golden Dawn, won 7 percent of the votes in the most recent elections for the Hellenic Parliament. (One of its MPs, Artemios Matthaiopoulos, was the bassist in a punk rock band called Pogrom before being elected to represent the town of Serres, not far from Thessaloniki. The title song of Pogrom's album was "Auschwitz," and its lyrics are too vile to print.)

The desire, however tentative, to confront Salonica's silenced Jewish past embodies conflicting trends within Greek society. Salonica's



The vandalized monument, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. (Courtesy of the author.)



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Aron waited, listening to his wife's cries behind a closed door. No, it was not going to be an easy birth. His head was in his hands and his thoughts collided. This new life, would they be blessed with it? Did he deserve this? What was his purpose and why had he survived when so many had not. Perhaps he was spared to be a witness, to tell of the suffering that had befallen his family, his people. An obligation to tell the truth.

brave mayor, Yiannis Boutaris, referred to the Jewish cemetery's destruction as Salonica's "hidden shame" for which the institutions that perpetrated the crime—the municipality and the university—still bear responsibility. He has also expressed an unprecedented openness to the city's Jewish and Muslim pasts. A new ferry line links Salonica to its Turkish sister city, Izmir. Flights connect Salonica and Ben-Gurion airport. Salonica now has a kosher restaurant and descendants of the city's Jews "return" in search of their roots.

Boutaris, himself descended from Greece's Vlach minority, signed the American Jewish Committee's Mayors United Against Anti-Semitism pledge, and wore a yellow star in protest against the anti-Semitism and racism of Golden Dawn at his inauguration. He has also worked with Jewish leaders to place cobblestone plaques at Salonica's port commemorating Jews murdered by the Nazis. The Jewish community also recently refurbished the only synagogue that survived the German occupation. The German government just pledged €10 million to create a Holocaust Museum and Education Center for Human Rights near the railway from which the city's Jews were deported to Auschwitz. The memory of the Jewish past is about to enter public consciousness in an unprecedented way.

Yet willful amnesia remains; 2016 marked the 90th anniversary of the establishment of Aristotle University, which mounted a photographic exhibition narrating the foundation and expansion of the campus since 1926. The recent monument notwithstanding, no mention was made of the fact that, with the exception of the initial building, the entire campus sits atop the Jewish cemetery. On the other hand, the university has inaugurated a new professorship in Jewish studies sponsored by the Jewish community. A specialist on World War II who also studies anti-Semitism, Professor Giorgos Antoniou has been amazed by the popularity of his course on Salonica's Jewish history, which enrolls hundreds of students. Some come with stories from grandparents about Jewish neighbors who "disappeared" in 1943; others know nothing of the city's rich Jewish past.

Some students see their foray into Jewish history as part of a progressive fight against racism and xenophobia on the rise in Greece, as elsewhere, since the 2008 financial crisis and now compounded by the refugee crisis. The Anti-Defamation League designated Greece the most anti-Semitic country in the European Union in its 2014 survey. Sixty-seven percent of Greeks affirm that Jews have too much power in business and international finance, as well as too much control over global affairs, the media, and the U.S. government. Some Jews involved in the local anti-racist movement also report unease with the knee-jerk condemnation of Zionism, and view with irony those Salonicans who condemn the dispossession of Palestinians while confessing that their own homes were stolen from Salonica's Jews.

At the Workers Center of Thessaloniki, a recent proposal to name the building after the founder of the city's (and country's) socialist movement—the Jewish activist Abraham Benaroya—met with resistance. The head of the transportation workers lashed out: "Jews are responsible for crucifying Christ"; "This hall has the name Benaroya because God made a mistake by creating Jews"; and, if that was not enough, "Unfortunately, Hitler did not complete his work." Such rhetoric is, unfortunately, typical in Greece. What was unusual this time was that co-workers and the Greek press fervently condemned the statements—something that did not happen in 2012 when a Golden Dawn MP read a passage of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in a session of Parliament. "*Kol ha-Kavod*, Salonica," wrote the Jewish blogger Abravanel.

At the national level, however, politicians' anti-Jewish rhetoric has not been abandoned. In September 2016, the vice-minister of education and religious affairs Theodosis Pelegrinis, from the ruling left-wing Syriza party, denounced Jews in Parliament "for appropriating the Holocaust"—claiming reparations and ultimate victimhood status—by convincing the world that the term should apply only to Jewish suffering at the hands of the Nazis. He nonetheless went on to argue that Greeks should mimic the Jews by similarly weaponizing the term "catastrophe"—used to describe the Greek defeat in Asia Minor by Turkey in the wake of World War I—in order to win reparations from Turkey. Indeed, when a group of Greek scholars followed up on the ADL's anti-Semitism survey, they concluded that both the right and the left share the belief that Greeks have suffered more than Jews—the difference being that Jews have achieved vindication whereas Greeks continue to be exploited by "invisible world powers." That sense of victimhood motivated Sia Anagnostopoulou, a prominent Greek intellectual and MP representing Syriza, to claim in 2012 regarding her country's unfavorable treatment by debtors and the EU: "We are the Jews of the 21st century."

Sixty-seven percent of Greeks affirm that Jews have too much power in business and international finance.

As in other parts of Europe, discussion about Jews occurs with few Jews around to speak for themselves. After I addressed the audience at Aristotle University, a Greek magazine reported that my brief remarks were the first time since the 1930s that Judeo-Spanish had been spoken in a Greek public forum. Although I have no illusions that Salonica will return to being "the Jerusalem of the Balkans," or that Judeo-Spanish will be heard again on its streets, it can still come to terms with its past.

When I first visited the city more than a decade ago, my grandfather, who had left Salonica as a child in 1924, wondered why I was going. As he saw it, nothing of the Jewish city he knew remained. But for me, as for the younger generation of Salonica's remaining Jews, to forget would be not only a loss but an injustice. My friend the pharmacist who salvages the Jewish tombstones still strewn about the city is joined by a small but growing cohort of Jewish activists, writers, and scholars and their Orthodox Christian allies who, in the face of resurgent anti-Semitism, seek to reclaim the city's Jewish past as their own.

Devin E. Naar is the Isaac Alhadeff Professor of Sephardic Studies and associate professor of history and Jewish studies at the University of Washington. He is the author of Jewish Salonica: Between the Ottoman Empire and Modern Greece *(Stanford University Press).*

What They Talk About When They Talk About Golems

BY ABRAHAM SOCHER

When, in his brilliant essay, Michael Weingrad argued that golems are "a classically negative Christian imagining of Judaism itself: unlovely, slightly threatening, and hopelessly literal and earthbound," I wasn't quite convinced. (See "Brave New Golems" in this issue.) It didn't tally with what I knew of golems from Gershom Scholem, Moshe Idel, and, of course, the Maharal of Prague tales, as filtered through the modest imagination of Yudl Rosenberg. I guess I just don't get out enough, so I hadn't heard any anti-Semitic golem stories.

Then I saw *The Atlantic's* now-infamous video clip of white nationalist leader Richard Spencer "hailing Trump," in which he says, "One wonders if these people are people at all, or instead soulless golem animated by some dark power to repeat" set talking points, and for a second I thought this was the kind of thing Weingrad was talking about. But, if you listen closely, Spencer was describing the media—for which he also gleefully used the old Nazi term *Lügenpresse* (lying press)—not the Jews, as a golem.

When CNN made the mistake of saying that Spencer had called Jews golems, the *Daily Caller* jumped: "SURPRISE! CNN Makes A False Claim And Press Picks It Up." The story that followed seemed to absolve Spencer of anything save contempt for the mainstream media—but not so fast. Why did Spencer pick a *Jewish* folk tale as his punchline in a racist, pseudo-Nietzschean rant ("To be white is to be a striver, a crusader, an explorer, and a conqueror. . ")? And what is the identity of this dark power that animates and controls the press golem? Which kabbalist rabbi—or is it a globalist cabal?—inscribes the Hebrew word *emet*, truth, on the forehead of the soulless clay man and sends him out on the Sunday morning talk shows to rampage against the Gentiles?

Of course, the reason Richard Spencer's smug ravings before a crowd of 150 sieg-heiling guys are newsworthy is that he is a leader of the "alt-right," and Steve Bannon, President-elect Trump's chief strategist, famously told a journalist at the Republican National Convention that his website *Breitbart News Network* was "the platform of the alt-right." It would be comforting to think that Bannon didn't really mean people like Spencer, but just a few months earlier *Breitbart* had published a long primer on the movement by its star provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos and Allum Bokhari. It described Spencer as a movement intellectual and credited him with inventing the very term "alt-right." The general tone of the piece was that the alt-right consists of a bunch of merry pranksters who read Spengler; think brave, heretical thoughts about racial differences; and should be taken seriously even if they do sometimes make Holocaust jokes. After the election, Bannon clarified to *The Wall Street Journal* that "our definition of the alt-right is younger people who are very anti-globalist, very nationalist, terribly anti-establishment," which doesn't sound quite so bad even if it isn't your cup of ideological tea ("Oh, you know Dick, he's terribly, terribly anti-establishment").

Bannon also said that *Breitbart* provides "an outlet for 10 or 12 or 15 lines of thought," including libertarianism, gay conservatism, right-wing Zionism (true), and so on, of which the alt-right is just one. Although he conceded that the latter has "some racial and anti-Semitic overtones," he maintained that he has "zero tolerance" for such things. But it's a funny kind of zero, for if *Breitbart* is not exactly a platform for these "white supremacists, anti-Semites, and Internet trolls" (that's the *National Review's* definition), it has subtly and unsubtly encouraged them—and its comments section has become one of their favorite playgrounds.

I am tempted to suggest that Bannon thinks of the alt-right as a golem, earthbound and unlovely but useful, especially in swing states. However, after reading Kimberley A. Strassel's *Wall Street Journal* profile and a transcript of a talk Bannon gave to a Vatican conference a couple of years ago, I don't think that's quite right. What Bannon seems to believe is that the election of Donald Trump, Brexit, and various Euro-nationalist movements are part of a worldwide revolt against the dark powers of international bankers, crony capitalists, and "what we call the party of Davos." Whatever bigotry and anti-Semitism is in these populist movements will, he said, eventually get "washed away." This is less than entirely reassuring.

The resurgence of old-fashioned anti-Semitism in the 21st century is a story that, unfortunately, we'll continue to cover in these pages. (If it all washes away, we'll be sure to cover that too.) My own recent brush with such anti-Semitism actually came from the left, on a campus (my own) famous for being at the cutting edge of radical activism.

A young colleague at Oberlin College, an assistant professor of rhetoric and composition named Joy Karega, turned out to have posted several anti-Semitic comments, memes, and Jewish conspiracy theories on her Facebook page. One of the least vile of these pictured a reptilian-looking old man identified as Jacob Rothschild with the text, "Hello there, my name is Jacob Rothschild. My family is worth 500 trillion dollars. We own nearly every central bank in the world. We financed both sides of every war since Napoleon. We own your news, the media, your oil, and your government," to which Professor Karega added, "Yep. This family and several others. Which is why I'm not concerned with or interested in any discussions or plans of action that don't get at things from the top-down." This is, of course, a more general version of the claim Richard Spencer was making when he called the media "a soulless golem, animated by some dark power." I bet he has ideas about a "top-down" plan of action too.

In all the subsequent hubbub on campus as to whether Professor Karega's posts were anti-Semitic—a deep literary question on the order of whether a five-line poem that goes *aabba* is a limerick—there was surprisingly little discussion of their specific moral and historical content. Instead, much of the controversy focused on Professor Karega's identity as an African American woman, her popularity among student activists, her support for the BDS movement (the suggestion being that maybe this was just a case of excessive but understandable anti-Zionist zeal), and, most incredibly, whether these postings were somehow part of her academic research. To its credit, a solid majority of the faculty signed a statement that forthrightly called her posts anti-Semitic and condemned "any manifestation of bigotry on our campus."

Conspiracy theories about the Rothschilds have been around since the 18th century (when I talked about the Karega affair with a Jewish historian, she kept repeating "The Rothschilds! The Rothschilds!" in half-amused horror). In recent years, Lord Jacob Rothschild, an octogenarian investment banker and philanthropist, has become a particular obsession of New World Order theorists. Like a Bond villain, he is imagined to preside over a dark globalist shadow power that rules the world through central banks, the mainstream media and so on.

In the fall of 2014, the new nationalist-populist party in Germany, *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), quickly expelled one of its members, a regional legislator named Jan-Ulrich Weiss, for posting a Jacob Rothschild meme on his Facebook page that was virtually identical (though in German) to Professor Karega's. German papers reporting the story declined to reproduce the post, with its picture of Rothschild, his features digitally distorted into a leer, finding it too reminiscent of Nazi propaganda. Perhaps Weiss's sacking was precisely a case of anti-Semitism getting "washed away" from a populist-nationalist movement just as Steve Bannon has predicted. Then again, maybe Weiss understood his constituents better than he understood the AfD's public relations strategy.

This past November, after nine months of public controversy (in which, I should say, I played a part), Oberlin's Board of Trustees, operating as a governing body but outside of the normal academic personnel process, fired Professor Karega. In the dismissals of both the American professor and the German legislator, some supporters saw evidence of the silent machinations of Jewish power.

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

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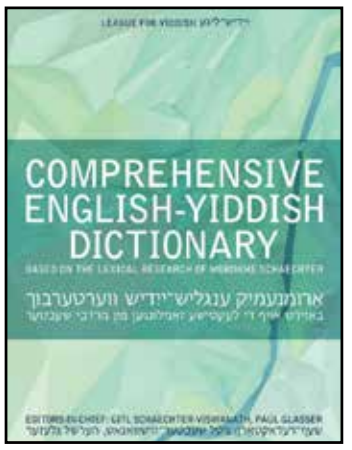
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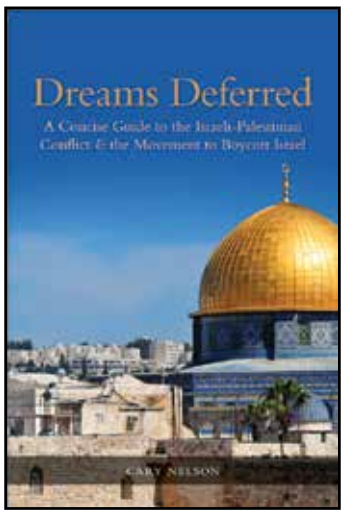
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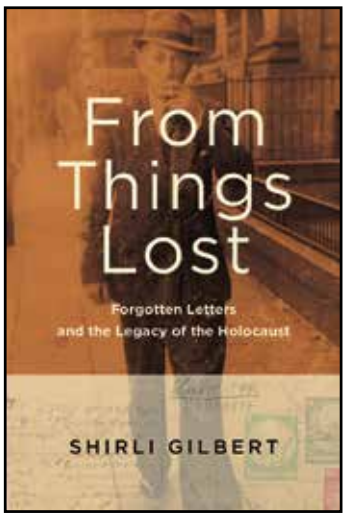
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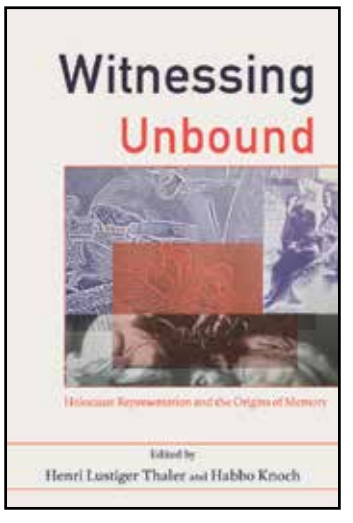
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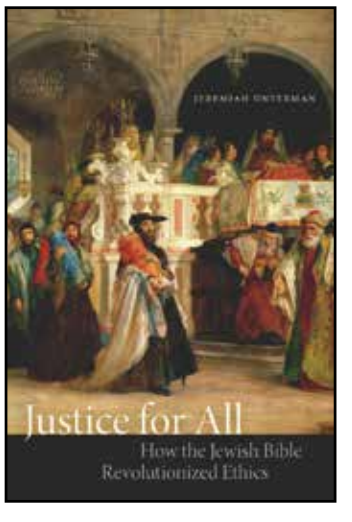
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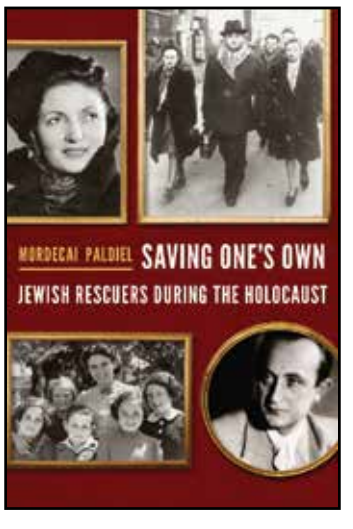
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