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Joy Ladin

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Lachrymose Criticism?

Dara Horn’s review of Black Honey, a film dedicated to the poet Avraham Sutzkever (“Yiddish Heroism, Hebrew Tears,” Winter 2019), turns on a series of moments when people interviewed in the movie cry: the poet’s granddaughter when she reconstructs her memory of a German actor announcing the death of her grandfather during a performance in Berlin; the Yiddish scholar Avraham Novershen when he describes Sutzkever requesting funding for his journal Di goldeye keyt from the general secretary of the Histadrut in 1948, unaware that the man had just lost his son in the War for Independence; and Ruth R. Wisse as she describes an encounter with Sutzkever, who accused her of not understanding the Holocaust. Last but not least, Ms. Horn also describes herself shedding tears at a security checkpoint in Israel.

I found this the wrong tone for a review of a movie about a great poet and a wonderful human being. The last incident, the encounter with the soldier at the checkpoint, was, I thought, too much. The story of Sutzkever and of Yiddish poetry, even in Hebrew translation, does not need the embellishments of sentimentiality.

Anita Shapira
Tel Aviv University

I am the director and screenwriter of the film Black Honey, The Life and Poetry of Avraham Sutzkever. Dara Horn’s essay is the first article written about any of my films that moved me to respond—to start a dialogue with her text.

From the title on, Horn’s “Yiddish Heroism, Hebrew Tears” is a revolutionary and subversive attempt to challenge the consensus that Yiddish is essentially the language of diaspora, of surrender, of helplessness and hopelessness, whereas Hebrew is the language of the victors who have taken control of their destiny. Here, the situation is reversed, revealing to us a new and exciting alternative for Jewish thought. Horn’s article exposes the very conceptual roots that guided me in making this film.

The more we study and research the Holocaust, the more helpless we remain in the face of human existence. Attempts to give artistic expression to what happened “over there” are swallowed in a black hole. Theodor Adorno famously said that “writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” The poet Avraham Sutzkever, on the other hand, climbed to dizzying heights of harmonious, musical, refined poetry—at the height of the extermination in the Vilna Ghetto. Like the sages of the Kabbalah, he redeemed the sparks from the ashes of the extermination in the Vilna Ghetto. He did that, but he added another layer by bariring the emotional responses the poet has evoked in contemporary readers—which are ultimately responses to the tragedies and triumphs of the last 70 years of Jewish life. Uri Barbash’s eloquent letter and his film express this far more directly than I did.

Was Lincoln Jewish?

Stuart Schoffman’s provocative article “Was Lincoln Jewish?” (jewishreviewofbooks.com, February 12, 2019) mentions both Daniel Boone and Abraham Lincoln as possible Melungeons (southerners of mixed, partly Sephardi, heritage). As it happened, the Boones and the Lincolns were immediate neighbors—which are ultimately responses to the tragedies and triumphs of the last 70 years of Jewish life. Uri Barbash’s eloquent letter and his film express this far more directly than I did.

Uri Barbash
Tel Aviv, Israel

Dara Horn Responds:

I thank both Anita Shapira and Uri Barbash for their thoughtful letters. Professor Shapira is utterly correct that Sutzkever is an unsentimental poet. My review, however, was not of his poetry but rather of the film and how it inverts the traditional Zionist disdain for sentimentality (I am reminded of a sarcastic poem by Yehuda Amichai entitled “You Mustn’t Show Weakness”). What I found amazing about Black Honey was how it showed not only the power and unsentimental beauty of Sutzkever’s life and work but also the astonishing way that his utter

ly disciplined poetry opens the emotional floodgates of others. Barbash could have easily made a film that simply told the phenomenal story of Sutzkever and his work. He did that, but he added another layer by bariring the emotional responses the poet has evoked in contemporary readers—which are ultimately responses to the tragedies and triumphs of the last 70 years of Jewish life. Uri Barbash’s eloquent letter and his film express this far more directly than I did.

The Transjordan Question

In “Chaim of Arabia: The First Arab-Zionist Alliance” (Winter 2019), Rich Rickman states that the Zionist movement in 1919 agreed that the boundaries of the Jewish national home meant “leaving almost all of Transjordan to the Arabs.” This, however, does not agree with Chaim Weizmann’s statement before the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine, on July 9, 1947, where he made clear that “Palestine” was in 1919 understood as “Palestine and Transjordan.” He stated, “[The Transjordan] was cut off . . . at a moment’s notice. First you amputate Palestine. You cut off a country which is three or four or five times the size of Palestine, and then you turn round on poor Zionists and tell them, you are a small country; you cannot bring any population.” In other words, 28 years after the Versailles conference, Weizmann still felt that certain tracts of Transjordan (currently Jordan) were also meant to be included in the future Jewish national home. If so, then the separate Transjordan created by Winston Churchill, as colonial secretary, in 1921, in fact was an Arab Palestinian state. In 1948, when it absorbed the major Arab settlements in the West Bank and changed its name to Jordan, it was, in fact, a Palestinian state. But the name was only revived when Jordan attacked Israel on June 6, 1967, and consequently lost the West Bank to Israeli occupation. Then came the outcry for a Palestinian state. But isn’t Jordan itself (even without the West Bank) also a Palestinian state?

Dr. Mordecai Paldiel
New York, NY

Correction

The photo on page 25 of our Winter 2019 issue was of the German musician Heinrich Ehrlich, not Henryk Ehrlich of the Polish Bund. We regret the error.
**The Mabam Strategy: Israel, Iran, Syria (and Russia)**

BY AMOS YADLIN AND ARI HEISTEIN

On September 7, 2017, Israeli fighter jets hit a “scientific research center” (in reality, an Iranian weapons facility) in the city of Masyaf in northwest Syria. And so began the next phase of the “campaign between the wars” (known in Hebrew as mi’aracha bein ha-milchamot or, more succinctly, by the acronym mabam). Since then, Israel has continued to quietly but decisively counter Iran’s entrenchment in Syria, worked to thwart the activities of its terrorist proxy Hezbollah on the northern border, maintained studied neutrality with regard to the outcome of the long Syrian civil war, and put into place a “deconfliction mechanism”—regular exchanges of information and a protocol when things go wrong—to avoid an unintentional conflict with Russian forces. It’s been a complex operating environment, and it won’t be any easier for the next Israeli government, whether it is led by Bibi Netanyahu or Benny Gantz.

Under the leadership of Major General Qasem Soleimani, commander of its Quds Force, Iran’s aim has been to equip proxies based on Israel’s northern border in Syria and Lebanon, and perhaps in Gaza as well, with advanced missiles. These missiles could serve to deter attacks on Iranian nuclear sites, while a nuclear weapon would eventually give its conventional forces on Israel’s borders the ability to act with impunity. Iran has sought to establish airfields and naval bases in Syria, built several precision missile plants like the one at Masyaf, and imported Shia militias from other countries into Syria so that it can continue operations even after withdrawing most of its own troops. It also continues to attempt to establish a Syrian Hezbollah modeled on the Lebanese version. Israel’s next prime minister will have the complex task of evolving a strategy to prevent new strategic threats from emerging as changing circumstances make the situation even more explosive.

Every Israeli airstrike in Syria carries three major risks: the potential for uncontrolled escalation on the northern front; the possibility of harming Israel’s already tense relationship with Russia; and the danger to Israel’s air force. In 2018, each of these risks was realized to some degree: Iran twice responded to airstrikes by firing missiles at Israel; a Russian plane was downed by the Syrians during an Israeli bombing operation, causing a diplomatic crisis between Moscow and Jerusalem; and an Israeli F-16 was shot down (though, fortunately, its pilot was able to eject over Israeli territory). There is no reason to believe that any of these incidents was a one-off. On the contrary, close observers believe that such risks may grow in the coming months.

With Syrian rebel forces all but vanquished as of this writing, the Iran-led axis will likely have a greater appetite for escalation against Israel. While Syrian forces are still deterred from firing on Israel in any capacity beyond air defense, it is feasible that Iranian and Hezbollah forces will seek to strike Israel from Syrian territory, eliciting a powerful Israeli response, and that could easily lead to a spiraling series of reprisals on both sides. As all military experts know, it is easy for even the most disciplined military to stumble into a full-scale war in such situations. And the risk is not confined to any single military force: With fighters from Syria, Russia, Iran, and Lebanon, and possibly the United States, the potential for an all-out war is high.

Russia is increasingly hostile about Israeli activities, calling them “provocative” and “gross violations of Syrian sovereignty.”

On May 9, 2018, Benjamin Netanyahu was the only Western state guest to attend the military parade on Red Square, but that was before 15 Russian soldiers died when a Russian surveillance plane was downed by Syria’s air defense systems this past September during an Israeli bombing raid on an Iranian target in northern Syria. Netanyahu did return to Russia just last month, in February 2019, to meet again with Putin, who issued a pointed statement that he “hope[d] . . . continuity will be preserved in the development of Russian-Israeli relations,” regardless of the outcome of Israel’s elections. Between these two meetings, however, Russian officials became increasingly hostile in their comments on Israeli activities in Syria, calling them “criminally negligent,” “provocative,” “arbitrary,” and “gross violations of Syrian sovereignty.”

Following the September 2018 downing of the Russian surveillance plane, the Kremlin equipped Syrian air defenses with S-300 surface-to-air missile batteries to enable better defenses against Israel’s air force. If Israeli operations in Syria continue at their present pace and the current trend in Russian-Israel relations persists, the deconfliction mechanism with Russia may not hold. What could happen if Russia stops cooperating with Israel? Might it employ its own even more advanced S-400 air defense systems to protect Iranian personnel, weapons, or facilities in Syria? Even if Russia and Israel manage to maintain cordial relations, Jerusalem clearly cannot depend on Moscow to achieve or guarantee its goal of security on the northern border, notwithstanding its posting as a useful mediator in Syria. As we were drafting this article, Israel struck Quneitra, just 500 feet from the 1974 ceasefire line between Syria and Israel, killing both Iranian and Hezbollah operatives. This February 2019 strike was only the latest reminder that Russia’s promise to distance hostile forces from Israel’s border remains unfulfilled. Meanwhile, the unpredictable nature of the U.S. government’s decision-making process in this arena should make Israeli strategists wary of depending on Washington for anything beyond a green light to strike when necessary and diplomatic support in international forums.

For Israel’s pilots, sorties over Lebanon and into Syria will likely become more dangerous as the Iran-led axis’s anti-aircraft capabilities improve. Moscow says that the S-300 batteries it recently delivered to Syria will be operational shortly (though it is not yet clear who will operate them and who will make...
decisions about how and when they are used).

So far, Iran has not responded in a serious way to Israeli strikes in Syria—because it has not been able to develop an effective operational plan for doing so—but that could change. Indeed, there is considerable danger that Tehran will feel increasing pressure to strike back in order to save face in the lopsided conflict. Such pressure will only grow as Israel becomes more vocal in claiming credit for strikes and more explicit about its goals. It was only this January that outgoing IDF chief of staff Gadi Eizenkot spoke openly of activities on the northern front as a coherent strategy of mabam, in an interview with Bret Stephens in the New York Times. The next month, after the Quneitra strike, Prime Minister Netanyahu said, “We operate every day, including yesterday, against Iran and its attempts to entrench itself in the region.”

But no matter how many Iran-run facilities and Iranian troop positions Israel strikes, it will never be cost effective to remove every Iranian soldier from Syrian soil. Instead Israel should focus on preventing its adversaries to the north from acquiring advanced weaponry and constructing the infrastructure for terror (from underground tunnels to missile batteries) along Israel’s border.

After the next election, Israel’s leaders need to decide if its current strategy is still the best way to keep the country safe from threats along its northern border. More fundamentally, Israel must clearly delineate its strategic goals with regard to Syria, which will be ruled by Bashar al-Assad with the active assistance of Russia and Iran for the foreseeable future. In designing an updated mabam strategy, Israel’s leaders have four strategic options from which to choose.

First, Israel could, of course, simply continue with the current approach, despite its growing risks and the new challenges. Israel could even seek to use the growing possibility of escalation in its favor by highlighting the risks that Iran’s provocations pose to Russia’s interest in stabilizing Syria, which might push Moscow to rein in Teheran. Second, since 2006, the IDF has adopted a passive approach toward Lebanon that depends on deterrence to avoid war. Israel could deploy this same strategy in Syria, in essence choosing to minimize the immediate risks, particularly the risk of escalation. The advantage of this policy is that, unlike the present mabam, it entails no immediate operational cost or risk of war, but the danger is that the failure of deterrence is “predictable” or explainable only in retrospect—and the cost of war is considerable.

Third, Israel might use technological tools to negate the efficacy of the advanced weaponry being supplied by Iran, in order to prevent missiles from hitting their targets in Israel. For example, Israel’s leaders could decide to fortify the country’s existing missile defense by purchasing additional Iron Dome or Arrow batteries, or the country might develop enhanced disruptive technologies like jammers for use against GPS missile guidance kits. Like deterrence, this approach does not risk escalation, but new technology is both expensive and uncertain. Moreover, any defensive measure can eventually be evaded by an adept enemy.

Finally, rather than continuing with the current piecemeal approach, Israel could launch a comprehensive preemptive strike to destroy all known advanced weapons systems and the facilities used to produce them in Syria. In a single day, Israel could deal a major blow to the Iranian/Hezbollah military build-up and set it back significantly. Of course, if the next Israeli government chooses this tack, war would be a fully expected outcome rather than a possible risk—albeit a war that Israel’s enemies might fight with considerably reduced firepower.

These four strategic options are not mutually exclusive; Israel might adopt elements of all of them as it formulates a new multilayered mabam strategy. For example, Israel could raise the threshold for approval of airstrikes, continue to carry out a smaller number of surgical attacks on targets of the highest priority, and work to develop technology to interfere with the successful operation of precision missiles, while at the same time planning a major strike on the mass production facilities of Iran’s advanced weapons project if and when they approach completion.

Of the many threats facing Israel, Iran’s effort to build major military capabilities in Syria and Lebanon ranks highest in both immediacy and magnitude. The supreme leader of Iran Ayatollah Khamenei has made it abundantly clear that his ultimate goal is not to deter Israel but to destroy it, and his proxy forces and advanced missiles in Syria are on the front lines of those efforts. As always, Israel must balance the need to prevent the emergence of a strategic threat against the importance of avoiding unnecessary escalation.

As the dust settles at what appears to be the end of civil war in Syria, Israel must rethink its strategy and tactics in the “campaign between the wars.” The decisions made over the next year may determine the strategic balance of the region for decades to come. As one of us wrote in these pages four years ago, “Assad’s demise and the collapse of the radical axis is the best strategic outcome Israel could expect.” That, unfortunately, did not come to pass. Israel’s next prime minister must deal with the reality we have, not the reality we hoped for.

Major General (ret.) Amos Yadlin was chief of Israeli military intelligence from 2006 to 2010 and is now the director of the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) in Israel.

Ari Heistein is an independent security and policy consultant based in Tel Aviv.
Friday afternoons in Sabbath-observant homes are a frenzy of cooking and cleaning. As the old adage goes, whoever prepares for the Sabbath eats on the Sabbath. Yet the Talmud tells of a pair of rabbis who regularly spent Fridays outside of the kitchen studying a mysterious work about creation. Luckily, these sessions also produced succulent meat, saving the good rabbi from hunger and, one would imagine, domestic discord. The identity of the rabbis’ magical text, known in medieval talmudic manuscripts as either “The Laws of Creation” or “The Book of Creation,” is unknown, but a text bearing the latter name—Sefer Yeṣirah in Hebrew—has circulated since the Middle Ages, and it is even more wondrous than any alchemist’s cookbook.

Sefer Yeṣirah is the most influential Jewish book you never heard of. Its many references to the decimal counting system, which it calls sefirot, gave us the central icon of Jewish mysticism—the 10 interlocking facets of the Godhead, which also came to be known as sefirot. Indeed, it has been argued that early commentaries written on the book tilted the gnostic soil out of which sprouted the tree of Kabbalah. At the same time, the text was creatively read against soil out of which sprouted the tree of Kabbalah. At least as important is its readership of kabbalists, philosophers, writers, and dreamers. For one, it was the book’s arresting thesis that the basic components of mathematical and verbal language, the letters and numbers that make up human speech and equations, are the very elements through which God fashioned the universe. At least as important is Sefer Yeṣirah’s idiom, which helped this obscure and extremely concise text—it weighs in at just a couple thousand words—secure a permanent place in the canon of Hebrew literature.

Indeed, what is most striking about it is its precise yet allusive prose, which somehow comes across as both scientific and sorcerous. This is apparent from the book’s opening lines, rendered here by the poet and translator Peter Cole:

Through thirty-two hidden paths of wisdom, YAH, the Lord of hosts, engraved His name—the Lord of Israel, Living God and King of the world, merciful, gracious God almighty, on high and dwelling in eternity, His name is holy and He is sublime and created His world out of three words sefer, sfar, sippar—letter, limit, and tale.

Ten spheres of restraint, Ten ciphers of Nothing—And twenty-two letters at the foundation.

Scholars have demonstrated that Sefer Yeṣirah comprises two shorter works: a passage about the 10 generative numbers and another, more substantial treatise about the 22 procreative letters. These two courses in arithmetic and grammar conjure up a chiding homeroom instructor possessed of a poetic soul:

His name in five positions: certain sounds in the throat, certain sounds on the lips, certain sounds against the palate and certain sounds against the teeth, and others along the tongue.

As the book proceeds, it becomes clear that these Hebrew discourses on phonology and numerology have only the veneer of rationality. The text reveals one handbreadth while concealing another, urging its readers to “consider what a mouth cannot utter and what the ear cannot hear.” The prevailing image is of immensity and solidity emerging from a great void—“tremendous columns out of air that cannot be grasped”—which shimmers with peril:

Bridge your mouth and keep it from speaking, your heart from wondering, and if it wanders, return to the place.

In the introduction to his Sefer Yeṣirah and Its Contexts: Other Jewish Voices, Tzahi Weiss quips that after a century and a half of research, we know almost everything there is to know about Sefer Yeṣirah except the identity of its author, the time and place of its writing, the shape of the original text, and, also, its meaning.

The book is, in fact, devoid of identifiable markers. It appears suddenly in the historical record of the 10th century, and, unlike most surviving classical Hebrew literature, there are no rabbis named in the text. Tradition may attribute Sefer Yeṣirah to the patriarch Abraham, based on the book’s bizarre coda that describes how God set Abraham “in his lap, and kissed him upon his head . . . He made with him a covenant between the ten fingers of his hands . . . bound twenty-two letters into his language, and the Holy One revealed to him the secret,” but for philologists, that is neither here nor there. Many conceivable contexts have been proposed, ranging from 1st-century Jerusalem to the 9th-century Islamic world, but nothing near a scholarly consensus has emerged.

Weiss acknowledges his debt to the scholars who preceded him, those who edited the text from the medieval manuscripts, teased out its layers, and drew connections with other works. But he is still confident that he has something new and important to say. Like his subject, his monograph is brief, and Weiss gets swiftly to work by disclosing his chief hermeneutical assumption, which is that, “We have no reason to assume that it tries to conceal its context.” For Weiss, Sefer Yeṣirah’s lack of identifiers and its exclusion of named rabbis from the text are neither frustrating accidents of omission nor deliberate omissions, they are clues that alert us to the text’s nonrabbinic origins.

It is true that the rabbis of late antiquity were passionate about the Hebrew letters, whether tallying their value and forging connections between numerically equivalent words in a still-popular language...
9th-century Latin epistle to Jews who “believe that...”

... etymology glosses lodged in the text. He also considers... explaining the scattered evidence for how... midrashim... amines late... read in the first centuries of its existence. He reex-

writings of Christian Hebraists, early modern philos-

ors, from aleph to tav, make up a kind of divine pe-

periodic table. In the religious writings of late antiquity, this really can only be found in the Syriac Christian literature of northern Mesopotamia, where an... interest in the generative powers of the divine alphabet flourished, having overcome earlier opposi-

by Neoplatonists and Church Fathers.

Weiss contends that Sefer Yeshirah applies the Syriac Christian alphabetology to the singular lan-

guage of Hebrew. He argues that the text emerged... is... problem of... Sefer Yeshirah's origin-

not only her voice, which ranges across “oriental” scales, and her tongue and teeth, which hiss and... word, early... as the heart knows more than the mouth, and the ear hears what the mouth cannot say.”

Of the countless uses and abuses of Sefer Yeshirah over the past millennium, perhaps the most faithful is Victoria Hanna's recent self-titled album. b淋nah. The lovesick young man smitten by Blumah is so dumbstruck that the narrator, riffing on Sefer Yeshirah, insists that we “consider not what his mouth utters... as the heart knows more than the mouth, and the ear hears what the mouth cannot say.”

Of the countless uses and abuses of this text over the past millennium or more, perhaps the most faithful adaptation has been achieved just recently. The self-titled album of the Israeli vocal artist Victoria Hanna includes lyrics taken from Sefer Yeshirah, and its aesthetics realize the book's embodied and evanescent view of language. Here, from the liner notes, is a translation of the beginning of the second track, appropriately called “22 Letters”:

Twenty-two foundation letters / Engraved in voice / hewn in wind / fixed in mouth in five places / In throat / In palate in tongue / In teeth in lips / Twenty-two letters he tied in his tongue / and revealed his secret / He drew them up in water ignited them in fire sounded them in wind set them on fire in seven / Led them in twelve constellations / Twenty-two letters / He engraved them / hewed them / weighed them / exchanged them / permuted them / And created with them the soul of all created / and of all future creation / He created substance from chaos / Made no-thing some-thing / Hewed great stones / From air that cannot be conceived.

Victoria Hanna is a stage name combining the names of the artist's paternal and maternal grandparents. The album Victoria Hanna, like Sefer Yeshirah, is actually two works fused together, the first dedicated to her Egyptian grandmother Victoria's holy and sensuous rebellion against her child-

hood marriage, and the other inspired by her Per-

sian grandmother Hanna's pious response to similar travails. (The artist herself was raised in what her website describes as an “ultra-Orthodox” Mizrahi community in Jerusalem.)

The “Hanna” section of the album is a collect-

ion of haunting melodies with lyrics mainly taken from the Bible and Jewish mystical literature, and the instrumentation soothingly frames Hanna's incantation-like utterances. The “Victoria” collection pulsates with the frenzy of creation. Punctu-

ating rap-like renditions of passages from Song of Songs, the Zohar, the Hoshanah prayers recited on Sukkot, and, of course, Sefer Yeshirah are drums, horns, and strings, including zither and oud. Yet the most versatile instrument is the artist herself, not only her voice, which ranges across “oriental” scales, and her tongue and teeth, which hiss and click rhythmically, but also her entire body, which reverberates with Sefer Yeshirah's vision of simultane-

ously carnal and other-worldly language.

Victoria Hanna was released in 2017, after many years in which the artist toiled away in relative ob-

curity. She had spent time in New York, in asso-

ication with the saxophonist and new Jewish music impresario John Zorn's downtown scene, but she also traveled to the four corners of the earth, of-

ten performing for audiences who had never heard Hebrew before, let alone considered it the Adamic language of creation. Throughout this period, she experimented intensely with the language, breaking it down into its smallest particles and recombining them. Like the talmudic rabbis' Friday afternoon study sessions, it was an arduous process of creation.

A few years before the album's release, the first two tracks went viral and launched the artist's now meteoric career. Of course, the popstar Madonna had already produced songs incorporating kabbalis-

tic ideas and imagery, but there is no comparison be-

tween the profound depths of Victoria Hanna's work and Madonna's New Agey adaptation of third-hand mysticism imbibed at the Kabbalah Centre.

In “The Alphabet Song,” Hanna brilliantly em-

bodies the instructive voice of Sefer Yeshirah, teaching Orthodox schoolgirls the aleph-bet and its honeyed mysteries. The song “22 Letters” is also an act of in-

struction, though more for mystics in training than elementary-school students. Dressed in a dark and demure dress, the artist uses her hands to count, point, and mime the ways in which the Hebrew let-

ters are grouped, where they can be found in the body, and how God “engraved them / hewed them / weighed them / exchanged them / permuted them.”

With her eyes wide open in awe, and her mouth working sonorous wonders, it occurs to me that in our generation, Sefer Yeshirah resides nowhere more than in the person of Victoria Hanna.

Shai Secunda holds the Jacob Neuber Chair in Jewish Studies at Bard College. He is the author of The Iranian Talmud: Reading the Ravli in its Sasanian Context (University of Pennsylvania Press).
Worship of Homer was dialectically related to contempt for Moses.

Witte begins by juxtaposing Heraclitus’s prescription that “War is the father of all and the king of all” with Isaiah’s proclamation that “nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” At the founding core of what he dubs this Greco-Germanic “counterreligion” stands the 18th-century art historian and archeologist Johann Joachim Winckelmann. Witte regards Winckelmann’s idolization of the naked body as concretized in ancient Greek sculpture as the negation of the Jewish prohibition against images. Plastic representations of human form served to gradually displace Judaism’s rational text- and word-centered culture. Here Witte could have buttressed his case with the work of a historian whom he does not mention, George Mosse, who demonstrated that this archetype of noble Greek beauty and character often served as a foil to the ugly, mis-proportioned stereotype of the cunning, nervous, rootless Jew. (Ideals of beauty have always been part of racist thought.)

Somewhat surprisingly, Nietzsche, with his famous irrationalism, his anti-Christian and intoxicated Dionysian impulses, is not central to Witte’s story. Instead he concentrates on earlier figures, including Goethe, Schiller, Hegel, Herder, and Hölderlin. Each of these thinkers valorized Grecian ideals as part of their modernizing zeal, while attacking the God of Judaism and Christianity. But, Witte argues, because Christianity was supported by state power, their rhetorical onslaught was concentrated on Judaism. Under the rubric of ancient polytheism, these thinkers promulgated the worship of the cosmic forces of “Nature” and set the autonomic person—typically in the form of the conquering warrior—as their crowning ideal. Homeric history, Witte asserts, is one of murder, war, and death. Positing society as a ruthless site of struggle, German Grecophiles promoted a worldview that increasingly suppressed the Judaic affirmation of God-created life and the proscription, “Thou shalt not kill.” In its place, they constructed a ruthless image of society. This, Witte argues, was the other side of the Enlightenment, and it left a deep mark on 20th-century German culture.

Readers familiar with German Jewish history may be somewhat surprised by Witte’s account of these classical German thinkers as essentially neopagan and anti-Jewish. Most acculturating Jews at the time and even later—whatever their orientation—did not see things that way. Indeed, in their eyes, Goethe and Schiller were liberating heroes of German Jewry. They regarded them—and not all that mistakenly—as Enlightenment humanists who advocated reason and a secular culture of Bildung (ethical self-cultivation) that was open to everyone. It was only through these broad-minded and humanist postulates that newly acculturating Jews believed they could integrate into German culture. “The significance of Friedrich Schiller for the formation of Jewish attitudes toward Germany is almost incalculable,” wrote Gershom Scholem (who was not exactly a proponent of German Jewish assimilation). As “spokesman for pure humanity, lofty poet of the highest ideals of mankind, [he] represented everything they thought of, or wished to think of, as being German.”

Ernst Bloch, to take another example, regarded...
Goethe and Humboldt as the proper forerunners to his radical Marxist humanism. Indeed, these luminaries were perceived not only as embodying the best of Germanism and universalism but as strengthening a new kind of Jewishness. Scholerm's friend Walter Benjamin agreed that "above all, in a study of Goethe one finds one's Jewish substance," while the Zionist Kurt Blumenfeld argued that making Goethe a part of one's life facilitated Jewish national consciousness! (Hindsight may judge these as tragic misperceptions, but Schiller, Goethe, and Humboldt certainly were welcome alternatives to both Christian and ultranationalist exclusion.)

Nonetheless, Witte shows Moses and the Jewish tradition were negatively caricatured not only by the usual ultranationalist and anti-Semitic suspects but by the classical thinkers of early German modernity. Indeed, he argues that even their seemingly positive portrayals were often anti-Jewish. Thus, while Schiller rendered Moses as an enlightened statesman, he dismissed the Jewish mob as a contemptible band of slaves and—ina theme that later became increasingly familiar and ominous—as traitors to the state. Herder's Moses did lead and liberate homeless Jews, but they are portrayed as dishonorable vagabonds and parasites. (By contrast, Herder regarded Homer's Greeks as ancient exemplars of patriotism.)

Goethe's Moses, by and large, is a powerful, positive figure, but Witte focuses on an obscure— and hitherto relatively unremarked—piece Goethe wrote in the shadow of the French Revolution. In it, a Robespierre-like Moses not only fails to civilize his people but murders Egypt's firstborn before he himself is murdered. In this way, Witte argues, Goethe dethroned Moses as the founder of Western civilization. The demonization of Moses reached its climax in 1933 with the German poet Gottfried Benn, who, though he regarded Sinai as one of the world's most significant events, depicted Moses as "the greatest völkisch terrorist of all time and the greatest eugenicist of all nations," the one who first brutally applied the laws of breeding for the greatest good of his own pure race and to the detriment of other foreign tribes.

There were German Jewish responses to such cultural attacks. Heinrich Heine, who had once called himself "a secret Greek," traded in his Hege- lian philhellenism for the prophetic tradition and portrayed Moses—rather than God—as the great emancipator of mankind, a kind of liberating soci- alist. Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* retells the story of revelation as a Greek myth, where Moses (rather than God) is a kind of father, whose murder paradoxically results in the formation of abstract ethical and spiritual consciousness, indeed a superior Judaic civilization. Witte regards Freud's story as an implicit response both to the Homeric and Nazi war of world and barbarity, and the many attempts to unseat Moses as the founder of Western culture. Martin Buber and Leo Baeck also sought to save the cultural memory of Moses as a foundational law-giving and ethical figure in opposition to both his cultured, philhellenic despisers and Nazi barbarism.

Witte also tells the less well-known story of Gertrud Kantorowicz (a cousin of the famous his- torian Ernst Kantorowicz), who was a historian of ancient art, poet, translator, disciple of the char- ismatic poet Stefan George, and lover of the great sociologist Georg Simmel. Intoxicated with ancien- t Greece, she tried to fuse what she saw as the best of the worlds of Homer and Moses. After be- ing turned back at the Swiss border, she was sent to Theresienstadt, where she worked as a nurse, serv- ing her fellow inmates. Acutely aware of both the beauty and the vulnerability of the human body, she developed an ethic of mental and physical service, an affirmation of "whole life." Incredibly hard working, by April 1945 she had withered to no more than 80 pounds. On her deathbed, she was found reading Homer in the original Greek. Witte sees her story as exemplifying both the tragedy and the triumph of the German Jewish experience.

Witte's work is scholarship as outraged personal reckoning. For Witte, the idolization of Greece and the concomitant ousting of monotheistic Judaism not only helped to shape modern German self-understanding and identity, but also paved the way to the murder of the Jews of Europe. "A specific form of so-called Bildung," he writes, "that transmitted an uncritical and unreflective human conception of Greece contributed to the fact that so many educated intellectuals could attach themselves to murderous National Socialist ideology." Moses and Homer were transmuted into the collective bodies of the Volk and race by schol- ars who were heir to a morally flawed tradition. (In- deed, part of his anger consists of the fact that such individuals merged seamlessly back into postwar German academic life.) "In this perspective," Witte writes, "the Shoah must not be seen as a break in Germany's history... it is also a historical consequence of the paradigmatic exclusions that had their origins in 18th-century Germany." He adds: "The beautiful dream of an 'aesthetic' education of mankind ended in the murder of 'life-unworthy life' and the attempt to finally exterminate the Jews of Europe."

Here we need to pause. If the mountain of scholar- ship covering virtually every nook and cran- ny of German (and European) society is to be believed, nothing is a stranger to the Holocaust. In the field of German intellectual and cultural history alone, from the Teutons to Martin Luther, Hegel, Kant, Fichte, Tietze, Nietzsche, Wagner, and Wagner (and the list goes on) who has not been indicted? Many scholars, like Witte, assume that Germany pursued a qualitatively different and particularly danger- ous path from the West (a so-called Sonderweg) that led, ultimately, to Auschwitz. Such studies often contain an account of a kind of disembodied "German Mind." As Geoff Eley pointed out some time ago: This approach means "reconstructing the intellectual pursuits of an earlier epoch in the image of Nazi ideology.... All these ideas are described as in some way distinctively German and all are traced back to the eighteenth century as aspects of an unbroken linear continuity."

Certainly, one must investigate the deeper roots of this catastrophe. Yet if nothing is alien to such a complex, multifactorial event, careful caveats and differentiations must be made. Thus, for example, it's clear that without the vast contingent event of World War II, the Holocaust could not have occurred, but it would be more difficult to trace the outbreak of war in 1939 to philhellenism. Moreover, even if one leaves aside crucial economic, politi- cal, and bureaucratic forces and limit ourselves to cultural analysis, one would at least have to men-
dependence between the Jewish and German
he suggests that there was a kind of ironic inter-
putative perpetrators. Even more challengingly,
move whereby the victims were transformed into
arrogant and aggressive separatism—a cunning
ish chosenness came to be represented as a kind of
Witte also draws our attention to the fact that Jew-
murderous superiority of blood, power, and race.
metaphysical and religious content and transform-
to the Jewish conception, emptying the idea of its
version of chosenness as diametrically opposed
self-celebration).
On the other hand, Witte describes the German
version of chosenness as diametrically opposed to
the Jewish conception, emptying the idea of its
metaphysical and religious content and transform-
ing provided a powerful, if, perhaps, comparably
essentialist, counterargument to Assmann, along with
an intriguing, provocative rereading of the entire
modern German intellectual tradition.
We should be grateful to Bernd Witte for hav-
ing provided a powerful, if, perhaps, comparably
essentialist, counterargument to Assmann, along with
an intriguing, provocative rereading of the entire
modern German intellectual tradition.

Steven E. Aschheim is emeritus professor of cultural
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Forays into Jewish Memory, European History and
Complex Identities (De Gruyter).

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Soon after the fall of France in 1940, on the anniversary of his ascent to the throne, the sultan of Morocco, Muhammad V, held a banquet. Present at the palace were officials from the collaborationist Vichy regime who had forced him to sign laws setting educational and occupational quotas for the country’s Jews and requiring them to move back into their ghettos. Present too, however, was a group of rabbis the sultan had sneaked into the palace in a supply wagon and seated next to the French officials. Appalled, a Vichy representative wrote back to his superiors:

“For the first time, the Sultan invited representatives of the Jewish community to the banquet and placed them most obviously in the best seats, right next to the French officials. The Sultan had wanted personally to introduce the Jewish individuals present. When the French officials expressed surprise at the presence of the Jews at the meeting, the Sultan told them: “I in no way approve of the new anti-Semitic laws and I refuse to be associated with any measure of which I disapprove. I wish to inform you that, as in the past, the Jews remain under my protection and I refuse to allow any distinction to be made among my subjects.”

On another occasion, the sultan told the Jewish community representatives that “I consider you to be Moroccans in the same capacity as Muslims, and your property, like theirs, will not be touched.”

In the years leading up to the war, roughly 470,000 Jews lived in the countries of North Africa: 240,000 in Morocco, 110,000 in Algeria, 80,000 in Tunisia, and 40,000 in Libya. Some of these Jews traced their ancestry to traders who accompanied Phoenicians in the 9th century BCE, others to those who fled Roman Palestine after the destruction of the Second Temple, still others to those expelled from Spain in 1492. Notwithstanding moments of pillage and chaos, when regimes teetered and tyrants reigned, there was, unlike most periods in Europe, no endemic history of anti-Jewish depredation in North Africa. So long as they remained apolitical and deferential, Jews were often ignored but rarely mistreated. One way of accounting for the position of Jews in North Africa as opposed to those living in Europe is to think of them as intimate and valued strangers who occupied an interstitial place in the organization of Muslim society.

Victim Enough? The Jews of North Africa During the Holocaust

BY LAWRENCE ROSEN

The Holocaust and North Africa
edited by Aomar Boum and Sarah Abrevaya Stein
Stanford University Press, 360 pp., $29.95

North Africa, think so, albeit with historical nuance. “[T]he Holocaust was experienced by Jews in North Africa,” they write, “through the implementation of French and Italian racial laws, the expropriation of property and economic disenfranchisement, and internment and forced labor.”

The German Entry into Nabeul, Tunisia, December 1942 by Rafael Uzan, 1988. (Gift of the artist. Courtesy of Yad Vashem Art Museum, Jerusalem.)

If you have even the most passing notion of the Arab world, it probably includes an image of the bazaar, a marketplace in which hawking and haggling are rampant and the prices depend more on patron-client relationships than impersonal market mechanisms. If you then think of this social world as rather like the bazaar, you can picture a culture in which people are constantly building networks of indebtedness that define who they are. It is a world in which a loan can be repaid with a marital intervention or a political favor, virtually all relationships being negotiable, a matter of what the traffic will bear. In this complex pool of exchange and favor,
obligation and ingratitude, the Jew is betwixt and between—too weak to be a potent ally, too distant to be a member of the family, but by that very weakness immunized from certain entanglements.

Not being fully part of the dominant society’s scheme of reciprocity had its advantages: A Jew could, for example, enter a Muslim’s home to repair the plumbing but was not likely to use his knowledge of the house or its inhabitants to help a Muslim acquire status or advantage. He could keep a Muslim’s confidence but wasn’t likely to convert it into a marital alliance. Since, as the Arabic saying goes, “your neighbor who is close is more important than your kinsman who is far away,” the nearby Jew could be viewed as neither intrusive nor threatening. Like that stranger you meet while traveling and to whom you might tell things you wouldn’t tell a friend, the Jew occupied a crucial space in traditional Muslim society, all of whose other relationships implied claims of obligation. Like women (to whom they were commonly compared) a Jew was both weak and valuable. To this day in North Africa, a house abandoned by departing Jews may be left alone by Muslim neighbors in the belief—at least among an older generation—that in their return a missing part of local self-regard will be restored.

It was into this complex traditional culture that the European colonist—and at the time of World War II the European fascist—intruded. The repercussions, however, were not identical throughout North Africa. Algeria, which had been conquered (though not fully pacified) in 1830, was rendered an integral part of France. As a result, it saw the settlement of tens of thousands of Europeans in both urban and rural areas, many of whom came to regard themselves as a distinct racial population. When Jews were made French citizens by the Crémieux Decree in 1870, Muslims attacked the Jews (who, while the British had abandoned by departing Jews) working with Vichy, set up about three dozen camps in Algeria (along with two dozen in Morocco and a handful in Tunisia and Libya) where some resident Jews, political prisoners from Europe, and Algerian Jewish soldiers serving in the French army were incarcerated. Treatment in those camps located at the edge of the Sahara was harsh, but actual murder was rare. Several of the contributors to the present volume note that in a number of instances Muslim guards refused orders to harm the Jewish prisoners. Similarly, with regard to Tunisia, the only North African colony directly occupied by Germany for a few months, Daniel Lee shows that, while the later claim by Vichy officers that they did not really enforce the racial laws is untenable, it is clear that their overriding concern was how to maintain their own colonial control. Some prisoners from both countries were sent to concentration camps—but not death camps—in Europe; most of them survived.

Libya forms a distinctive case. As Jens Hoppe points out, in 1931 there were 25,000 Jews in Libya and only 39,000 in all of Italy. Local Italian fascists attacked Jews in Tripoli and Benghazi on several occasions in the early and mid-1930s, but, as Aomar Boum and Mohammed Hatimi argue, for the southern part of Morocco, German anti-Semitic propaganda had no real effect on the local Muslims. Indeed, many Muslims took Jews into their homes to protect them from the colonial administration during this period. Ironically, it was only after the British recaptured Libya in 1942–1943 that some Muslims attacked the Jews (who, while the British turned their backs, bravely defended themselves), believing them to support continued Italian control over national independence.

The contributors to this collective volume are faced, like so many of the Jews who lived through these years, with the question as to how the North African experience should be treated within the broader context of the Holocaust. While the Jews of North Africa did suffer they were not subjected to a program of systematic genocide. On the other hand, the Jews of the region—and more particularly much of the Israeli establishment—have either remained silent about their experience or downplayed it. If, as the editors state, it is necessary on behalf of North African Jewry to “push the boundaries of Holocaust history [because] justice has not been served,” this still leaves open the question of how and to what end their history should be included in the larger narrative of the Holocaust. As the Tunisian Jewish novelist Albert
Memmi wrote, “I am not enough of a victim; that is why my conscience is tortured.” Must the Jews of North Africa, as contributor Lia Brozgal puts it, write “a history that competes with a more catastrophic one, or be written out of history?”

Many of the contributors accept that the experience of the Maghrebi Jews was marginal to the events of the European Holocaust. But they also make the case that a view from the margins can be revealing. That the Nazis and Vichy cared so much to enforce their race laws, even (as Ruth Ginio shows) in French West Africa, demonstrates how deep-seated the connection between racism and the colonial venture was. As Susan Slyomovics shows in an excellent chapter, we can see how local populations succumbed to or resisted the colonizers’ racial categories as they responded to the plight of their Jewish neighbors.

Telling the story of the Jews of North Africa during the Holocaust also has practical implications. There is the question of the willingness of several European governments to include these Jews in their reparation programs. Perhaps more importantly, inclusion in the overall narrative of the Holocaust has a bearing on the place of Mizrahi Jews in Israeli society. By including their experience in this period one can better understand that while the North African Jews rarely lost their lives the Holocaust did cost them a cherished way of life.

In recent years several Muslim scholars have made their careers writing about the Jews of North Africa. Aomar Boum, who along with his coeditor Sarah Abrevaya Stein teaches at UCLA, returned to his home village in the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco to eavesdrop on the remarks Muslims made about the now-absent Jews and discovered a deep sense of loss by the older people who remembered their Jewish neighbors. However, this was not passed on to the younger generation, who think of Jews in stereotypical terms, predominantly as the oppressors of Palestinians.

Sultan Muhammad V—despite the urging of Shimon Peres and many others—has not been included among the righteous Gentiles honored at Yad Vashem. As the contributors to this volume demonstrate, it is important to understand how ordinary Muslims comprehended what was happening to their Jewish neighbors, to their country, and to themselves under Nazi and Vichy oversight. Even more importantly, we must understand the experience of the North African Jews themselves. Boum and Stein’s book is a good start.
W hen, in August 1945, Geo Josz reappeared in Ferrara, the only survivor of the 183 members of the Jewish community whom the Germans had deported to Germany in the autumn of 1943, and all of whom were generally believed to have ended up in the gas chambers, no one in the city at first recognized him.

Thus begins the short story “A Memorial Tablet in Via Mazzini” by the Italian author Giorgio Bassani, who was best known for his 1962 novel The Garden of the Finzi-Continis (and the Oscar-winning Vittorio De Sica film based on it). Along with Primo Levi, Bassani was among the first writers to chronicle the fate of the Italian Jews under Mussolini and over the course of the Holocaust. Now Bassani’s complete magnum opus has reappeared in a new English translation by British poet Jamie McKendrick, published in a single volume under the title Bassani chose: The Novel of Ferrara.

Bassani set all six of the separate volumes that comprise his larger saga—the others are Within the Walls, The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles, Behind the Door, The Heron, and The Smell of Hay—in and around his native town of Ferrara, where Jews have lived since 1277. The city’s medieval walls and the streets of its one-time Jewish ghetto, still intact and visible today, provide physical metaphors for the boundaries that in the centuries before World War II separated the Jewish community from its Christian neighbors while also embracing its members within the shared borders.

Contemporary visitors to Ferrara can also see the actual memorial tablet on Via Mazzini, which was the main street of the former ghetto and, even after that, of the city’s Jewish community. If you visit Ferrara, as I did recently, you can let Bassani be your melancholy guide as you stroll along “the crowded rows of stores, shops and little outlets facing each other” to arrive at the synagogue’s “baked-red facade.”

A street in the Jewish ghetto of Ferrara. (www.cittadarte.emilia-romagna.)

If you visit Ferrara, you can let Bassani guide you as you stroll along “the crowded rows of stores, shops and little outlets facing each other” to arrive at the synagogue’s “baked-red facade.”

And yet here he is, forcing the townspeople to remember him, even though they would prefer not to recall where, why, and how he and so many other Jews had disappeared. Geo reclaims the former family house that had not so long ago been seized and occupied by the fascist regime responsible for deporting his and the town’s other Jewish families. He compels his fellow Ferrarans to view the photos he has salvaged of the family members who were killed and listen to him recount the horrors of his life in the camps. His very insistence on remembering makes Geo intolerable to them, his survival an impediment to their postwar desire to put the past—including Geo’s past—behind them. Before long, the townspeople shun him, their faces “lit up with malice.” They cannot understand why he doesn’t get over the past and get on with life, as they are. They expel him from a town club and breathe a collective sigh of relief when Geo mysteriously disappears from Ferrara once again.

“A Memorial Tablet in Via Mazzini” was one of Bassani’s earliest short stories, written in the 1950s and included in Within the Walls, the first of his six books of fiction that make up The Novel of Ferrara. The last one, The Smell of Hay, appeared in 1972. Over the course of those years he had increasingly come to see these works as a unified whole. That led him to embark on what might be called a literal revision as he reworked the individual books to create his now epic The Novel of Ferrara. This unified edition appeared in 1974, but he was not yet done. He reworked it once more and brought out his final version in 1980, which is what Jamie McKendrick has now masterfully translated.

While free-standing as individual volumes, all six of Bassani’s books hang together thematically, just as his title suggests, as the story of Ferrara. Throughout, Bassani conjures a street map of Ferrara as vivid as it is precise. The city’s distinctive historic landmarks serve as the unchanging backdrop to personal dramas that play out over several decades, while this outward-seeming stability deepens the contrast to the dramatic political transformations that will upend the characters’ lives as the 1930s and 1940s progress. Wherever you go in these stories, Bassani brings you back to the town’s historic center, a spot from which you only need raise your eyes to see the city’s defining structure, the four crenellated towers of the fortress-like 14th-century Este Castle.

The effect of reading them one after another is immersive, carrying the reader to the years before, during, and after Mussolini’s rise to power. It is an epoch that encompasses two world wars and the Holocaust, all shown in microcosm within the walls and on the streets of Ferrara.

Bassani’s focus encompasses the inhabitants of the entire city of Ferrara: Christians as well as Jews, fascists and communists, members of the Resistance, and passive bystanders. We come to know his Jewish characters as they weigh their odds for survival, agonize over whether to escape or stay—

In Giorgio Bassani’s Memory Garden

BY DIANE COLE

The Novel of Ferrara
by Giorgio Bassani, translated by Jamie McKendrick
W. W. Norton, 800 pp., $39.95

W. W. Norton, 800 pp., $39.95
by Giorgio Bassani, translated by Jamie McKendrick
and after the war, if they survive, whether to return. We also watch as his non-Jewish characters choose what they wish to see or ignore. He recounts all this with an abundant mixture of tenderness, intensity, and ferocity. Bassani's prose invites an intimacy that makes it seem as if he is telling us his own life story. And in many ways, he is.

So many biographical details does Bassani share with the first-person narrator of the novels *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles, Behind the Door*, and *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* that it is difficult not to view the narrator as a fictional double. Born in the university city of Bologna in 1916, Bassani grew up in nearby Ferrara, where both sides of his family had lived for several generations. His father, a physician, had served as a medical officer in the Italian army during World War I; his mother had studied music and voice before marrying his father.

Even in the first years after Mussolini came to power in 1922, Jews experienced little or no anti-Semitic stigma. Many of Ferrara's Jews, including Bassani's father, were even proud members of Mussolini's Fascist Party. The Jews of Ferrara considered themselves as thoroughly Italian as they were Jewish. And so Bassani depicts Jewish families mingling easily—at least outwardly—with their non-Jewish friends, just as he and his family did: vacationing at the same resorts on the Adriatic Sea, playing tennis at the local sports clubs to which they all belong, and pursuing educational opportunities at public schools and universities that are open to all, regardless of religion.

He also shows the residual anti-Semitism hiding in plain sight even during such halcyon times and how easily it was brought to the fore. That warning pervades *Behind the Door*, set in the early 1930s. It's the story of a schoolboy humiliation, but no less traumatic for that. In the narrative sweep of *The Novel of Ferrara*, it foreshadows the many blows to come.

Bassani dramatizes these changes in tandem with the story of Dr. Athos Faraghi, a respectable Christian physician in his late forties. As a closeted gay man he is an outsider whose secret has long been ignored by his many patients in return for his exceptional medical care. When his secret is exposed, he becomes a pariah. The question that hangs over the narrative is: Could a similar trajectory await the Jews?

It could, and it did, starting with the series of racial laws that began rolling out in September 1938. The laws banned the country's 46,000 Jews from attending or teaching school; from civic service jobs and roles in politics, finance, and government; and from practicing law, medicine, journalism, and publishing, among other professions. They also expelled Jews from memberships in libraries and sports clubs, barred them from most hotels and restaurants, and allowed the confiscation of their homes, personal property, and businesses.

Bassani experienced these outrages himself and vividly depicts his characters' shock and outrage as the privileges they had until so recently taken for granted are rescinded, one by one. “[W]e no longer belong to any class, we make up a social group apart, as in medieval times,” the recurring character Bruno Latte bitterly laments.

In his life as in his fiction, Bassani had managed to receive his degree at the University of Bologna by virtue of a loophole; he had enrolled for his final year just before the racial laws went into effect. But unable to follow his wished-for career path as a teacher, he took instead the only educational job available to him as a Jew, which was teaching the Jewish students who had been expelled by the state schools—an alternative work path also chosen by the character Latte.

Lattes, we eventually learn, manages to save himself by escaping to America, where he builds a successful academic career. But Bassani chose to remain in Italy, soon joining the anti-fascist Resistance. In 1943, he was imprisoned for three months, after which he went into hiding until the end of the war. (The prison building where he served his sentence now houses the National Museum of Italian Judaism and the Shoah.)

The Holocaust shadows all six books of *The Novel of Ferrara*, but especially *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*. It is the most fully realized and resonant of the individual volumes and deserves its
place at the very center of The Novel of Ferrara.

At its heart lies the friendship and unrequited love of the narrator for Micòl, whom we know from the novel’s very first pages will not survive the Holocaust. The narrator begins his reminiscence when a visit to ancient Etruscan tombs sparks his memory of another once grand but now abandoned monumental tomb built to provide eternal repose for deceased members of the aristocratic Jewish Finzi-Contini family of Ferrara. In 1943, they had been deported to Germany, “and no one knows whether they have any grave at all.”

Even before the war, the narrator tells us, the flamboyant tomb was regarded by Ferrara’s Jews and non-Jews alike as an aesthetic “monstrosity” aimed at separating and elevating the family in death. Similarly, their elegant mansion and its vast garden isolated them from the lives around them, and so old or ill are some members of the family that they seem to have cut themselves off from life altogether.

But the wealth and prestige of the family lent them a dual aura of mystery and enviability. One day in 1929, when he is in ninth grade, the narrator accidentally wanders into the lushly wooded garden after school and falls asleep. He awakens from his nap as into a real-life dream when he hears Micòl calling him from afar. She has climbed to the top of a ladder on her side of the garden wall, and from there she invites him to climb up his side to join her. But he is not quick enough, and she disappears.

It turns out that though the two have never been formally introduced; they know each other as fel-

What, after all, did that word “Jewish” mean? What sense could expressions such as “The Jewish community” or “The Jewish Faith” possibly have, for us, seeing that they entirely left aside the existence of a far greater intimacy, a secret one, to be valued only by those who shared it, which derived from the fact that our two families, not by choice, but by virtue of a tradition more ancient than any possible memory, belonged to the same religious observance.

Possible answers are suggested as the story jumps forward to 1938, two months after the racial laws have gone into effect. The narrator, along with all other Jews, has been banned from the city’s public tennis club, and Micòl’s older brother Alberto invites them to use the clay court at the Finzi-Contini estate. There the group convenes their own club, as it were, with games of tennis the backdrop for flirtation and friendship. As parks, piazzas, and other public places become off-limits to Jews, the elegant snacks provided by the Finzi-Contini staff also serve as an alternative café where the group can sit and chat as they used to. When the narrator is uncer-

Giorgio Bassani at the Villa Blanc, ruined by decay and neglect, Rome, May 1974. (Photo by Mario De Biasi/Mondadori Portfolio via Getty Images.)
Seventy Years in the Desert

BY ALLAN ARKUSH

Desert in the Promised Land
by Yael Zerubavel
Stanford University Press, 368 pp., $29.95
Concrete Boxes: Mizrahi Women on Israel’s Periphery
by Pnina Motzafi-Haller
Wayne State University Press, 360 pp., $36.99

S
ometime around 1965, I took a bus to New York City for a round of the International Bible Contest, not to compete but to cheer on a high-school friend. My main reason for going, however, was to see David Ben-Gurion, who was scheduled to pose some of the questions to the contestants. All I can remember now are the two that he addressed, in his trademark high-pitched shout, to the entire audience: “How many of you are ready to make aliyah to the Land of Israel?” And then, more specifically, “How many of you are ready to come and live with me in the Negev?”

The recently retired prime minister’s questions certainly weren’t in the spirit of his famous 1951 promise to the American Jewish Committee’s Jacob Blaustein not to play Pied Piper to idealistic Jewish youngsters in this country. But Blaustein, had he been present, would not have been worried. Only a few people raised their hands in response to the first question, and no one at all did so after the second one. “This isn’t too surprising, given the Negev’s mostly empty and severe terrain, its aridity, and its notorious hot climate. Indeed, Ben-Gurion hadn’t had much better luck in Israel itself than he did in New York. As Yael Zerubavel reports, he had, while prime minister, “championed the national goal of ‘making the desert bloom’ [but] there was a limited response to this call.” Most of the Jews who came to settle in Israel’s south in the first two decades after the establishment of the state did so involuntarily. Immigrants, mostly from Arab countries, were transported “directly from the boat to their designated settlement in the Negev in order to minimize the possibilities for them to object to this plan.”

In fact, some were smuggled into their new homes in development towns in the dead of night to prevent them from being alarmed by the desolation all around them. Those who arrived in daylight would sometimes refuse to disembark. On such occasions, Zerubavel writes, “the driver would raise the truck on a slant ‘and they were poured on the ground. The truck would leave, and the people remained on the ground.”

Zerubavel is far from alone in highlighting such bleak moments in Israel’s history. But her book is not another indignant exposé of statist manipulation of distasteful “human material.” She writes not to condemn nor, for that matter, to celebrate the policies pursued by Israeli leaders in the 1950s but to situate them in the context of a broad range of “complex and contradictory” Zionist stances toward the desert in general and the Negev in particular.

The biggest of the many contradictions Zerubavel discusses is between the Zionist longing to transform the desert and a longing to be transformed by it. The celebrated poet Nathan Alterman, for instance, wrote “The Road Song” (1934), in which a road builder sings, “Wake up, wasteland, your verdict is decided / We are coming to conquer you!” The less well-known, countervailing tendency reflects the susceptibility of some Zionists to a “desert mystique,” which imagined both “the ancient Hebrews and the contemporary Arabs as close to nature, a quality that had been lost to Jews during centuries of life in exile.” In a 1912 story by Yosef Lidwin, “a native Hebrew boy . . . rebels against school and adult authority, preferring to ride his horse and spend time with the Bedouins.” His immigrant Jewish friend sees him as “a desert figure whose black eyes burn with a strange, wild fire.” A little later there was the real-life Pesach Bar-Adam, an oleh from Poland who dropped out of the Hebrew University in the mid-1920s to live with the Bedouins as an apprentice shepherd.

In the course of time, however, the Negev itself has been transformed more than the Jews who settled there. While development has not taken place on the scale or in the way that Ben-Gurion imagined, Israel has, in fact, made a large swath of the Negev bloom. Beersheva has grown into a sizeable city, and its satellite suburban communities have flourished. Surprisingly, despite the fact that the Beersheva region contains more than half of the Negev’s Jewish population of 422,000, Zerubavel devotes only a few scattered paragraphs to it, focusing instead on smaller but more exotic developments, such as urban קיבוץ in development towns such as Sderot, new residential religious settlements in the center of the Negev, and the unusual expansion of individually owned farms.

Much of the impetus to enhance and diversify Jewish settlement in the Negev has stemmed, in recent years, from what Zerubavel describes as the fear that “the fast-growing Bedouin population in the Negev posed a demographic and security threat.” The Bedouin population has mushroomed from around 120,000 after the exodus that took place during the War of Independence to around 170,000 in 2007 and to 249,800 in 2016, more than a third of the total population of the Negev. The Israel Land Administration projects that their population will reach 300,000 by next year (the Negev Bedouins have one of the highest natural growth rates in the world). Jewish fears that they will someday become a majority in the area are based, it seems, on real statistics. But are the Bedouins a security threat?

As is well known, some Bedouins volunteer to serve in the Israeli army, but their numbers, as Zerubavel observes, have remained small (between 5 and 10 percent of the draft-age population) and are decreasing. This is largely a reflection, according to Zerubavel, of festering inequalities in the towns to which thousands of Bedouins were forcibly removed and the state’s refusal to legalize the “unrecognized villages” in which 100,000 Bedouin residents lack “the basic infrastructure of roads, running water, a

Mitzpe Ramon in the Negev, ca. 1957. (National Photo Collection, Israel.)
central sewage system, electricity and public transportation to which legal settlements are entitled.” Dislocated, alienated, and impoverished, the Bedouins are becoming increasingly inclined toward religious fundamentalism and political radicalization.

This volatile situation has sparked fears that the Negev will be the scene of the next intifada. After quoting a number of newspaper headlines that warn of such a development, Zerubavel summarizes Tzur Shezaf’s 2007 Hebrew novel The Happy Man, about a revolt led by two Bedouins, a neurosurgeon and a high-ranking IDF commander. Disillusioned “by the state’s coercive measures against their people,” they launch a peaceful protest that soon escalates into a war that lasts for two years and culminates “in the destruction of the Bedouin villages and the expulsion of their residents across the border to Egypt.”

While taking note of such nightmares, Zerubavel does not prophesy catastrophe. Here and there, she even sees bright spots. Things seem to be better in urban environments than in rural ones, especially in Beersheva, which “presents a range of formal and informal opportunities for Jews and Bedouins to interact,” including Ben-Gurion University of the Negev and the Soroka Medical Center.

Zerubavel also provides evidence that the early 20th-century “desert mystique” isn’t entirely gone. She notes that Jewish desert tour guides often wear white kaffiyehs, and the website for the New-Agey Desert Ashram in the southern Negev promises visitors that they can “connect to your inner Bedouin and stay in a genuine wool tent.”

Yael Zerubavel teaches at Rutgers, but she wrote most of Desert in the Promised Land at the Ben-Gurion Research Institute for the Study of Israel and Zionism in Sde Boker, near Ben-Gurion’s own kibbutz in the heart of the Negev. Pnina Motzafi-Haller, an anthropologist at Ben-Gurion University, lives and works in Sde Boker, but her new book, Concrete Boxes: Mizrahi Women on Israel’s Periphery, focuses on the nearby development town of Yerucham, which is a symbol, throughout Israel, of socioeconomic failure.

It is also the home of the Mizrahi women who cleaned her office, and she would often schmooze with them there around 11 a.m., “after they have finished the first part of their daily cleaning rounds and before their lunch break.” However, Motzafi-Haller did the bulk of her research in Yerucham itself, where she interviewed a large number of men and women. In the end, she decided to focus her book on five women whose lives reflect “the reproduction of ethnic-and class-based inequality in Israel over three generations.” The story she has to tell is both fascinating and surprising.

Motzafi-Haller’s subjects are all the descendants of the people who were unceremoniously dumped in the desert half a century or more ago. Some of them have risen above the unfavorable circumstances—including homes in apartment blocs that are nothing more than “concrete boxes”—into which they were born, but others have never escaped them or have done so only for a short time. Motzafi-Haller herself comes from a background similar to theirs, and she openly empathizes with them. In the course of writing the book, she tells us, her “position within the research, as a Mizrahi academic woman straddling the lines between ethnic belonging and class borders, took center stage.”

While she depicts the material hardship and aimlessness of many of her subjects’ lives, Motzafi-Haller is also eager to demonstrate the extent to which some of the women take their lives into their own hands, exercising real “agency” even when it doesn’t quite work. Take Esti, for instance, the child of immigrants from Morocco in the 1960s who has worked on and off as a cleaner for most of her life. A single woman with shaky finances who largely survives on welfare and money derived from unclear sources, she insists on living flamboyantly, well beyond her means, and has had to deal with the consequences. Observing her unnecessary purchases, Motzafi-Haller oscillates “between an accepting, inclusive stance from which I cheer on Esti’s wild revelry, and a middle-class, moralist, external positioning that asks her to be serious.”

Motzafi-Haller never loses sight of Esti’s self-sabotage, but neither does she cease to see in her “a spirited rebel, who never loses sight of Esti’s self-sabotage, but neither does she cease to see in her “a spirited rebel, who

O f all the options available to her subjects, however, it is not rebellion but “religious strengthening” (hitchakzut) that Motzafi-Haller regards as the “most constructive,” an attempt to transform, or at least better, their lives, rather than escape them. “The act of participating in religion classes marks them as serious, respectable women with high spiritual aspirations, not gossips who spend their evenings watching shallow soap operas on television.” This can lead not only to greater peace of mind but also to new patterns of consumption. Motzafi-Haller quotes one woman:

“Religious women are different from us financially. They manage with what there is. They’re more careful with money. They don’t go to some boutique. They don’t buy stupid things. No Digimon or Pokemon. No TV or PlayStation. They invest more in their children.”

Motzafi-Haller tells us about going to an interview at a nursery school in Sde Boker with one of her subjects, a mitzchuzeket named Efrat. At the school, they ran into Efrat’s older sister, a part-time cook and cleaner. The nonreligious sister’s tight purple pants and loose, faded sleeveless shirt contrasted starkly with Efrat’s modest dress, which radiated respectability. Efrat got the job.

Motzafi-Haller is, we shouldn’t forget, an unabashedly secular woman. Her recognition of the beneficial aspects of religiosity is neither pious nor apologetic. She sees hitchakzut as just the best available option for women like Efrat who have been failed by “liberal and neoliberal efforts to break Yerucham’s intergenerational cycle of poverty and social isolation.”

Things have turned out very differently from what David Ben-Gurion was imagining when he urged a bunch of American Jewish teenagers to come and join him in the desert. As both Yael Zerubavel and Pnina Motzafi-Haller demonstrate in their different ways, Israel’s effort to conquer the Negev has been incomplete and plagued with unintentional consequences, but they also both provide reasons for hope.

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Universal Rights and the Particular Jew

BY YEHUDAH MIRSKY

Rooted Cosmopolitans: Jews and Human Rights in the Twentieth Century
by James Loeffler
Yale University Press, 384 pp., $32.50

I
n 1925, Jacob Robinson, a Jewish lawyer, former German prisoner of war, and member of Lithuania’s parliament, gave the keynote at the Congress of European National Minorities and put his finger on the fatal flaw of the League of Nations. It was, he said, “a league of states, and not a league of nations.” Its members are only governments and not citizens. Its model of reciprocity, he darkly quipped, was “I hit my Jews, you hit your Jews.”

In other words, Jews, like so many other minorities, whether they had states or not, deserved recognition and protection as nations. Whether, as America’s founders and France’s revolutionaries had asserted, all individuals were endowed with inalienable rights was moot. Only states could deliver basic rights, and without a Jewish state of some sort, there were no Jewish rights to be had. The idea that there could be a delivery system for rights other than a nation-state was made thinkable by the unthinkables trauma of statelessness visited on Jews and other “undesirables” over the next two decades.

Today, as authoritarianism and xenophobia surge, the global human rights apparatus meant to tame those evils has become a cruel joke whose running punchline is monomaniacal, wildly imbalanced criticism of Israel and regularly, by implication or worse, the Jews. Israel, for all its flaws, is nowhere near the depravity of dreadful regimes that escape United Nations’ censure. Is there something about human rights as an idea and institution that is inimical to Jews?

The question is sharpened when we recall that some key architects of the human rights movement, including Robinson, were not only Jewish, but active Jewish nationalists. James Loeffler, a historian at the University of Virginia, has now told their story. His book belongs on the shelf of anyone interested in human rights or modern Jewish political thought and history. He marshals remarkable archival research, literary grace, and philosophical insight to recover a forgotten chapter of history (several, actually) and make us think more deeply about political ethics, both Jewish and universal.

His genealogy of human rights shows the particular role that group rights, usually seen as an illiberal idea, have played in the history of modern liberalism. It also casts light on the deep theological undercurrents shaping the seemingly secular dispensation of human rights.

The book’s clever title plays on the epithet Stalin bestowed on Jewish intellectuals before murdering them. But Loeffler has a larger point: He indicts the contemporary “historical amnesia” that has yielded a “lazy dichotomy between nationhood and cosmopolitanism.” This, he argues, has left us “with a human rights universalism that pretends to come from nowhere and a Jewish nationalism that is positioned in opposition to the world.”

The League of Nations model, Jacob Robinson darkly quipped, was “I hit my Jews, you hit your Jews.”

At the center of Loeffler’s story is a quintet: Jacob Robinson; Hersch Zvi Lauterpacht, a major figure of postwar international law; Peter Benenson, the founder of Amnesty International; Jacob Blaustein, the longtime president of the American Jewish Committee; and rabbi-activist Maurice Perlzweig. (The informed reader may ask: Where’s the father of the Genocide Convention, Raphael Lemkin? Good question, but hold that thought for now.)

The intertwined stories of these five men bring together two discrete trends in recent historical scholarship, one exploring how human rights movements and institutions arose so swiftly in the mid-to-late 20th century, only to flounder soon after; the other asking whether Zionism was the only form of modern Jewish nationalism. Briefly, it wasn’t. “Autonomists,” most famously the great historian Simon Dubnow, who were not so much anti-Zionist as un-Zionist, argued that Jewish national identity was a brute social fact that could be accommodated within nation-states which were committed to protecting the rights of minorities. This was a proposition with which Zionists did not necessarily disagree.

In 1919, the Zionist movement called not only for recognition of Palestine as the Jewish national home and equal rights for Jews in all countries but also for Jewish national autonomy—cultural, social, and political—in the countries where they would remain. The forum that was meant, in theory, to enforce those rights was the League of Nations. But the league’s dominant powers, France and England, weren’t interested. There emerged instead a system of minority treaties, giving Jews and other minorities freedoms and protections—as individuals, utterly dependent on the political will of member states.

The league was a political failure, but it was a legal failure, too. The death of its minority rights system only sharpened the question of how to square nation-state citizenship with national belonging beyond borders, a question whose most vivid symbols and actors were, then as now, the Jews. Hence the dark comedy of Jacob Robinson’s remark to the Congress of European National Minorities.

Robinson wasn’t the only Jewish jurist trying to think all this through. In 1927, Lemberg-born Hersch Zvi Lauterpacht, founder of the World Union of Jewish Students, published the doctoral thesis he had written at the London School of Economics. States’ territories, he said, are their properties, not the romantic inheritance of their peoples. Sovereign states in international society, like sovereign, property-holding individuals in liberal society, are, and must be, bound by laws—in the case of states, international laws. These ideas would guide him through a celebrated career as a professor at Cambridge and on the world stage.

Meanwhile, Maurice Perlzweig, Orthodox-bred Reform rabbi, leading English Zionist, and head of the British section of the World Jewish Congress, worked through the late 1930s to remake the WJC from a quasi parliament into a self-defense agency. Jews, he said, had to claim “human and national rights” together. Those years also brought home to Jews the sheer terror of statelessness as never before.

As the magnitude of the Nazi catastrophe dawned, so did the understanding that securing Jewish existence in the postwar world would take new institutions and new ideas. With European
Jewry murdered and Eastern Europe falling to the Soviets, the search for Jewish rights shifted to America and Palestine. Jacob Blaustein, Maryland oilman and head of the patrician American Jewish Committee, then perhaps the premier American Jewish organization, saw Judaism as “an apolitical religious faith” and a partner in “an American Judeo-Christian vision of human rights (that) would tame the fires of Old World nationalism and advance international democracy at one fell swoop,” obviating the need for Zionism. In 1944, the AJC drafted a “Declaration of Human Rights,” signed by 1,300 distinguished citizens, Jewish and non-Jewish, and rabbis of all denominations, a stepping stone toward 1948’s epochal Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (Neither mentioned the Holocaust.) The AJC also commissioned a volume by Lauterpacht titled An International Bill of the Rights of Man. The failure of the toothless League of Nations, European democracy, and vague notions of natural moral law, Lauterpacht wrote, showed there was no substitute for “rules, voluntarily accepted or imposed by the existence of international society.”

Robinson and Blaustein both disagreed with Lauterpacht’s internationalist vision. Both thought rights meant nothing unless backed by power. But whose? For Blaustein, it would be American power—for Robinson, Zionist. Neither gave up, though, on the promise of a new international legal order. Through 1945 and 1946, they and other Jewish rights defenders took part as best they could in the creation of the UN Charter, the war crimes trials at Nuremberg, and European peace treaties; each time they came back disappointed.

At the Nuremberg war crimes tribunals, Lauterpacht was on Britain’s prosecutorial team, and his idea of “crimes against humanity” was in the tribunal’s charter. Yet throughout the trials themselves, no one count in any indictment specifically mentioned the Nazis’ war on the Jews. Finally, in the fall of 1946, at the Paris Peace Conference convened to settle postwar arrangements, not one of the 21 participating countries would agree to introduce a memo on Jewish rights. Once again, the wages of Jewish statelessness had been made painfully clear.

The year 1948 is the great turning point of Loeffler’s narrative. On May 14, the State of Israel was declared. December 10 saw the passage of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and on December 11, UN General Assembly Resolution 194 brought Arab-Jewish hostilities to a (temporary) close. Crucially, the same Jews were engaged in all three and saw no contradiction between them.

By the logic of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, each and every individual stands vis-à-vis the state, their own or any other, as themselves a sovereign, at least when it comes to the individual rights articulated in the declaration. Unfortunately, Loeffler observes, left “out of this idealistic formulation was the crucial material that linked individual and state, and divided Arab from Jew: the nation.”

Yet the nation figured powerfully in an UN instrument enacted that same year on December 9, the day before the passage of the declaration. The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide was the brainchild of yet another Eastern European Jewish jurist, exile, and crusader, Raphael Lemkin. It was Lemkin who most clearly saw state-sponsored murder as the most straightforward legal response to the murder of European Jewry. Loeffler suggests that it was precisely a desire to avoid the appearance of special pleading that led Lemkin, by then an American law professor, to obscure his Zionist past. What’s more, Lemkin had his doubts about the whole framework of human rights, which seemed too vague and declaratory to actually stop states from killing peoples and cultures. He kept his ideological and personal distance from Loeffler’s quartet, and they from him.

One suspects something else may have been at work, as well. Lemkin, too, had emerged from the legal circles committed to the group rights of national minorities. The one Jewish thinker Lemkin mentions in his carefully curated memoir is none other than the historian Simon Dubnow. In other words, while his peers were affirming both Jewish statehood and individual rights unthwarted from citizenship, Lemkin was working to transplant the prewar idea that minorities have group rights within other peoples’ states into international law.

Although he disagreed with Lemkin, Hersch Lauterpacht, who was one of the architects of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, still thought it was nonsense to declare rights before building the machinery to enforce them. He sent Ben-Gurion suggestions for Israel’s Declaration of Independence to this end. His formulations on the natural sovereign rights of Jews and civic equality for Arabs made it in, but his suggestions with regard to international law didn’t.

Jacob Robinson, who became a legal advisor to Israel’s delegation at the UN, believed in law too, but always in conjunction with politics. So he focused on state-to-state compacts: the genocide and refugee conventions, as well as the International Criminal Court (on which Lauterpacht served and which, in the absence of support from the Great Powers, went nowhere). Meanwhile, with Jewish nationalism relocated safely and exclusively to the Mediterranean, Jacob Blaustein became a supporter of Israel, a favorite of Harry Truman, and one of the only people allowed to call Ben-Gurion by his first name.

Peter Benenson (né Solomon) was born to a wealthy Zionist family. He was a student of

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Perlzweig who worked in the 1930s to bring Jewish refugees to England. During World War II, he served as a code breaker at Bletchley Park. After the war, he was a lawyer, journalist, human rights activist, and left-leaning Zionist. In 1958, he converted to Christianity, and in 1961 he founded Amnesty International. With Benenson’s story, the theological freight of Loeffer’s narrative moves to center stage.

Though Benenson had converted to Catholicism, he rejected the work of midcentury Catholic thinkers such as Jacques Maritain who had been instrumental in promoting the idea of human rights as an extension of classical ideas of natural law. Instead, Benenson drew from the deep well of Christian antimonianism first hewn by Saint Paul, who rejected the very idea of law as necessary for human salvation. “It has always seemed to me,” Benenson said in a characteristically Pauline remark, “that a humanitarian movement should decide its actions from the heart not from the book of law.”

Benenson himself didn’t disavow his Jewish roots. He sought and received the blessing of his former rabbi, Maurice Perlzweig, who was then helping to lay the groundwork for Vatican II and calling for “a new beginning” for human rights that would somehow rise above the hard political choices of the Cold War. True to Benenson’s thinking, Amnesty International focused not on groups but lone dissenters, “prisoners of conscience.” In doing so, it offered, as Loeffer astutely notes, a kind of antipolitics, pitting the individual against the state, with the individual helped by activists from abroad who “would also redeem themselves in the process.” Benenson and Amnesty International jettisoned the forums and chanceries of international law for the chambers of conscience and the court of public opinion.

Meanwhile, the decolonization movement gathered steam under the sponsorship of the militantly antiliberal and avowedly anti-Semitic Soviet Union. Although awareness of the Holocaust grew through the 1960s, Loeffer notes its uniqueness, like that of the Jews, made for an ungainly fit with postcolonialism’s moralizing temper. To care about Jewish rights, as groups or individuals, was, at least on the radical Left, to paint oneself as an enemy of the oppressed of the earth.

In a decolonizing world increasingly focused on the evils of apartheid and colonialism, anti-Semitism hovered awkwardly between the categories of racism and religious intolerance. Like the Jews themselves, anti-Semitism was just too sui generis to fit the dictates of the human rights imagination.

Then came 1967 and the Six-Day War.

The 1970s saw both rising consciousness of human rights and the demonization of Israel as itself a quasi-colonial power. The unexpected resurrection of human rights was, as historian Samuel Moyn argued in his groundbreaking 2010 volume, The Last Utopia, a reach for ideals after the crushing disillusionments of Soviet totalitarianism, postcolonial authoritarian mayhem, the failed revolutions of the 1960s, and the floundering of international law. By mid-decade, the World Jewish Congress and American Jewish Committee’s UN offices were closed, the UN General Assembly had passed its infamous resolution equating Zionism with racism, and Amnesty International had won the Nobel Peace Prize.

That Amnesty International rose to acclaim as Israel took a beating was, as Loeffer notes and Marxists used to say, no accident:

The quest for the universal always begins with a rejection of the particular... Amnesty International... took the form of a religion-less religion, or more properly, a secularized global Christianity. Human rights left behind behind the particular. In the post-1960s human rights imagination, the pole of stubborn particularism increasingly came to be symbolized by Zionism.

But history is full of surprises; in the late 1970s human rights activism and Jewish collective rights were reunited under the aegis of American power, as President Jimmy Carter made human rights the theoretical centerpiece of American foreign policy, while Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson made saving dissidents and Soviet Jews one of its primary objectives.

The Soviet Jewry movement united the seemingly antithetical rights claims of groups, states, and individuals. Its apotheosis came at the monumental rally for Soviet Jewry in Washington, D.C., in December 1987. That month also saw the outbreak of the First Intifada, and the relationship between Jewish politics and human rights activism has been tortured ever since.

Several truths peek out of the wreckage. First, although the drama of the particular and the universal runs through all humanity, in Jews and Judaism they are joined at the root. That is why Jews are, yesterday and today, the lightning rod for arguments over nationalism and globalism (and why Jewish thought holds such deep promise for the world). Second, liberal theories unmoored from traditional religion, local culture, or democratic politics quickly become vacuous and self-deceiving, ammunition for both hypocrites and tyrants. Nonetheless, the basic intuition underlying all human rights activism, that there are some things that governments must not be allowed to do to anyone, is one of the deepest lessons of Jewish history. It is as true for us today as it was to those emerging in 1919, and again in 1945, from the ruins.

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“Christ, I’m tired,” Ben Hecht grumbled to his wife Rose in 1931. Stuck in Hollywood, Hecht was writing Scarface and complaining mightily. “Oh how tired I am!” he continued, gathering strength with every groan. “Aches, neck, back, eyes, heart—oh so tired.”

This is the sound of a man enjoying his misery; a master at the Jewish art of recreational kvetching. With Hecht, the line between pain and pleasure was vanishingly thin. In Hollywood, he wrote seemingly effortless dialogue until he collapsed (“I love a good honest pain, as you know”). Blurred lines abounded in Hecht’s life. When writing The Front Page, his great collaboration with Charles MacArthur, he set out to skewer journalism but produced a love letter. “Our contempt . . . was a bo-

“Then the chronological march forward begins, and things get shaky. Hoffman renders Hecht’s early years in broad, colorful strokes, jumping from New York City (“the ghetto,” Hecht boasted) to Racine, Wisconsin. Young Hecht is carefree and mischievous, a talented thief, marksman, and saboteur of railroad tracks. A young Lothario, he scores with Racine’s willing daughters, whose irate fathers chase him over fences. For Hecht, youth is a carefree, uninterrupted idyll, with the added bonus of benign, encouraging parents.

So far, this resembles no childhood—but certainly no writer’s childhood—that ever existed; yet it extends long past puberty. Hecht goes off to college, drops out, and lands on his feet in Chicago. With his uncle’s help, he inveigles a newspaper job at the Chicago Daily Journal. Soon, he is hoodwinking editors, who print his fabulous stories about river pirates and earthquakes. Somehow, he parlays these pranks into a “star” position at the paper. When Hecht leaves Chicago, it’s front-page news; a rival paper declares it a tragedy: flags lowered to half-staff! How much of this actually happened? Some, perhaps. Serious Hecht fans will recognize these fables—they’re cribbed from Hecht’s highly unreliable memoirs. Some poking around in Hecht’s archives reveals more pedestrian truths. The newspaper job? In one account, Hecht’s mother got it for him; in another, he used a chain of connections. As for college, there’s no proof Hecht came anywhere near the University of Wisconsin campus. A letter from a university staffer, recently deposited in the Hecht archives, exposes the fiction. Hecht wasn’t a “star reporter” for the Chicago Daily Journal, nor did he cover “crime and corruption in their most sensational form.” For the most part, Hecht was an ordinary court reporter, covering unsexy stories in Chicago’s Byzantine court system. Most of his articles were brief and unbylined.

All kinds of dubious stories are foisted on the reader in these chapters. Hecht never hoaxed his editors; that story was itself a hoax. He almost certainly never lived in “the city’s most notorious bordello.” He lived with, or across from, his doting parents. In Hoffman’s telling, the writer Sherwood Anderson “was enraged” over Hecht’s portrait of him in a novel. He wasn’t. In letters to friends, Anderson praised Hecht’s novel, saying nothing about his cameo. When Hecht left Chicago, a flattering story appeared by his friend Ashton Stevens, but it was a squib, buried on page nine, not “front-page” news. And on and on.

What’s curious about all this is that Hoffman seems to know better. In wiser moments, she notes how slippery Hecht can be: Hecht’s stories “have the gusty air of legend”; some sound like “sheer make-believe”; others like “vivid hyperbole.” Yet she ignores her own warnings. At some point she seems to have made the fateful decision simply to repeat Hecht’s gusty legends without any disclaimers. The result is a steady stream of Hechtian whoppers. Ben Hecht: Fighting Words, Moving Pictures is briskly paced, stylishly written, and clearly the product of serious effort and research. But that research
Ben Hecht was born in 1893, the favorite son of young, newly married Russian immigrants. His father, an ambitious but feckless clothing designer and his sober, practical mother, managed two impressive feats: escaping dire poverty and imbuing their son with supreme confidence. From the start, Hecht recognized his own talents. In an early autobiographical novel, Hecht projected himself forward, into the bright future, and took stock of his achievements. There would be stories, novels, plays—"Triumph after triumph."

In 1910, the budding littérateur landed in Chicago, where in some sense, his life began. Young Hecht—or "Bennie," as he was affectionately known—discovered bohemia, where literature was known—discovered bohemia, where literature was unknown, unpublished, and somewhat illiterate, as madly, between book covers, "he later wrote. He felt ignored and bullied. Hecht's marriage to Marie Armstrong, a charming reporter at the Chicago Daily Journal, was turbulent from the start. They were marvellous.

The teenage Hecht, asked why he concealed his Jewishness, replied that he "did not wish to boast." By 1918, Hecht's star was indeed rising: he'd cracked Mencken's magazine, The Smart Set, and the Best Short Stories anthology; at parties, he seemed to cast a spell over people. "There is only one intelligent man in the whole United States to talk to—Ben Hecht," crowed Ezra Pound, an early admirer. Though these were, by most accounts, happy, secure years for Hecht, there were already signs of chaos and tumult. Hecht's marriage to Marie Armstrong, a charming reporter at the Chicago Daily Journal, was turbulent from the start. They were marvellous.
Jewish organizations.

the Bergson campaigns, which faced mobilized friends (who marveled at hummable as a nursery rhyme—detonated across Jewish America.

This chapter of Hecht's life makes for exciting, if confounding, reading. For seven years, he wrote speeches, mobilized friends (who marveled at his newfound passion), and defended the Bergson campaigns, which faced intense resistance from mainstream Jewish organizations.

In 1946, his Zionist pageant A Flag Is Born raised enough money to purchase a ship, dubbed the SS Ben Hecht, which sailed incognito toward Palestine with 600 DPs on board. The Bergson group's courage, boldness, and integrity seemed to bring out the best in Hecht. Had they indeed awakened his Jewish self? Or did Hecht have a secret Jewish life long before he met Peter Bergson?

Here, Hoffman's research is illuminating. Her book's main revelation is that Jewish issues had always preoccupied Hecht. Slowly, a portrait emerges: Hecht wasn't a believer, wouldn't have recognized the inside of a shul, and didn't keep kosher; yet he felt profoundly Jewish. Sifting through archives, Hoffman locates Hecht's Yiddish-inflected poetry in a self-published magazine. She finds plans for a "peculiarly Jewish novel" (Hecht's words) to be published in two volumes. The teenage Hecht, asked why he concealed his Jewishness, replied that he "did not wish to boasts." A detail quarried from an obscure memoir.

A conventional Jewish upbringing was the foundation for Hecht's Jewish attachments. As a boy, he suffered through Hebrew lessons, the misery ending with his confirmation. In late 1925, Hecht surprised his friends by moving to the Henry Street settlement, near his childhood home. The sound of spoken Yiddish, the comforting density of Jewish communal life on that bustling shetl block, called out to him. Even Hecht's 1931 novel A Jew in Love, with its noxious Jewish stereotypes, suggests something more than indifference. Hoffman finds the book "pervasive" but also revealing, proof of Hecht's "deeply divided sense of Jewish self."

So much for Hecht's claims to a belated Jewish awakening. Hoffman laughs: "He'd been a Jew from the get-go." Taking Hecht's testimony "with a grain of kosher salt" makes perfect sense, here and elsewhere. What about Hollywood, then? "While he claimed loudly to loathe the movies and all they stood for, he also quietly adored them." That might be stretching it, but at least Hoffman is reading against the grain. Pondering Hecht's 1937 play To Quito and Back, she senses a writer at sea, craving a purpose. She's certainly on to something, yet her fast-paced narrative speeds ahead, with Hechtian velocity, never looking back.

Hoffman solves half the mystery of Hecht's Jewish rebirth and conversion to militant Zionism. Still, one senses a larger, more complicated story unfolding. In 1935, his mother died, a devastating loss that haunted him for decades. In the aftermath, he embarked on a (predictable) affair, sneaking off to Quito, Ecuador, with a young socialite. He returned in 1937, his marriage to Rose miraculously intact, and promptly suffered a setback: the failure of his comeback play. The New York Times called To Quito and Back "a sham battle of words and fine phrases."

Turbulent though that period was, it seems continuous, in some ways, with Hecht's earlier life. To read Hecht's letters from the 1920s is to behold a troubled soul, who, when he's not playing the Superior Man, is profoundly stuck. He's tired of constantly performing and feels trapped inside his many masks. "You have not a pose that is more important than your soul," he writes plaintively to Rose. "I have. Artists usually have." Moreover, he's split down the middle: "A rueful truth—the contradictory desires of humans who want always to be free and at the same time to be servants of something," he later wrote. Hecht gave that dilemma to his fictional stand-ins, tortured writers all. They fear failure, these anxious, well-defended young men, but even more than that, they fear hollowness and solipsism.

Generally, one shouldn't conflate an author and his creations. But with Hecht, you might as well. ("He is me," Hecht wrote of one protagonist, a troubled Chicago journalist.) What's clear from Hecht's writing—but not terribly clear from Hoffman's biography—is how greatly Hecht suffered, and how that suffering forged the person—and the Jew—he later became. By 1938, Hecht was a changed man. "Compassion came to me," he later wrote, "compassion even for the stupid, the hypocritical and the ugly." The old Nietzsche-Mencken mask fell away. When German mobs began targeting Jews, Hecht faced a stark choice: stonie silence or raucous hell-raising. The first wasn't his style at all. The second most definitely was.

Watching Hecht pinwheel through life, one senses the scale of Hoffman's challenge. Biography imposes order on life's chaos, but Hecht's unruly life and vague, contradictory personality resist sense making. He could be frank or cunning, boisterous or shy, harsh or tender, and the exact balance of those qualities was never quite clear. Hoffman's attempt to unravel the puzzle that was Ben Hecht yields few deep insights. At a loss, she labels him "pervasive"—a biographer's shrug.

That shrug alternates, here and there, with a wince. Hecht's Holocaust pageant, We Will Never Die, was "relentlessly lugubrious" and "almost bulging in its high-minded mawkishness." Hoffman groans at the "ad hominem assaults" in Hecht's book on anti-Semitism, A Guide for the Bedevilled, finding it "exhausting." These are strange reactions—surely "mawkishness" about the murder of European Jewry was a lesser crime in 1943 than silence.

Hoffman is harsher still on Hecht's 1961 Jaccuse, Perfidy, a contentious account of the Kastner affair, which divided Israel over the question of wartime collaboration. To Hoffman, it reads like a clumsy western: "a flamboyant rhetorical shoot 'em up." Writing about Israel, a country he never visited, Hecht was "out of his element and less self-aware than ever." Going further, Hoffman finds "something grotesque about the way he inserted himself in his Nyack lawn chair and accused the likes of Weizmann and Ben-Gurion" of betraying during the Holocaust. Perhaps, she suggests, Hecht wasn't really angry, just acting out: "arguing for argument's sake." But any careful reader of the book (let alone Hecht's notebooks) can see that Hecht was full of righteous fury. Turning away from Hecht's anger, here and elsewhere, suggests a larger problem of biographical understanding.

All his life, Hecht was recklessly, noisily excessive, a man for whom too much was never enough. But for Hoffman, this too-muchness seems to be just a headache. Unlike Hecht's movies, with their cleverness and pizzazz, Hecht's novels teem with unseemly angers, vanities, doubts, insecurities. That, too, was a side of Hecht, though not a side Hoffman has much patience for. One pictures her slogging through novel after novel, wishing they were DVDs. Therein lies the problem. We never meet the author of these many vexing books. Hoffman all but ignores him, as if afraid to confront something messy, murky, and human. What spurred his attention seeking? Why was he so angry? Clearly, some of the answers must lie in Hecht's childhood—his actual one, not the happy picturesque one Hoffman writes about.

The question looming over any account of Hecht's life is whether he wasted it, artistically speaking. In the early 1920s, he was one of America's most promising young novelists, "the whirlwind prose hope of Chicago," as Ezra Pound put it. Then came Hollywood, several fortunes, and fame. What if Hecht hadn't been lured westward—if, instead, he had channeled his considerable talent and energy into serious writing? Every author has a shelf of unwritten books. It's tantamount to imagining Hecht's. Or perhaps not. "Hecht was among the very worst judges of his own talents," Hoffman states confidently. "Screenwriting was Hecht's calling, whether he liked it or not." Well,
yes—it’s hard to argue with success. Hecht’s mov-
ies are cherished; his best plays, especially The Front 
Page, stand as classics, but his novels and memoirs 
are largely forgotten.

Could those works be rediscovered today? 
Hecht was, in fact, a superlative writer, a graceful, 
confident prose stylist of A. J. Liebling’s or Joseph 
Mitchell’s caliber. He could do hardboiled, slap-
stick, lyrical—you name it. He was a master of 
the simple sentence that snaps at the end, induc-
ing whiplash. “The Jews have the greatest unity in 
the world—as a target,” he once wrote. “They were 
for lucidity and laughter, when sober,” he wrote of 
his old newspaper chums. Writing on deadline, he 
produced gem after gem, some while risking his 
life in Berlin after World War I. “Yet the cabarets go 
on,” he wrote in one dispatch. “Whirling couples 
dance among the round-topped tables. “In addi-
tion to his appallingly good sentences, Hecht was 
one of those writers with an invisible stopwatch 
in his head telling him exactly when paragraphs 
should end.

Predictably, Hecht’s phenomenal speed and pro-
ductivity tend to obscure everything else. Hoffman 
describes a force of nature: Hecht’s copy “splashed 
in his daily columns, “ then it “erupted into a sec-
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The Fire Now

BY CHLOÉ VALDARY

Antisemitism: Here and Now
by Deborah E. Lipstadt
Schocken, 304 pp., $25.95

A
few months before I graduated from 
college, I received my first death threat 
from an anti-Semite. Although I am not 
Jewish, I had become a pro-Israel activ-
ist on campus. The threat came in the form of a six-
second YouTube video. First it showed me holding 
an Israeli flag, then a picture of someone in a hospi-
tal, and finally a picture of a tombstone; the accom-
panying audio called for the use of bullets—six to be 
exact—to take me out.

It was the first time I experienced anti-Semitism, 
not as a historical phenomenon to be discussed in a 
classroom, or even as an alarming contemporary news 
item (anti-Jewish violence in Paris, genocidal threats 
from Iran, or hateful words from American radicals, 
right or left), but as a palpable danger that was, to quote 
the subtitle of Deborah Lipstadt's important new book Antisemitism, "here and now." A sense of dread entered 
my dreams and stayed with me even after I woke up. 

The subject of anti-Semitism is hardly new to 
Lipstadt. A distinguished historian at Emory Univer-
sity, she has written books on the American 
press during the Holocaust, the phenomenon of 
Holocaust denial, and the Eichmann trial. She was 
also famously sued in British court by Holocaust 
Denier David Irving in 1996, and her book on the 
experience was adapted for the 2016 film Denial. 
Nonetheless, as she writes in the introduction, this 
autobiography—really, Hecht's song of himself, his 
greatest work.

These remarkable bookends—one a work of pre-
cocious brilliance, the other a capstone—contain 
Hecht's multitudes, his various public selves. And 
yet, as Hecht's letters reveal, the real drama of his life 
was internal: a person struggling against his dark-
er, destructive impulses and trying to cultivate the 
gentler, more generous side of his character. It was 
the struggle to abandon the false selves he acquired 
in his twenties and become who he really was—or 
wanted to be, at any rate.

That story is largely lost on Hoffman, which is 
too bad, since there's pathos in Hecht's efforts to em-
brace his better angels. The final decades of his life— 

a reckless, courageous, in some ways tragic life— 
were filled with nostalgia, melancholy, and humble 
aims at self-betterment. As quip dialogue 
became passé, and Americans turned to television 
for distraction, Hecht's screenwriting career wound 

down. He returned to his youth in several charming 
memories and embraced a kind of mindfulness. 

“And what is joy?” Hecht wrote in his final years. 
"Existing out of myself. Responding to life with my 
senses and not my prejudices. Seeing others with 
amusement rather than fretting over being seen.”

He began each morning with a prayer to the deity 
he never believed in, pleading for the strength not to 
harm anyone. That private battle didn't make head-
lines, but it was as dramatic, and perhaps as heroic, 
as his more famous battles and triumphs.

Jesse Tisch is a writer, editor, and researcher. He lives 
New York City.
in American civic life, and he’s not quite sure where anti-Semitism fits into the picture. “Antisemitism,” he writes, “is something I’ve long abhorred, but also something that I fear I do not fully understand.”

Lipstadt introduces her two correspondents (who, she says, are each “composites of many people”) to each other and hits Reply All. Their correspondence on anti-Semitism covers everything from the spelling of the word—Lipstadt prefers the all-lowercase, no-hyphen option because it doesn’t endorse the racist idea of “Semitic,” and because “[s]omething this absurd does not deserve a capital letter”—to its deep ideological and religious origins.

In these calm, lucid letters, Lipstadt shows Joe and Abigail how anti-Semitism currently emulates from both the Right and the Left, and under-political spheres to recognize and tackle the probability for all, one finds it acceptable to “include blan-

Combine racial essentialism—the belief that virtue is derived from and inherent to skin color—with class warfare and a bizarre belief that being an underdog suggests ethical superiority—and you can justify anything.

Lipstadt’s book manages to cover a lot of hard and depressing ground in an engaging, thorough way, yet I did leave it wishing for a bit more anthropological, or perhaps spiritual, depth. While Lipstadt is trenchant about who the anti-Semite is, she is less interested in the question of why he is. “It’s not anti-Semitism that is inconsequential, it’s the antisemite himself,” she writes. But I’m not so sure.

In The Fire Next Time, James Baldwin wrote, “White people in this country will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this—which will not be tomorrow and may very well be never—the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed.” If, as Lipstadt persuasively argues, anti-Semitism is ultimately a conspiracy theory, the belief in an all-powerful, nefarious cabal of Jews tirelessly working to uproot and destroy the nations of the world, it is worth asking why the anti-Semite suffers from such acute paranoia. A person who believes himself to be both a perennial victim and a hero fighting against a cosmic evil does not truly know himself. What spiritual malady does belief in the “Jewish problem” solve?

Lipstadt writes that “[a]ntisemites must be fought . . . but they are people of no consequence.” As a proud Jew and historian who has spent her life studying and fighting those who irrationally hate her people, she is under no obligation to occupy herself with their spiritual problems. And yet, isn’t it often precisely because they are people of no consequence that they often take their wretched sense of dislocation and anguish out on others? As former skinhead Arno Michaelis recently wrote, “In the absence of love’s light, hate can be exciting, seductive. It beckons you and sends torrid, empty power coursing through your veins. . . . Every minute you spend hating someone is a hole in your life.”

Deborah Lipstadt’s book shows what the anti-Semitic hatred of such people looks like now, from Holocaust denial to the denial that Jews are a nation. One hopes that it will be read by the thousands of “Abigail’s” and “Joe’s” who are unlikely to be tempted by the first form of anti-Semitism but will undoubtedly be tempted by the second. This is, unfortunately, a necessary book.

Chloé Valdary is the founder of Theory of Enchantment LLC, teaching conflict mitigation in schools and businesses. Her articles have appeared in the Atlantic, Commentary, the New York Times, and the Wall Street Journal.
Horace Kallen can be found in the ill-starred pantheon of prolific writers known for only one thing: one novel, one sonnet, one treatise, or, in his case, one idea. That idea is “cultural pluralism,” which Matthew Kaufman describes in his useful new book, Horace Kallen Confronts America: Jewish Identity, Science, and Secularism, as “a theory of democratic cooperative discourse” affirming the centrality of ethnic identity in civil society. Kallen first expounded this notion in print in 1924, but he had coined the term almost 20 years earlier when he was a graduate student at Harvard.

In fact, Kallen’s oeuvre includes some 39 books and more than four hundred articles on a vast array of topics: Zionism, the nature of truth, pragmatism, ethnicity (or “hyphenation”), American Jewish identity, synagogues and JCCs, internationalism and the League of Nations, the future of the new State of Israel, democracy and academic freedom, censorship and civil liberties, individualism, consumerism and cooperatives, separation of church and state, Reform theology, religion and science, secularism and humanism, art and aesthetics, comedy, the book of Job, aging, premartial sex, race and “color blindness,” and education—of children, adults, workers, Jews, and college students, the latter in a blistering pamphlet called College Prolongs Infancy (1932). His 91st year found him flying in a tiny plane from Cape Cod to Charlottesville to lecture on the subject of his final book: Toward a Philosophy of the Seas. He died a few months later, in February 1974.

The son of German Jewish immigrants from Silesia, Kallen arrived in Boston in 1887 at the age of five. His stern father, Jacob, intended his oldest son to follow in his footsteps and become an Orthodox rabbi, but Horace had other ideas. A scholarship boy at Harvard, he worked his way through college as a meter reader and settlement-house counselor, the latter job providing free room and board. He credited Professor Barrett Wendell, in a course on the “Hebraic” American Puritans, for restoring his pride in being a Jew. After a fellowship at Oxford, where he befriended a young Bertrand Russell and his fellow student Alain Locke, who would later become a leader of the Harlem Renaissance, Kallen returned to Harvard to pursue a PhD in philosophy under William James. In his last months, James hand-picked his best student, “the critic Kallen,” to edit his final, posthumous book; into his fifties, Kallen was still billed as “the student of William James.”

In 1906, Kallen cofounded the Menorah Society, a highbrow fraternity for Harvard’s Jewish students, and became a leader in the Intercolligate Menorah Association (IMA), launching his heterodox views about American Judaism in the prestigious Menorah Journal. The same year, after talking Zionism with Solomon Schechter, he became an evangelist for the cause. He crafted a platform for the Federation of American Zionists and in 1913 helped to bring Louis D. Brandeis into the Zionist fold. It was Kallen who provided Brandeis with the multicultural justification for Brandeis’s argument that “to be good Americans, we must be better Jews, and to be better Jews, we must become Zionists.” While teaching at the University of Wisconsin, Kallen crisscrossed the country to promote, alternately, the IMA and Zionism. (The story of his Zionist activism is told in Sarah Schmidt’s invaluable 1995 monograph, Horace M. Kallen: Prophet of American Zionism.) In 1919, after stints at Princeton (where he was the victim of anti-Semitism) and Wisconsin, Kallen cofounded the New School, where as dean of the graduate faculty, he later hired—and saved—dozens of German Jewish refugee scholars. He taught there until his retirement in 1973.

Horace Kallen Confronts America is the first full-length work on Kallen since the ascendance of multiculturalism. One might assume that Kallen’s star would have risen in this period, but that hasn’t been the case. In 1986, the Harvard scholar Werner Sollors wrote “A Critique of Pure Pluralism,” which vilified Kallen for his fixation on race and heredity, comparing it unfavorably to his friend Alain Locke’s writings on “cultural racialism” and black identity. Arguing that the origins of cultural pluralism were tainted by racism, Sollors published excerpts from two letters Kallen wrote from Oxford about Locke. While deploiting Locke’s ostracism by his American peers—though not by Kallen, who spent Thanksgiving with him and threw him a tea—Kallen conceded that he had “neither respect nor liking for his race—but individually they have to be taken, each on his own merits.” The other, more reticent letter simply nodded in assent to the corro- sively racist views of his erstwhile mentor, Wendell. These are indefensible comments, even (perhaps especially) in the context of Kallen’s enduring friendship with Locke; nor can it be denied that Kallen, in his early years, was fixated on the topic of race and heredity. That Kallen repudiated racial thinking in the 1930s and awoke to the cause of black civil rights in the 40s and early 50s is true but no antidote to the toxic racism of these letters. And, while I know of no other disparaging comments about African Americans in his works and letters, Kallen has been justly criticized for excluding black ethnicity (as well as Asian and Native American ethnicity) from his seminal essay of 1915, “Democracy Versus the Melting-Pot,” and for deflecting, with an evasive footnote, the subject of black Americans in his 1924 book Culture and Democracy in the United States. Kaufman should be applauded for plumbing head-first into these difficulties, framing them within Kallen’s practice of integrating scientific concepts, theories, and discoveries into his ideas.

Kallen, Kaufman argues, “viewed science as a resource for a values-driven response to life.” At the same time, he also relied on scientific concepts to support his claims for Jewish inclusion in civil society. In addition to what was called “race science,” Kallen culled support from evolutionary theory, psychology, relativity, and even quantum mechanics. Tracing “Kallen’s footprint in print culture”—in wide-circulation dailies, weeklies, and monthlies, as well as annuals, pamphlets, and books—Kaufman makes the case for the importance of Kallen’s role in the public conversation. Kallen also argued vigorously in private with leading intellectuals, from T. S. Eliot to the Reform rabbi Abraham Cronbach. (It’s moving to find Kallen contending with Eliot for five pages, then offering him a room on his next trip to New York; could such a thing happen today?) The plethora of articles and essays is only one of the challenges Kaufman takes on here; the other is writing about a thinker whose trajectory is not linear but spiral. Every 20 years or so, Kallen would double back to a previous topic, revising his views within a new historical context and for a new audience. While Kaufman’s book is roughly chronological, he dramatizes not only what but how Kallen thought.

In the first, stronger half of his book, Kaufman offers a close study of Kallen’s writings on Jews and race, widens out to consider cultural pluralism, then draws an even wider circle to assess Kallen’s views on nationalism and transnationalism. In the second half, Kaufman studies Kallen’s writing about pluralism and democracy, as well as his forays into modernism. Whether one agrees with Kaufman on reading Kallen as a “religious thinker,” as he does in his final chapter, depends on what one understands Kallen to have meant by “religion.” In a long career of idiosyncrasy and heterodoxy, Kallen’s writings on secularism as a religion are among his most tendentious.

Kallen was hardly alone among Jews of his era in his racial discussions of Jewish identity, and Kaufman takes pains to specify exactly what he believed. Kallen eschewed physiological theories of race based on craniometry, flirted only briefly with
the idea of "racial purity," and favored the notion of an inherited Jewish "racial psyche." While his sources denigrated blacks as "unstable" and "slow," Asians and Native Americans as "slow," and Jews as "materialistic," Kallen himself focused on defending cultural difference by an appeal to nature. And where Kallen's colleague E. A. Ross wrote about a Darwinian struggle among ethnic groups, warning Anglo-Saxon whites against "race suicide," Kallen used evolutionary theory to vindicate ethnic diversity. He was adamant in rejecting both racial hierarchies and racial determinism.

Trained at Harvard before philosophy and psychology went their separate ways, Kallen was both a functionalist psychologist and a philosophical pragmatist, two approaches that focused on how individuals adapt to their environment. Kallen viewed identity as just such an adaptive experience, a dialogue between descent (what an individual inherits) and consent (the freedom to negotiate one's environment). We experience descent, Kallen wrote, as the "inward half" of our being, comprising "methods of valuation," the group patterns, the consuetudinous rhythms and symbols of custom and speech that are one's heritage, the springs of one's character—all characteristics that could easily pass as an entirely cultural inheritance, were it not for his insistence that they are indelible and inherited. "To me," he later wrote to T. S. Eliot, "Jew," "Irishman," "Negro," "Indian," and so on, signify nothing racial. Each word denotes a singular configuration of beliefs, thoughts, rites, rotes, works, and ways which have been compounded into an ethos, that any individual can enter by birth, by conversion, or by immigration and naturalization. No one is born with an ethos. It is not an innate idea, but an acquired one. It is to a group what personality is to an individual—not an endowment but a pattern of existence attained by learning and self-commitment.

If what mattered most to Kallen, as pragmatist and psychologist, was culture, education, and experience, why did he insist on racial inheritance? Analyzing Kallen's views in the context of racist discourse is enlightening, but it obscures Kallen's own strivings toward a "hyphenated" Jewish American identity. To be the American Jew he needed to be—proud to embrace his Jewish heritage but radicantly free to choose what and whether to believe—Kallen needed to define Jewishness as something other than a religion. American Jews, he believed, needed to forge a modern Judaism, purged of chauvinism and freed from the illusion (inscribed in the Reform movement's 1910 platform) that their religion was a universal "light unto the nations." Kallen called his revisionary Judaism "Hebraism" and traced it directly to the Hebrew Bible, especially the prophets, and on through the rich lifeways Jews had sustained over the ages, in many parts of the world. (Those who defined Jewishness in religious terms only; he provocatively called "Judaists.") And with Jews, as with any organism, phylogeny recapitulated ontogeny: Just as Hebraism had descended from the Israelites, individual Jews bore within them indelible vestiges of the Jewish past. Kallen's insistence on biological inheritance was not only the ground for his forward-looking identity; it also summoned American Jews to listen to the "inward" call of Jewishness as they lived out their American freedoms.

Kaufmann's patient probedings in the archives show Kallen defining the ideals of Hebraism in various ways. Sometimes he emphasized moral seriousness, of reforming the Reform platform of a Jewish mission to the world, he endorsed the idea of a Jewish mission to the world, a contri

bution that Jews could make only as a nationality, whether living on their ancestral soil or elsewhere, especially in the United States, in the context of a culturally pluralistic polity. For Kallen, Zionism was living Hebraism, the process of enabling Jews, as a historical community, to become a nation in the modern world.

Kallen's most coherent articulation of Hebraic values came in his lifelong obsession with the figure of Job. Kaufmann's analysis of Kallen's citations of the book of Job over half a century is a highlight of his book. Kallen strongly identified with the book of Job's anguished hero. When his play based on the biblical text was performed by the Wisconsin Dramatic Society in 1913, he even took on the leading role. Three years later, it was performed at Boston's Jordan Hall, garnering a favorable review in the Boston Globe, although Job—now played by a Harvard student—ruled his lines a bit. All the while, Kallen was eking out the audacious argument of The Book of Job as a Greek Tragedy (1918). In that book, he ventured that the Job author was a Jew who had seen a Euripidean tragedy and was inspired to compose a Hebraic tragedy of a suffering man who clings to his integ

rity in the face of an indifferent, inscrutable God. According to Kallen, the playwright's fellow Jews, deeming the play blasphemous, interpolated the voice out of the whirlwind (Job 38–41), the divine voice that humbles and silences Job. Kallen, ever the provocateur, knew this would be read as a preposterosous theory, but that was the point: Kallen wrote a preposterostrous literary history of an equally preposterosous theody. He identified with Job not as a fellow sufferer (apart from occasional back pain, Kallen's life was fairly free of physical pain) but because Job adapted to suffering by virtue of his own human strength and not faith. It was a biblical prooftext for all of Kallen's major ideas, whether he weighed the claims of Jewish culture against Greek culture, dramatized his evolutionary version of pragmatism, testified to his "belief" in secularism, or acclaimed Job as an antitotalitarian hero of freedom—an American Job, as it were. Another of Kallen's provocations was a book he published in 1954, at the age of 72, entitled Secularism Is the Will of God. This book is the basis for Kaufman's argument that Kallen must be read as a "religious writer." Kallen did call secularism "the religion of religions," vowing that he would "bet my life" on it. But who was demanding martyrdom for a faith in secularism? Kaufman suggests that Kallen's concept of secularism is "salvific" for democracy, but being a guardian and protector of democracy is not the same as being its messiah.

Comparing Kallen's Why Religion? (1927) to James's The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902), Kaufman both Kallen and James as psychologists of religion, pursuing religious experience rather than dogma. But Kallen actually shows very little interest in religious experience. In fact, he confesses that his only "religious" experience was under the influence of nitrous oxide and grudgingly concedes that individuals in crisis tend to seek comfort in religion. Why Religion? is much more animated in its discussion of the tyranny of religious leaders and institutions than it is about religious experience. He could even turn on such a seemingly benign figure as the Jewish Theological Seminary's chancellor Louis Finkelstein and accuse him, on account of his involvement in interfaith affairs, of making "a devil's pact with the Catholic Church." By contrast, William James was clearly fascinated by the dozens of testimonies he quotes by visionaries, stricken doubters, saints, and converts. In short, a more stringent argument would be needed to characterize Kallen's "religion of religions" as a serious engagement with religious thought.

But this lapse is a small matter in a book as valu

able as this one. Matthew Kaufman has given us a revelatory, detailed account of a sorely neglected figure in the history of American Jewish life. His Kallen is a man of contradictions: pragmatist and visionary, iconoclast and true believer, encourager and scourge, deeply wise and, at times, foolish indeed.

In an extraordinarily long and productive career, Horace Kallen's most audacious act was to glimpse a life for Jewish Americans beyond piety, beyond tolerance, and beyond pride in Jewish contributions and success. Why Kaufman has entitled his book Horace Kallen Confronts America, as if Kallen somehow stood apart from America, is a bit mysterious, since Kallen's deepest desire was to wed America to American Jews. On the evidence of Kaufman's book, when Horace Kallen confronts America, he does so as a devoted, lifelong partner, "like a groom coming forth from his chamber."

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Our Man in Beirut

BY DAVID B. GREEN

Spies of No Country: Secret Lives at the Birth of Israel
by Matti Friedman
Algonquin Books, 272 pp., $26.95

Friedman believes that both Israelis and non-Israelis would understand the country better if they were more attuned to that part of the Jewish population that has its origins in the Islamic world. Certainly, it’s true that the culture, history, values, and traditions of Mizrahi Jews were for too long given short shrift, even as they became the majority of Israel’s Jewish population. The men and women who founded the state and established its most important institutions (including the Israel Defense Forces, the Histadrut labor organization, the universities and kibbutzim) were for the most part of European birth or descent, and they deserve enormous credit, not only for those accomplishments, but for successfully taking in and settling some 800,000 Eastern Jews virtu-}

The Arab Section, suggests Friedman in one of the book’s nicer lines, “needed men idealistic enough to risk their lives for free, but deceitful enough to make good spies.”

S
ome of the most dramatic moments in Matti Friedman’s excellent new book about the men of the Arab Section, an espionage unit that served Israel in the months immediately before and after statehood, take place at the border. These immigrants, newly arrived from the collapsing Jewish communities of the Arab world, found themselves asked to turn around and head back into what was now enemy territory. Equipped with false identities, they were trained to gather intelligence and carry out occasional missions of sabotage. Making the crossing, often in the guise of a fleeing Palestinian refugee, could be dangerous. “[O]ne slip, one second, and you were in a nightmare. There was no way back through the gate. The only way out was forward, into enemy territory.”

But they could hardly let their guard down once they were living in countries that were at war with Israel from the day it was founded. Anything could set off the suspicion of their neighbors. Damascus-born Gamliel Cohen had assumed the identity of a Palestinian named Yussef and ran a small candy shop around and head back into what was now enemy territory. (Courtesy of Isaac Shoshan.)

Five members of the section. Gamliel Cohen (nom de guerre “Yussef”) grew up in Damascus and was sent to serve the state-in-the-making in Beirut in early 1948. There he was...
joined by Isaac Shoshan ("Abdul Karim"), an Aleppo native; Havakuk Cohen ("Ibrahim"), from Yemen; and eventually by the Jerusalem-born Yakuba Cohen, aka "Jamil." (None of the Cohens were related.)

All of these men were "mista'arvim," a Hebrew word meaning "Ones Who Become Like Arabs." You will be familiar with the concept if you’ve seen episodes of Fauda, the hit Israeli TV series about contemporary warriors who impersonate Arabs in order to infiltrate Palestinian terror groups. But Gamliel, Isaac, Havakuk, and Yakuba lacked the backup or technological support that Fauda’s heroes can rely on. They had only their wits and their native knowledge of Arabic to help them maintain their subterfuge.

They also understood that if they were caught, there was little their country would be able to do for them. In fact, initially, "They had no country"—hence the book’s title— since "in early 1948, Israel was a wish, not a fact. If they disappeared, they’d be gone."

Yakuba Cohen had a habit of attending public hangings during his time in Beirut, because he thought one day it would be him standing there, and he wanted to know how it would feel." He later described how he pictured himself shouting out, "Long live the State of Israel," in Hebrew, before the gallows plank was removed below him, until he realized that acknowledging his real identity, even in death, would only endanger his colleagues. Instead, he resolved, "I’ll keep quiet and they’ll bury me like a dog."

The legend that many still tell themselves about Israel writes the author, is that "people like our four spies came from the Islamic world and joined the story of the Jews of Europe. But what happened was much closer to the opposite. The Palmach, a brash militia animated by the revolutionary energy of mid-20th-century Europe, is famous as one of the country’s founding myths. The Arab Section, a tiny outfit of Middle Eastern Jews cautiously traversing their own dangerous region, isn’t famous. But the Palmach explains little about Israel now. The Arab Section explains a lot.

The importance of the Mizrahi experience for a true understanding of Israel and its place in the modern Middle East has been a concern of Friedman’s since his first book, The Aleppo Codex (2012). There he told the story of the eponymous 10th-century copy of the Hebrew Bible, the most authoritative version of the Masoretic text known to exist. Friedman described the journey of the book from its creation in Tiberias to its transfer to Cairo after the Crusader conquest of the Holy Land in 1099, and eventually its move to Aleppo, whose ancient Jewish community guarded it from the 15th century until 1958, when it was smuggled into Israel for salekeeping. During its final journey, or more precisely, probably just after its arrival in Jerusalem, more than half of its pages disappeared, a disappearance that was retrospectively blamed on marauding Syrians in the anti-Jewish riots of 1947. Friedman makes a strong case that the missing leaves were stolen by the then-director of the Ben-Zvi Institute, which had been entrusted with its preservation. A restrained, often ironic writer, Friedman portrayed an Ashkenazi Zionist establishment that not only felt entitled to deceive the Aleppo community, whose rabbis it viewed as primitive, into giving up its most cherished possession, but was then unwilling to acknowledge or investigate the theft carried out by one of its own.

In his 2016 book, Pumpkinflowers, about the small IDF outpost in Israel’s self-declared “security zone” in southern Lebanon where Friedman served as an infantryman shortly before Israel’s final pull-out from Lebanon in 2000, he writes about the folly of the type of wishful thinking that imagined Israel as poised on the brink of an era of peace. The country, he writes, was entering a new stage as the world moved toward greater amity. The country, he writes, was entering a new stage as the world moved toward greater amity. Friedman makes a strong case that the missing leaves were stolen by the then-director of the Ben-Zvi Institute, which had been entrusted with its preservation. 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All or Nothing?

BY AMY NEWMAN SMITH

If you picked an Orthodox person off the streets of Lakewood or Monsey to describe the life of someone who has gone religiously astray, or “off the derech,” they might describe the life of Larry, the flawed protagonist of Nathan Englander’s latest novel, kaddish.com, though perhaps not in detail. The more sheltered would be unlikely to imagine “the everyday depravities filling the alternate reality that ate more and more of sad Larry’s time.”

Counting the ways in which he has suffered during the shiva week for his father, Larry lists his foregone fleeting pleasures, congratulating himself for going almost a week, almost, without pornography.

For nearly a week, despite his small rebellions, he’s smoked neither cigarette nor joint, he hasn’t had a stiff drink (or three), he hasn’t once sunk into the living-room couch to binge eat and binge watch, gorging on junk (visual and edible) until the stomach acid burned and his brain conked out.

Englander, whose earlier novels and short story collections established him as a creator of sharply drawn characters, has created in this protagonist both a cranky, curmudgeonly nebbish and a flat social type. Engrossed in his own loss, Larry is unwilling to understand the commitment to say Kaddish for his father, a demand made clear to him by his still-frum sister Dina. This is 1999, in the midst of the first dot-com bubble, so Larry searches out kaddish.com, a website where this is a small novel, easily read, but head simply in order to survive. I’ve been using the phrase “bifurcated brain” for this; by which I mean a person’s ability to believe something and its contrary at the same time. When I think back on the short stories that have had a profound impact on me—whether it’s Philip Roth’s “The Conversion of the Jews,” or “Goodbye and Good Luck” by Grace Paley or “The Story of My Dovceot” by Isaac Babel—they all leave me with a sense of those conflicting realities being challenged.

In kaddish.com, Englander creates his own conflicting realities. How, for example, are we to experience Dina’s heartbreaking plea that her brother be the one to say Kaddish?

“You don’t have to be religious,” his sister says. “You don’t have to believe. You can think nothing and feel nothing and eat your cheeseburgers every meal,” . . . “But you can’t skip a minyan. Not once. Not ever. It’s what our father expects—what he expects right now from Olam HaBa. Because it’s that alone, what you do, what you say, that sets for our father the best conditions in the World to Come.”

How can these prayers mean so much to her, and how can they possibly mean anything to God, if she knows Larry will recite them resentfully as a litany of meaningless syllables? And how are we to reconcile the real and recognizable kindness and warmth of the Orthodox world Englander evokes with the violent and callous yeshiva rebbe who hit young Larry so hard for not being able to answer a question that he was left with a permanent scar?

And how, finally, are we to understand Larry/Shuli himself? If Englander is right that human survival is predicated on not choosing but on holding open the possibility that two opposites are true, then perhaps a selfish porn addict indifferent to his only sister’s grief can become a loving family man, a caring teacher who deals sensitively with his students’ transgressions, large and small. And perhaps this upright model of Jewish propriety can, when the plot propels him from his yeshiva to sleeping rough on the streets of Jerusalem in an attempt to finally fulfill his obligation to his father, still be so impulsive that he threatens the life he has built. As far as Shuli has traveled, he is still, to some extent, “sad Larry,” wearing different clothes, pursuing different goals, but still chafing at imposed obligations, still tending toward excessive monomania, and still willing to upend the life of others to pursue his own obsessive desires.

kaddish.com is a small novel, easily read, but Englander has nested inside it questions within questions and opposites within opposites.

As Englander no doubt knows, it is impossible to read kaddish.com without thinking of his own well-publicized background as a yeshiva student who turned away from Orthodoxy. It is similarly impossible not to contrast the tenuousness with which Englander draws his Orthodox characters in the present novel with the pointedly harsh judgments of Orthodox characters in the stories that made him famous, from the hypocritical Rabbi Baum of “Reunion” to the lying, grasping Ruchama of “The Wig” in his debut story collection, For the Relief of Unbearable Urges. In this new book, the question that he was left with a permanent scar?

In kaddish.com, Englander says “You don’t have to believe. You can think nothing and feel nothing and eat your cheeseburgers every meal,” . . . “But you can’t skip a minyan. Not once. Not ever. It’s what our father expects—what he expects right now from Olam HaBa. Because it’s that alone, what you do, what you say, that sets for our father the best conditions in the World to Come.”

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

BY ELLIOTT ABRAMS

Between the late 1960s and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, nearly two million Jews left Russia, Ukraine, and other parts of the Soviet Empire. Their heroic struggle for the right to worship, to learn Hebrew, and to emigrate elicited the support of diaspora Jewish communities around the globe, especially in the United States. American Jews supported Soviet Jewry’s fight in many ways: from writing and calling individual “refuseniks,” remembering those imprisoned at Passover Seder, and “twinning” their children’s bar and bat mitzvahs with those of Soviet Jewish children who could not celebrate them, to mass rallies, protests at Soviet embassies, lobbying Congress and the administration, and actually traveling to Russia to meet refuseniks and express their solidarity. In the 1970s and 80s it seemed as if every synagogue in America had a huge poster outside of it demanding freedom for Soviet Jewry.

But just as there is a myth that all Americans were united in the final struggle against communism and the Soviet Union, there is a myth about the Soviet Jewish exodus. The myth is that the American Jewish community was united from start to finish and that the power of this unity liberated Soviet Jews. There is much to celebrate in American Jewish activism in those decades, but the full story is more complex.

The plight of Soviet Jewry first came into focus for American Jews in the 1960s. In 1963, the Cleveland Council on Soviet Anti-Semitism was formed. In 1966 Elie Wiesel’s The Jews of Silence: A Personal Report on Soviet Jewry, based on articles he wrote as a reporter for Haaretz, was published in America and became a surprise bestseller. Thirty-two local groups formed the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews (UCSJ) in 1970, and the first World Conference on Soviet Jewry was held one year later, the same year the National Conference on Soviet Jewry (NCJS) was formed.

In October 1972, Senator Henry M. “Scoop” Jackson first proposed linking trade benefits for the Soviet Union with freedom for the Soviet Union with freedom of emigration; the Jackson-Vanik Amendment became law in 1975. Anatoly (Natan) Sharansky was arrested in March 1977 and arrived in Israel only after serving nine years in the Gulag. By December 1987, American Jewish support for Soviet Jewry was high enough to mobilize 250,000 people for the Freedom Sunday march and rally. As (and after) the Soviet Union collapsed, a million Jews moved to Israel from Russia, Ukraine, and elsewhere in the former Soviet Empire. In addition, another million went to Canada, Germany, and the United States.

It goes too far to say that American Jewish activism achieved this; there were other factors, the greatest of which were the courage and determination of Soviet Jews. But recognizing that they (or their parents) had failed to protest effectively—or enough—for their European brethren during the Shoah, American Jews were determined to be organized, loud, and resourceful in aiding the newest victims of systemic governmental anti-Semitism.

Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko asked President Carter: “Who is Sharansky?”—and that ended the matter. But after leaving, Gromyko asked Dobrynin: “Who really is Sharansky?”

While many parties can claim a part in the freeing of Soviet Jewry, American Jews surely played a large role. It is not only a heroic story but an extraordinary historical episode worthy of close analysis.

Yet there seems to be very little of such analysis, at least at the academic level. I recently looked at the course offerings of Jewish studies programs in 20 leading American colleges and universities and found not a single course about the Soviet Jewry movement. The story of Soviet Jewry and American Jewry’s mobilization to help save it is in danger of being forgotten.

Were Jewish studies programs to focus on the Soviet Jewry movement in the United States, what would they find? First, the students would see that the 1960s, 70s, and 80s were very different from the 1940s, when Jews played a smaller role on the American political stage and were, in many cases, hesitant to use what power they did have. When discrimination against Soviet Jews became known, American Jews had more power and were willing to use it, as they had used it in support of the nascent State of Israel. Their numbers now in-
Jewish financiers in New York City, led by Jacob Schiff, prevented the Russian Empire from getting critical Wall Street loans during the Russo-Japanese War to pressure the tsar to stop the persecution of Jews or to punish him for failing to do so. Instead they sold Japanese war bonds; it has been estimated that this supplied half the cost of the war to Japan.

It is absolutely true that the Soviet Jewry movement was on the side of the angels, and that helps explain its very broad support in the United States. But that isn’t what the Soviet regime was worried about; trade, loans, and money were. As the then head of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) Morris Amitay put it, “If they want trade and technology from us, let them pay for it in what we want to get from them—persecuted Jews.”

The Soviet Jewry movement achieved the delicate balance between ethical principles and hardball politics in part by focusing more on individuals than on abstract arguments about human rights. As Douglas Kahn wrote in A Second Exodus:

“There was a clear recognition that it would be easier to engage American Jewish activists—and to press the Soviet government—by focusing on individual cases. Even when there were more than twenty thousand refusenik families, the thrust of advocacy was on a personalized approach.

Names like Anatoly Sharansky, Ida Nudel, Yuli Edelstein, and Vladimir Slepak became watchwords in the American Jewish community. Many American Jews wore bracelets inscribed with these names. The abstract goals of emigration and of Jewish rights became flesh and blood. This organizing tactic mystified the Soviets. In his recent memoir, Stuart Eizenstat says that when Soviet foreign minister Andrei Gromyko came to see President Carter in 1977, Carter confronted him with the Sharansky case.

[A]s Carter recalled it, Gromyko dismissed Sharansky as “a microscopic dot” of no importance to anyone. According to [Soviet ambassador to the United States Anatoly] Dobrynin, Gromyko asked the president: “Who is Sharansky?” —and that ended the matter. But in the car after leaving, Gromyko asked Dobrynin: “Who really is Sharansky? Tell me more about him.” Dobrynin did so and discovered that Gromyko had previously instructed his aides not to bother him with such “absurd” matters.

To Soviet officials the individual cases of Jewish refuseniks were “absurd,” but calls to change the entire Soviet system by respecting human rights were dangerous. This also created a conundrum for the Soviet Jewish movement: Were they a part of the Soviet human rights movement or a separate Jewish movement with overlapping demands? To put it most pointedly, was the human rights movement an ally or a threat to the far narrower demands of Soviet Jewry?

These questions were at the heart of the battle in the Soviet Jewry movement over the “narrow or broad” issue: Was the goal respect for human rights in the USSR, or was it just to get the Jews out? And might one goal undermine the other? The Israeli government thought so and was consequently not very keen on Sharansky, who was the bridge between the two movements.

Sharansky had a clear view that the two movements could strengthen each other, as did the leader of the Soviet human rights movement, the great physicist (and father of the Soviet atomic bomb) Andrei Sakharov. At a key moment in the struggle over the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, when many in Congress and even some leaders in the Jewish community were wavering, Sakharov wrote an open letter to Congress. Kissinger and Nixon were arguing that détente and world peace were simply more important than the fate of Soviet Jews. Privately, Kissinger told Nixon, “I’m Jewish myself, but who are we to complain about Soviet Jews? It’s none of our business.” Far worse, in a 1973 conversation with Nixon after the White House visit of Israeli prime minister Golda Meir, Kissinger said, “The emigration of Jews from the Soviet Union is not an objective of American foreign policy. And if they put Jews into gas chambers in the Soviet Union, it is not an American concern. Maybe a humanitarian concern.” To be fair, this was more than just moral indiffERENCE. Nixon and Kissinger argued that world peace and détente could not be undermined on behalf of Soviet Jewry. Nixon’s response to that last quoted Kissinger remark about the Soviet treatment of Jews was, “I know. We can’t blow up the world because of it.”

This argument had some support among influential Jews. Nahum Goldmann, the longtime head of the World Jewish Congress, said at the time, “Jews make a big mistake by treating the U.S.S.R. as if it were some minor country. Jews have no sense of proportion.” But Nixon-Kissinger realpolitik was defeated by more powerful arguments, and the most powerful were often made by Soviet dissidents. Here is what Sakharov wrote to Congress in support of the Jackson-Vanik Amendment:

The amendment does not represent interference in the internal affairs of socialist countries, but simply a defense of international law, without which there can be no mutual trust. Adoption of the amendment therefore cannot be a threat to Soviet-American relations. All the more, it would not imperil international détente. . . . The abandonment of a policy of principle would be a betrayal of the thousands of Jews and non-Jews who want to emigrate, of the hundreds in camps and mental hospitals, of the victims of the Berlin Wall. It would be tantamount to total capitulation of democratic principles in the face of blackmail, deceit and violence.

Sakharov was arguing that action on human rights was the only way to create a decent Russian regime with which the West could be at peace. This was a debate about whether human rights could have a serious role in the Hobbesian world of international politics. As Sakharov saw, the first problem with realpolitik as a theory of international relations is that it takes states as black boxes. It is uninterested in their internal affairs. But people live in those states, and...
they act—for example, they risk their lives and their freedom to have the right to learn Hebrew or to emigrate to Israel. This is a key lesson of the Soviet Jewry movement, a reminder never to see Iran or China or any place else as if the only actual entity is a government, a regime, or a dictator and not also a nation consisting of millions of people.

The second problem with realpolitik is that it isn’t very realistic. It excludes the domain of individual, principled, passionate action or sees such actions and movements merely as obstacles to the smooth working of interstate relations. But such relations are a means, not an end. It was never worth sacrificing the freedom of Soviet Jews or the American commitment to human rights to smooth relations with a hostile power. Freedom was more valuable—not only as an abstraction, and not only in its impact on the lives of refuseniks and their families, but in strategic terms. It helped bring about the collapse of the United States’ greatest enemy. Thus, the Soviet Jewry movement, and later Ronald Reagan’s confrontation with the Soviet Union, proved that a freedom strategy was in the end more realistic as a matter of international politics. The Soviet Jewry movement weakened America’s principal enemy where detente had strengthened it.

Whatever the Soviet Jewry movement achieved in the Soviet Union, it also had a significant impact here in the United States, Yossi Klein Halevi, who was a teenage activist for Soviet Jewry as part of Meir Kahane’s Jewish Defense League, wrote that “saving Soviet Jewry meant retrieving not only the last great Jewry of Eastern Europe but also the lost honor of American Jewry . . . The group’s slogans, which focused on our determination not to repeat the Holocaust-era sin of silence, spoke precisely to my need: ‘This Time We Won’t Be Silent; ’I Am My Brother’s Keeper.’” Halevi added that “American Jews came to see themselves as a major force for Jewish freedom and security . . . In its struggle for the freedom of Soviet Jews, American Jewry liberated itself as well.”

That’s a large claim and hard to prove. Suffice it to say that millions of American Jews worked together and used all the power they had to save and free fellow Jews. What they could not do was work in unity. One might suppose that this would have been a great weakness of the movement, but history shows otherwise.

There is, as we have noted, a widespread notion that the American Jewish community was entirely united behind this cause, left to right, all denominations, all organizations. Many wish that we could attain that kind of unity today, about Israel or anything else. But that unity is a myth. The UCSJ and NCSJ, for instance, were often at each other’s throats. In his history of the movement, Stuart Alshuler writes that petty turf battles, territorial disputes, character assassinations, and threats coming from National Conference leaders about the Union of Councils burdened the movement overall and prevented necessary cooperation at critical times.

There were disagreements about particularism versus universality, the role of Israel, activism versus old-fashioned shtadlanut (go to the streets or go see Kissinger?), and the role of the major community organizations as opposed to the newer single-issue groups such as the UCSJ.

Unity would have been a straitjacket. As things were, some people met with Kissinger, while others denounced him as a traitor. Some organizations, like the UCSJ, had only one issue, while the major Jewish organizations had to worry about many interests, including relations with the government of Israel, major donors, and the U.S. government. The major Jewish organizations also had to get along with each other; they had a past and a future together. So, the best outcome may well have been what David Harris of the American Jewish Committee (who was back then Morris Abram’s deputy at the NCSJ) has described as a balagan. That’s Russian (and now Israeli Hebrew) for “a mess”; another good word is “pluralism.” Many exist of different perspectives was probably a secret of the movement’s success. What was necessary was activism, not unity.

American Jews relearned in the Soviet Jewry movement what Jews had learned in the 19th century and even the 18th: to think of Jewish interests in terms of American values. In its debate with Nixon and Kissinger, the movement was quite correct in arguing its case in terms of American interests and principles—exactly as Jackson did in his amendment, whose text said nothing about Jews but instead backed freedom of emigration as a basic human right.

Thus, the Soviet Jewry movement in the United States rightly presented itself not as struggling for Jewish rights but as working for human rights of the sort all Americans believe in. The “narrow or broad” debate was a serious one for Soviet Jews: Should they seek the right of Jews to emigrate or all the human rights that were guaranteed by the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Helsinki
Accords, and even the Soviet constitution? But for American Jews this wasn’t a hard question.

What was far more difficult was dealing with the complex role the state of Israel played in this entire drama. Israel pressed very hard not for the general right to emigrate but for the right to emigrate to Israel, while most American groups believed in the absolute right to select one’s own destination. From the Zionist perspective, Jews who fled the USSR were not stateless “refugees”; they were Jews being repatriated to their homeland. There were other Israeli state interests at stake as well. As Sharansky put it, “Israeli leaders, and [the] Israeli establishment, were afraid to irritate the Soviet Union, and were afraid of public pressure coming from Israel.” As well they might have been: Israel was a tiny, endangered state facing a hostile superpower.

In short, the Jewish state is a state, has state interests, and pursues those interests. We should not then be shocked when it pursues those interests. That’s not a crisis, nor is it a disappointment or a sign that something is wrong with Israeli foreign policy. That is the kind of realism in foreign policy that we should understand. States will inevitably pursue state interests, but those interests must still be cogently defined.

One story illuminates the difference between cold state interests badly conceived and private morality. On July 4, 1974, Sharansky married Natalia Stieglitz, and the following day she left for Israel because her exit visa was about to run out. He was supposed to follow in a few months, but, after a series of arrests, he was tried in 1977 for treason and sentenced to 13 years in the Gulag. Sharansky was the key middleman between the Soviet human rights and Jewish emigration movements, the personification of the linkage that Israel feared would both slow emigration and make Soviet rulers furious at the Jewish state. When Sharansky was sent off to Siberia, his young wife (now called Avital) was advised by some Israeli officials to divorce him and find someone new in Israel. No doubt, they thought they were advancing national interests, but they had it all wrong: Support for Sharansky was obviously Israel’s most realistic path. In 1986, he was freed from prison and reunited with his wife. A few years later, the Soviet Union disintegrated.

A complementary point should be made from the perspective of the individual. States may act like states, but individuals are not states and need not, often should not, act like them. Sharansky himself made a related point shortly after arriving in Israel: [F]or us Jews there is no choice but to undertake an open campaign and maintain open pressure on behalf of Soviet Jews. While President Reagan can use quiet diplomacy, American Jews should not take this approach. This was the error Kissinger made, or part of it: He seemed to think that because diplomacy might work for him it was therefore also the way the Jewish community should act. That’s wrong. Governments should act like governments, and Jewish organizations should act like Jewish organizations, including creating bulgans.

Here the lesson for our students is that officials and experts do not know everything and too often do not have enough skin in the game. The UCSJ always listened first to Soviet Jewish activists, not other American Jewish organizations or politicians and diplomats. The Israeli government had its own ideas; the Russian Jews knew better.

Too many officials in Washington and Jerusalem thought quiet diplomacy would work better than confronting the USSR. They were wrong, and Sharansky was right. At its best, the American Jewish movement to free Soviet Jewry backed amazingly courageous Soviet citizens who had to set the pace and make the most of the key decisions. The American Jewish role was crucial, but it achieved the most when it backed the goals and strategies of Soviet Jews.

It isn’t surprising that the Soviet Jewry movement gets a great deal less attention than the Holocaust, but it is striking that it gets almost none at all. There are important lessons to be learned about politics, policy, and Jewish history from taking a close look at the 30-year struggle to free Soviet Jewry. The story should be remembered, understood, and retold.

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Nobody Expects

BY JOHN J. CLAYTON

Here's what I thought was in store for me as I grew old: I'd stay clear, strong, and energized through my eighties, keep writing stories, and then I'd slow down and my heart would begin to give out, a stammering motor catching, stumbling, dimming—sunlight blocked by cloud—and there'd be a time when I'd say goodbye, goodbye to wife and children and friends, and then rational consciousness would slip away, I'd fade into oblivion and children and friends, and then rational consciousness would slip away, I'd fade into oblivion or, better, be enfolded into radiance, the radiance that emanates through all the worlds, and I, barely I anymore, would feel the diffusion of my individual light as it spread and spread.

But no, it turns out, no, that's not what's in store. For in my early eighties, Parkinson's disease has settled on me, a vulture. It followed upon a terrible case of shingles. There's no cure. This is the beginning. The Parkinson's won't kill me—I keep getting told this, as if it should comfort me. It won't kill me—but it has already submerged my life. I shake, I tremble. I have a hard time swallowing, food falling off my fork. I drool. Have begun to stumble. Ah, but that's the least of it. Worse, I become exhausted, wake exhausted, nap often. I'm usually half-asleep. If I take a pill, I can obtain an hour of writing—slow, muddy writing on my laptop. An hour of writing. And maybe still worse, when I speak with friends or in a group—a book group, a political group—it often feels as if my brain is under water. Everything slows, slows. I reach for an idea like a stutterer reaching for a word, struggling to enunciate a word, but it has disappeared. My mind feels sluggish, thick, yet empty, blank. There's silence in the room. The group, uncomfortable but wanting to help, waits, kindly giving me time. I can feel their encouragement. I finally come up with a reduced version of my idea, lacking specifics, spoken in a guttural croaking. A frog speaks.

All my adult life I've had the ability to manipulate categories, play with the nuances of texts. Now I'm permeable. Nothing to battle against; no expectation of a miracle cure. If you're lucky it gets worse more slowly.

I exercise hard, I stretch. I take time to notice and to love—maybe because as a ghost I don't put myself in the way. I love more, not less. My love surprises me. I sleep badly and there are mornings when I groan. By noon I'm usually in the mode of expecting nothing. I am an old man, wanting to stay comfortable till I die. I go to work. But fatigue fills me. I've always believed that my life, though now with more difficulty than I've ever faced. But secretly, inwardly, I'll be separate, taking in the world without acting in it.

It's foolish to strive. Saul Bellow's Augie March tells us, When striving stops, the truth comes as a gift. A ghost's truth: nothing at stake. I offer no resistance, claim nothing, take no solid position, let the food fall off my fork. I cope on my own. Ghosts don't join together for mutual support. My whole adult life I've been firm; if anything, too firm. Now, would feel the diffusion of my individual light as it spread and spread.

John J. Clayton, 2014. (Photo by Laura Clayton Baker.)

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I don't expect a lot; my friends and family don't expect a lot from me. I wonder if they see the love, for my face has stiffened, I'm told, into a "mask," the frozen face of Parkinson's. I never expected to have a frozen face. With effort, I can smile fully, with eyes and cheeks and mouth. But to do so feels dishonest, mugging for a camera.

A ghost? But please!—who do I think I'm kidding? Some ghost! Do ghosts drool? Oh, I'd like to talk myself into seeing my disease not as deterioration but as an opportunity for spiritual growth. But isn't it self-deception to pretend I'm lucky to stumble along—it's striving just to get myself up in the morning. I'm no ghost. To pray morning prayers is a struggle. I strap on tefillin and mumble words of gratitude and awe and try to feel connected with the One. But fatigue fills me. I've always believed that you find your deepest life not by getting rid of difficulties, not by asking everything to go smoothly, but by sailing your hardship through difficult seas. The seas will change you, will make you a sailor. And now? And now?

I mug at myself in a mirror, recite Monty Python's old gag in which a character complains at being questioned, saying, "I didn't expect a kind of Spanish Inquisition." In bursts Michael Palin in 16th-century red cape, and sneers, "Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition."
the sun or about the stiff rattan seats is true, but frankly, I have to reconstruct it after the fact. I was oblivious then.

I began to be aware of a conversation going on next to me. A distinguished older man in jacket and tie was exchanging words with a well-dressed woman, same age, maybe 60, maybe 70. He tipped his fedora. He stood up, she sat down in his place, and they commenced to talk about the "younger generation." To talk about me—isn't it a shame, young people nowadays.

"Do they think to give you a seat? How were they brought up?"

"They just sit—just sit and watch you stand."

"They must think they're privileged."

They spoke loudly, so I would hear and take shame. It wasn't fair! I had been in the world of my book. Usually, in fact, I made it a point to offer my seat. Nevertheless, I swallowed the shame, carried it block after block as they entertained themselves talking about me. If I'd been older, I'd have entered the conversation, laughed at my own impoliteness, apologized. But I'd waited too long. And I was too young and too mortified. They were old—white hair and wrinkles, probably full of aches and pains.

I waited for my stop at 86th Street, and then my strategy came to me as I put the book in my book-bag. When the streetcar slowed, I got up and, blank of face, I played the gimp, the poor cripple, played it as if I were trying to avoid playing it, limping, limping down the aisle, not looking back, careful not to exaggerate, one shoulder just a little higher than the other, grasping seat backs and poles, and then, when the door opened, I made my painful way down the steps and out the trolley. And when I crossed to the sidewalk I kept limping until the streetcar was well down the tracks, so that if they saw me, the old people, even a block away, they'd see a cripple, a poor cripple boy they'd bad-mouthed. I was elated.

I can imagine walking down the aisle not of a trolley but of a rocking subway or bus, slightly blank of face from the Parkinson's, stiff, struggling to hold on. And now those old people, long dead, watch me walk. Ghosts. "Not so funny now, is it, please, when you have to do it?"

From one to ten, how much pain are we dealing with here? Not a lot. Nothing to do with the Parkinson's. Let's call it a five point three, ladies and gentlemen. Aach. Not so terrible; but not all that funny. And now, three-fifteen in the morning, the cramp melts, the calf relaxes, and the old guy can stumble out of bed, foot to the floor, other foot to the floor. Can he stick the landing?—and yes! Yes he can. Let's give said old guy a round of applause... uncertain legs carry me to the bathroom, back to bed again, where my wife Sharon stirs.

"You okay?" she murmurs. "What's the matter?"

"Who said anything's the matter?"

"You groaned. Goodnight, then," she says, and turns over, already asleep. Her sleep comforts my sickness, but he never complained. He was kind and generous. He expressed gratitude for the life given him."

For me it is true, but not fair! I had been in the world of my book. Usually, in fact, I made it a point to offer my seat. Nevertheless, I swallowed the shame, carried it block after block as they entertained themselves talking about me. If I'd been older, I'd have entered the conversation, laughed at my own impoliteness, apologized. But I'd waited too long. And I was too young and too mortified. They were old—white hair and wrinkles, probably full of aches and pains.

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I can imagine walking down the aisle not of a trolley but of a rocking subway or bus, slightly blank of face from the Parkinson's, stiff, struggling to hold on. And now those old people, long dead, watch me walk. Ghosts. "Not so funny now, is it," one of them says.

I pray for equanimity. I want to acknowledge my sickness with equanimity. But I don't want to lie. This long diminishment may, I pray, be a blessing. The trivial is discarded, shrugged off, the ordinary and everyday accrue meaning, even beauty. It's not just the Spanish Inquisition that's not expected. God and everyday accrue meaning, even beauty. It's not like a three-legged dog. It's three legs, maybe one lost to a truck? He may have whined from pain when he was kept from licking at the wound by an uncomfortable lampshade collar, but now that the collar's off, he adjusts to the new condition as if there were no loss—it's the way I am. A dog will mourn for a lost master or for the loss of another dog in the same household, but not for a lost leg. He doesn't seem to experience the contrast between now and before. Let me become like a three-legged dog.

What should I make of this life? I make, have always made, words. I'd like to be brave, like to be cavalier—at least pretend to myself to be cavalier. But again and again I fall into monitoring my losses and my potential losses, as if I were my own banker. It's a bum investment. I might as well live it up, turn spendthrift, prodigal, profligate—very nice. Very nice. See if you can fool yourself with words.

We all know the way we're supposed to respond to a sickness such as Parkinson's. So that at the memorial service a eulogist can say, "He fought his sickness, but he never complained. He was kind and generous. He expressed gratitude for the life given him." But I'm not going to fake it in order to rate a decent eulogy.

Dear God, help me accept what's coming to me. Help me join what's coming as to the strange music of a dance. I want to dance to the new music. You, coming through the ballroom door, teach me to dance. Be my partner in the dance.

John J. Clayton is the author of four novels and five short story collections, most recently Minyan: Ten Interwoven Stories (Paragon House). His stories have been featured in O. Henry Prize Stories, Best American Short Stories, and the Pushcart Prize anthology. He was a professor of English at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, for more than 30 years.
Harold Bloom: Anti-Inkling?

BY MICHAEL WEINGRAD

It's a bit surprising to come across Harold Bloom's confession that the literary work that has been his greatest obsession is not, say, "Hamlet" or "Henry IV," but a relatively little-known 1920 fantasy novel. After all, Bloom is our most famous bardolater. When I took an undergraduate class with him at Yale, he announced his trembling bafflement before Shakespeare's greatness in almost every lecture. In the course of his career, Bloom has named a handful of other literary eminences who compel from him a similar obeisance—Emerson, Milton, Blake, Kafka, and Freud are members in this select club—but one does not find David Lindsay on this list.

Yet, in his 1982 book Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism, Bloom writes of Lindsay's A Voyage to Arcturus: "I have read it literally hundreds of times, indeed obsessively I have read several copies of it to shreds." The much-shredded book has, he says, "affected me personally with more intensity and obsessiveness than all the works of greater stature and resonance of our time." In fact, Bloom wrote his own fantasy novel—The Flight to Lucifer, published 40 years ago this year—in apparent response to Lindsay's. "I know of no book," he writes, "that has caused me such an anxiety of influence, an anxiety to be read everywhere in my fantasy imitating it."

What is it about A Voyage to Arcturus that so captivated Bloom? Though it never had much mainstream success, Lindsay's genuinely strange and unsettling novel surely belongs on any list of the 20th century's most significant works of fantasy. The trendsetting British fantasy novelist Michael Moorcock, writing in 2002 on the occasion of one of the book's republications over the years, called A Voyage to Arcturus a "Nietzschean Pilgrim's Progress" and praised its "compelling, almost mesmerising influence."

A Voyage to Arcturus opens with a drawing-room séance interrupted by three strangers: the threatening Krag, his grim cousin of Conan the Barbarian. He battles the planet's demiurge with sword and shield but more often struggles to escape the sexual snare of several monstrous yet alluring female deities.

In deference to his scholarly reputation, reviewers tried to be forgiving, but most judged Bloom's novel turgid. A typical example of the dialogue:

Valentinus nodded as he rose. "This rocky world is a battered affection of the Pleroma. When the inwardness fell away from itself, when the non-entity of time, outward and downward."

The book is filled with snappy exchanges like this one. Writing at the time in the London Review of Books, Marilyn Butler summed it up as follows:

As fiction, The Flight to Lucifer has practically nothing to recommend it. The plot, so important an element in fantasy, lacks suspense, pace and variety... Lucifer is not a fictional world for the imagination to linger in: the landscape is repellent, the light poor, and the native inhabitants both nasty and feeble—while the visitor Perscors, angry, murderous, exceedingly male, is about as empathetic as King Kong.

I wouldn't call Perscors "exceedingly male," but I agree with Butler that "it is hard not to speculate, in ordinary Freudian terms, about this character's obsession with punishing a succession of elderly and uninviting whores..." Bloom's novel features a cringeworthy orgy and several S&M scenes that are even more soporific than the dialogue quoted above.

In Agon, Bloom grudgingly acknowledges some of his novel's shortcomings, remarking that it "reads as though Walter Pater was writing Star Wars." (This may be generous.) Yet Bloom also announced that he was at work on a second fantasy novel, entitled The Lost Traveller's Dream. It has never appeared, and, when I encountered Bloom in that classroom in the late 1980s, he enjoined his students to burn any copies of The Flight to Lucifer we might come across.

According to Bloom's famous theory of the "anxiety of influence," we don't get to choose our influences. Moreover, a writer's explicit designation of a major influence is usually a ruse, intended to hide (mostly from himself) the real influence at work. By his own lights, then, Bloom's explanation of The Flight to Lucifer as an anxious response to Lindsay deserves a second look.

It seems significant in this regard that, in the same chapter of Agon in which he reviews his own
novel, Bloom holds up Lindsay as a counter to the fantasy writers known collectively as the Inklings: J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and Charles Williams. With his trademark portentousness, Bloom announces that Lindsay’s *The Voyage to Arcturus* is at the very center of modern fantasy, in contrast to the works of the Neo-Christian Inklings which despite all their popularity are quite peripheral. Tolkien, Lewis and Williams actually flatter the reader’s Narcissism, while morally softening the reader’s Promethianism. Lindsay strenuously attacks the reader’s Narcissism, while both hardening the reader’s Promethianism and yet reminding the reader that Narcissism and Promethianism verge upon an identity. Inklings fantasy is soft stuff, because it pretends that it benefits from a benign transmission both of romance tradition and of Christian doctrine. Lindsay’s savage masterpiece compels the reader to question both the sources of fantasy, within the reader, and the benignity of the handing-on of tradition.

As Bloom never clearly defines “Narcissism” or “Promethianism,” nor explains his assertions by offering examples from any of the authors concerned, it is not entirely clear what he means here. Evacuated of its gassiness, his argument amounts to a preference for romantic rebellion to religious tradition. Interestingly, C. S. Lewis admired David Lindsay and called *A Voyage to Arcturus* “that shattering, intolerable, and irresistible work,” a fact which Bloom avoids. Bloom does quote from Lewis’s encomium to the 19th-century fantasist George MacDonald, whose books offer an experience that, in Lewis’s words, “gets under our skin, hits us at a level deeper than our thoughts or even our passions, troubles oldest certainties till all questions are reopened."

Bloom responds to this by saying that he believes he understands what Lewis is describing, but judges it applicable only to Lindsay.

Given these swerves, gaps, and evasions, it starts to look as if it was actually the Inklings, and especially Lewis, who got under Bloom’s skin. Is Bloom’s obsession with Lindsay a screen for a more anxious relationship with Lewis? Might we read *The Flight to Lucifer* not as a weak rewriting of Lindsay, but rather as a failed struggle against Lewis?

Bloom’s novel does have notable elements in common with two of Lewis’s books. One is the children’s fantasy *The Silver Chair*, not least because both Bloom and Lewis draw on Spenser’s Elizabethan epic *The Faerie Queene*. Bloom even has Perscors quote a line from the poem—from an episode that includes a silver chair. Both Bloom’s and Lewis’s adventures feature sunless underworlds, heroes who struggle to recall who they really are, and seductive villains who dress in green.

The more telling juxtaposition, though, is with Lewis’s *Perelandra*. In *Perelandra*, the second book in Lewis’s Space Trilogy, the protagonist Elwin Ransom travels to another planet at a point in its history that corresponds to the Fall of Man in our own. At the behest of angelic “Archons”, Ransom tries to stop Satan’s attempt to corrupt Perelandra’s Adam and Eve. Lewis’s rewriting of Genesis is audacious, but presumably not “Promethian” enough for Bloom’s taste, since it accepts rather than rejects the premises of Christian theology even as it shows how that theology might play out on another world.

In *The Flight to Lucifer*, Bloom also attempts a kind of rewriting of Genesis. His planet features versions of the biblical flood, the tower of Babel, and Nimrod the hunter but with the familiar Gnostic twist: the biblical God is actually a satanic demiurge, and the characters who defy his authority are emissaries of truth. Unfortunately, in Bloom’s hands, these Gnostic inversions are repetitive and dramatically sterile. His characters wander around expressing defiance of the powers that be (“Perscors decided that his quest now had a clear aim: to battle against the Archons, though it be in no cause and to no purpose”) and avowing that religion is a lie of the demiurge. Bloom’s Valentiann announces:

> I saw that the Gnosis alone was sufficient for salvation and freedom, and I cast out the sacraments and rituals of the Great Church’s mysteries. . . . Through knowledge, then, the inner man, the pneumonia, is saved, so that to us the knowledge of original being suffices; this is our freedom; this is the true salvation.

Judaism does not come out much better than Christianity, by the way, at least if Bloom’s portrayal of Lucifer’s Mandaeans, “this fearful, narrow, aggressive remnant of a people” consumed with “the common quarrel about possession of land,” means what I think it does.

All in all, *The Flight to Lucifer* is less of an homage to Lindsay than an anti-*Perelandra*. And yet, despite Bloom’s intentions, it demonstrates that what Bloom calls “Promethianism” is, well, kind of narcissistic. It turns out that Gnostic rebellion is not especially interesting, at least in Bloom’s dramatization; it seems rather adolescent and self-obsessed.

One is reminded of another C. S. Lewis-hater, Philip Pullman, whose far more impressive Dark Materials trilogy began with such promise but, hampered by its dogmatic materialism and smug insistence on the stupidity of organized religion, petered out weakly with the main characters weeping for joy over the survival of their atoms. Bloom’s fantasy lacks even Pullman’s moments of Blakean wildness, but neither Bloom nor Pullman achieve the genuine surprise afforded by Lewis’s supposedly orthodox, yet truly wild, vision.

**In my history, some lectures and a few beers in Cambridge presaged something like the Great Bloom-C. S. Lewis Schism of 1954.**

I attended a few of his lectures, and for a while regularly talked with him at two pubs on the river. As I was twenty-four, and he fifty-six and immensely learned, I attempted to listen while saying as little as possible. But he was a Christian polemict and I an eccentric Gnostic Jew, devoted to William Blake. We shared a love for Shelley, upon whom I was writing a Yale doctoral dissertation, and yet we meant different things by “Shelley.” Cowed as I was, the inevitable break came after a month or so, and we ceased to speak.

Bloom’s retrojected memory inflates the merest of interactions into something like the Great Bloom-Lewis Schism of 1954. “We ceased to speak?”

Moreover, Bloom does not, in this essay on Lewis, discuss any of Lewis’s books—though he does tell us, “I own and have read some two dozen of them.” He refers dismissively in passing to the Narnia Chronicles and *Mere Christianity*, while allowing the scholarly worth of Lewis’s celebrated study of medieval cosmology, *The Discarded Image*. Wholly unmentioned are *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Great Divorce*, A Grief Observed, *Miracles*, The Allegory of Love, That Hideous Strength, The Abolition of Man, Till We Have Faces*, and—of course—*Perelandra*, to name a few. Instead, we get the following:

C. S. Lewis, though as sedentary as myself, was a muscular Christian who is now the intellectual sage of George W. Bush’s America, whose Christianity is mere enough to encompass enlightened selfishness, theocratic militarism, and semi-literacy. (President George W. Bush vaunts that he never read a book through, even as a Yale undergrad.) That a major Renaissance scholar, C. S. Lewis, should now be a hero to millions of Americans who scarcely can read is a merely social irony. Like Tolkien and Charles Williams, his good friends, Lewis is most famous for his fantasy-fiction, particularly *The Chronicles of Narnia*. I have just attempted to reread that tendentious evangelical taletelling, but failed. This may be because I am seventy-five, but then I can’t reread Tolkien or Williams either. And so forth. Bloom concludes this splenetic belch with a final judgment: “Lewis was religious, which is not in itself an achievement.”

Given this evident frustration and envy, it would seem that C. S. Lewis was Bloom’s demiurge, the Crystalman he sought to defeat and displace. As his failed attempt at a fantasy novel shows, he was not successful. But then, being heretical is not in itself an achievement.

Michael Weingrad is professor of Jewish studies at Portland State University. He is a frequent contributor to the Jewish Review of Books and Mosaic and is currently working on a book about Jews and fantasy literature.
A Letter to Mama

BY ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER, WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY DAVID STROMBERG

I n “A Letter to Mama,” which appears here for the first time in English, Isaac Bashevis Singer tells the story of Sam Metzger, who, having immigrated to America, marries and establishes a successful clothing shop with his wife, Bessie, without ever writing home to his widowed mother in Poland. Now almost 60, unhappy in his marriage and estranged from his daughter, he is overwhelmed by the enormity of his neglect of his mother in Poland and his abandonment of Yiddishkeit. “In his effort to forget,” Singer writes, “Sam had become a traitor to his people.”

Singer’s postwar fiction about America was generally set in the contemporaneous present, describing the new American lives of refugees and survivors of the Holocaust. “A Letter to Mama,” which was originally published in the Forverts on October 29, 1965, is something of an exception. Its mention of Hitler’s threats to invade Poland and the vivid description of the Yiddish literary scene in the Café Royal clearly place it in the late 1930s, and yet other details and cultural markers have an anachronistic feel. For instance, the Metzgers’ comfortable house in a small Illinois town is described as being a $60,000 home, but in the late 1930s, $60,000 would have bought a mansion in the Midwest. Less definitively, Sam’s daughter Sylvia goes to school in California, is engaged to a non-Jew, and admits to her mother that she has had an abortion, all of which certainly could have happened in the 1930s, but would be more culturally typical of the mid-1960s when Singer wrote the story. Perhaps these somewhat incongruous details are meant to underline its dreamlike atmosphere.

The most powerful cultural reference is in the story’s title. The song, “A brivele der mamene” (“A Letter to Mama”), was composed by Solomon Shimulewitz in 1907, and tells the story of a young man who immigrates to America, finds success, but ignores his mother back in the Old Country—until one day he receives a letter saying that his mother has died and that her last wish was for him to say Kaddish for her. More haunting than the reference itself, which Singer would have expected his Yiddish readers to recognize instantly, is the fact that the song eventually inspired a film of the same name, which was one of the last Yiddish films to have been produced in Poland, in 1938. It opened to packed theaters in New York the following year at more or less the moment in which the story is set. With a single stroke, Singer evokes not only the difficult experience of separation caused by emigration from Poland, but also the finality of that separation for those who found themselves on the other side of the Atlantic with the outbreak of the Second World War.

In some ways this must have resonated with Singer’s personal experience. When he left Poland in 1935, he left behind his mother Batsheva, with whom he was very close (he famously incorporated her name into his pen name), and though he did write to family and friends from America, he was a poor correspondent. A letter from his mother, undated but appearing in the archives among envelopes dated September 1936, puts it bluntly: “you don’t have to make a fuss if a letter is late since you yourself write seldom too. If you wrote more often, I’d also write more, God willing.” In the early 1940s, Singer’s mother and his brother Moyshe were evacuated by the Soviets in cattle cars to the Pamyl region of Kazakhstan, where they died of illness and starvation.

Like every other morning, Sam awoke feeling insufficiently rested, with a bitter taste in his mouth which came from his bile, his liver, or perhaps from his soul.

It is suggestive that just two days before “A Letter to Mama” appeared Singer published another piece, “A Story that Mama Told Me,” which portrays a young man who, having heard about the wonders of the Garden of Eden his whole childhood, decides that when he grows up, he wants nothing more than to die. “A Letter to Mama” itself is exceptional in Singer’s body of work in its attempt to portray the conscious experience of death and the soul’s passing into the world to come.

The older he became, the less able Sam Metzger was to understand why he had never written to his mother after leaving Krasnobrod for America. This “letter to Mama,” which he never wrote, became the bane of his existence. Granted that he disliked writing letters and that the first years in New York he used to work fifteen hours a day in a sweat shop. Still, to leave his widowed mother behind in Krasnobrod and never write her so much as a single word, he had to be out of his mind. Sam could not fathom how this came about, although he had brooded over it many sleepless nights.

At first, it was simply a matter of putting it off. Then he seemed to forget about it altogether. At night, while trying to fall asleep in Moishe Leckech-becker’s alcove on Attorney Street, along with three other boarders, he would think of it. In the morning, he would forget again. Later the nagging sense of shame turned into conviction that it was already too late. A devil possessed him who wouldn’t let him take a pen in hand. In New York at the time, they were all singing a popular Yiddish song which went: “Why delay? Write your mother today.” From the Yiddish theater stage, from Second Avenue cabarets, in the workshops on Grand Street, from record players blaring in homes, the song followed him everywhere.

Perhaps that was the reason Sam left New York. He got as far as Chicago, where he became a peddler. He knew no fellow countrymen from Krasnobrod there. He married a Romanian girl, a plump orphan named Besia, and his business prospered. Besia had saved nine hundred dollars with which she opened a women’s wear shop. Sam and a partner bought a store which handled the same sort of merchandise.

Miracles didn’t happen to Sam. He didn’t become a Rockefeller. He and his wife needed little and managed to earn three or four times more than they needed. When they were in their thirties, a daughter was born to them whom Bessie named Sylvia—after her own mother, Sarah. The couple hired a Polish servant, Antosia, who became devoted to the child. Antosia’s husband, a coal miner, had died in a pit. They had had no children. Antosia was more trustworthy than a relative of the family could ever be. She ran the household, cared for Sylvia, and was frugal. She invested her savings in Sam’s business, eventually accumulating several thousand dollars. Whenever Sam would try to pay her salary, she would argue, “What good is money to me? I have everything.” She drew up a will in which Sylvia became her sole beneficiary.

Later, Sam bought a department store in a city in Illinois where no more than twenty Jewish families lived, mostly business people, a few professionals, a doctor, a dentist, and a veterinarian. During the day, the men were occupied with their work. At night, they played cards. After a while, they hired a rabbi and established a synagogue, but there were never enough men attending to make up a minyan, except for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The rabbi, a bachelor, was openly living with a Gentile girl. Everyone called him by his first name, Jack. In the late twenties, fundraisers began coming from Chicago, New York, even from Palestine, all demanding large donations. They reprimanded the Jews for not giving their children a proper upbringing. But there were hardly any Jewish children left, only grandchildren of mixed marriages.

Sylvia had grown up and had gone off to college. Sam was approaching sixty. The years had been filled with business, card playing, and an occasional trip to California or Florida. Antosia had died and Sylvia had inherited her money. Sam set an elaborate tombstone over Antosia’s grave in the Catholic cemetery.

Over the years, Sam had managed to avoid contact with anyone from Krasnobrod. He had no idea whether his mother had died and whether he should say Kaddish and light an anniversary candle for her. He kept from mentioning the word Krasnobaod among the town Jews, even though they probably wouldn’t have known where it was since they all were born either in Lithuania or Rumania.

In his effort to forget, Sam had become a traitor to his people. Several of the Jewish spokesmen who
visited the town from time to time would refer to the community as godless, materialistic, moneysterling. The other men resented these rebukes, but Sam Metzger reluctantly agreed.

During the day, Sam was too busy to think about these things, but at night, after the card playing, lying beside Bessie in the upstairs bedroom, his thoughts would assail him like a swarm of locusts.

Sam owned a $60,000 home with a large garden and a two-car garage for his and Bessie’s Cadillacs. Sylvia was at school in California. Bessie now needed a pill before going to bed. Sam was in the habit of taking a warm bath at bedtime. This late-night bath had become for him an hour of reflection.

Every time he undressed and saw himself nailed in the mirror on the door, he would make a short reckoning of his life. He had been lucky but had aged prematurely. His round, bald head was ringed with sparse white hair. His crooked nose was covered with drunkard’s warts although he seldom drank. Loose flaps of skin hung beneath his brown eyes, and he had a flabby double chin. His legs were bowed and too short. His toenails were twisted and yellowish.

Occasionally, after his bath, he would sit down in the dinette and drink a glass of orange juice. A photograph of Sylvia hung there. The girl was the image of her grandmother, the very one to whom Sam did not write...

It was impossible to escape his mother. She sprang up before him over and over again in his new house. The resemblance was apparent the moment the nurse brought the newborn Sylvia to him in the Chicago hospital. Sam felt a love for this child which he knew was excessive.

Once Sylvia started to walk, she showed how capricious and contrary she would be. Sam was almost convinced that the girl was repaying him for the wrong done her grandmother.

Now Sylvia was planning to marry a Gentile, a sportsman who won medals at racing sailboats, the son of a rich engineer. She had confessed to her mother that she was living with him and had already had an abortion. Sam’s love for Sylvia was spoiled. The fortune he had amassed through the toil of a lifetime would eventually pass into the hands of this son of a rich engineer. She had confessed to her mother that she was living with him and had already had an abortion. Sam’s love for Sylvia was spoiled.

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the bathroom. Sam's gaze followed her, but he soon shut his eyes. There was only one bathroom upstairs, and, though Bessie didn't mind his sharing it with her, he preferred to wait till she had washed, bathed, and was out of the house before using it himself. She never ate breakfast, just drank a glass of milk.

For a moment, Sam didn't remember what had happened to him during the night. Like every other morning, he awoke feeling insufficiently rested, with a bitter taste in his mouth which came from his bile, his liver, or perhaps from his soul. He lived in hope that the day would come when the ringing of the alarm clock wouldn't startle him each morning, but that day was yet to come.

Now he could neither fall back asleep nor really wake up. He furrowed his brow in an effort to force himself to sleep. “What time is it, eh?” he wondered, too lazy and too indifferent to look at the clock. Surprisingly, he did doze off but soon awoke with a start. Bessie must have left the house because he heard nothing from the bathroom or kitchen.

Suddenly, remembering the apparition, Sam sat bolt upright. God in heaven! This was no ordinary morning! This was like Yom Kippur morning, where even here, in this godforsaken town, every Jew went to pray in the synagogue. There was something unusual in the air — something unidentifiably cool and heavy.

Ordinarily Sam would fix himself a breakfast of orange juice, a roll, and coffee after Bessie's departure, but today he had no appetite. He shaved and bathed. Standing in front of the mirror, scratching his beard, which seemed to become rougher from day to day, he came to a decision: He would go to New York, look up the Krasnobraod people, and find out the truth about his mother once and for all.

“My God, I still have relatives somewhere who most probably need me, need help,” Sam said to himself. “Maybe that’s why Mama came to me, to get me to help them. For a few thousand dollars, I might save lives!”

His conscience, which had been asleep for so many years, had awakened. “I’ll leave them enough! More than enough!” Sam spoke aloud. He was referring to Bessie and Sylvia. “She can even remarry, to someone who threatens Poland with war. He would travel to Krasnobraod and find his relatives there. Then he would bring them to the American consulate in Warsaw and see to it that they all obtained visas. He would rescue as many as possible.

The words of the spokesmen of the Zionist organizations, even though he had never really listened to them, now came back to mind with new force, as if he were hearing them for the first time. They repeated themselves like a record being played over and over again: “Our suffering brothers are waiting. They are our flesh and blood. If American Jewry doesn’t help, what then…”

“How could I have heard those pleas and remained indifferent?” Sam asked himself. True, to those delegates it was just a business. They got a percentage. But what they were saying was nevertheless true. Who would help if not he? Who should be concerned about Krasnobraod — Hitler?

Sam could hardly wait for the train to arrive in Chicago. At the station, he inquired about a flight to New York. Somehow, everything fell into place. He took a cab and drove to the airport. Ten minutes later he was airborne. “Will the plane crash? Let it,” Sam thought. He felt no fear at all, remembering a saying that those who go on a mission of mercy are protected.

The plane flew into a snowstorm and started to roll from side to side, but Sam continued to sip the cocktail the stewardess had served him. Seeing that other passengers were anxious, he smiled to himself. Next to him sat a young woman wearing a sable coat and a Russian-style fur hat, a papakha.

Sam said to her, “We’ll soon be landing in New York.”

“Either in New York or in a snowy grave,” she answered.

“Everything happens according to God’s will,” Sam said, a little surprised at his own words.

“The question is: What is God’s will?” she replied dryly.

A clever woman, Sam thought. What does God want? Who would dare go to heaven and ask God to tell him His desire?

Patches of fog drifted past the window. The pilot tried to lift the plane above the storm clouds but apparently wasn’t able to manage it. In a matter of seconds, it became dark as night outside. Sam imagined the motors were operating on their last bit of fuel. The wind was blowing against them from the Atlantic Ocean. The hostess had disappeared as if she felt personally responsible for having trapped the passengers in this dangerous situation.

The woman in the sable said to Sam, “Better fasten your safety belt.”

“What good will it do me?” Sam gestured with his hand, expressing paternal gratitude. She is more devoted than Sylvia, he thought. Sylvia, in her place, wouldn’t have given him so much as a glance.

The plane bumped down the runway and came to a stop in the New York airport. Sam said to the woman, “Now you know what God desires.”

“Yes, now I know!”

Some men have all the luck, Sam mused. I’ve thrown away my best years struggling with that dried-up Lithuanian wife of mine, stuck in a town where everyone knows what’s cooking in everyone else’s pot.

Sam went into a telephone booth and called Bessie, saying, “Bessie! I’m going to New York!”

The two of them still conversed in Yiddish. Bessie was silent for a while. “What’s happened?”

“My mother died.”

“Only now? How do you know?”

“I received word.”

“So what will you do in New York? After all, she’s in Poland, not in New York.”

Bessie argued that he couldn’t leave at this time. They were getting ready for a big sale. She couldn’t be everywhere. She shouted at him in her Lithuanian dialect, calling him names. But Sam yelled back and hung up, almost saying, “Let Bill Weintraub help you!”

Aside from the special excitement he was experiencing, he felt a long-forgotten wanderlust, a boyish thrill at the thought of being free. He had bought $5,000 worth of traveler’s checks. A train was leaving for Chicago in a half an hour. He walked out of the bank and took a cab to the railroad station, arriving in enough time to have a sandwich and a cup of coffee. “What in heaven’s name led me to waste my life in this good-for-nothing hole? What was I hiding from? Where was my brain?”

The train was warm and spacious. Sam looked out of the window at the snow-covered fields. In contrast to his lifelong habit of frugality and saving, Sam was now eager to spend money. He would go to the Krasnobraod Society in New York and donate a large sum toward relief. He would fly by plane to Poland. What could possibly happen to him? He was old and sick. He wasn’t even afraid of Hitler, who threatened Poland with war. He would travel to Krasnobraod and find his relatives there. Then he would bring them to the American consulate in Warsaw and see to it that they all obtained visas. He would rescue as many as possible.

Issac Bashevis Singer outside the S. Rabinowitz Hebrew book store on the Lower East Side, New York City, 1968. (Photo by David Attie/Getty Images.)
Sam started. "It's been 30 years since I've been here."
"Tomorrow you can go to the Yiddish newspaper office. They'll fill you in on everything."
"You've never heard of Krasnobrod?"
"Krasnobrod? No, my dad came from a town near Minsk."
"And your mother?"
"My mother? I don't know. From somewhere in Russia . . . ."

The driver grumbled continuously, scolding other drivers. He blew his horn loudly at a truck which was holding up traffic and zigzagged around it, almost knocking down a pedestrian. He never stopped cursing: "Sons of bitches . . . They should break their legs."

When the taxi drove down Second Avenue, Sam thought he recognized the street. He saw restaurants with baskets of rolls on the tables, store windows displaying knishes, bagels, egg kichel, challah, apple strudel. He could almost smell the gefilte fish, peppered chickpeas, sauerkraut, all familiar Krasnobrod dishes. Young boys were hawking Yiddish newspapers. On a theater marquee there was brightly lit Yiddish lettering.

Sam Metzger's eyes filled with tears. Jews had gone living here while he wasted his years in exile. He could hardly wait for the taxi to come to a halt. The meter indicated $2.80, but Sam handed the driver a five dollar bill and told him to keep the change. The man was so astonished that he said, "That's for good luck . . . ."

"Sure.

"Take me where I can find some Jews."
"New York is full of Jews."

"Where do people from the Old Country get together? Do you by any chance know where any Jews from Krasnobrod meet?"
"Are you crazy, or are you putting on an act? Tell me where you want to go."

"Where is the Yiddish newspaper office?"
"Mister, I'll take you down to Second Avenue, to the Café Royal. You'll find lots of newspaper men there."

The driver pushed down the flag on the meter. Sam leaned his head against the side of the cab, affected by the overwhelming odor of tobacco. He rolled the window down a bit. It had been years since he was last in New York, and he hardly recognized the city. He had never really known it. The streets seemed narrower and the buildings taller. There was a hint of the nearby ocean in the air, which smelled of gasoline, exhaust fumes, and all the pungent odors of city life.

Early in the day it had been warmer, but it was turning colder now. The radio predicted a snowstorm. Sam knew that he should first have made hotel reservations, but he decided that there were plenty of hotels in New York. Now that he was here, he was anxious to be among Jews as quickly as possible. There had been a time when he had lived, worked, attended meetings in this city. He had taken up with a girl who had been a passenger on the same boat from Europe with him. He had kissed her, even planned to marry her, but through the years he had forgotten all the names and all the addresses. The girl was his age, perhaps a bit older. She was undoubtedly a granddaughter by this time.

Sam shut his eyes, letting the cool wind blow across his forehead and eyelids. He inhaled the city air. He couldn't believe he was actually making this trip.

After a long silence, the driver spoke, "You're homesick for Jews, eh?"
Sam bought a newspaper. On the front page was a headline about Palestine. "Why don't I visit Palestine?" he asked himself. Sam paused in front of the window of a Yiddish bookstore that also sold sheet music. He would have loved to go in, but it was closed. A fine, needle-sharp snow started to fall. In a moment, the crowded street emptied except for a few drunkards who looked to him like actors on a stage set. A strong wind blew. A page of a Yiddish newspaper lifted into the air, tried to fly up to the dark red sky, fell back to earth again, spun around and came to rest at Sam's foot. Maybe it's a message, he thought, a letter from heaven. He wanted to stoop over and pick it up but his back wouldn't bend. "What kinds of thoughts are filling my head," he wondered.

A taxi drove up and Sam stepped in. Sam read the driver's name, David Cohen, on his back license. Sam said, "Take me to a Jewish hotel, Mr. Cohen." "Do you want kosher food?" "What? Yes, kosher." "Well, on Broadway and Fourth Street there's a kosher hotel. Rabbis hold conventions there." "Okay. Take me there." "I once took three rabbis there. Polish refugees." "Have you ever heard of anyone from Krasnobrod?" "Oh, you'll find out about everything at this place." A few minutes later the cab stopped in front of a hotel. Sam went up to the registration desk and asked for a room. The clerk handed him a form to fill out and a bellhop took him up on the elevator. As they passed one floor, Sam could hear loud voices and music, and the foot stomping of a party. He went into his room, set down his books, tipped the bellhop a dollar, and was given a key. This transaction took no more than a few minutes. He put his reading glasses on, opened one of the books, read a few of the phrases, and shut it again. "They eat blintzes like everyone else," he thought, "but their ideas are very difficult."

He had to use the bathroom again. Where does all this liquid come from? I don't remember having drunk so much. He knew the truth: He had an enlarged prostate. The doctor had recommended surgery, predicting complications if it were ignored. Sam's heart was getting weaker, not stronger.

He wanted to undress but he was too tired, so he just took off his coat and shoes, stretched out on the bed and shut the light. It was warm in the room, the steam hissed in the radiator on one monotonous plaintive note. Sam imagined that the steam was complaining. 'I'm uncomfortable, I'm miserable, I can't get out, I can't get out. No one can help me, not even God. I must suffer, suffer . . .' The dance music from below became louder. Sam thought he heard a familiar melody he recalled being played at Krasnobrod weddings. He wasn't sure exactly what it was: the wedding march to the chuppah? A scissors dance? An anger dance? Sam listened intensely. This music seemed to be played by hometown musicians, magically transporting him to Krasnobrod. He saw the faces of relatives, neighbors, teachers, classmates. He pictured the rabbi with his white beard, his puffy cheeks with fine blue veins, his thick white eyebrows and heavily lined forehead. The old man smiled blissfully, a grandfatherly indulgence radiating from his eyes. The melodies followed one after the other, and Sam knew them all. Perhaps he just imagined he did. He had heard them back home. He found himself singing along, humming the tunes. The party grew noisy. He could hear laughter, bursts of applause, loud masculine pronouncements, responsive feminine giggling. This was not a party, but a wedding. In New York, people led a Jewish life, married their children according to Jewish traditions, had Jewish in-laws.

The band stopped and then struck up again. God in heaven, they were playing "A Letter to Mama." As soon as Sam heard this tune, his face was bathed with tears. A miracle had happened, a miracle! He had come to New York and on his very first night they had played a song that had con-
stantly echoed in his ears. Sylvia, who had played the piano and had studied some music, had referred to this song as “junk.” But how can “junk” uplift the soul, fill it with a longing and love beyond description? Sam had the urge to go down to the wedding, to congratulate the bride and groom, to mingle with the guests. He was tired, but not sleepy. He got off the bed. His legs felt unsteady but just the same he switched on the light, found his shoes, and went out into the hall. He rang for the elevator and waited a long time, but it didn’t come.

Sam walked down the stairs, figuring that on the floor below he would find the wedding, but the corridor was dark and quiet. He walked down another flight but there was no wedding there either. For a moment he stood unbelievably. “Is the wedding over?” he asked himself. He decided to walk down one more floor but with the same result.

He rang for the elevator again, waited and still it didn’t come. “What kind of service is this?” Sam muttered. “Well, I might as well go down to the lobby.”

He went down a few more floors without reaching the lobby. Instead he found himself in the basement. There were lights on but the place was empty. Folding chairs were stacked along the walls. Sand-filled ashtrays held cigarette stubs. Smoke smell filled the air. Some glass doors stood closed. At the end of the room he turned to go back up the stairs but he didn’t hear any sound from above. He started to walk but couldn’t make out the exit. Like a blind man, he felt his way in the dark. He began to panic. His heart beat loudly. He could no longer resist the cold. His body broke down. He was all alone in the world.

He looked up and saw a pay phone. An urge to call Bessie took hold of him. She was, after all, his wife. She might be worried about him. He inserted a dime, intending to call collect, but didn’t hear the usual dial tone. The phone was apparently out of order. He clicked the receiver cradle up and down to get his coin back but nothing happened. “When men make something, you can be sure it will know how to steal,” Sam mused.

At that moment everything became dark. It seemed someone upstairs had shut the lights. Sam shouted, “Hey, you! Put the lights on! Hey, mister! Let me out!” He started to walk but couldn’t make out the exit. Like a blind man, he felt his way in the dark. He began to panic. His heart beat loudly. He could no longer remain standing. He had to sit down. His body broke into a cold sweat and severe nausea gripped him.

He felt the ground and heard the dull thud of his body against the floor. Then it became still—a stillness outside of himself as well as inside. He lay quietly, not knowing whether he had fainted or just fallen. “Is this a heart attack?” he asked himself. If so, it isn’t so terrible. It’s probably gas, from the blintzes.

A sense of peace descended upon him. He shut his eyes. He listened to his innermost self. His desires, his regrets, left him. He knew now that Bessie would marry Bill Weintraub, yet he felt no anger toward them. What’s the poor woman to do?

His mother reappeared, but something had changed. She and Sylvia were one and the same woman. “How come I didn’t understand this before?” he asked himself.

He became light and started to fly into the night. He flew past the New York skyscrapers. Together with his mother he flew over a congealed ocean. Down below, ships stood motionless. Then mother and son approached a path between two mountains. In the valley, he saw something shining like a brilliant red sunrise. Where is my father? he asked himself and heard the answer, “You, Sam, are your own father.”

At the border, an unseen power held him back, but his mother embraced him. Together, arm in arm, they floated back to Krasnobrod.

Nadine Epstein shares her memories of Wiesel in this striking volume, Nadine Epstein brings together 36 reflections from friends, colleagues and others who knew him—including his son Elisha Wiesel, Michael Berenbaum, Wolf Blitzer, Father Patrick Desbois, Ben Kingsley, Ronald S. Lauder, Bernard Henri-Lévy, Kati Marton, Itzhak Perlman, Natan Sharansky, Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, Oprah Winfrey and Ruth Wisse. Featuring more than 100 photographs.

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Disgruntled Ode

BY JAKE MARMER

I grew up in a dreary provincial town, in the middle of the Ukrainian steppes, and early on turned inward, seeking to experience life through the books I was reading. When I learned the phrase “the book of life,” I imagined a sprawling sculpture, made of sutured books, each one representing a major junction in one’s life.

It is not surprising that I was drawn to books that described anything other than the world around me. Not surprising either was the fixation I described anything other than the world

I haven’t known were Jewish—were emigrating. The recent death did I understand what his book had done for me two decades ago.

If teshuvah means “return,” then the ba’al teshuvah is someone with an appetite for turnstile acrobatics.

Within a year, I had decided to stay in America and managed to enroll in Yeshiva University’s undergraduate business school—not because I saw myself on Wall Street or even knew what, or where, it was, but because I knew I would have to support myself. I replaced bookish fantasies of Yiddishkeit with the pleasures of a religious life so intricate and incomprehensible to the nonnative that I knew it would take the rest of my life to imagine my way into it. It was as if, within a year or less, my identity as a reader had vanished, along with the old-world self I no longer wished to be.

And then, in my second year of college, just as I turned 17, a fellow Russian Jewish classmate at Yeshiva University slipped me a copy of Philip Roth’s Portnoy’s Complaint. Only after Roth’s recent death did I understand what his book had done for me two decades ago.

I read it in my dorm room, read it shaking on the subway to my first job, read it on a Washington Heights bench and in a van that shuttled me from the subway to my first job, read it on a Washington Heights bench and in a van that shuttled me from

Jake Marmer is the author of two poetry collections, The Neighbor Out of Sound (2018) and Jazz Talmud (2011). His jazz klezmer-poetry record Hermeneutic Stomp was released by Blue Thread Music in 2013. He is the poetry critic and a contributing editor at Tablet magazine and teaches at Kehillah Jewish High School.
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