

The Jewish Century Yossi Shain & Michal Schwartz

# JEWISH REVIEW

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## OF BOOKS

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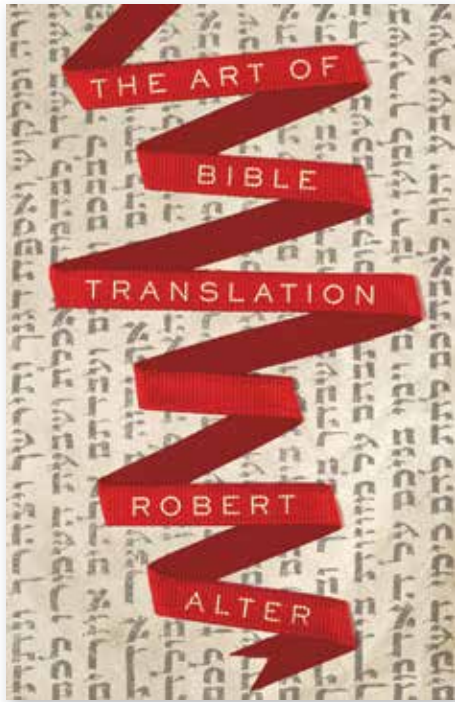


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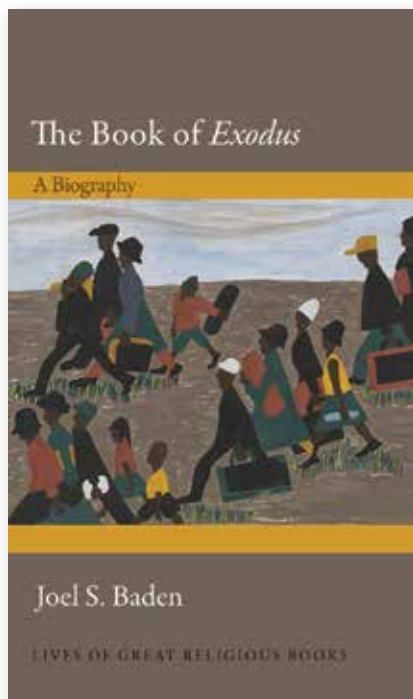
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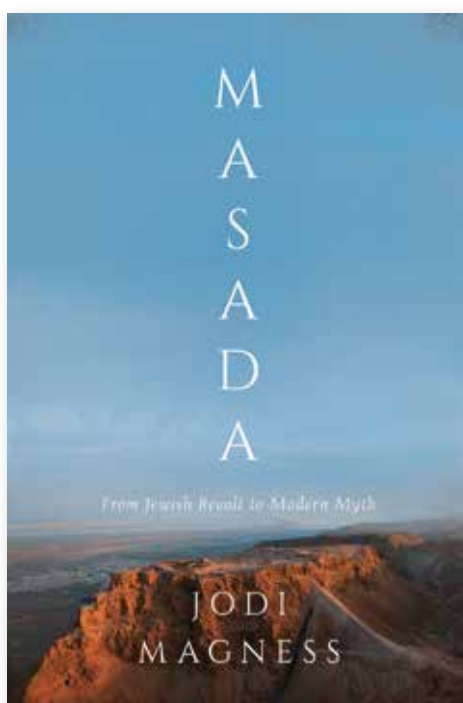
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*Ben-Gurion declared that "with the creation of the state, we are standing on the edge of a new era. Not only in the life of the Jewish community in Israel, but . . . in the history of Judaism itself." He was right, but not in the way he thought he would be.*

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**Garden Betrayed**

In “In Giorgio Bassani’s Memory Garden” (Spring 2019) Diane Cole fails to mention Bassani’s long-lasting anger with the film adaptation of his novel *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*. Nowhere does the film’s director, Vittorio De Sica, underscore that Italian Jews overwhelmingly supported fascism, Bassani’s major point, thereby whitewashing history. Had he done so, he would have been forced to confront the greater issue—majority support for Mussolini and his party by the populace.

Roberta Hanfling Schwartz  
Evanston, IL

**Diane Cole Responds:**

Thank you for noting Giorgio Bassani’s strong objections to the 1970 film version of *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* directed by Vittorio De Sica. I did not discuss the film in my essay because my focus was the book itself, my purpose to engage readers directly with Bassani’s vivid realization of the Jewish community of Ferrara and its downfall under fascist rule.

As for the film, it did indeed take many liberties in tone and plot with the novel on which it was based, and Bassani detailed the reasons for his anger and frustration in the essay “Il giardino tradito” (“The Betrayed Garden”). Despite its discrepancies from Bassani’s text and vision, the movie did bring to the attention of a broad international audience the history of the Holocaust in Italy and continues to do so.

**Mysterium Tremendum or Coping Mechanism?**

Allan Arkush’s review (“Seventy Years in the Desert,” Spring 2019) of Pnina Motzafi-Haller’s recent book reminded me of a conversation I had with my Yemenite Israeli wife right before our wedding. I asked her if she might want to move to one of the development towns in the Negev. I was attracted by the low housing costs, the new Religious Zionist communities being founded there, and the supposed adventure of it all. My future wife—bless her soul—looked at me with the same kind of expression one gives an errant child who demands ice cream for dinner. “No one wants to move to the Negev,” she said.

Motzafi-Haller’s claim that “religious strengthening” (*hit’chazkut*) can function as a way for Mizrahi women in Israel’s periphery to “transform, or at least better” their lives is compelling. In my own predominantly Mizrahi and Yemenite neighborhood in Petah Tikva, for example, one sees many *mit’chazkim* and *mit’chazkot* who coalesce around our local “holy man” (my neighbor) for brief words of wisdom, comfort, and Torah. I never thought of this phenomenon as a kind of cultural capital that individuals might be able to mobilize to transcend the difficult material circumstances of life, as Motzafi-Haller apparently does. At the same time this perspective seems so anthropological to be almost cliché. Since the beginnings of the discipline in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, social scientists have sought to reduce religious passions to other social, psychological, or political needs. Durkheim, for example, reduced religion to social cohesion. Freud equated religious desires to forms of mental pathology. Marx famously treated religion as just a thin veneer for class conflict. Even the interpretive anthropologist Clifford Geertz limited religious experiences to

modes of meaning making whose function was to aid individuals in finding solace in their suffering.

The social sciences (quite unsurprisingly) treat religion as a reflection of society and its problems. There is nothing inherently wrong with this approach, but it does perhaps miss the point for the multitudes of the faithful who find both mystery and majesty in their religious faith and practice. This just makes me wonder, is it not at all possible that the religious passions of (at least) some of these Mizrahi women are simply rooted in a pious desire for a genuine experience of the divine? Some anthropological food for thought.

Nehemia Stern

Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
Ariel University of Samaria

**Lucifer in the Details**

I’d like to make a point not to refute but perhaps to complicate Michael Weingrad’s conclusion (“Harold Bloom: Anti-Inkling?,” Spring 2019) that Harold Bloom’s anxiety of influence in writing *The Flight to Lucifer* was not so much its explicit source, David Lindsay’s *A Voyage to Arcturus*, as C. S. Lewis’s *Perelandra*. This is because Lewis’s *Perelandra* was not just influenced by the form of Lindsay’s novel but contains its own anxious refutation of it. If, as Weingrad says, “*The Flight to Lucifer* is less of an homage to Lindsay than an anti-*Perelandra*,” then *Perelandra* itself is an anti-*Arcturus*.

In a letter to Ruth Pitter, Lewis calls Lindsay’s *A Voyage to Arcturus* the “father” of his novel *Perelandra*. He goes on to say it was from Lindsay he “first learned what other planets in fiction are really good for: for *spiritual* adventures.” But *Perelandra* takes more than an inspiration of intent from *Arcturus*; it effectively takes the end of Lindsay’s novel for its plot.

Toward the end of *A Voyage to Arcturus*, two characters (the “God” and “Devil” of Lindsay’s world) vie, through persuasion, for the main character’s soul. This takes place in a watery landscape, and the characters eventually climb onto a floating island of matted reeds and drift out to sea. *Perelandra*, of course, is mostly about two characters (mouthpieces for the “God” and “Devil” of Lewis’s universe) vying for the soul of a third character (the Mother), at first through persuasion, later fisticuffs, and is set on a world mostly made up of floating islands of matted reeds. There are many minor similarities of feel between the two novels, but perhaps the most marked echo is that both end with an abstract vision of the cosmic order (“green corpuscles” and “whirls of white light” in *Arcturus*, “corpuscles of momentary brightness” and “ribbons or serpents of light” in *Perelandra*), in both cases explained in musical terms. (In Lindsay’s discordant universe, it’s a clash of rhythms; in Lewis’s harmonious cosmos, it’s the Great Dance.)

Lewis’s agon with Lindsay is most apparent in the philosophy of his character of the Un-man/Weston. In *A Voyage to Arcturus*, the death of living souls feeds the “Devil,” Crystalman; in *Perelandra*, Weston’s view comes with the idea that the souls of the dead are “melted down into their Master, as a lead soldier slips down and loses his shape in the ladle held over the gas ring,” after which they are “one whom Satan has digested.” This, to me, sounds like Lewis’s version of Lindsay’s outlook.

(Lewis was always careful to point out, whenever he praised Lindsay’s novel for its form, that its philosophy was, as he says in the letter to Ruth Pitter, on the “borderline of the diabolical.”)

Perhaps, in the light of this, Bloom’s agon with Lewis could be seen as a literary counterpunch—reclaiming Lindsay’s novel after Lewis’s rewriting of it. But I have to agree with Weingrad’s view of Bloom’s novel itself that, as literary counterpunches go, it lacked the necessary force.

Murray Ewing

East Grinstead, West Sussex, United Kingdom

Michael Weingrad has a slowly growing monopoly on learned and original treatments of contemporary Jewish fantasy. Nobody writing today has more interesting things to say about the very possibility—and limitations—of Jewish fantasy and science fiction, especially the way Jewish and Christian theological and cultural contexts respectively shape the forms and structures of this wildly popular genre. His most recent contribution is a case study of the failed fantasy of a heretical Jew, the Shakespearean scholar and critic, Harold Bloom, and the subterranean influence of his Christian foil, C. S. Lewis.

Weingrad, in a thoughtful meditation on the role of literary influences on these two, in many ways, polar opposite figures, importantly notes that both Lewis and Bloom had a shared and deeply held affinity for David Lindsay’s *A Voyage to Arcturus* but misses a critical distinction: Lewis largely limited his praise of Lindsay to the innovative and daring form of his fantasy, while Bloom was mesmerized by both the structure and the “Promethean and Nietzschean” motifs of this transgressive novel.

Lewis, despite his negative assessment of Lindsay’s actual philosophy, wrote in an essay titled “On Science Fiction” that “good stories,” like *A Voyage to Arcturus*, are “actual additions to life; they give, like certain rare dreams, sensations we never had before, and enlarge our conception of the range of possible experience.” Lewis’s ability to acknowledge the goodness, truth, and beauty in people and ideas that didn’t totally embody his own truth was a consistent feature of his intellectual life. In the climactic volume of the *Space Trilogy*, *That Hideous Strength: A Modern Fairy-Tale for Grown-Ups*, Lewis rather interestingly includes the skeptical Scotsman MacPhee in the mystical company of St. Anne’s. Students of Lewis are nearly one in identifying MacPhee with Lewis’s no-nonsense but clearly beloved tutor William Kirkpatrick, affectionately known by the Lewis brothers as the “Great Knock.” In his spiritual autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis describes Kirkpatrick as a forthright and skeptical man, an atheist of the old-fashioned Thomas Huxley variety. Under Kirkpatrick’s powerful influence, Lewis “came near to being a purely logical entity,” who considered even the most casual remark as a “summons to disputation.” But Lewis’s biographers agree that the two and a half years that Lewis spent with Kirkpatrick were the most peaceful in his entire life. Perhaps as importantly, Lewis eventually learned to value the adversarial and logical style of a rival way of thinking to his theological and romantic truth.

For all of Bloom’s talk of Lewis’s intellectual rigidity (“C. S. Lewis was the most dogmatic and aggressive person I have ever met”), Lewis comes

# The Jewsraeli Century

BY YOSSI SHAIN AND MICHAL SCHWARTZ

## #Yahadutyisraelit: di'ukan shel mahapecha hevratit (#IsraeliJudaism: A Portrait of a Cultural Revolution)

by Shmuel Rosner and Camil Fuchs

Kinneret Zmora-Bitan Dvir and Jewish People Policy Institute, 285 pp., 49 NIS

In 1948, David Ben-Gurion declared that “with the creation of the state, we are standing on the edge of a new era. Not only in the life of the Jewish community in Israel, but—I believe—in the history of Judaism itself.” Ben-Gurion was right—Jews and Judaism have become increasingly “Israelized” throughout the 21<sup>st</sup>-century diaspora, but not quite in the way that he thought they would be, because Israeli Jewish identity is not what he thought it would be.

In their important, accessible new study, #Yahadutyisraelit: di'ukan shel mahapecha hevratit (#IsraeliJudaism: A Portrait of a Cultural Revolution), the prolific journalist-publisher Shmuel Rosner and the distinguished Tel Aviv University statistician Camil Fuchs sketch a portrait of Israeli Jewish identity based on data from a recent well-constructed and widely distributed survey. In doing so, they reveal a broad Israeli public that is far more traditional than Ben-Gurion, who envisioned the new Israeli as a Bible-quoting secularist who looked back with pride to the exploits of Bar Kokhba, imagined. Thus, almost all Israeli Jews, or a large majority of them, “attend Seders on the first night of Passover, observe Rosh Hashanah, celebrate Hanukkah, have Friday night dinners . . . and perform circumcisions. A large majority of the Jews believe in God (78 percent), if not all the time and not in perfect faith.”

What distinguishes these Jews from all who came previously is their complete “mixing of Jewishness and Israeliness.” Rosner and Fuchs dub them “Jewsraelis,” practitioners of a new “IsraeliJudaism,” and show that they now comprise 55 percent of the Israeli Jewish population. They divide the rest of Israel Jews into three groups: those who are more traditional but less nationalistic (thus, for instance, they celebrate Shabbat but not Yom Ha-atzma'ut), whom they simply call “the Jews” (17 percent); those who are more nationalistic but less traditional, “the Israelis,” including the old-style Ben-Gurion Labor Zionists (15 percent); and those cosmopolitan universalists who profess

little allegiance to either the State of Israel or Judaism (13 percent). (If you want to understand the base for Bibi Netanyahu’s Likud for the last

from their religious ones since the Enlightenment and Emancipation. And yet, in an ironic if not paradoxical turn of history, it is just as Ben-Gurion

## Just as Ben-Gurion predicted: The Jews and Judaism of the diaspora are increasingly and inevitably oriented toward Israel.

decade and its coalition partners, look to the first two types of Israelis who make up almost three-quarters of the Jewish population.)

This new Jewish type, the Jewsraeli, is a patriotic nationalist for whom fighting for Israel and its safety (“at any cost”) is the ultimate Jewish creed: “The

predicted: The Jews and Judaism of the diaspora are increasingly and inevitably oriented toward Israel and its distinctive brand of civic religion. Moreover, this is true in both positive and negative ways: Israel is looked to as a source of pride, identity, and Jewish meaning, but the “Jewish question” has also, and with increasing virulence, become the “Israel question,” whether it is on the streets of Paris, in the British Parliament, or on American college campuses roiled by the controversies over the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement.

The Israelization of Judaism begins with the numbers. Of the 34 democracies in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Israel has by far the highest birth rate: about 3.14 children per woman. This is not just because of the fertility of the haredi (and religious Muslim and Druze) populations. Israeli women who describe themselves as secular or traditional but not religious have a birth rate higher than that found in any other OECD country. As the authors of a recent study note, “Israel’s exceptional fertility” is driven by its national culture:

Israel’s fertility is not only exceptional because it is high. It is exceptional because strong pronatalist norms cut across all educational classes and levels of religiosity, and because fertility has been increasing alongside increasing age at first birth and education—at least in the Jewish population. From an international perspective, these are atypical patterns.

Nowhere in the diaspora, outside of haredi communities, do Jews grow at such a fantastic rate, and, unsurprisingly, no Jewish culture in the diaspora has developed such a powerful formula for Jewish identity as the one developed in the State of Israel. Indeed, the most successful and celebrated program in promoting American Jewish identity is Birthright, which basically puts young American Jewish adults on a plane to Israel and introduces them to Jewsraelis.

Rosner and Fuchs’s Jewsraelis are certainly not the new Jews that Ben-Gurion expected, but they are similar in one crucial respect. Neither type is



Early image of Israeli soldier with national flag. (Judaica Palestine Collection.)

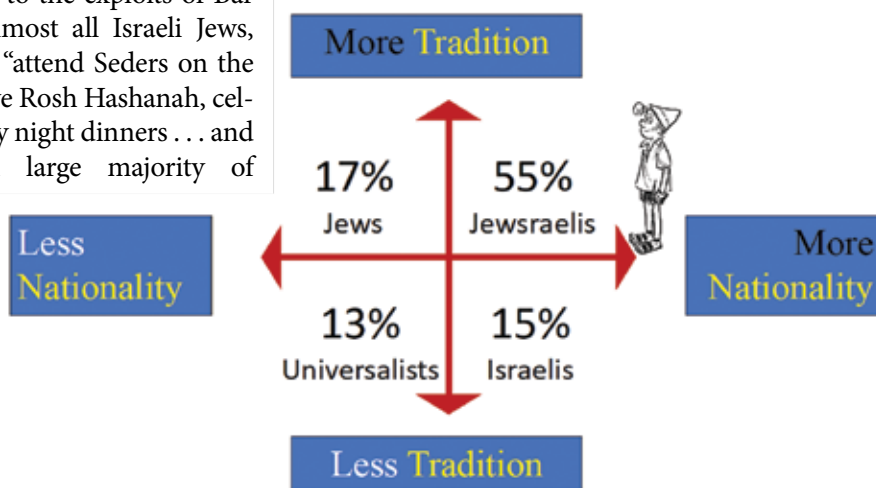


Chart depicting how Israelis identify themselves in terms of tradition and nationality. (Courtesy of the Jewish People Policy Institute, JPPI.)

Israeli Jew practices Judaism like no previous Jew.” Israeli Judaism is “an amalgamation of tradition and nationality. In many cases it is very hard—maybe impossible—to determine where the Jew ends and the Israeli begins, or where the Israeli ends and the Jew begins.”

Such Israeli Jews are, of course, very different from their American and European cousins whose national identities have been more or less distinct

preoccupied with “Jewish survival,” nor are they concerned about the loss of Jewish identity. Judaism for the Israeli Jew is an undisputed given. Meanwhile, Jewish life in the diaspora is increasingly overshadowed by Israeli trials and triumphs. As Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove of Park Avenue Synagogue recently wrote:

These days, American Jews no longer debate who wrote the Bible. Instead, we argue about Israel. Israel is what brings us together and what tears us apart. We work to keep our relationship with Israel strong and are anxiety-ridden at signs of its weakening. We fear for our children’s encounters with anti-Zionism on campus, and we hope that they sign up for Birthright trips. The labels that delineate our denominations are no longer based on belief or observance—Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist—but on our views about Israel: AIPAC, ZOA, JVP, J-Street and the rest of the alphabet soup of Israel advocacy.

All over the world, Israeli politics, culture, economics, and religion are more and more identified with the Jewish people and Judaism itself. Indeed, as one of us (Yossi Shain) has argued in these pages, the orientation toward Israel is even more pronounced in Europe, where it has increasingly become a life question—should I make aliyah? should my children?—first in France and now in England, rather than the kind of policy question debated in Cosgrove’s distinctively American alphabet soup of organizations.

Since its early days, the State of Israel has claimed responsibility for “Jewish interests.” Seven decades later, Israel routinely and decisively speaks on behalf of the Jews throughout the world. And hatred of Jews is increasingly expressed as hatred of the State of Israel, a phenomenon that has existed since the state was founded but has recently become more pronounced. (In May 2019 the German Bundestag voted to define the BDS movement as anti-Semitic, because it “questions the right of the Jewish and democratic State of Israel to exist or Israel’s right to defend itself.”)

From the interminable “who is a Jew?” controversies to political negotiations over how the Holocaust is remembered, the State of Israel has become the most powerful arbiter of the Jewish identity and memory. This is not an unalloyed good—there were, for instance, strong arguments against the deal Prime Minister Netanyahu cut over Polish responsibility during the Holocaust—but it is inevitable. The Jewish center of gravity—demographic, cultural, religious, political, and even economic—is in Jerusalem, not New York. The unprecedented Jewish identity of Rosner and Fuchs’s Jewsraeli is central to this development.

**N**ovelists often register social phenomena and trends before we social scientists discover them in our data sets, and this is certainly true of the new dominance of Israel in Jewish life. The

leading contemporary American Jewish writers have all found themselves increasingly, if ambivalently, drawn to Israel and the impact of Israel’s sovereign life on the question of Jewish kinship and Jewish values.

## The most successful and celebrated program in promoting American Jewish identity is Birthright, which basically puts young American Jewish adults on a plane to Israel and introduces them to Jewsraelis.

The literary historian Morris Dickstein has written, “Until the early 1980s there was . . . little trace of the Jewish state in American fiction . . . American writers by and large were not Zionists . . . Israel



Newborns in the nursery at the Bikur Cholim Hospital, Jerusalem. (Courtesy of Flash/90.)

was perhaps too insular to capture the imagination of assimilated writers.” By the last decade, it was an entirely different story. Michael Chabon, Nathan Englander, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Nicole Krauss have all found themselves exploring Jewish identity by turning to Israel. As Matti Friedman recently noted in these pages, “Jewish American writers of a few decades ago might have poked around the strange Jewish country in the Middle East, but they knew that the real literary action for them was back home. The novelists of 2017 don’t seem so sure.”

A character in Nicole Krauss’s novel *Forest Dark* says that “the Wealthy American, come to Israel to dip into the rich, authentic Jewish vein all those US dollars have gone to protect, so that he knows it’s

still alive over here and doesn’t have to regret too much; come to turn himself on again in the bracing atmosphere of Middle East passion.” In *Dinner at the Center of the Earth*, Nathan Englander captures the American liberal Jewish conundrum in regard to Is-

rael. His novel depicts progressive American Jews as caught in an insoluble dilemma. If they distance themselves from Israel, they wither as Jews, and if they take on or defend the Israeli point of view, they lose their status as liberals. As Friedman writes, “I don’t think anyone reading these books could miss their distance from the brash and rooted tone of ‘I am an American, Chicago-born.’ The center seems to have moved.” Indeed.

American Jewish identity, particularly but not only in its liberal form, evolved in a completely different historical and social context than the Israeli one, and yet American Jews cannot ignore Israeli Judaism. The relationship is not symmetrical. As Rosner and Fuchs show, the ordinary Jewsraeli tends to be indifferent to Jewish affairs in the diaspora, at least until there is a crisis in foreign affairs or an anti-Semitic attack.

None of which is to say that Israel or Israeli Jews have solved the problems of religion, state, and modernity. To the contrary, Israel culture and politics are perpetually caught in the tension between ardent nationalism and liberal democracy, between constant innovation and the demands of traditional halakha, and a dozen other versions of these tensions. For decades, the internal strife this engendered was contained mainly because of the Arab threat. That threat has changed in recent years as the region has become more chaotic and Israel has become stronger. But Israeli Jewish culture has also evolved, and the Jewsraeli identity that Rosner and Fuchs so ably limn has managed to hold the center and even command the world stage while maintaining the sense of Israel not only as a coherent, successful polity but as a family, albeit a troubled one.

The Israeli Jew’s strong sense that he has a home, and a place to come back to, allows him to move confidently and act in the world with comfort and a sense of security. If the Jewish 20<sup>th</sup> century was dominated by America, the 21<sup>st</sup> century shows every sign of being the Israeli century.

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*Yossi Shain is head of Tel Aviv University’s School of Political Science, Government and International Affairs and professor emeritus of government at Georgetown University. His latest book, The Israeli Century and the Israelization of Judaism (in Hebrew), is currently a bestseller in Israel. It will be published in the United States in 2020.*

*Michal Schwartz is a literary scholar and educator. She is currently a Goldman Fellow at Tel Aviv University’s School of Political Science, Government and International Affairs, where she studies the role of literature in Jewish societies.*

# Spiritual Survival

BY NADIA KALMAN

## *Vasily Grossman and the Soviet Century*

by Alexandra Popoff

Yale University Press, 424 pp., \$32.50

Reckless optimism has not traditionally been a characteristic of the Jewish author, and even less so of the Soviet Jewish author. And yet, in 1960, the novelist Vasily Grossman wrote to then-premier Nikita Khrushchev with an unusual intention. He wished, he wrote, to “candidly share my thoughts” with the most powerful man in a country that often murdered bearers of candor.

The argumentative thrust of his long, impassioned, and eloquent letter, which appears in Alexandra Popoff’s recent biography, *Vasily Grossman and the Soviet Century*, is essentially this: that Grossman’s *Life and Fate* is a truthful novel and Khrushchev is a truthful leader; therefore, Khrushchev should end its censorship.

It makes sense that, for Grossman, truthfulness was the paramount point in the book’s favor; he was well known for his “stubborn” adherence to that unfashionable principle. But did Grossman really believe that Khrushchev was as much an advocate of the unvarnished, difficult truth as he himself was? Although there was a relaxation of censorship under Khrushchev, with admissions about the “excesses” of Stalinism, the premier had also warned authors that, “We do not support democracy without borders. . . . We will find strength to restrict it . . . and will arrest people if necessary”: a chilling reminder of the state’s intention to continue its control over literature.

And of all truths for Khrushchev to defend, did Grossman really think he would take up the cause of *Life and Fate*, in which Grossman harrowingly depicted these so-called excesses, compared Hitler and Stalin, and—perhaps most dangerously of all, given the time and place—argued for the irreducible value of the individual human life?

In this letter, Popoff notes, Grossman bared his “deepest held beliefs.” Even more surprisingly, he wrote as if he and Khrushchev shared the *same* beliefs, drawing a direct line between the uncompromising truths within *Life and Fate* and the (very partial) truths within Khrushchev’s political speeches:

The strength and courage of your speech [at the XXII Party Congress] give reasons to think that norms of our democracy will grow just as production norms of steel, coal, and electricity grew after the days of economic collapse accompanying the Civil War. . . . I believe a new society is unthinkable without continuous growth of freedom and of democracy.

Grossman seems almost to be attempting to conscript

the premier as a comrade in the battle for transparency, democracy, and freedom. For a trained chemist and committed observer of the facts on the ground, this seems rather counterfactual.

## Grossman seems almost to be attempting to conscript Khrushchev as a comrade in the battle for transparency, democracy, and freedom.

Nor was this Thaw-era letter the first or only time Grossman displayed what Popoff calls a “desperate defiance” of the nature of the state and its



Vasily Grossman in an undated photo. (Institute of Russian Literature [Pushkin-House], St Petersburg/Alamy.)

leaders. Her compelling, perceptive biography focuses on Grossman’s working years, which coincided with the bloodiest of the Soviet decades. In the times of greatest terror, Grossman repeatedly risked his neck for his work, his family, and such unlikely, humanistic ideals as “love, mercy, forgiveness, and compassion.” Even more surprising, he built his appeals on a foundation of humanism (a philosophy often paired with the adjective “rotten” in the Soviet lexicon).

In 1932, Grossman wrote to Maxim Gorky—already a propagandist and obedient servant of Stalin, and about to become the key proponent of “Socialist Realist” norms—to argue against the censorship of his first novel with the assertion: “In our day truth and revolution cannot be separated.” (Gorky wrote back that Grossman’s was a “very bad and tormenting truth.”)

Several years later, at the height of Stalin’s Terror,

following the arrest of his wife Olga as the former “wife of a traitor to the homeland,” Grossman immediately brought her sons from her marriage to that “traitor” to live in his apartment, saving them from separation and the notorious NKVD orphanages for “socially dangerous” children. This in itself was a politically perilous act, as Grossman knew: The boys’ extended relatives refused to take them in. (In a late story, “Mama,” a nanny wants but does not dare try to save her charge from a such an orphanage.)

Grossman did not stop there. Next, he wrote many letters arguing Olga’s innocence, including one to Nikolai Yezhov, at the time the Terror’s chief architect. As Grossman understood, one could be killed merely for failing to denounce, let alone actively defending, one’s spouse. Such defiance, Popoff notes, amounted to “putting his own head in a noose.”

Similarly risky was the letter’s main argument: again, an attempt to conflate Soviet and humanistic values. The letter invoked the “humanity” of Soviet law and quoted Stalin’s comment, “The son is not responsible for the father,” ignoring Stalin’s implementation of collective punishment.

How much of what he wrote in these letters did Grossman believe? It is quite likely that, as Popoff asserts, Grossman’s 1938 letter to Yezhov did not “reflect actual belief in the ‘humanity’ of Soviet law”—but Grossman did seem to have had a desperate, willed belief in some humanity within those who created and executed these laws.

Unlike *Life and Fate*’s Commissar Berman, who merely utilizes ideals to manipulate soldiers’ behavior, Grossman seemed to genuinely hope to influence people by invoking humanist ideals. For example, he repeatedly asked whether Khrushchev had himself read *Life and Fate*—as if an experience of the book’s essential truthfulness would lead to a desire on the part of the premier and first secretary of the Communist Party to disseminate those truths. Against his scientific training, he seemed to be attempting a kind of alchemy, a reignition of the human spirit in his readers.

Grossman’s other acts of authorial courage included long stints as a war correspondent in Stalingrad and other fronts he sought out specifically for their dangerousness; a 1946 editorial in which he defined the Soviet Union’s war victory as a triumph of truth and compassion (Popoff notes, “Every word in this article argued against the regime”); and an appeal to Stalin himself to publish the first part of

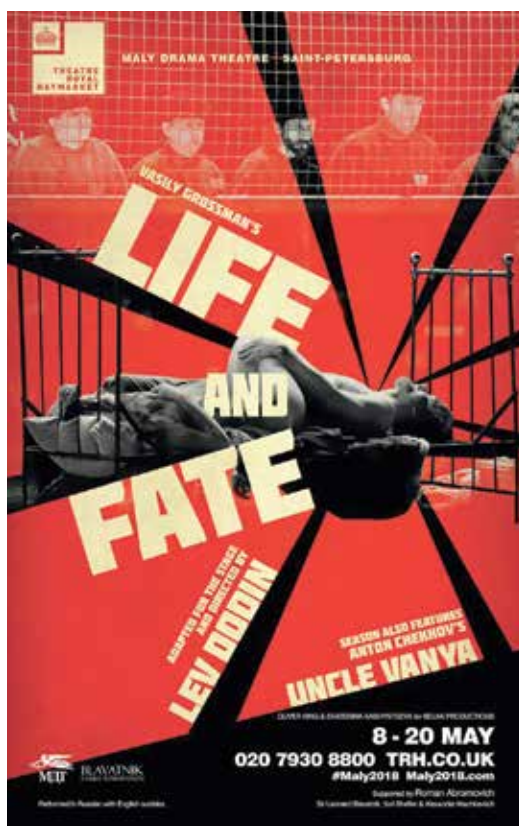
what would become *Life and Fate*—at the height of the postwar anti-Semitic campaign.

But perhaps his most spectacular act of defiance came immediately *after* his letter to Stalin. Unlikely as it may seem, Stalin seems to have been willing to allow publication, if only Grossman would remove a troublesomely Semitic character, the Jewish scientist Viktor Shtrum. Grossman refused, as he would subsequently refuse many, many similar calls to remove Jewish characters and references from his work, leading one beleaguered editor to compare him to a “mad bull.”

What neither the editors nor the apparatchiks realized was that Shtrum’s namesake had once lived among them. In fact, the character was named after and based upon a friend of Grossman’s, a brilliant physicist murdered in the Terror and subsequently “scrubbed” from history. So thoroughly did the Soviet regime erase all traces of the historical Viktor Shtrum that only recently did a literary researcher discover the real-life model for this character. Grossman refused to sacrifice the character of Shtrum, or any other character, for any promised “greater good”—any more than he would sacrifice an actual human life.

This stubbornness, as it was called at the time, almost led to his own destruction (his arrest was forestalled only by Stalin’s death) and ruined his chances of a successful postwar career. In his later years, he was largely unpublished, isolated, and assiduously surveilled by the KGB. He died of lung cancer in 1964, without ever being informed by his physicians that death was imminent—denied this truth, as was customary in that time and place.

In a regime that demanded black-and-white thinking (even as the objects of that thinking shifted with the political winds), Grossman argued for the irreducible complexity of the individual human. In a totalitarian state, he fought for “humanist ideals of love, mercy, forgiveness, and compassion.”



Poster advertising *Life and Fate* based on the book by Vasily Grossman, performed at the Theatre Royal Haymarket, London, May 2018.

What gave this self-described “stepson of the age,” a sufferer of phobias as well as entirely reasonable fears, such oversized courage? What gave this truthful, careful observer of the worst of what humans had done such sturdy faith in the human soul?

Grossman wrote often about the endurance of the human soul, but he understood its fragility, too. Living through “the cruelest time,” his characters mark the spirit’s erosion and erasure, in others and within themselves. In *Life and Fate*, Lyudmila Shaposhnikova notices a woman refuse help to a blind man and wonders whether the recent history of famines shaped this kind of callousness. Yet, Lyudmila herself refuses to help beggars.

As Grossman knew, one’s humanity does not naturally withstand terror. It must be held onto deliberately, against one’s instincts for survival, even against reason. The cruel genius of the show trials was to offer a compromise—life in exchange for surrender—and then, once surrender had been achieved, to withdraw the promise of life. *Life and Fate*’s Viktor Shtrum, frightened into signing an accusatory letter he knows to be false, tells himself to remember this experience always, to use the shameful memory as a prod for future integrity. (Grossman experienced a similar event, and Popoff suggests he may have made a similar vow.)

In the same novel, a beloved former teacher of the Gulag prisoner and Soviet true believer Abarchuk explains that continued faith in the party is a “weakness,” a ruse to maintain his spirit. Abarchuk argues with this teacher, then runs off, losing the chance to say goodbye to his dying friend. Enduring faith sometimes requires great sacrifices.

Optimism—faith in oneself and others—may often be an obvious lie, “opium,” as another character, Sofya Levinton, calls the rescue fantasies of her fellow cattle-car passengers en route to a death camp. But it is the only possible antidote to the lies accompanying the mad, all-consuming exercise of power. The people in the cattle car assure each other that the Soviet government has sent an ultimatum to Hitler demanding their immediate release: “*this wagon had its own strategy*, Sofya reflects, *a strategy founded on a passionate hunger to remain alive.*” If opium is required for spiritual survival, we would do best to take it.

Grossman’s letters and appeals, arguing for the lives of those closest to him and for the validity of the truths in his novels and stories, were perhaps his means of maintaining his own humanity, his own moral courage. His eccentric discipline was this: In trying to convince others of humanist values, including dictators and torturers, he revived those values in himself.

Sometimes, his willed optimism was even borne out. Grossman’s wife Olga was released by Yezhov, her children allowed to remain at home. Stalin did eventually allow the publication of the first part of *Life and Fate*. The entire book was published not “only in 250 years,” as several comrade-editors had once suggested, but in “merely” three decades—posthumously.

*Nadia Kalman is currently completing a novel set in Russia in 1917; her previous novel was The Cosmopolitans. She is also the editor of the website Words Without Borders Campus, which publishes global literature for classroom use.*



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*Holy City of Jerusalem, by far the most famous city of Judah and the entire Orient which in its dimensions and magnificence is conspicuous in this age of ours. (horizontal)*

# Red Light, Green Light

BY MICHAEL DORAN

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## ***Shadow Strike: Inside Israel's Secret Mission to Eliminate Syrian Nuclear Power***

by Yaakov Katz

St. Martin's Press, 320 pp., \$28.99

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In early July 2007, President George W. Bush called Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert to deliver a significant message. Some three months earlier, Olmert had dispatched Meir Dagan, the head of the Mossad, to Washington to inform Bush of a startling discovery by Israeli intelligence. Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, with the help of the North Koreans, was building a nuclear reactor. Assad had hidden the facility, soon to be known as al-Kibar, in the east of the country, in a remote valley near Deir Ezzor. Destroying it, they said, was imperative—and the clock was ticking. In a few months, the Syrians would introduce fuel rods into the reactor's core, after which it would be impossible to attack, because bombing would ultimately disperse radioactive material into the Euphrates River, which would carry it downstream to Iraq, poisoning countless civilians in two countries.

Olmert expected that the president would agree that the reactor had to be destroyed. He preferred for the American military to do the job, but if that was not possible, he hoped Bush would give his approval for an Israeli strike. When the president came on the line, however, he not only refused to destroy al-Kibar but said that he also expected Israel to behave with restraint. He planned to send Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to Jerusalem in the coming days. Olmert and Rice, Bush explained, would hold a joint press conference at which they would refer al-Kibar to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and to the United Nations.

For Olmert, this approach merely offered Assad an opportunity to save the reactor. "I understand your reasoning," he told the president, "but don't forget that the ultimate responsibility for the security of the State of Israel rests on my shoulders and I'll do what needs to be done and trust me—I will destroy the atomic reactor." The bluntness surprised Bush, but he did not rebuke Olmert. "We will not get in your way," he said. There would be no press conference with Secretary Rice.

Two months later, on September 6, Israeli warplanes successfully struck al-Kibar. They eliminated the reactor but did so in a particularly stealthy manner, one calculated to allow Assad to save face by behaving as if the attack never happened. Assad did not disappoint. He neither remonstrated nor retaliated, thereby avoiding an escalation that might have led to all-out war.

The July conversation between Bush and Olmert is the dramatic turning point in *Shadow Strike* by Yaakov Katz, the editor-in-chief of the *Jerusalem*

*Post*. Based on extensive interviews with the major players in Washington and Jerusalem, the book tells for the first time the full story of the discovery of al-Kibar, the ensuing diplomacy with Washington, and

**"Gutsy and decisive leader of integrity" is not the first description that leaps to mind when Israelis hear the name Ehud Olmert.**

the planning and execution of the Israeli air attack that destroyed the reactor.

Katz's storytelling brings a hair-raising, deeply consequential, and largely forgotten episode to life. As someone who served in the Bush White House working on the Middle East until April 2007, just



*The Syrian al-Kibar nuclear reactor before (left) and after (right) it was destroyed by Israel, on September 6, 2007. (Israel Defense Forces.)*

days before Meir Dagan came to Washington, I am intimately familiar with the political and diplomatic context of the events that Katz narrates. To the best of my knowledge, his account is not only fascinating but accurate in both fact and judgement.

A few years back, I asked a friend, a retired Mossad officer, to name the Israeli leader he respected most. His answer surprised me. "Ehud Olmert," he said without hesitation. Why? "Olmert had a bias in favor of action, made clear decisions very quickly, and, come what may, took responsibility for the results." When it came to intelligence operations, my friend continued, Olmert never played games. When faced with the need to decide whether to approve operations, other Israeli leaders would delay, maneuver, and scheme, aiming to take the credit for successes while escaping responsibility for failures.

"Gutsy and decisive leader of integrity" is not

the first description that leaps to mind when Israelis hear the name Ehud Olmert, whose reputation will be forever marred by two notable failings. First, Olmert stepped down from office in 2008 while under official investigation on a variety of corruption charges. He was eventually found guilty of, among other things, taking bribes when he served as mayor of Jerusalem and later when he was trade minister. Second, he mishandled the 2006 Lebanon War. That conflict ended in a stalemate between Israel and Hezbollah and revealed major shortcomings both in the decision making of Israeli leaders and in key institutions, including the hallowed Israeli Defense Forces.

According to the Winograd Commission of Inquiry's interim report, published in late April 2007, Olmert made military decisions "hastily" and without "systematic consultation with others." He announced unachievable war aims, the report further stated, and when their unrealistic nature became clear, he failed to adjust his goals. After the publication of these findings, his approval rating plummeted to 3 percent. The interim report came out immediately after Meir Dagan's April trip to Washington, and it haunted Olmert throughout the summer and fall. As he was making the fateful decisions that the al-Kibar question forced on him, public trust in his capacity for such decisions was essentially nil.

Smelling blood, his rivals began to circle. The greatest threat came from Ehud Barak, the defense minister and leader of the Labor Party, a coalition partner of Olmert's Kadima Party. Throughout the al-Kibar deliberations, Barak repeatedly second-guessed Olmert, arguing for delays in operational decisions. Barak's views carried special weight, because he was not just a former prime minister but also a former general, chief of the general staff, and one of the most decorated soldiers in the history of the Israeli military. Olmert, by contrast, ended up spending most of his short military service as a journalist writing for the armed forces magazine after an injury. Critics of his performance in the Lebanon War often noted that he lacked command and operational experience.

"Olmert," Katz writes, "suspected that Barak was banking on the final Winograd Report on the Second Lebanon War—scheduled to be released later that year—to be so critical that it would force Olmert to resign." Barak would then oversee the strike on Syria and use its success to propel himself back

into the prime minister's office." Of course, Barak told Katz a different story. "Olmert was dead set on attacking and showed little interest in the details," he said. "It was a pattern . . . Olmert had developed already during the Second Lebanon War."

Unlike an American president, an Israeli prime minister cannot simply order an attack; he must persuade his key cabinet colleagues to follow his lead. In the contest with Ehud Barak, the tyranny of the clock worked to Olmert's advantage. Almost everyone agreed that destroying the reactor before it went operational was a necessity. Over time, Barak's calls for delay appeared increasingly self-serving, and Olmert's considerable political skills did not desert him under pressure.

Little details in Katz's account reveal what one might call Olmert's emotional intelligence. His handling of Secretary of Defense Robert Gates is a case in point. Gates arrived in Israel about a week before Dagan was due to fly to Washington to reveal the reactor to Bush. "Olmert," Katz writes, "feared that Gates would hold a grudge . . . if he found out that [the Israelis] had intentionally kept him in the dark" during his visit. The prime minister, therefore, had Gates briefed about "the discovery of what might be a nuclear facility in Syria" but instructed the briefer not to make the reactor "the main focus of conversation." Dagan, Gates was informed, "would soon be traveling to Washington to provide the White House and the CIA with more details."

The choice to share more rather than less with the Americans was not without risk. By the time the Israelis attacked, approximately 2,000 people were in the know about al-Kibar. As time went on, the chances increased that the media would get wind of the story. If just one person had leaked, Assad would

have received warning of Israel's intentions—and a chance, in the words of CIA head Michael Hayden, to "turn [al-Kibar] into a day-care center, making a military operation virtually impossible."

Another danger was political opposition. Keeping Bush and his team informed risked the possibility that they would work to thwart an attack. In 1981, Prime Minister Menachem Begin chose to attack the Osirak reactor in Iraq without consulting the Americans at all. The operation was a resounding success, but the Reagan administration lashed out in anger. It stopped the delivery of four F-16 aircraft to Israel and supported a UN Security Council resolution that labeled the attack a "clear violation" both of the UN Charter and of international norms. Unfazed, Begin praised the operation as "a precedent for every future government in Israel."

Olmert recognized the force of the precedent—but with a twist. Keeping the Americans informed every step of the way, he gave future Israeli leaders an additional model of alliance maintenance. Although Bush had initially counseled Olmert not to attack, the red light that he had flashed quickly changed to amber; before long, it turned to solid green.

**B**ush's political circumstances in 2007 are the key to understanding his behavior. When the Israelis first informed him of al-Kibar, he, like Olmert, was suffering from low approval ratings due to his perceived mishandling of a war. Bush's critics castigated him for claiming that Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein had been hiding a nuclear weapons program. In addition to eroding public trust, this justification for the war also generated significant tension between Bush and the intelligence community. The CIA, especially, accused Bush of forcing it, for political reasons, to over-

state its confidence that Saddam Hussein was indeed secretly developing a nuclear bomb. With the United States military bogged down in both Afghanistan and Iraq, Bush was reluctant to launch a preemptive strike on another Muslim country based, yet again, on intelligence reports about a clandestine weapons program.

And the CIA, with respect to al-Kibar, was in no rush to make Bush's decision any easier. In mid-June, the president convened a crucial meeting of the so-called "Drafting Group," a tight circle of aides he had tasked to advise him on al-Kibar. A key question before them was whether the United States could trust the Israeli assessment. On that score, Michael Hayden, the CIA director, presented four key findings: al-Kibar was indeed a nuclear reactor; the North Koreans built it; the Syrians had been cooperating with North Korea for about a decade; and it was a component in a nuclear weapons program. Hayden presented the first three findings with high confidence. However, on the fourth finding there was, Katz writes, "a major problem."

While the CIA believed that al-Kibar was part of a weapons program, neither it nor the Israelis could find the other elements of the program. Where, for example, was the team that would assemble a warhead? Without solid proof of a weaponization effort, Hayden had to express the fourth finding with "low confidence." Everyone understood the gravity of those words. "The war in Iraq, and particularly the intelligence failure that got it started, hung over the people present in the room like a guillotine," Katz writes. "No one wanted to be caught again approving a war based on intelligence that ultimately ended with a 'low confidence' assessment."

No one, that is, except Dick Cheney. From that point forward, the vice president stood unwaveringly

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in favor of a military strike—by the United States or, as a second-best option, by Israel. Cheney was concerned that American inaction would erode the power of its deterrence. He wasn't just thinking about Syria and Iran. In October 2006, when North Korea had conducted a nuclear test, Bush declared that, "The transfer of nuclear weapons or material by North Korea to states or non-state entities would be considered a grave threat to the United States, and we would hold North Korea fully accountable for the consequences of such action." Backing up these words with action, the vice president believed, was imperative.

Cheney's experience as secretary of defense in the first Bush administration had given him a great respect for Israeli intelligence. Prior to Operation Desert Storm in 1991, the Israelis told him that Saddam Hussein had restarted his nuclear weapons program. "When [the IAEA] gained access to Iraq after the war," Katz writes, "Cheney was not surprised to learn that Saddam had in fact restarted his nuclear program." The Israelis had known more than the CIA. "Israel was at least equal if not better than we were in terms of [the Iraqi nuclear program]," Cheney would tell people.

He also realized that if Menachem Begin had not ordered the destruction of Iraq's reactor in 1981, the United States would have confronted a far more formidable foe in 1991. After the war, Cheney sent a satellite photo of the bombed-out Osirak reactor to David Ivry, the Israeli commander who had orchestrated the attack. It was inscribed "With thanks and appreciation for the outstanding job you did on the Iraqi nuclear program in 1981, which made our job much easier in Desert Storm!"

For Cheney, Israel was an asset to the United States. But Secretary of State Rice and Secretary of Defense Gates had a different take. Rice came away from the Second Lebanon War wary of Israeli capabilities and distrustful of Ehud Olmert's judgements. As for Gates, he had long believed that the Israeli tail too often wagged the American dog. Both officials feared that military action, whether by the United States or Israel, risked harming American interests and endangering the lives of American soldiers. In addition, Katz writes, "they had doubts about entering another conflict based solely on intelligence . . . obtained by Israel."

The split between his top advisors was laden with political significance for Bush. Cheney had been cast as the villain who strong-armed the intelligence community into accepting the erroneous assessment about Saddam's clandestine development of weapons of mass destruction. Given the widespread belief in this view, how could Bush order an attack on al-Kibar with only the vice president supporting him? The CIA refused to confirm unequivocally that al-Kibar was part of a secret weapons program, and his other top officials adamantly opposed a military strike. Bush had little choice but to opt for a diplomatic strategy.

As events unfolded, however, Bush's reactions indicate that, instinctively, he was closer to Cheney's position than his formal decision mak-

ing suggested. When Olmert, in the July telephone conversation, bluntly rejected Bush's preferred diplomatic strategy, Bush backed off. "We will not get in your way," he had told Olmert.

The next day, Bush met with his advisors to brief them on the situation. Gates, Katz reports, was livid. "Olmert, he told Bush, had asked America for help, but was unwilling to accept anything as an answer if it wasn't a US attack on Syria. America, he said, was being held hostage by Israel." Unconvinced, Bush praised the "steadfastness" of Olmert and instructed his team to do nothing "that would preempt Israel."



U. S. president George W. Bush with Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert in Israel, January 9, 2008. (Photo by Nati Shohat/Flash90.)

This order had practical consequences. It meant, among other things, that intelligence cooperation with the Israelis continued uninterrupted even as they planned and conducted the strike. The amber light was turning green.

On September 6, immediately after the Israeli planes destroyed al-Kibar, Olmert called Bush, who was on a state visit to Australia, a circumstance which forced the two to speak cryptically. "By the way, Mr. President," Olmert said, "remember there was something in the north that we didn't like?"

"Yes."

"I just wanted you to know that it doesn't exist anymore."

"Oh, that is very interesting. Do you expect any response or have a feeling about a possible response?"

"No. For the time being, it seems that all indications are that there will be no response."

The conversation, Olmert thought, was over. What came next shocked him. "Okay," Bush said. "I just want you to know that if there will be a response, you can count on all of America being behind you."

"Olmert shook with emotion," Katz writes. "It was a statement he would never forget, one that gave him confidence and assurance that he had made the right decision."

Rolling the dice of war is the loneliest decision of any leader, but for an Israeli, rolling them without superpower support is especially harrowing. Every Israeli leader knows Ben-Gurion's dictum: Never go to war without great power support. It is easy for Israel to start a war alone, but nearly

impossible to bring the conflict to an end on favorable political terms without help from a powerful backer in the international arena.

Israelis tell a story about what happened, in 1967, when Ben-Gurion schooled then-chief of staff General Yitzhak Rabin on the necessity of great power support. President Lyndon Johnson, preoccupied with the Vietnam War, had refused to take any significant action against Nasser in the lead-up to the Six-Day War. "You won't have to go it alone, unless you go it alone," he famously told the Israelis. In other words, the United States would not stop Israel from attacking, but it would not support the war. If things went wrong, the Israelis were on their own. During the tense waiting period between the Egyptian remilitarization of the Sinai and the Israeli decision to attack, Rabin visited Ben-Gurion, who was living in retirement at his home in Sde Boker in the Negev. Ben-Gurion, so the story goes, castigated Rabin for preparing to launch a war without American backing. Following the dressing down from Ben-Gurion, he suffered a nervous breakdown that incapacitated him for two weeks.

Bush probably never heard this story, but his own experience had taught him the loneliness of ordering men and women into harm's way. He offered Olmert the emotional and political support needed to face any adversity that lurked ahead. Among American presidents, Bush surely ranks as one of the most supportive of the Jewish State. Nevertheless, his administration still harbored very serious doubts about the Israelis' chosen course of action. The al-Kibar episode thus reminds us, among other things, that algorithms do not determine how best to secure national interests, people do.

Although the bet that Olmert placed on Bush entailed some risks, he always held a trump card up his sleeve: the IDF. Olmert was confident from the outset that even if the Americans would oppose military action, Israel still possessed the tools to get the job done. One of Olmert's colleagues, Katz reports, had been working for years to keep this fact at the forefront of the Israeli thinking. Major General Eliezer Shkedi, the commander of the Israeli Air Force, had distributed a dramatic photo to countless Israeli soldiers and airmen. The photo captures the moment when three Israeli F-15s, operating on Shkedi's orders, defied the Polish authorities and flew low over Auschwitz. Shkedi had personally inscribed most of the photos, "To remember. Not to forget. To rely only on ourselves." Shkedi was the man responsible for planning the al-Kibar operation.

This exhortation to self-reliance is laudatory, but as practical advice to prime ministers it probably requires a slight revision: "To remember. Not to forget. To rely, *when necessary*, only on ourselves." Olmert was wise to seek assistance from Bush, and he did so shrewdly, but his readiness to go it alone in very trying circumstances was his greatest asset. Without that, Bush's red light would never have turned to green.

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*Michael Doran is a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute. He served as senior director in the National Security Council in the administration of George W. Bush. He was also a senior advisor in the State Department and a deputy assistant secretary of defense in the Pentagon. He is the author of Ike's Gamble: America's Rise to Dominance in the Middle East (Free Press).*

# "Jacob Gazed into the Distant Future"

BY ALLAN ARKUSH

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## *Jacob & Esau: Jewish European History Between Nation and Empire*

by Malachi Haim Hacoen

Cambridge University Press, 752 pp., \$34.99

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Most Jews today know Jacob and Esau as the twin sons of our ancestors Isaac and Rebecca, embroiled long ago in a nasty family drama that peaked in the gentle Jacob's somehow acceptable theft of his rough-hewn, hairy-handed brother's birthright, and culminated in the two brothers' awkward reconciliation on the far side of the Jabbok River. They know, too, that Jacob went on to become Israel, the eponymous forefather of God's chosen people, and, if they were paying attention in Hebrew school or Intro to Bible, that Esau became the ancestor of Israel's cruel neighbor, Edom. Most people don't know, however, that the rivalry between the two brothers persisted in the conflict between—initially—the real Israel and the real Edom, and—subsequently, and more importantly—between the real Israel and the supposed heirs of Edom: Rome and Christianity. In *Jacob & Esau: Jewish European History Between Nation and Empire*, Malachi Haim Hacoen provides a dense but lucid account of how the history of this typology of sibling rivalry unfolded, first in the later books of the Bible and then, following the invention of a linkage between Edom and the Roman Empire, in rabbinic literature, and, finally, in later Jewish and Christian

writings, down to modern times. But Hacoen's book is not just the history of a literary trope; he also wants to "tell a European story that highlights traditional Jews," who understood the events of their own times in terms of it, and to do so in a way that will be of use

## "How could Edom become Rome, Esau's hands become Caesar's?"

to present-day and future Jews.

Hacoen situates this story, rather unusually, in "Jewish European history." If he doesn't call it European Jewish history, like just about everyone else, it's not because he wants to decenter anyone's Jewishness. What he wishes to stress is that the Jews' experience in Europe should be understood as that of very longtime and central participants in the formation of the continent's culture. Telling this story is, in Hacoen's eyes, an urgent task. He believes that the lessons that emerge from both the premodern traditions concerning Jacob and Esau and his version of Jewish European history can benefit the Jews of the whole world, who face a future that will be very different from the present.

"How could Edom become Rome, Esau's hands become Caesar's?" Hacoen writes, riffing on Genesis 27:22 ("yet the hands are the hands of Esau"), while asking a standing historiographical question. It was not, of course, through any kind of genealogical research but the result of historical experience. But which experience? Was it defeat at the hands of the Romans in the 1<sup>st</sup> century that inspired the rabbis to graft their new enemy onto their old one, or

did they do so only much later, after Rome had fallen victim to an originally Jewish heresy that laid claim to Jacob's heritage? Hacoen answers this question decisively. Parting company with many scholars of antiquity, most famously Jacob Neusner, he argues that "the Roman Empire and not Christianity was crucial to rabbinic Edom" and goes on to argue that

the late antique Christian–Jewish dialogue may have been more limited than some imagine; and that European Christendom's formation in confrontation with Islam first fixed the Jewish gaze on the Roman Empire's religious character and triggered the Christianization of Edom and Esau.

It was the Crusades, however, that "completed Edom's Christianization" and "shifted the major target of Jewish hatred from empire to church" without altogether dissociating the Holy Roman Empire from Edom. The "Roman Church, leading Crusades across the Mediterranean against the Muslims and in Europe against heretics, and overseeing the Inquisition, was the one to look truly imperial—Europe's leader and the Jews' mortal enemy." The church, Hacoen writes, "overshadowed the empire."

Whether it was focused on the empire or the church, and whether it was deployed by rabbis, poets, or mystics, the Jewish typology remained basically the same, depicting an ongoing struggle between "Jacob-Israel, praying to God and fulfilling the commandments," and a "violent rebellious Esau, the representative of cosmic evil." Born of defeat, these images discouraged political activism. "*Jacob & Esau* testifies," Hacoen tells us, "to the potency of memories of destruction and exile, to perpetual Jewish yearning for redemption and vengeance, and, above all, to a life of eternal waiting." To illustrate the paramount importance of boundless patience, Hacoen adduces the 6<sup>th</sup>-century liturgical poet Yanai, who ignored "Jacob and Esau's reconciliation, and mildly [rebuked] Jacob for prostrating himself before Esau, "pleading" for redemption and revenge." And he also tells us how the Zohar recounts that

When Jacob and Esau met, Esau offered Jacob to "let us share together this world," but Jacob declined: "You have first your dominion of this world, and [I shall] reserve myself for the world to come and for the latter days" (171a)... "Jacob gazed into the distant future . . . when his descendants should need the blessings in the struggle against the nations of the world . . . and therefore deferred the[ir] fulfillment" (145a, 172a).

Usurping on behalf of their own people the role of "the true Israel," some of the church fathers were inspired, naturally enough, to turn the typological table and brand the Jews as the descendants of



Meeting Between Esau and Jacob by Giovanni Maria Bottala, ca. late 1630s. (Capitoline Museums, Rome.)

Esau. But this was a relatively marginal phenomenon until deep into the Middle Ages, when “the first full-blown Christian typology of Jewish Edom” emerged from the pen of a convert from Judaism, Archbishop Paul of Burgos. By the early modern period, at least among some Protestant theologians and painters, Jacob and Esau came to symbolize not Christian and Jew but Catholic and Protestant, and the emphasis fell not on their rivalry but on their final reconciliation.

Reflecting the development of a new *modus vivendi* between Christians and Jews, the old myth of eternal enmity between estranged brothers tended to disappear from early modern Jewish texts, from the early 17<sup>th</sup>-century Yiddish “women’s Bible,” *Tsene-Urena*, to Moses Mendelssohn’s *Biur*. Later, in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Central Europe, the typology was “revitalized, repressed, transformed, rechanneled, and deflected, all in an effort to make it possible for Jacob to become a modern European Jew.” For early Reform preachers, for instance, “Esau remained a negative type, but he came to embody Jewish apostasy and pagan hedonism, rather than Christian malevolence.” Samson Raphael Hirsch, one of the founders of modern Orthodoxy, “presented Jewish emancipation as fulfilling Jacob & Esau’s reconciliation.” But the antagonistic Esau didn’t altogether vanish, even from Reform discourse:

At the height of the emancipation struggle in Austria in December 1862, none other than German integration’s chief Jewish exponent, Viennese Rabbi Adolf Jellinek (1821–1893), burst out during an anxious sermon against emancipation’s opponents: “Deliver me, I pray Thee, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, lest he come and smite me, the mother with the children” (Genesis 32:11).

As Hacoen chillingly reminds us: “Little did he know!”

One of the central idiosyncrasies of this big ambitious book is that Hacoen combines his survey of the history of the “Jacob & Esau” typology with an even lengthier study of the predicament of the Jews in modern Europe that has little to do with it, though it does focus very heavily on the ostensible heirs to one of Esau’s incarnations, the Holy Roman Empire and its Austro-Hungarian successor. He devotes a considerable amount of attention to Jews living elsewhere in the German cultural sphere, too, but scarcely mentions the Jews of Great Britain, France, or Italy, and he gives scant attention even to the Jews of Russia, who constituted for so long the majority of the Jews on the continent. This is because Hacoen isn’t really telling the story of modern European Jewry, he’s making an argument about it, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, or at least the possibilities it seemed to hold out, is central to that argument. “[T]his book,” he writes, following in the footsteps of the great historians Salo Baron and Simon Dubnow, “highlights the protections and opportunities extended to Jews in pluralist imperial orders, especially in Austria-Hungary, as an alternative to national integration.”

If the modern Jews’ choice has been between nation and empire, as his book’s subtitle has it, Hacoen is decidedly against the former. He force-

fully echoes Simon Dubnow’s famous criticism of the European nation-states for demanding that the Jews repudiate their distinctive national identities and merge with the general population. Like Dubnow, he singles out Count Stanislas de Clermont-Tonnerre, who in 1789, in the French National Assembly, promised everything to the Jews as individuals but denied them anything as a nation.

In Germany, when the Jews were “faced with the demand that they cease being a community,” they responded by formulating “pluralist visions of a multi-

within the imperial framework:

By offering the Jews the prospect of national autonomy, late imperial Austria extinguished the ghosts of Edom, lying dormant at its own foundation. Ancient Rome had put an end to Jewish autonomy and devastated the Jewish homeland; the monarchy, which traditional Jews saw as Rome’s successor, had been recreating a homeland for them.

## Hacoen is disturbed by the way “the inexorable logic of religious ethno-nationalism” has led some prominent religious intellectuals in Israel to exalt Esau as an honorable warrior.

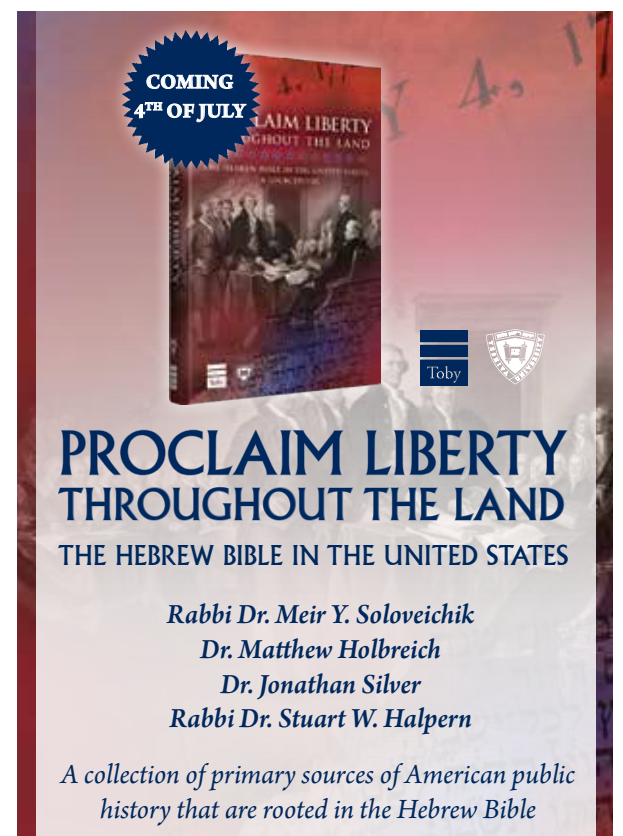
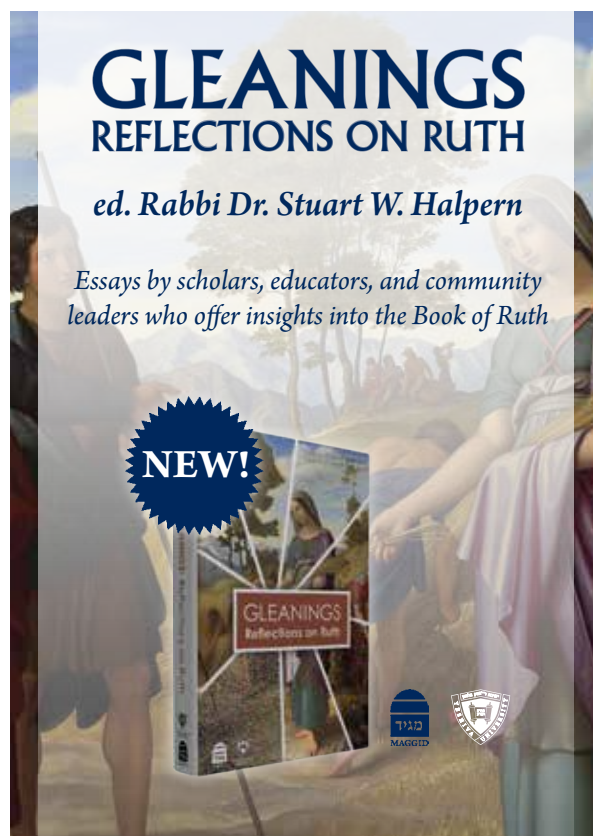
ethnic Germany, a nation-state united by a humanist political culture.” Unfortunately, “these visions, much admired today, had no traction among non-Jews. Nationalism liberated the Jews; the threat of banishment, should they fail to become part of the nation, always hung in the balance.” In the end, of course, racialized German nationalism denied the possibility of the integration of the Jews on any terms and led to their expulsion and much, much worse.

German racism became entrenched in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, too, but its non-German majority and highly diverse population left far greater scope for pluralist visions. By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, even as many Austrian Jews continued to hope for complete integration among the empire’s Germans, others came to conceive of the Jews as a separate nationality that ought to enjoy autonomy

But this moment was fleeting. “The monarchy’s disintegration in the aftermath of World War I dealt a debilitating blow to Jewish hopes for national autonomy.” The postwar Austrian republic that took part of its place was unable to “accommodate ethnic, cultural, and political diversity. Jews and other Austrians tell the European story of the nationalizing state’s failure.” The lesson to be learned from these developments is central to Hacoen’s entire narrative:

Since the nation-state emancipated the Jews, critics and admirers alike have regarded them as modernizers of European life. Austrian history suggests the opposite. The Jews flourished under the late empire; the nationalizing state, the heart of modernity, was their death writ.

## Ancient Texts, New Scholarly Readings



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For the Jews, the empire was gone but not forgotten. As Hacoheh demonstrates, nostalgia for it was widespread among the Jewish intelligentsia in the decades after its demise and found expression not just in the works of authors such as Joseph Roth, Franz Werfel, and Stefan Zweig. An idealized picture of life under Emperor Franz Joseph maintained a continuous presence in Hebrew literature from “Rabi Binyamin to Shmuel Yosef Agnon to Haim Be’er . . . well into the State of Israel.”

Hacoheh himself isn’t nostalgic for empire, exactly, but he does think that there are lessons from the historical experience that are worth remembering, especially for Jews. After World War II, he writes,

empire quickly became a pejorative term, associated with humanity’s darkest chapters. The idea that empire could be the historical norm and have something to recommend itself remained a taboo until the twenty-first century. The imperial world of Jews and other Austrians survived only in the literary imagination. This book has set out to reclaim it.

Nation-states still dominate our horizon, but they are, Hacoheh writes, increasingly challenged by “novel forms of globalization and regional collaboration,” and “lessons derived from the imperial legacy” may help Jews to address their problems. Hacoheh believes that it is very important to show how some of these lessons have been absorbed and applied in Austria. But he folds his account of developments there within a narrative of changes that took place throughout Europe, beginning in 1968, a

tumultuous year that “was at once symbol and stimulant of internationalization.” In the ensuing years,

[t]he easing of the nation-state’s political and cultural boundaries, and the growing acceptance of a measure of ethnic and cultural diversity accompanying Europeanization, attenuated, though by no means resolved, the problem of Jewish difference. Crucial above all was the growing European confrontation with the Holocaust and the definition of a new Europe, in the 1990s, against the Holocaust experience. Even today, when xenophobic nationalism has returned, vivid memory of the European past, and the determination not to repeat it, still offers Jews a measure of protection from the hostility directed toward Muslim and Roma communities. The Jews have become European.

Hacoheh does not substantiate these broad generalizations with an assessment of the state of affairs in all of the European countries that still have sizeable Jewish communities, and I am not at all sure that he could. Instead, he highlights the emergence in post-World War II Austria of a new generation of Jewish intellectuals who have “shaped new German-Jewish and European cultures.” And even about them he does not tell us very much.

Why did Malachi Hacoheh compose this unusual book? On the next-to-last page of the epilogue, he writes:

Let it be remembered that there was a moment

in history when a postorthodox Jew could imagine European culture accepting traditional Jews, and, indeed, recognizing them as an important marker of its history and culture.

That Hacoheh is a postorthodox Jew is something previously disclosed only in his acknowledgments and introduction, and even there the reader is left wondering exactly what he means. “Postorthodox Jews, like this author,” he writes in one of his first footnotes, “are traditional Jews conscious of their tradition’s historicity,” but since, in Hacoheh’s rather idiosyncratic terminology, “traditional Judaism” means rabbinic Judaism so broadly conceived as to include the Reform movement, this doesn’t help much. Setting this question aside, whose memory does he wish to assist in this passionate invocation? Not Jewish Europeans, for he seems quite doubtful about their prospects, after “recent waves of populist nationalism” have thrown “the postwar order, the EU, and the transatlantic world into a crisis.” This turn of events has led him to fear that “the anomaly of the postwar moment in Jewish European history may be approaching its end more quickly than I anticipated.” “World Jewry’s future,” he recognizes, “is not in Europe.”

He doesn’t think it’s in the State of Israel either. Hacoheh is, for one thing, “pained and ashamed . . . by the injustice that Jewish power has inflicted on the Palestinians, and its gross insensitivity to the humanity of others.” He is even more disturbed by the way in which “the inexorable logic of religious ethno-nationalism” has led some prominent religious intellectuals in Israel to exalt Esau as an honorable warrior and to incorporate him into their national ideal. For such people, he laments, “Jacob has turned into Esau.”

In his first chapter, he refers to the state provocatively, but in passing, along with ancient Judah and the Hasmonean Kingdom, “as short episodes of Jewish sovereignty . . . contingent on Near Eastern imperial lulls: the short-term absence of a hegemonic regional empire.” Almost 600 pages later, he puts things much more clearly:

If history offers any instruction, it is that the ethno-national conflict in Israel-Palestine will run its course, and the second Hasmonean state will have reached its end in my own daughters’ lifetime. A catastrophic end is not impossible, but more likely it will be an implosion, the ethnically and religiously diverse population in the Land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River claiming, albeit not necessarily receiving, their citizenship rights (or their equivalent). The Land’s historical diversity will reemerge with no empire yet in sight to impose order. The worst scenarios of ethnic massacres may be exaggerated, but Israeli-Palestinian relations give no grounds for hope of peaceful coexistence either, and one recalls that Jewish-Hellenic confrontation in Caesarea ignited the Jewish-Roman war that ended in Jerusalem’s destruction תתבבבא.

This dismal prospect does not entirely demoralize Hacoheh. The Hebrew letters at the end of his sentence, as he does not explain, stand for these words: May it be rebuilt and reestablished quickly in our days, amen. More reassuringly, Hacoheh then muses that in the aftermath of destruction “[m]any a Jacob will then again be crossing the Jordan River

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with their staffs, hoping to rebuild a community abroad and, yet again, return.”

Malachi Hacoen, an Israeli émigré who teaches at Duke University, apparently sees himself as just such a Jacob and also seems to regard his new book as, to some extent, a means of rebuilding a community in the diaspora—in preparation for some future return of the Jews to the Promised Land. In his



Emperor Franz Joseph, by Eduard Klieber, 1851. (Wikimedia Commons.)

epilogue, he looks back on his long, “loving post-modern exploration of premodern traditions” and proceeds to contemplate the way in which it might assist his teenage “daughters, Hadas and Lilach, and their (future) children,” who “will need to recover the experience of Jewish life in a state of expectation and relearn to wait”—like their ancestor Jacob.

What should they be waiting for? Maybe something that will never come. “*Jacob & Esau* testifies . . . above all,” Hacoen tells us, as I have already noted, “to a life of eternal waiting.” Perhaps for at least one postorthodox Jew, waiting—forever—is what it’s all really about.

On the other hand, there is Hacoen’s dark prognostication of an implosion in Israel that will be followed by a time when “no empire” is “yet in sight to impose order.” If and when such an empire does eventually loom into view, he may be thinking, the Jews who will still live in the Land of Israel, and others elsewhere who will care about them, might benefit greatly from all of *Jacob & Esau*’s lessons concerning the shortcomings of the nation-state and the virtues of empire, especially for the Jews.

*Jacob & Esau* is a sprawling, often scintillating book, a work of great range and depth. Hacoen’s analyses of the political outlooks of modern rabbis of very different stripes, ranging from Moses Sofer to Samson Raphael Hirsch to Adolf Jellinek, are innovative and eye-opening. His 10-page intellectual biography of the literary critic Erich Auerbach does a marvelous job of explaining that man’s complex and regrettable attitude toward his Jewish heritage.

Nonetheless, his book contains a disconcerting number of errors, small and large. I’ll mention only three, one ancient, one medieval, and one modern, each of which at least touches on a key theme of *Jacob & Esau*. Hacoen writes that the rabbis of the

second century “shrank from declaring Bar-Kokhba a false messiah, but they would not recognize him as Messiah son of Joseph, presaging Messiah son of David and destined to fall in war.” To support this assertion, he refers us to scholar of midrash Joseph Heinemann’s classic *Agadot ve-Toldotehen*. On the very pages Hacoen cites, however, Heinemann actually argues that the rabbis probably developed the concept of a preliminary Messiah son of Joseph who dies in battle only *after* Bar Kokhba went down in defeat, in order to salvage the reputation of the slain but still-admired hero.

Moving to the Middle Ages, Hacoen writes that, “Even the vicious anti-Jewish polemics of Peter the Venerable (1092–1156) and Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) did not seek to undermine the Jews as a protected minority.” Astonished to find Bernard described so harshly despite his strenuous efforts on behalf of the Jews during the Second Crusade, I checked Hacoen’s source, an article by Jeremy Cohen in the *American Historical Review* on the “study and evaluation of Judaism in European Christendom,” in which Cohen does not mention Bernard (though he has done so in several other publications, without ever describing him as a vicious anti-Jewish polemicist).

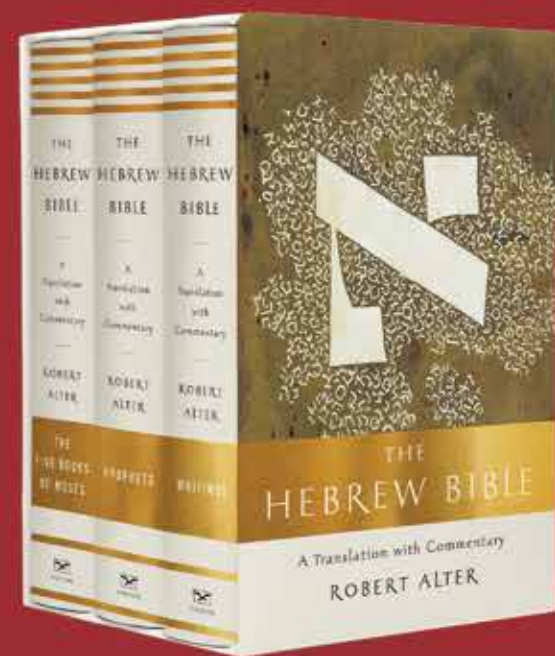
“Well into the 1780s,” Hacoen writes of the Jewish Enlightenment, “the Haskalah tweaked early modern parameters but could not imagine emancipation.” Moses Mendelssohn, the great standard-bearer of the Haskalah, he writes, could not “foresee Jewish citizenship in the nation-state, the quid pro quo of complete equality for complete integration.” But that is *precisely* what Mendelssohn bargained for in his *Jerusalem*, a book that unequivocally argued that every citizen in the state, regardless of religion, was entitled to full equal rights.

Of course, mistakes in a book of *Jacob & Esau*’s scope and ambition are inevitable. Still they ought to give the reader some pause, for the rhetoric of Hacoen’s book turns less on persuasive historical argument than an apparent sovereign command of more than 2,000 years of Jewish history and literature, which underwrites his vision of the whole. “Going beyond the polemics on Zionism,” Hacoen tells us, his book “makes it possible for pre-Holocaust and pre-Israel historiography, grounded in the *longue durée*, to speak to the Jewish future.” He writes, then, if not for the ages than for the next age, when the explosion or implosion that he quietly predicts in Israel will already have occurred, the dust will have settled, and the surviving Jews will be able to begin their work of reconstruction. No longer blinded by what he at one point calls “the miraculous Jewish State,” they “will need to fashion new paradigms to explain the Holocaust and the Jewish State’s place in Jewish history”—with Hacoen’s presumably post-humorous assistance. If, God forbid, that day should ever come, and a new post-postorthodox Yavne is convened, I greatly doubt that Hacoen’s scholarly tome will be of much help to its ages.

*Jacob & Esau* is a brilliant, bewildering medley of myth, history, literary criticism, and prophecy. Readers should mine it (carefully) for what is valuable and disregard what Hacoen thinks about what lies ahead and how we ought to deal with it.

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

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# The Witness

BY BENJAMIN BALINT

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## *H. G. Adler: A Life in Many Worlds*

by Peter Filkins

Oxford University Press, 424 pp., \$29.95

## *Theresienstadt 1941–1945: The Face of a Coerced Community*

by H. G. Adler, translated by Belinda Cooper

Cambridge University Press, 882 pp., \$135

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**O**n July 3, 1943, a 33-year-old inmate of Theresienstadt gave a talk about Franz Kafka. Decades later, invited to write a “living obituary,” he would introduce himself thus: “H. G. Adler was born in 1910 in Prague in the last years of the Habsburg Empire as Franz Kafka began to forge his unique art.”

Raised in an assimilated German-speaking family and baptized as a Protestant at age 12 (he later called the conversion a “charade”), Adler had seemed destined for a stellar literary career as an heir to the Prague Circle, a group of German-language writers that included Kafka, Max Brod, and the philosopher Hugo Bergmann. As Adler’s longtime friend and rival Elias Canetti remarked in 1937: “Even in Germany it would have been hard to find a man more dominated by German literary tradition.”

Unlike Brod and Bergmann, Adler did not make it to Palestine. “Although I could see what was happening,” he recalled, “for some strange reason I didn’t leave, even though I made some attempts to do so in 1938 and 1939.” Trapped in Nazi-occupied Prague, Adler had been assigned in late 1941 to “shattering” work in the city’s Jewish book depository, which in his description “soon turned into a center for the liquidation of possessions stolen from Jewish apartments.” While he was there, “Kafka’s library (taken from his sister’s apartment) passed through my hands.”

On that summer Saturday afternoon in the Theresienstadt barracks, on what would have been Kafka’s sixtieth birthday, Adler spoke of his literary predecessor with somber nobility as a “symbol of the suffering human of these times for whom no way out exists.” At the conclusion of the lecture, Kafka’s youngest sister, Ottla, thanked him on behalf of her family. Three months later, she was deported to Auschwitz, never to return.

Within weeks of his arrival in Theresienstadt, Adler commanded himself: “You must observe life in this society as soberly and objectively as a scientist studying an obscure tribe.” Adler did not expect to survive. If he did, however, he resolved to encompass the experience of the camps “in two different ways. I will research it in a scholarly manner and so separate it from myself completely, and I will also describe it in a poetic manner.”

Theresienstadt, the so-called model camp—pre-

viously a prison and then a garrison for the Czech army—featured its own pseudopostage and currency, but no gas chambers: It served instead as a depot for

Adler was liberated by American soldiers in April 1945; although he had never considered himself much of a Prague patriot, he returned to his

**Within weeks of his arrival in Theresienstadt, Adler commanded himself: “You must observe life in this society as soberly and objectively as a scientist studying an obscure tribe.”**

transports to the east. Adler called it a *Totemmühle*, or death-mill. The SS deported some 88,000 people from Theresienstadt; of these, 3,500 survived. An additional 35,088 perished in the unbearably cramped confines of the camp itself. “For the few who managed to live through it,” Adler wrote, “Theresienstadt held a grip on their lives forever. . . . It was the most hellish ritual mask that death ever wore.”

In October 1944, after 32 months in what he called a “bottomless abyss of coercion,” Adler and

native city in June. Eighteen members of his family had been murdered, including his mother and father. “Neither Dante nor Dostoevsky,” he noted the next month, “could have dreamed up such an unreal Hell, though Kafka could, for he has become a prophet, a realistic prophet of these horrors.”

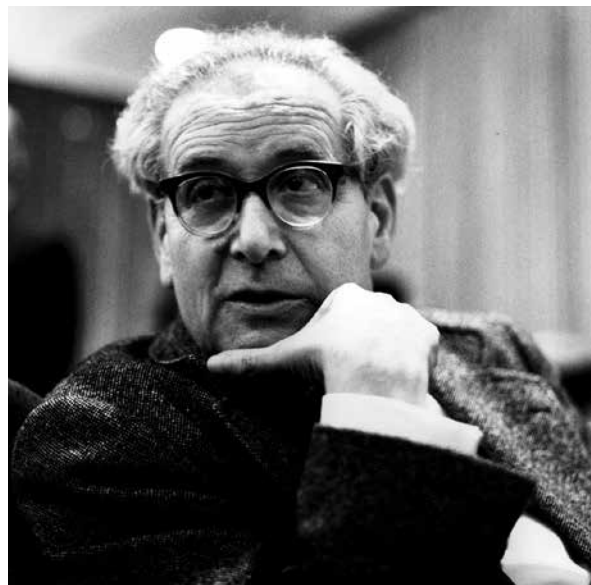
Before his deportation from Theresienstadt, Adler had handed Rabbi Leo Baeck a black leather briefcase for safe keeping. Besides a hundred poems he wrote in the camp, the first draft of a novel, and notes for his lectures, it held papers Adler and Gertrud had collected on the camp. “Many people stole bread, I stole documents!” he said.

After liberation, Adler returned to Theresienstadt to retrieve the briefcase. Determined to bear witness to the destruction and desecration, he began almost compulsively to transform its contents into a book. “I felt that I couldn’t go on,” he said, “that the pain of what had happened would leave within me an abyss of despair, a gaping emptiness, if I didn’t try, in this way, to overcome the monstrosity both intellectually and emotionally; and so I had no other option but to begin my research.”

**I**n a single 10-page serpentine sentence at the climax of W. G. Sebald’s final novel, *Austerlitz*, the title character burrows through a “heavy tome, running to almost eight hundred close-printed pages, which H. G. Adler, a name previously unknown to me, had written between 1945 and 1947 in the most difficult of circumstances, partly in Prague and partly in London, on the subject of the setting up, development, and internal organization of the Theresienstadt ghetto.” Jacques Austerlitz, a Czech Jew who lost his mother to the Theresienstadt death-mill, reads the book “down to the last footnote,” afterwards lamenting “that now it is too late for me to seek out Adler.”

In 1947, before the imminent Communist takeover that would once again rob Czechoslovakia of its independence, Adler fled from Prague to England. “I celebrate as my day of liberation that of my arrival in England,” he said, “rather than the day in April 1945 on which I was rescued from the power of Nazi Germany.” He was met on arrival by Elias Canetti; the anthropologist Franz Baermann Steiner, his closest friend; and Bettina Gross, a Prague-born artist soon to become his second wife.

Adler carried with him the bulky first draft of what would become one of the first scholarly studies



H. G. Adler, 1970, Austria. (Brigitte Friedrich/Süddeutsche Zeitung Photo/Alamy Stock Photo.)

his wife Gertrud, head of Theresienstadt’s medical lab, were crammed onto a freight car and deported to Auschwitz along with her 64-year-old mother. The mother and daughter were gassed on arrival.

Adler survived not only Auschwitz but also Langenstein, an underground forced-labor subcamp of Buchenwald. Describing the latter, he wrote:

Just imagine, you are yourself half-starved, crawling with lice and filthy, tired and feeling faint, and all around you can be heard the cries of the most pathetic misery as each day masses of people die over whose bodies you trip, as you notice how they have been literally beaten and also desecrated, as well as robbed, and how they have been forced to do deadly work that even a healthy and well-fed person could not stand to do, while you have to look on and can do nothing at all.

of the Holocaust: his comprehensive study of Theresienstadt. Completed the next year, its understated but tactile prose offered a detailed anatomy of every aspect of the camp: the adulterated “wordscape” of the German camp jargon; the daily caloric intake for malnourished children; the varieties of work details; the cynical charade that duped inspectors from the International Red Cross during their visit in June 1944; and the psychology of *Judenrat* elders such as Benjamin Murelstein, whom Adler describes as “well armed against compassion” (and who sued the publisher for damages). In the only personal words in the volume, Adler dedicated it to Gertrud, who “for thirty-two months did all she could for her family, up to the limits of her strength.”

Adler’s friend, the Vienna-born novelist Hermann Broch, praised the book’s “cool and precise method” and “the vivid immediacy of the writing.” Even burdened by bureaucratic detail, the narrative collage reads like a novel. In fact, Adler described his book as “a Kafka novel with the terms reversed, transcribed according to reality.” His only son, Jeremy Adler, professor emeritus of German at King’s College London, told me in a telephone conversation: “The world of Terezín struck him throughout as Kafkaesque.”

The book struck many readers as miraculous. “It’s hard to imagine that such a gentle and sensible person remained so mindfully present and capable of objectivity amid such an organized Hell,” Theodor W. Adorno wrote, “. . . and for this he deserves not only the thanks of those on whose behalf he wrote, but the undiminished admiration of all the rest of us who believe that they could never equal him.”

And yet only in 1955—and only

with Adorno’s intervention in raising funds to cover printing costs—did Adler succeed in publishing the book in Germany, where it has remained a fixed point of reference ever since. In the meantime, failing to secure an academic post, Adler lived in penury. (He succeeded in getting full reparations from Germany only in 1960.)

Attempting to find an American publisher, Hermann Broch enlisted the help of Hannah Arendt of Schocken Books and Elliot Cohen, founding editor of *Commentary* magazine—to no avail. It would be 62 years before *Theresienstadt 1941–1945: The Face*

*of a Coerced Community* would appear in Belinda Cooper’s faithful and fluent rendering into English (edited by Amy Lowenhaar Blauweiss). “[I]t seems inconceivable today how difficult a task it was,” Jeremy Adler noted, “how little moral support he received—there was no question of financial aid!—and how much opposition he encountered. . . . [T]he scholarly establishment proved at best indifferent and at worst hostile.”

That Adler—author of 26 books of history, fiction, poetry (his volume of collected poems runs to 980 pages), and what he called “experimental theology”—has remained so unknown to English readers for so long is a dereliction. Peter Demetz, the Czech-born scholar of German at Yale, called it “one of the great intellectual scandals of our time,” given that Adler rightfully belongs “on the very heights of world literature.”

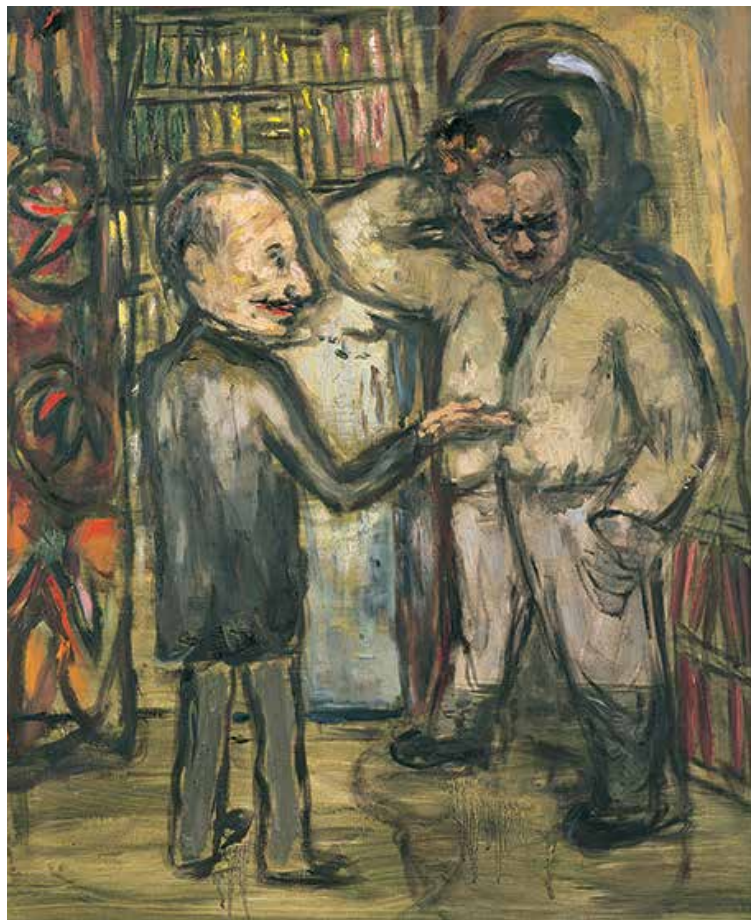
In *H. G. Adler: A Life in Many Worlds*, a fascinating and scrupulously researched authorized biography of Adler, Peter Filkins, a professor at Bard College at Simon’s Rock, cites “the critical neglect that hung like a veil over his achievement,” especially his six novels. “Neither Germany nor the world was ready for novels about the Holocaust in the 1950s,” Filkins writes elsewhere. At the same time, drawing on Adler’s extensive literary estate kept at the German Literature Archive in Marbach, Germany (Oxford’s Bodleian wasn’t interested), Filkins unveils the lambent artistry of that achievement.

Other survivors wrote memoirs. According to Filkins, however, Adler was “the first Jew writing in German to publish a novel about his ordeal [in the camps].” A trilogy of his novels has in the last decade belatedly come out in Filkins’s finely wrought English translations.

*Panorama*, a first novel “soaked in autobiography,” as Adler put it, was written in 1948, but it took 20 years to find a publisher courageous enough to bring it out. In 10 vignettes, its gradually coagulating language tells Josef Kramer’s coming-of-age story in Bohemia, affording us glimpses of him as a suffocated boarding-school student (he calls the school “The Box”), a 20-something staffer at a Prague cultural center mired in Marx Brothers absurdity, a forced laborer imprisoned in “a deep hole of horror” and “robbed of the justification for existence,” and an unmoored exile in Britain who retreats into philosophical ruminations. Adler no doubt intended his character’s name to evoke Josef K., Kafka’s most well-known protagonist.

*The Journey*, with its intentionally disorienting shifts of tense and voice, was written in 1950 and published by a small press in Bonn in 1962. Elias Canetti called it a “masterpiece.” Despite his aversion to Holocaust fiction, Harold Bloom would declare that “this book helps redeem an all-but-impossible genre.” Not everyone agreed. Rejecting the novel, an editor at the British publishing house Secker & Warburg advised Adler that “he would have more success if he wrote a book on the death camps in the style of Norman Mailer’s *The Naked and The Dead*.”

*The Wall*, a modernist meditation on survivor’s guilt, was completed in 1956, though not published in Germany until 1989, a year after Adler’s death. Its main character, Arthur Landau, is divided by an invisible wall of incomprehension from his past and present both. “I soon appreciated that there was one too many people in the world, and that was me.” In



Conversation in the Library, 1950, by Marie-Louise von Motesiczky, shows Elias Canetti and Franz Steiner. (Courtesy of Marie-Louise von Motesiczky Charitable Trust and Literature Archive Marbach.)



A photograph documenting the filming of *Theresienstadt*, a Nazi propaganda film made to show they were not mistreating Jews in the ghettos. (Wikipedia.)

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a poignant passage, Adler’s narrator compares Landau to a signpost,

scorned by disaster in a deadly snowstorm; when the storm had moved on, all his companions had been frozen to death, the signpost is shattered, no destinations can be deciphered on its fragments, and the paths themselves have ceased to exist.

Landau, unbowed, is given the first and last word: “You have to be able to feel broken and yet not damn the world.”

Timely and untimely, each of Adler’s novels inhabits the borderland of reverie and reality. They hardly mention the words “Nazis,” “Jews,” or “camps.” In *The Journey*, for example, Adler calls Jews “the forbidden,” and in *Panorama* “the lost ones.” He refers not to the gas chamber but to the *Mordtempel* (temple of murder); not to Hitler but to “the Conqueror.” He names Prague only as “over there.” Adler’s mix of allusions to the past, present, and future,” Filkins observes, “taps the ability of montage to link seemingly disparate times and places such that, again as in Kafka, one place is interchangeable with another amid the nightmare of a seemingly inescapable labyrinth.”

Adler returned in his last decades to the documentary mode. Drawing on his extensive research in Gestapo files, he submitted a 41-page affidavit to the Israeli prosecutors in the trial of Adolf Eichmann. Awaiting trial, Eichmann read parts of Adler’s Theresienstadt study in his cell. Arendt relied on it heavily in her reporting on the trial in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

At a time when interest in such things was still scant, Adler meanwhile coedited a 400-page collection of documents and eyewitness accounts called *Auschwitz: Testimonies and Reports* (1962). Filkins calls it “the first major documentary account of Auschwitz in any language and the first time that experience of the victims was told from ‘the inside’ rather than only from the perspective of the perpetrators.”

Finally, Adler labored on *The Administered Man*, an encyclopedic account of the deportation of German Jews and of the administrative apparatus and abuse of state power that made it possible, which he published in German in 1974. Adler considered it his “greatest scholarly achievement.” It is still untranslated.

In assessing that achievement, Jeremy Adler remarked of his father: “The prisoner became an observer, the observer a theorist, the theorist a witness, and the witness an admonisher.” What binds those roles together, he added, was his father’s conviction, “ultimately grounded in his Jewish faith, that a system of beliefs, ethical values, and the basic political concepts of human rights and democracy do make sense. Their abuse, however terrible, did not destroy them.”

In the first essay he wrote after the war, H. G. Adler expressed the hope “that something can be formed out of this last darkness that may indeed become light.” Contrary to his own lecture on Kafka, Adler embodied that hope: Even where the labyrinth’s signposts are shattered, a way out toward the light exists.

*Benjamin Balint, a writer living in Jerusalem, is the author of Kafka’s Last Trial (Norton).*

# Poisoned Gefilte Fish, Broken Heart

BY ALLAN NADLER

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## ***Broken Heart / Broken Wholeness: The Post-Holocaust Plea for Jewish Reconstruction of the Soviet Yiddish Writer Der Nister***

by Ber Kotlerman

Academic Studies Press, 300 pp., \$69

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In his introduction to *The Birobidzhan Affair: A Yiddish Writer in Siberia*, the translation of Yiddish poet Israel Emiot's harrowing prison memoirs, Michael Stanislawski wrote that its "true, if unstated, subject . . . is the tragedy of modern Jews' nearly boundless capacity for self-delusion." Emiot had been among those who allowed themselves to believe in the project to create a Jewish state in the Soviet Union and were cruelly fooled not once but twice by Stalin. The well-known contemporary saying notwithstanding, it would be unfair to shame them for their gullibility. After all, by the time Emiot and his fellow Yiddish writers in Birobidzhan were about to be sent to the Siberian Gulag in 1948, self-delusion—that is to say, hope—had become the only alternative to despair and madness.

The Soviets' initial promise, in 1928, of some form of Jewish autonomy in an isolated, forbidding, eastern corner of the republic, bordering on Japanese-occupied Manchuria, ignited the first flowering of hope in Soviet Jewish national autonomy. This hope was crushed by Stalin's Great Purges less than a decade later, by the end of which there remained almost nothing distinctively Jewish about the farcical "Jewish Autonomous Region." Already well before the purges, more than half of the original Jewish settlers had long abandoned Birobidzhan and returned to their homes, in Moscow and Minsk, and—incredibly—Los Angeles, New York, Montreal, Buenos Aires, Haifa, and Tel Aviv. The intense, much briefer revival of the initiative after the Holocaust lasted less than two years, culminating in the show trials of Jewish literary, cultural, and political leaders, Emiot and his friend the great novelist known as Der Nister among them, and their exile to the Siberian Gulag.

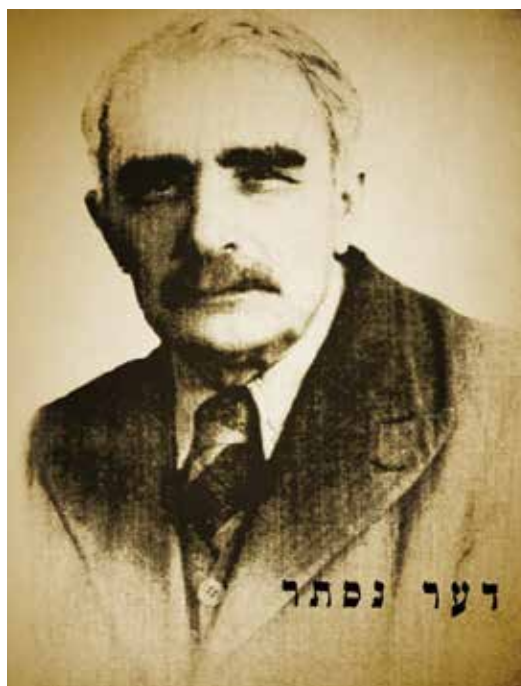
Reality never discouraged pro-Birobidzhan Jewish organizations in America and Canada, such as IKOR (the Organization for Jewish Colonization in Russia) and Ambidjan, which continued to publish propaganda about Birobidzhan, in Yiddish and English respectively, through the mid-1950s. The New York Communist Yiddish daily *Morgen Freiheit* not only failed to report on the many disastrous crop failures, floods, and famines in, and evacuations of, Birobidzhan; it suppressed any news of Stalin's brutal purges until after his death.

In 1947, the Kremlin had officially "unfrozen" the Birobidzhan initiative. This resulted in the stunningly fast displacement of more than ten thousand Jews from their prewar homes, mostly in Ukraine,

via a series of 11 long Pullman freight trains (*eshelonen*, in Yiddish), each typically carrying more than one thousand Holocaust survivors on almost month-long treks to an alien region well over four thousand miles from their prewar homes. While the

## **More than 10,000 Jews were displaced via 11 long Pullman trains.**

destination's isolation, primitiveness, and huge distance from these Jews' places of origin were always obstacles to the success of the Birobidzhan project, the idea of living so far from the former Pale



*Pinkhes Kahanovitsh, also known as Der Nister, "The Hidden One."*

of Settlement also offered these Ukrainian pogrom and Holocaust survivors an alluring, if ultimately illusory, sense of security.

As the Yiddish poet Yosef Kerler, who was among the Jews who departed Vinnytsia, Ukraine, on the *tsveyter* (second) *eshelon* to Birobidzhan on June 6, 1947, observed, they had:

a vague, stubborn dream—to be as far away as possible from "home," where the ground was drenched in Jewish blood, to be as far away from the non-Jewish neighbors, who either gave a hand to the terrible slaughter of the Jews, or merely plundered Jewish property, or outwardly appeared compassionate while in reality furtively rejoicing. To be free from the eternal hatred. To be among [our] fellow Jews [*tsvishn undzere*].

In short, they dreamed of a land, or at least a territory, perhaps a Soviet state, of their own.

Israel Emiot had been living in Birobidzhan since 1944 as one of its few distinguished intellectuals. His literary loneliness was briefly alleviated when that second *eshelon* pulled into the world's only train station whose name was—and remains today—boldly carved in granite Yiddish letters. For on that second transport was not only his fellow poet Kerler but the older and more illustrious writer Pinkhes Kahanovitsh, known by his pen name Der Nister (The Hidden One), as well as journalist Ilya Lumkis, the Birobidzhan "bureau chief" (and sole correspondent) for the Moscow Bolshevik Yiddish newspaper *Eynikayt*.

The four writers quickly became close collaborators who tirelessly promoted the establishment of Yiddish schools, adult Yiddish language classes, Yiddish literary soirées, the expansion of the repertoire of the Birobidzhan Yiddish State Theater, significant additions to the Yiddish—and even Hebrew—holdings of the Sholem Aleichem Library, and so forth. Emiot and Der Nister had a special bond, as—in contrast to almost all the other artists who had ever come to Birobidzhan, along with the majority of Yiddish writers across the Soviet Union—they shared profoundly religious upbringings and advanced, one might say higher, Jewish educations. Emiot was one of Der Nister's very few readers who caught his every allusion to biblical, rabbinical, and kabbalistic texts and understood the deep Hasidic resonance of his chosen pen name, an allusion to the period of self-seclusion before a *tzaddik* revealed himself.

Der Nister was born and raised in Berdichev, where he had been steeped in the world of Hasidism. Unlike many of his colleagues who had left the world of tradition, he never stopped studying Kabbalah and the teachings and stories of the great Hasidic masters, Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav in particular (his brother became a Bratslaver Hasid), as his great unfinished novel *The Family Mashber* testifies. Emiot, for his part, was raised in a pious Polish Jewish family and had been ordained at the fabled Yeshivat Hakhmei Lublin. Moreover, Emiot was a proud descendent of the great Polish Hasidic master Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchak (The Holy Jew) of Przysucha—follower of the great *Khoyze*, or Seer, of Lublin.

During their brief time together in Birobidzhan, Der Nister told Emiot an odd, haunting story about his holy ancestor and his teacher, the Seer.

Rabbi Yaakov Yitzhak of Przysucha was among the guests at the Passover seder of his teacher, the famous "Seer of Lublin." The latter sat at the table and read . . . with his head and body wrapped in a talis ("prayer shawl"). At the words, "*uvemorah gadol: zeh gilui shekhinah*" ("and with great terribleness—this refers to

the revelation of the Divine Presence”), he removed his *talis* to reveal his face. When this happened, from fear and dread of the Almighty . . . Rabbi Yaakov Yitzhak of Przyscha lost all his teeth, except one . . . he . . . would call this tooth *roshe* “the evil one”—because it did not fall out at the words of his teacher: “and with great terribleness.”

As Ber Kotlerman deftly notes in his important new monograph on Der Nister’s fateful trip to Birobidzhan, *Broken Heart/Broken Wholeness*, he used this tale to dramatize the need for Jewish writers to be willing to sacrifice themselves for *Yiddishkeit*. As he put it, “*Ot dos kharakterizirt di groyse, gute yidn*”—this, the willingness to “fall out,” or die, characterizes the great and good (Hasidic) Jews. As for Kerler, despite his more secular upbringing, he fully shared these two colleagues’ passion for Yiddishizing Birobidzhan, as well as a healthy, if carefully concealed, skepticism about Bolshevik rhetoric and enforced Soviet cultural and literary norms. All three were fearlessly dedicated to creating a meaningfully Jewish, which is to say Yiddish, homeland in Birobidzhan.

Kotlerman’s book not only vividly recounts Der Nister’s experiences in Birobidzhan but also provides the first English translations of the powerful, moving essays he composed while travelling on the *eshelon* from Vinnytsia, as well as a substantial excerpt from the hitherto unexamined six thick volumes of Russian transcripts of the subsequent trumped-up “Birobidzhan Affair,” in which Der Nister, Emiot, Kerler, and others were accused of being Jewish conspirators.

In an appendix, Kotlerman also reproduces photo images of the very last writings that have survived from Der Nister’s hand, his Birobidzhan manifesto, which have never before been seen by scholars, along with a brief, trenchant explication of that barely readable manuscript. The manifesto, which may have begun as notes for lectures, reveals the inner sentiments of a singularly important Yiddish writer during the final year of his life while confined to a Siberian camp for the crime of having taken the promise of a Jewish Autonomous Region seriously:

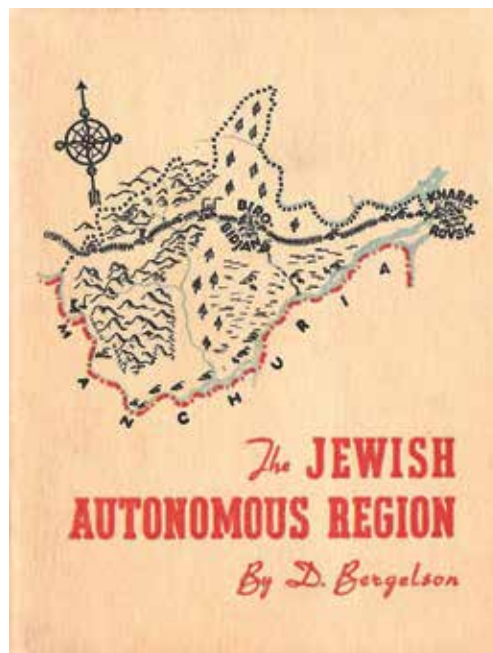
. . . the main condition for a people to be considered as such is, first of all, soil, a place . . . where all the forces and abilities given to it should find their fullest expression, sovereignly, without hindrances . . . Is it necessary to say here that we are talking about the Jewish Autonomous Region, which could, today or tomorrow, with our good will, turn into a [Soviet] republic, the seventeenth, in addition to the sixteen that already exist?

In a characteristic turn of phrase, Der Nister wrote that the realization of this possibility would be a “*brokhe af doyyes*” (blessing for future generations). The bitter irony is almost unbearable.

The idea of resettling Russia’s Jews, who had been concentrated in the former Pale of Settlement and most of whom were merchants and craftsmen, was originally propelled by two priorities of the young Soviet State: namely to decisively shape the national, cultural, and linguistic development of its large national minorities and to

transform the Jews from the merchant class to a “useful and productive” agricultural one.

The Jews had a distinct language and culture, to say nothing of their rich Yiddish and Hebrew literatures. What they lacked was an identifiable Jewish land. The attempted mass transition of the Jews from the merchant class to being “productive” agrarian citizens of the USSR had resulted in the creation of more than a score of Jewish agricultural settlements in the early 1920s, mostly in Crimea. In 1928, the Central Executive Committee of the Soviet Union designated an area in the easternmost region of the Soviet Union, roughly the size of the



An English translation of David Bergelson’s book.

USSR’s almost four million Jews, the Jewish population of this autonomous region never exceeded 18,000, less than one-tenth of a percent of Soviet Jewry and less than 10 percent of the general population of the region.

The single most distinguished Yiddish writer who advocated for a Soviet Jewish cultural, but not nationalist, home during this period of the “first aliyah” (if I may) was David Bergelson. After a brief visit to New York, he had concluded that America’s Jews were doomed to total assimilation. As for the Jews in Palestine, Bergelson described them vividly, if unoriginally, as “dancing on a volcano,” after



A resident with the Yiddish newspaper Birobidzhaner shtern, 1935.



Birobidzhan’s train station, with a sign in Russian and Yiddish.

state of Vermont, as a Jewish agricultural colony, which would eventually be called Birobidzhan. The initial objective was to rapidly resettle at least 50,000 Jews there as “useful and productive” citizens within Stalin’s “multiethnic” republic.

This original goal of agricultural resettlement quickly yielded to the forbidding realities of the region and the gradual industrialization of Birobidzhan. Quasi-nationalistic ideals of a distinctly Jewish homeland, a cultural center with Yiddish as its official language, became increasingly more of a priority than farming. In 1934, the Central Executive Committee of the Communist Party upgraded Birobidzhan’s status to that of a Soviet Jewish Autonomous Region. The problem was that among the

the murderous Arab riots of 1929. Bergelson visited Birobidzhan briefly in 1932. Although he never returned, he became one of its most influential enthusiasts, writing ecstatically about the hypnotizing effects of the deep blue northern skies, beautifully rugged mountain ranges, and seemingly endless vistas of her plains. What he chose not to do was look down to notice the deep muds that re-

mained after the savage winters, the brutally humid summers, or the alternating floods and droughts which doomed the hard work of the idealistic Jewish farmers on Birobidzhan’s *kolkhozs*, or collective farms. This was the poison literary fruit of either shameless propagandizing or fear of execution. Bergelson went so far as to extol, of all things, the exceptionally hot and healthy sun in Birobidzhan, which, he claimed, was “three times as powerful as the sun in Berdichev, Minsk, or Kiev,” and absurdly to proclaim that, “This sun, coupled with the sun of the socialist homeland, makes the Jewish people healthy and strong.” This was precisely the kind of craven, self-shaming, and farcical Yiddish verse that the Soviets long and happily exploited. One of the

greatest writers in Yiddish literary history had tragically become one of Stalin's most useful of Jewish idiots. He published two "manifestos" proclaiming his loyalty to Birobidzhan, which he extolled as a "gift from Stalin, the Jews' best friend."

The reality of Birobidzhan was bleak. The first colonies of idealistic settlers to work its forbidding land soon faced a disastrous summer, marked by

## She was sentenced to hard labor for serving Secretary Kaganovich "poison" gefilte fish.

floods that wiped out all of the work of the previous eight months, followed by a terrible winter which brought them near starvation, surrounded only by forests where wolves, tigers, and bears roamed. In 1934, just as the remnant of Jewish farmers on *kolkhozs* such as Birofeld, Valdheim, Amurzet, and IKOR (after the North American organization that funded it) were getting back on their feet, summer brought unbearably humid heatwaves followed by more catastrophic floods and both human and bovine epidemics. The idealistic settlers, especially those from Canada, the United States, and Argentina, who had not yet abandoned Birobidzhan began to flee after the ensuing crop failure and the deaths of most of the livestock.

And yet, despite the many obstacles, by the mid-1930s important educational and cultural institutions had been established in Birobidzhan, including a network of Yiddish schools, the Sholem Aleichem Yiddish Library, the Yiddish State Theater, and a Yiddish daily paper, the *Birobidzhaner shtern*. The very height of optimism among the Jewish settlers who soldiered on came in February 1936, with the visit of the most powerful Jew in the Soviet Union, Stalin's closest political ally and trusted friend Lazar Kaganovich, secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. Kaganovich delivered long lectures about Leninism to local members of the party, attended a gala performance at the Birobidzhan Yiddish State Theater, which was subsequently named for him, and publicly proclaimed that the time had arrived to perform "heroic epics in the history of the Jewish people" on its stage.

A highlight of Kaganovich's visit was the dinner he had at the home of the local chairman of the Communist Party Matvei Khavkin. Khavkin's wife Sofia prepared an array of traditional Jewish foods that were becoming increasingly rare in Soviet Russia, including kreplach and gefilte fish, which Kaganovich praised highly. And yet, Khavkin himself was soon arrested and sentenced to 15 years of hard labor in the Gulag for his alleged crimes of Trotskyism and bourgeois nationalism. In an ultimately cruel irony, his wife Sonia was arrested and sentenced to hard labor in Kazakhstan, for the alleged plot to assassinate Kaganovich by serving him a poisoned portion of gefilte fish at the dinner which had elicited such high praise from its supposed target. By the fall of 1937, almost nothing of the original idea of creating a Soviet Jewish state in Birobidzhan remained: The migrations ended, the Yiddish schools and publications ceased, and the Jewish population froze at about 15,000. Few local Jewish leaders es-

caped Siberian imprisonment or execution.

The brutally sudden and tragic purge of the now-farcical Jewish Autonomous Region was particularly painful to the Soviet Union's Yiddish artistic and literary elite, members of the Jewish Antifascist Committee (JAFAC), so many of whom had trumpeted their great hopes for its future. Throughout the 1930s and early 1940s there really was only one great Soviet Jewish writer who neither praised nor ever mentioned the Jewish Autonomous Region, Der Nister. Known for his political caution and his literary art of concealment, Der Nister shared neither the cravenness nor cowardice that were tragically on display in the show trials and executions, culminating in August 1952 with the executions of all the remaining members of the JAFAC. And yet, in the bitterest of ironies, Der Nister had been arrested well before the massive sweeps of 1949, precisely for his late-life enthusiasm for the revival of the frozen Birobidzhan project and his fearless insistence on turning it into one of the two Jewish national centers that would realize his ideal for a post-Holocaust reconstruction of the "broken wholeness" of his people, as he put it, "ours over here, and theirs over there." There, meaning the young State of Israel.

Kotlerman has translated the emotional essays Der Nister wrote on the train to Birobidzhan. His depictions of a wide array of characters, from child survivors to young soldiers just recently discharged from the Red Army, are exceptionally powerful. Seeing this mass of Jews, "the nation that survived the sword," huddled together on a four-thousand-mile ride to an entirely unknown new home fills him with national and religious fervor. He comments on all of the Yiddish subdialects heard on the train, "Volhynian, Crimean, Odessan and mainly Podolian," and imagines the *eshelon* as a modern-day Noah's Ark, sent to rescue and repair the broken Jewish nation.

In these impressionistic essays, Der Nister employs a doppelganger, a kind of consoling angel or shadow, whom Der Nister calls "My Jew" and who appears to him whenever he begins to doubt the future in Birobidzhan. Thus, when he imagines this long journey as just more wandering, another exile, "the nation again on the way . . . Starting at the Nile, through all the world's waters, and now even up to the Amur . . ." his shadow rebukes him:

No, it's not similar . . . The present wandering is not at all like all those earlier ones . . . A deep break is occurring in the psychology of the Jewish masses, for the sake of reconstruction, in order to repair the broken wholeness, and put an end to the historical silliness that always left them hanging in the air . . . After the recent Catastrophe came the fundamental reexamination. In the Middle Ages, such events, which occurred far and wide in the Diaspora, would awaken hopes in false messiahs. Now—we see a striving for a real action . . . an awakening . . . and not only will there be no obstacles, but rather maximum help and support [from the Soviet state].

Der Nister's cautious optimism during his trek to Birobidzhan was most movingly made manifest in his response to a dramatic wedding that took place

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ADVANCING JEWISH THOUGHT **Mosaic**

on the trip. A Jewish soldier who had lost his entire family married a girl who had somehow survived when her entire family had been shot by the Nazis. While Der Nister was too ill to attend the wedding, he describes how the bride came to him before the chuppah and requested his blessing, as if he himself were a Hasidic rebbe. Having heard her heartbreaking tale of loss and survival, Der Nister observes that the bride had shed one single tear, about which he muses: “In truth, if we are dealing with crying, the bride should have been betrothed to the sea, in order to shed the necessary amount of tears.”

Finally, Der Nister intones, “*ve-yibone beys be-Yisroel*” based on the standard rabbinic blessing under the chuppah, that the newlyweds might together build a faithful home in the midst of the Jewish people. Here Kotlerman makes a slight error in correlating this blessing with the prayer for the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, which became a popular folk song, “*she-yibone beys hamikdash*,” which, while employing analogous language, has nothing to do with Jewish newlyweds and their future home. In so doing, he unwittingly overstates the extent of Der Nister’s messianic and pseudo-Zionist enthusiasm, which was limited to his great hopes for a fundamental change in Jewish history that would be achieved by the success of the Soviet Jewish Autonomous Region. In a terrible irony, this same “Zionist-messianic” misreading of Der Nister’s blessing was contained, along with a Russian translation of his second essay, in a report making the case for the arrests and show trials in Khabarovsk. The document, which would be Der Nister’s death warrant, was seen sitting on Joseph Stalin’s desk in early 1948!

Kotlerman’s very minor error in no way diminishes the general accuracy of his interpretation of Der Nister’s thinking in 1947. He clearly demonstrates that Der Nister went from being a reclusive, secretive symbolist who kept as far from politics as he could to being a fearless champion of Soviet Jewish nationalism, while taking on an increasingly public role as a kind of secular *tzaddik*, who blesses, consoles, and advises all who come to him for counsel.

In his analysis of a stunning 1944 article titled “Hate,” published by Der Nister just three years before he boarded the second *eshelon*, Kotlerman shows the early signs that he had taken on this role

of a modern-day comforter, echoing the powerful chapters of comfort of Jeremiah after the destruction of the First Jerusalem Temple:

... you [must] feel and [be] certain that, no—the last line of our life-account has not yet been drawn. Our spring has not yet dried up, and these previously abandoned, talented children whom we know, and those we don’t know,—children . . . are our comfort, our promise and guarantee of our future rebuilding and renaissance . . .” Woe to the Hitlers—those that have disappeared, those that still exist, and those that may possibly rise in the future. Amen, woe to them . . .

I cannot think of another secular Soviet Yiddish writer who concluded his thoughts with a pious “Amen.” Kotlerman is emphatic about Der Nister’s self-assumed role as a secular Hasidic *tzaddik*. He bases this claim not only on evidence from the writer’s own Holocaust-era works, and the two essays presented in the book, but also on the impressions in the memoirs of his two close collaborators, Emiot and Kerler. Emiot depicts Der Nister as being completely preoccupied with Kabbalah, reciting long passages of the *Zohar* from memory. Emiot claims that he had also memorized the teachings of Nachman of Bratslav’s *Likutei Moharan*.

The title of Kotlerman’s third chapter, “A Man Dieth in a Tent,” is based on Der Nister’s application of Rabbi Nachman’s interpretation of a verse in the Torah, which was read during the week of his arrival in Birobidzhan, to Yiddish writers and Russian Jewish leaders. The plain sense of verse describes the spread of impurity from contact with a corpse: “If a man should die in a tent, all that is in that tent shall be impure for seven days.” Rabbi Nachman reads the verse this way: “If [one is to be] a man [he must be willing to] die in the tent—namely the tent of Torah.”

“They [the righteous men]” Der Nister said, “did not play around with their Yiddishkeit; at any moment they were ready to sacrifice themselves.” Kotlerman quotes Der Nister’s bitter letter to Nachman Mayzel in New York about the *nishtike rol* (pathetic role) of his “colleagues” on the JAFC who continued to do Stalin’s bidding to the end. Their failure was

on account of their “connivance, pessimism, cowardice, and reconciliation with their own nothingness” (in Yiddish, more powerfully: *sholem-makhn mit der eygener nishtikayt*).

Having finally gotten on board (literally!) the Birobidzhan enterprise, it was his inspiring encounters with children and adolescent survivors that bolstered Der Nister’s hopes for the future of Soviet Jewry. Seeing these tough, determined young survivors, he asks, “what kind of building in the world can resist being built by such types?” He anoints the youngest children on the train as “little Davids against whom no Goliath will ever prevail.” Reading of this confidence in Jewish national continuity that these Holocaust orphans inspired in Der Nister reminded me of the most powerful and, I believe, personal of his 1943–1944 short stories, “*Vidervuks*,” or *Regrowth*, the title of a recent English translation of his Holocaust-era stories.

In his introduction, Kotlerman recalls his promise to Der Nister’s eminent Hebrew translator Shalom Luria that he would follow his advice and “look the artist straight in his face.” The face Kotlerman sees, and compels us to see, is as awe inspiring as that of the *Khoyze*, the Seer of Lublin.

Der Nister was reported to have died in a Soviet prison camp, somewhere on the edge of the Arctic Circle in 1950. David Bergelson and others who had cravenly made peace with “their own nothingness” were executed two years later in the “Night of the Murdered Poets.”

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Allan Nadler is the Wallerstein Professor Emeritus of Comparative Religion and former director of the program in Jewish studies at Drew University.

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## LETTERS

(continued from page 4)

off as the more capacious and liberal thinker in at least this respect: He learned from figures with dramatically different worldviews than himself—and gratefully acknowledged his intellectual debts to them. Bloom has a lot to learn from Lewis, on both counts.

Rabbi Mark Gottlieb  
The Tikvah Fund  
New York, NY

### Michael Weingrad Responds:

I am grateful to Rabbi Mark Gottlieb and Murray Ewing for their thoughtful responses to—and enlightening complications of—my essay and for directing my attention to C. S. Lewis’s revealing letter to Ruth Pitter on the subject of David Lindsay’s (in Lewis’s words) “disquieting but not-to-be-missed” novel. It is indeed striking, as both of these erudite readers indicate, how deeply Lewis was able to engage with even those writers he saw as inhabiting the “borderline of the diabolical”—and without falling into the weak romanticism of a Harold Bloom.

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# The Anti-Imperialism of Idiots

BY ALAN JOHNSON

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## *The Lions' Den: Zionism and the Left from Hannah Arendt to Noam Chomsky*

by Susie Linfield

Yale University Press, 400 pp., \$32.50

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**W**hy are “Zionism” and “Left” now seemingly incommensurable terms? Why do so many left-wingers who ostensibly stand for national self-determination for all peoples demand instead that a single nation-state, the little Jewish one, be brought to an end? Why do they anathematize Jewish nationalism as “racist” and “settler-colonialist,” even comparing it to Nazism, while welcoming Arab nationalists and even Islamists as “part of the global Left,” which is how the social and cultural theorist Judith Butler described Hamas and Hezbollah, despite the program and practice of both organizations being palpably fascist? And why are Judeophobic forms of “anti-Zionism,” once the smelly preserve of the Soviet Union, now spreading so fast on the global Left (not least in the British Labour Party) that many Jews are experiencing left-wing surges as anti-Semitic purges?

If the impact of Israel’s 52-year control of the West Bank on the Left in general is one cause of the estrangement, Susie Linfield’s book exposes the intellectual roots of the other, and surely larger, cause, the self-immolation of much of the Left itself once it abandoned Enlightenment reason and the values of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century democratic revolutions in favor of political fantasies, inchoate anti-Western negativism, and armchair bloodlust toward Israel.

Linfield’s book shows how the ground was laid for the Old Left’s socialism of fools to morph into the New Left’s anti-imperialism of idiots. She sets out the prehistory of the Left’s sad trek from “*liberté, égalité, fraternité!*” to “We Are All Hezbollah Now!” through critical studies of the oft-tortured engagement of eight intellectuals with Zionism and Israel—two Europeans, Hannah Arendt and Arthur Koestler; four socialists, Maxime Rodinson, Isaac Deutscher, Albert Memmi, and Fred Halliday; and two Americans, I. F. Stone and Noam Chomsky.

While it is customary to trace the Left’s bitter divorce from Israel to the Six-Day War of 1967, Linfield shows that in some cases the relationship breakdown began earlier, in the late 1950s, when the New Left, having given up faith in the Soviet Union, decided anticolonialism is socialism, as Albert Memmi, who opposed this turn, framed it. This was an intellectual disaster from which the New Left has never really recovered.

Linfield quotes from a 1958 essay by British Marxist Harry Hanson in the *New Reasoner* to show

how that terrible idea led the Left astray. About the Arab nationalist movement, Hanson wrote, “Despite its . . . exaggerated xenophobia, its apparent

## **The consequence of being in thrall to reactionary anti-imperialism was the Left’s “calamitous obliviousness” to reality.**

resemblance, in certain of its aspects, to Fascism or Nazism, and—most serious of all its vitriolic hatred of Israel—it is fundamentally and essentially a progressive movement.”

The notion that fascistic nationalism could now be objectively progressive because it was “anti-imperialist” became “foundational” for the Left, says Linfield. It merged with an older notion, held by many Marxists since Marx himself,



*Albert Memmi, December 1982. (Photo by Claude Truong-Ngoc, Wikipedia.)*

that while individual Jews were acceptable enough, the notion of Jewish *peoplehood* was a reactionary anachronism that should be dissolved forever in the solvent of progressive universalism. Only now it was Israel that was to be dissolved.

Linfield shows how Albert Memmi, a Jew whose experience after Tunisian independence of ostracism and expulsion in the 1950s led to his embrace of Zionism, identified this spurious universalism as a “betrayal of the Jews” that had become “intrinsic to Left politics.” What was so painful to him was that this betrayal had taken place “within the very movement in which so many Jews had placed their hopes and for which they had sacrificed, fought, and died.”

**T**he consequences for the Left of this combination of attitudes have been legion, and they have all been baleful. Linfield’s book can be read as a study of how some of her subjects (Arendt, Koestler, Rodinson, Stone, Chomsky) prepared the way for two of those bad consequences, while others (Memmi, Halliday, and to some extent Deutscher) came to see the need to challenge both.

First, Linfield shows that the consequence of being in thrall to reactionary anti-imperialism was the Left’s “calamitous obliviousness” to reality, along with its “treacherous readiness to substitute ideology, wishful thinking, or sheer fantasy” for it. For example, after registering the many achievements of the French communist Maxime Rodinson, she shows that, perhaps more than anyone else, he taught the Left to see the Zionist sin as the original sin; Arab hatred and terrorism as always reactive and always, therefore, justified; and to think that servility to the mythical “Arab masses” (so often swathed in “idealization or ignorance”) was the Left’s duty.

Most of Linfield’s portraits are studies in the forms taken by this dogma-drenched refusal of reality. Maxime Rodinson insisted that assimilation had been a roaring success only a few years after both his parents were murdered at Auschwitz. Hannah Arendt, with her signature combination of the unworldly and the imperious, chose the war years to high-handedly instruct the Yishuv to embrace “ludicrously chimerical” proposals for Palestine’s future that would set aside the idea of Jewish statehood in favor of “solutions that were shockingly heedless of history, culture, and political realities.” (Linfield tells us that the political philosopher Judith Shklar said that Arendt’s ideas on nationalism were “immune to evidence.”)

Noam Chomsky has been instructing us since 1976 that the PLO, Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran, and the Arab states have all been working hard for the two-state solution only to have their efforts blocked by Israel and the United States, a claim Linfield dismantles piece by piece. Indeed, she shows that Chomsky’s inaccuracies about the conflict are “so numerous and ideologically consistent” that they cannot be considered errors in the normal sense. Rather, his Manichean history “demands that he cleanse away, misrepresent, ignore, and deform an immense amount of evidence.” Over several pages, Linfield refutes a large and illustrative set of Chomsky’s false claims. His standing would not recover from her coolly devastating critique of what she calls “Chomskyland” if our intellectual culture had not already sunk so near to his level.

Linfield’s prose, by the way, is itself quite often coolly devastating. I especially enjoyed her five-word critique of binationalism—“It died for a reason”—and her mordant observation about I. F. Stone’s claim to have been a persecuted Jewish “dissident” in the United States, that, “Being shunned by the B’nai B’rith is a far cry from languishing in a So-

viet psychiatric ward.” She can certainly stick them with the pointy end.

The second bad consequence of the embrace of reactionary anti-imperialism on the Left highlighted by Linfield has been the forsaking of the Left’s own foundational values. She shows how the impact of that reversal on many leftists’ approach to Israel has been almost total, dumping the Left’s old program for resolving disputed national questions—a rational effort to accommodate the aspirations of all peoples through consistent democracy—in favor of cheering on the “anti-imperialist” camp, denying Jewish peoplehood, seeking to end Jewish statehood, and replacing the old idea of international solidarity with the “toxic gift” of its own armchair bloodlust. (The funniest thing I have published in seven years as editor of *Fathom* was Michael Walzer’s response to Perry Anderson’s flirtation with the prospect of an Arab military conquest of Israel in *New Left Review*. “I was reminded reading it of an old *New Yorker* cartoon,” wrote Walzer. “[T]wo old men are sitting in their club, drinks in hand, and one of them, leaning forward in his chair, says to the other: ‘I say it’s war, Throckmorton, and I say, Let’s fight!’”)

While Linfield is generous about the strengths of each of the eight writers, the heroes of her book are Albert Memmi and Fred Halliday (and, to a lesser degree, Isaac Deutscher). Perhaps their writings only seem remarkable because they appear in contrast to the surrounding political idiocies. It was simply by rising to the level of political common sense that Isaac Deutscher was able to register that “the world has driven the Jew to

seek safety in a nation-state,” that Albert Memmi understood the Palestinian “right of return” is in reality another way of saying “destroy Israel,” and that Fred Halliday saw plainly that the Left’s support for terror was a “relativist fantasy.”

A reviewer is obliged, or at least entitled, to nitpick. Jacqueline Rose is not an “acclaimed British



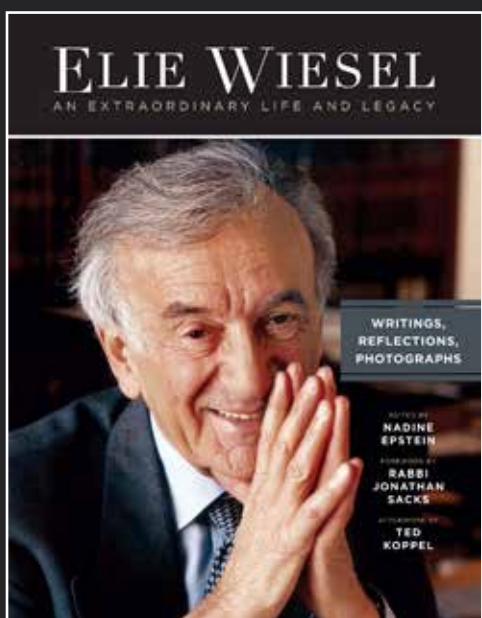
Susie Linfield. (Photo by Netaya Anbar.)

psychoanalyst” but an anti-Zionist literary and cultural critic who practices what Freud once called the “wild psychoanalysis” of the untrained, in her case diagnosing Zionism as “a form of collective insanity.” And I think it is possible to mount a defense of Leon Trotsky, who is bracketed by Linfield, unfairly I think,

with Rosa Luxemburg as an abstract internationalist, mostly indifferent to the special suffering of the Jews. By contrast, I think his long war against just about every iteration of anti-Semitism, religious and secular, left and right, culminated in such a radical rethinking of “the Jewish question” that he became a sort-of Zionist, as I have recently argued at length elsewhere. Yes, he was completely wrong to think that only an international socialist revolution could deliver what he now favored—a territorial solution to the Jewish question, a mass migration, a national homeland, a state, and a “rich spot in the sun” for the Jews (as for the Arabs)—but *what* he ended up favoring does seem to me to be a sort of Zionism.

As Linfield makes clear from the very beginning, she is herself a leftist, a critic of Israeli policy whose experiences on the West Bank have on occasion left her “ashamed to be a Jew.” Her book is not a repudiation of her comrades but a powerful critique of their flaws that could become a precious resource for a future decent Left. It rehabilitates two elements: due respect for the tragic dialectic of history and for the value of compromise (with reality and between the peoples). I share her cause: a Left that leaves Chomskyland behind to live responsibly, inside history. But I wondered if my own fear didn’t also suffuse this essential but anguished book: Our cause may well be lost.

Alan Johnson is the editor of *Fathom Magazine* and senior research fellow at BICOM. He was, for many years, a professor of political theory at Edge Hill University.



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# Open-Door Policy

BY THEODORE SASSON

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## ***The Jewish American Paradox: Embracing Choice in a Changing World***

by Robert H. Mnookin  
Public Affairs, 320 pp., \$28

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Last year, in a now-infamous commencement address to the graduates at the Reform movement's Hebrew Union College, novelist Michael Chabon surprised his audience with a disquisition on the virtues of intermarriage, which he described as the "source of all human greatness." Expressing abhorrence of "homogeneity and insularity, exclusion and segregation," he urged the graduates—newly credentialed rabbis and educators—to "find room in our Jewish community for all those who want to share in our traditions."

In a scathing response, Sylvia Fishman, Steven Cohen, and Jack Wertheimer charged Chabon with seeking to "dismantle Judaism." Their real quarry, however, was not the showboating novelist but rather the "left camp" in the broader Jewish communal debate over intermarriage. By failing to come to terms with the damage intermarriage has caused to Jewish family and communal life, Fishman, Cohen, and Wertheimer argued, advocates for greater outreach to intermarried families opened the door to Chabon's more extreme rhetoric: "We urge the proponents of welcoming and inclusion . . . to think anew about where they stand in regard to Chabon's challenge. . . . Where would you draw boundaries?"

Robert Mnookin, a Harvard Law professor and self-described secular Jew, picks up that gauntlet. His book, *The Jewish American Paradox*, advocates broadening the criteria for inclusion in the Jewish collective and opening wide the doors of Jewish communal life. The book expresses Mnookin's conviction that only a Judaism of choice, open to all who publicly declare their belonging, has any prospect of flourishing in American society.

Mnookin began pondering the question of Jewish continuity when, as a grandparent, he asked himself how likely it was that his grandchildren would be Jewish. In contrast to people like Chabon, he discovered that he cared about the answer to that question a great deal. Against the "right camp" in the intermarriage debate, however, he believes that the effort to discourage intermarriage is simply a "fool's errand," which will not be made more successful by repetitive hand wringing. Moreover, "[f]ar from promoting the survival and distinctiveness of the Jewish people, it risks alienating many young Jews and, for those who intermarry, their children as well."

The paradox at the center of the book is famil-

iar to observers of American Jewish life: American Jews have achieved great integration into American society and, on the whole, have done quite well but

## **Mnookin recognizes that his call for a Judaism partially untethered from ethnicity and descent is historically unprecedented.**

now face the specter of their community's assimilation. Beyond the precincts of Orthodoxy, Mnookin argues, Jewish life in America is threatened by secularization, intermarriage, and political divisions



*Meredith Baxter and David Birney in the television program Bridget Loves Bernie, which depicted an interfaith marriage between a Catholic woman and a Jewish man, 1972. (Historic Collection/Alamy Photo.)*

over Israel. Moreover, he doubts the threat of anti-Semitism will return American Jews to a more robust identity, as it did in other times and places. (Mnookin wrote this book before the Pittsburgh and Poway massacres, and I wonder whether his confidence in the diminished relevance of anti-Semitism has been at all shaken—mine certainly has been.)

Where should our communal borders be drawn to enable Jewish life to flourish? Mnookin surveys existing alternatives—the halakhic emphasis on matrilineal descent; racial definitions focused on "Jewish blood"; definitions

centered on ethnicity, religious practice, and those of Israeli jurisprudence—and finds each to be either overinclusive or underinclusive. He objects, for example, to the halakhic notion that a person born or converted to Judaism cannot cease to be Jewish. Instead, Jews ought to be allowed to opt out of the collective—as, he notes, prominent public figures such as developmental psychologist Erik Erikson and former secretary of state Madeleine Albright did under very different circumstances.

More importantly, Mnookin argues that in an age of high rates of intermarriage and fluid group boundaries, people ought to be able to opt in more easily. As Jewish life is not limited to the religious domain, and most American Jews are fairly secular, admission to the collective should not be through religious conversion only. Instead, Mnookin proposes "public self-identification" as a criterion for belonging. It is a standard that is "broadly inclusive, emphasizes individual choice, and does not require people to express their Jewishness in any particular way."

By encouraging a "big-tent" approach to communal boundaries, Mnookin hopes to engage an expanding circle of people, including the children of intermarriage, non-Jewish spouses of Jews, those with a single Jewish grandparent—or even more remote Jewish ancestry—as well as people who are Jewish by birth and ethnicity but identify with another religion. Recognizing that all Jews cannot agree to this approach, Mnookin acknowledges that individual congregations, schools, and other organizations will continue to enforce their own standards.

What I'm really arguing for is greater tolerance for ambiguity. The Jewish community has evolved for thousands of years and is still evolving. The American community is increasingly diverse. Conflicting standards already exist. The intermarriage rate is exploding. Instead of fighting this trend, which I think is futile, we should find a productive way to address it. . . .

What I'm trying to get at is a level of generosity. A recognition that there is no standard that neatly solves all problems. An acknowledgement that, as a practical matter, American Jews do have the gift of individual choice. Let's reach out to those who might be reachable. Welcome everyone who wants to come in.

Mnookin recognizes that his call for a Judaism partially untethered from ethnicity and descent is historically unprecedented—that it "violates centuries of Jewish tradition." Drawing on several studies that, as it happens, I coauthored with colleagues at Brandeis University, he nonetheless makes the case for the viability of an "opt-in"

Judaism. He cites, for example, our finding, based on the Pew Research Center's 2013 survey of Jewish Americans, that millennial generation children of intermarriage were more likely than the offspring of intermarriage in previous generations to have been raised Jewish, and to identify as Jewish in adulthood, even by the more restrictive category of "Jewish by religion."

## Disinterest in religion in general—which is both a cause and effect of intermarriage—is a better explanation for comparatively low levels of Jewish commitment.

Mnookin does not seem overly concerned by the thin version of Judaism practiced by most of the children of intermarriage. His analysis is distinguished by a lack of nostalgia for an imagined golden age of American Judaism when levels of religious observance were supposedly higher. As an ambivalent secular Jew who raised his own children with little Jewish education, he grasps that assimilation does not only occur as a consequence of intermarriage. Moreover, witnessing both of his adult children, one of whom married a Jew and one a non-Jew, choose to raise Jewish children makes palpable for him the transformation of American Jewry into an increasingly voluntary collective—one that is attractive to a range of people who have disparate connections to the Jewish people.

It is a collective, however, whose more tentative members are sometimes discouraged by narrow, halakhic standards of belonging and party-line conformity in relation to Israel. In the future, Mnookin frets, "Those who don't fit in—probably including my descendants—will be marginalized. Over time, those who feel alienated and excluded . . . will likely stop identifying themselves as Jew-

Mnookin is hardly the first to advocate a big-tent approach. Decades ago, the Reconstructionist and Reform movements decided to recognize patrilineal descent as a legitimate basis for Jewish belonging. More recently, Reform Judaism—numerically, the largest denomination—declared "audacious hospitality" directed toward those remote from Jewish life to be a cen-

terpiece of its mission. Although the Conservative movement recently reaffirmed its prohibition on rabbinic officiation at mixed marriages, it increasingly encourages strenuous efforts to welcome interfaith families into other aspects of communal life, including celebrations before and after the wedding ceremony, and inclusion of non-Jewish spouses as synagogue members. Even Chabad, despite its haredi origins, is, at least unofficially, welcoming of intermarried couples to some of its outreach programs. *Kal ve-chomer*, as the rabbis would say, the secular institutions of Jewish life, including federations, Jewish community centers, Hillels, and Birthright, all of whom unequivocally embrace intermarried families and their adult offspring. Mnookin is clearly pushing at an open door.

This big-tent approach, moreover, has not gone unnoticed. Researcher Michelle Shain and I, together with several colleagues, surveyed hundreds of Jewish-Jewish and Jewish-non-Jewish couples, asking both partners questions about their religious attitudes, practices, and experiences. We found, unsurprisingly, that mixed couples were substantially

wedding ceremony had difficulty finding it. Disinterest in religion in general—which is both a cause and effect of intermarriage—is a better explanation for their comparatively low levels of Jewish commitment. In short, there is little reason to believe that community gatekeepers discourage intermarried couples or their offspring from identifying as Jewish when they choose to do so.

Whether the increasingly fluid and inclusive approach to Jewish belonging will enable liberal and secular Judaism to flourish in the United States beyond the next generation is really, I believe, an open question. Contributors to these pages have often expressed profound pessimism on this score. Although predicting Jewish population trends is demonstrably more difficult than many commentators would like to think, I believe there are grounds for a more optimistic view.

After rising sharply in the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the intermarriage rate appears to have stabilized. Intermarriage, moreover, has the immediate effect of sharply increasing the number of households that include a Jewish adult, for the obvious reason that marriage between two Jews produces a single household, whereas marriages of two Jews to non-Jews produce two households. Therefore, the lower rates of participation of interfaith families may actually prove sustainable from a communal and demographic standpoint.

It is also critical to remember that very little about American Jewish life remains static for long. In recent decades, organized Jewry's practices of welcoming and outreach have increased the proportion of children raised in mixed households that participate in Jewish educational experiences in childhood and during the college years, and that identify as Jewish in adulthood. As Mnookin reminds us, moreover, Jewish practices of individuals and families often wax and wane over their lifetime: "Even if the Jewish strand of their identity is very thin at this point in their lives, it may become more important at a later time, as it did for me." This is an important point that is lost on many demographic pessimists. American Jewish life features considerable circulation between core and periphery, and, if trends regarding incorporation of the offspring of intermarriage continue, a substantial portion of that population may be retained in or returned to Jewish communal life.

Ultimately, the fate of American Judaism may depend less on the battle over boundaries—a battle that advocates of big-tent Judaism seem to have largely won outside the Orthodox community—than with the social forces Mnookin identifies as the main causes of assimilation. These forces—increasing secularism in the broader society, political divisions over Israel, and intermarriage—will shape the Jewish future in America far more than the policy pronouncements of communal gatekeepers. Many Jewish educators, innovators, and funders are working hard to shape these trends; only time will tell whether their efforts can revitalize and sustain non-Orthodox American Jewish life.



Young couples, many intermarried, on a Birthright-style "honeymoon" in Israel, 2015. (Courtesy/Honeymoon Israel.)

ish at all." This is really the crux of Mnookin's argument. Like many parents and grandparents, he worries that children who lack proper Jewish bonafides will be rejected by communal authorities and will in turn abandon their tenuous but potentially developing Jewish identities.

less likely to observe Jewish holidays, consume Jewish culture, and express a commitment to raising their children Jewish. Only a small minority of those same couples, however, described feeling unwelcome in the Jewish community, and virtually no couples who sought rabbinic officiation for their

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*Theodore Sasson is director of programs of the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Foundation.*

# The Sounds of Silence

BY ISAAC INKELES

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## *Seven Types of Atheism*

by John Gray

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 176 pp., \$25

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John Gray's latest book isn't a field guide for spotting atheists. Rather, it's something much more ambitious, if perhaps less useful: an indictment of much of the last several hundred years of atheist thinking for being, well, too much like monotheism.

Gray, a retired professor of philosophy at the London School of Economics, first came to popular attention with his book *Straw Dogs*, which argued that freedom and progress are illusory. He began his career as a more conventional political philosopher at Oxford, where he fell under the influence of Isaiah Berlin. Like Berlin, Gray was occupied with the question of why values seem to point us in different directions. Finding the various attempts to identify a principle by which to order them unsatisfactory, he concluded that our values conflict because there is no such principle. Berlin had arrived at a similar conclusion, but for him it was an argument for classical liberalism: Since there is no "right way" to choose between values, people should be more or less left alone. Gray's conclusion was closer to nihilism: People will look for and fight over value, but they'll never actually find it.

Now Gray, himself a nonbeliever, takes atheists to task for trying to convince themselves that the world is organized according to an intelligible principle—a proposition he believes they inherited from monotheism. He writes:

Contemporary atheism is a flight from a godless world. Life without any power that can secure order or some kind of ultimate justice is a frightening and for many an intolerable prospect. In the absence of such a power, human events could be finally chaotic, and no story could be told that satisfied the need for meaning. Struggling to escape this vision, atheists have looked for surrogates of the God they have cast aside.

The first five chapters of the book, each ostensibly on a different type of atheism, are devoted to attacking those God surrogates, which in Gray's analysis end up being different versions of the same idea. The two remaining chapters discuss atheist worldviews that, according to Gray, own up to life's chaos and lack of meaning. Writing about them, Gray gives the most complete account of his own beliefs (or lack thereof) found in this volume and draws heavily on two decidedly heterodox Jewish thinkers.

Gray insists that science (and thus atheism) does not suggest an ethical theory—there are no objective moral or political beliefs. Nor should religions be viewed as bad or primitive scientific theories. Rather than being a discredited explanatory theory

lasting ethical progress falls away. The conviction that humanity is making itself cumulatively and permanently better, Gray explains, is just a hang-over from monotheism. First of all, there is no good reason to believe that such a thing as "humanity"

## Gray's conclusion was closer to nihilism; people will look for and fight over value, but they'll never actually find it.

of the physical world, religion is an attempt to find the meaning within it that science cannot. "Religion," he insists, "is no more a primitive type of science than is art or poetry. The practice of religion expresses a need for meaning, which would remain unsatisfied even if everything could be explained."



John Gray at the Brainwash Festival, Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2015. (Wikipedia.)

Those atheists who neglect this insight run the risk of thinking that because science can explain natural phenomena it can explain ethics or prescribe politics. Gray writes that, "With few exceptions, twenty-first-century atheists are unthinking liberals. But atheism has no specific political content, and many atheists have been virulently anti-liberal." Proponents of so-called scientific ethics simply take on conventional values. Far from being benign, those conventional values have often been sinister: "Racism and anti-Semitism are not incidental defects in Enlightenment thinking. They flow from some of the Enlightenment's central beliefs." Science doesn't necessarily lead to bigotry, but it doesn't preclude it either.

Once science and its seemingly inevitable progress has been uncoupled from ethics, the idea of

exists at all. The multiplicity of cultures, beliefs, and projects speaks to the division of the species, not its unity. Moreover, the very idea of progress itself is incoherent:

The idea of progress is a mutant version of the Christian belief that human salvation is found in history, while modern revolutionary and liberal movements continue the faith in an end to history that inspired the teaching of Jesus. Partisans of revolution, reform and counter-revolution think they have left religion behind, when all they have done is renew it in shapes they fail to recognize.

In contrast, Gray insists that "history is going nowhere in particular." While progress does not necessarily require an end point, it does require a direction. But to what, and from where? The notion that there is a direction to human affairs implies the existence of an Archimedean point from which our behavior might be evaluated. Just as monotheism holds that human activity is valuable in virtue of God's existence, atheism believes that human activity is valuable in virtue of science, rationality, or some other God surrogate. For Gray, this is the ultimate chimera. Atheists no longer want to believe in God but cannot accept the fact that the world without Him is ultimately chaotic, so they invent gods by other names—or at least ideas that share with God the attribute of imbuing life with meaning.

One atheist who did not fall into this trap, according to Gray, was the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish American philosopher George Santayana. Santayana's "disillusion proved liberating, since it allowed a view of the world from a perspective that did not expect salvation in history." In coming to terms with "the godless flux of matter," Santayana was able to achieve an almost transcendent freedom, and one that undermines faith in reason. If there were such a thing as progress, there would be something to try to understand. But if there is only the flux of matter, the ability to critically reflect has been vastly overrated. Gray writes:

[Rationalists] imagine that the right way of living can be found by the use of reason. But that is because they inherit a belief that the world is rational—the faith of Plato, of

Christianity and secular humanism. If there is no order at the bottom of things, a self-examined life may hardly be worth living.

In essence, Gray says that life is incomprehensibly arbitrary, so it's best to stop worrying about understanding it and focus on standing silently in the face of insoluble questions.

In his chapter titled "The Atheism of Silence," Gray discusses two dissident Jews. One, unsurprisingly, is Spinoza. Spinoza begins his *Ethics* by arguing that God must exist, but, as Gray notes, Spinoza's God is not that of revelation. The God that Spinoza argues for—*Deus sive Natura*, God or nature—only rules the universe in the sense that it is itself the governing set of rules that determine everything. This God has no more agency than you or I do, at least according to Gray:

But whether in God or in human beings, free will is an illusion. The world is a universal system in which everything is as it must be. Nothing is contingent, and there are no miracles. In such a world the only possible freedom is freedom of mind, which means understanding that things cannot be otherwise than they are.

Nothing can break free of the universe's rules, not even God. Whether, in the final analysis, the universe is in arbitrary flux, as Santayana suggested, or perfectly determined, as Spinoza thought he had proved, nothing can be done to change it. Contingent or necessary, the cosmos is the way it is, and nothing we can do will move it forward or backward. Santayana found freedom when he saw the universe as a godless flux of matter, and Spinoza, as Gray puts it, in "submission to necessity." Either way, freedom consists of realizing that the universe does not care for us.

Gray's other Jewish "atheist of silence" is Lev Shestov. Shestov, who was born and educated in the Russian Empire and died in Paris in 1938, is in a sense Spinoza's opposite. While Spinoza thought freedom is found in submitting to necessity, Shestov found freedom in transcending it. For Spinoza, God was the necessary condition of the universe, but Shestov believed that God was beyond necessity, "beyond all laws, whether of logic or ethics," and hence accessible only by faith. Such a God is impossible to know.

Gray tells us that he groups Spinoza and Shestov together because they were both negative theologians, holding that God can only be described by what he is not: God is not an actor in this world and does not impart meaning to life or history. Whether the divine is a set of fully determined rules or the boundless possibility that lies beyond them, it offers no determinate, practicable way forward for us.

*Seven Types of Atheism* is a lucid and stunningly Serudite book. Easily jumping from the great Western philosophers and early church fathers to Victorian scientists and contemporary TED talkers, Gray finds example after example to prove his point. Unfortunately, the point he tries to make is easy to misunderstand, and that's partly Gray's fault. His book is not a typology of atheism, as the title might suggest, but a polemic against the host of thinkers who believe they have successfully abandoned God when they have only replaced Him with substitutes.

## Gray's jeremiad against meaning is less devastating than he thinks.

Gray is certainly right, I think, that in an attempt to flee what for them would otherwise be a godless world, atheists often make the same sorts of metaphysical assumptions they criticize the religious for making. But his jeremiad against meaning is less devastating than he thinks. Let's assume for a moment



Interior of the Society for Ethical Culture, founded by Felix Adler in 1877. (Wikimedia Commons.)

that the atheists of silence, with whom Gray identifies, are correct in that our ability to know God is severely limited. But does that undermine religion? Their great predecessor Maimonides didn't think so: "We are only able to apprehend the fact that [God] is and cannot apprehend His [essence]," a proposition that would be agreed to by the first Lubavitcher Rebbe, not to speak of Meister Eckhart and many others. Gray's jump from silent metaphysical humility to atheism ignores some of the most important religious thinking in several traditions.

But there's another point to press here. Gray has argued that there is no objective source of meaning. Therefore, he says, religious and ethical statements are meaningless. But this, too, is an unwarranted leap. Just because one cannot justify one's belief to a skeptic does not mean that it must be abandoned or even that it is unjustifiable. First of all, if one cannot objectively prove one's beliefs, then one need not.

No one is obliged to do what is impossible.

If this move sidesteps the problem, the alternative is to double down and embrace it. Even in a silent, unknowable world, faith is possible—not despite silence and skepticism, but because of them. This was the position of, among others, the late Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg, who has become increasingly influential in Israeli religious circles in the decade since his death in 2007.

After reviewing several midrashic passages that highlight Abraham's uncertainty regarding God's will with regard to the sacrifice of his son Isaac, Rabbi Rosenberg concluded that there was no way for Abraham to know what God wanted him to do. His trial—like ours—was to believe and to act in instances where belief and action could not be justified:

A conceited, all-knowing religious stance renders the trial, and with it the entire religious endeavor, a sham. The trial, along with a religious lifestyle and connection to God, can exist only in the context of a humble personality that is content in not knowing. . . . The trial will forever be associated with a subject who by nature is in the dark.

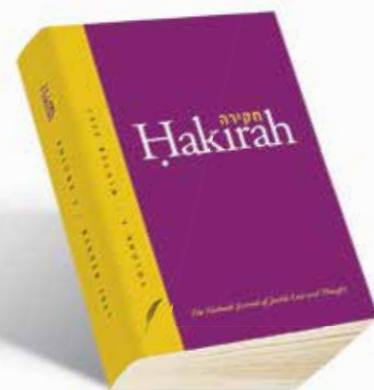
An inability to ground human meaning and religious faith might not mean they cannot be justified, only that they need not be.

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Isaac Inkeles, formerly an editorial assistant at Mosaic, is an incoming Furman Scholar at NYU Law.

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# In My Country There Is Problem

BY JARROD TANNY

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## ***Anti-Zionism on Campus: The University, Free Speech, and BDS***

edited by Andrew Pessin and Doron S. Ben-Atar  
Indiana University Press, 456 pp., \$46

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A performer gets up onstage and tells the audience, “Anti-Semitism. Yeah, okay. This is my anti-Semitic song. I know it sounds R&B stuff but don’t think of Rihanna when you sing it, think of, um . . . don’t think of Beyoncé, think of Mel Gibson. Go *that* anti-Semitic.” He then gets the tittering audience to sing the line “I’m in love with a Jew” in a parodic call and response before launching into his song about a Palestinian stuck in an elevator with a female Israeli:

Her skin is white, my skin is brown  
She was going up, I was going down . . .  
In the elevator, no electricity  
Between us, there was electricity  
Was it meant to be? Could she be the one?  
Her name ain’t Jenny but she’s got a gun  
Do I speak Hebrew? A bit hard for me  
“YESH AVODA?” means, u gotta job for me?  
Does she speak Arabic? She said a word or two  
“WAKEF YA BATUKHAK” means, freeze or I shoots

This reminds one of nothing so much as Borat getting the audience at a country and western bar to sing “In My Country There Is Problem” (“Throw the Jew down the well / So my country can be free”)—except it was an audience of professors and students at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and the rapper, Tamer Nafar, wasn’t joking. (The official video for the song includes the cute Israeli soldier beating him, acting like a dominatrix, taking selfies with him tied and blindfolded, and so on.) Nafar had been invited to open, and hence presumably set the tone, for the Duke-UNC Consortium for Middle East Studies Conference “Conflict over Gaza: People, Politics, and Possibilities,” which promised to give participants “a deeper understanding of the context” of the conflict. What is happening on American campuses?

The March 2019 Duke-UNC conference happened too recently to be included in *Anti-Zionism on Campus: The University, Free Speech, and BDS*, the first book published by an academic press to contextualize first-hand accounts from faculty and students who became ensnared in the systematic assaults against Israel—and by extension Jews—that have become commonplace in higher education. Through this collection we get a disturbing picture of how students and faculty in the self-proclaimed progres-

sive movement have demonized and marginalized Israel, its advocates, and anyone who wishes to genuinely learn about the Jewish State. Although such progressives claim that anti-Zionism is not anti-Semitism, because they are attacking a political entity and the ideologues who uphold it, not an ethnoreligious community, these essays suggest otherwise.

## **The email arrived on the last Friday of the term: “It has been alleged that you may have . . . discriminated against another person at the university.”**

They make a strong case for those who argue that anti-Zionism is the “new anti-Semitism.” Indeed, if the two were distinct phenomena, why in the world would a room full of engaged university citizens



*Rapper Tamer Nafar performing in the northern Arab-Israeli town of Sakhnin, October 23, 2016. His performance at a recent conference drew attention to anti-Semitism on campus. (Ahmad Gharabli/AFP/Getty Images.)*

ostensibly eager to learn about the context of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict applaud a performer who urges them to “go *that* anti-Semitic” and treats being “in love with a Jew” as a parodic badge of shame?

It is a badge of shame because these activists have one objective: to humiliate everyone who can be branded as “complicit in Zionism.” This includes faculty who sponsor events featuring Israeli speakers, students who publicly oppose boycott and divestment from Israel resolutions (BDS), and even those who advocate for the rights of the LGBT community in the Jewish State (rights they in fact possess, as opposed to the citizens of every other state in the Middle East).

As Professors Andrew Pessin and Doron Ben-Atar write, “Where some might see in Israel a prosperous (if flawed) liberal democracy, or the only

modern example of an indigenous people reclaiming lost sovereignty over its homeland, the new campus orthodoxy sees only an apartheid regime founded on racism, genocide, ethnic cleansing, and colonialist imperialism,” all of which are terms they routinely deploy without empirical evidence. Zionism is illegitimate and “Jewish democracy is an offensive oxy-

moron” because it is impossible for a Jewish State to exist or to have come into being without the violent dispossession and displacement of the land’s alleged rightful indigenous inhabitants (thus, incidentally, the pitch-perfect phrasing of Nafar’s song: “Her skin is white, my skin is brown,” though of course it doesn’t describe Israeli reality).

This view, belligerently propagated by Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP), and similar activist networks, rejects outright the idea of a two-state solution to the conflict, precisely because it legitimates the Zionist project, which they argue is little more than European imperialism masquerading as Jewish self-determination. Rejecting the legitimacy of the “Zionist narrative” absolves Palestinian activists from any responsibility to engage respectfully with their opponents through debate, negotiation, and empathy. Such absolutism is a license to boycott, malign, and threaten anyone who affiliates with Israel.

**A**nti-Zionism on Campus is not a collection of essays by academic scholars of anti-Semitism; rather it is by academics who have experienced anti-Semitism in the academy. Take, for instance, coeditor Doron Ben-Atar’s experience. “The email arrived on the last Friday of the spring term shortly before 5:00 p.m.,” he writes. “Anastasia Coleman, Fordham’s director of Institutional Equity and Compliance / Title IX coordinator, wanted to meet with me. ‘It has been alleged . . . that you may have acted in an inappropriate way and possibly discriminated against another person at the university.’” Given that Title IX addresses sexual misconduct, Ben-Atar panicked, and he mentally replayed all the caustic and cheeky quips, “the many slips of the tongue I had had in three decades of teaching.” But this had nothing to do with his students or his classroom propriety.

So what had Ben-Atar done? He had taken what he considered to be a principled position against the American Studies Association’s 2013 resolution to boycott Israeli universities. Arguing that the resolution unfairly discriminated against an entire nation’s academics irrespective of their individual

politics, Ben-Atar implored his colleagues in Fordham's American Studies program to explicitly reject it. When his colleagues chose to remain silent, Ben-Atar threatened to "resign from the program and fight against it until it took a firm stand against bigotry." The program's director decided to retaliate against him by filing a specious Title IX complaint, "charging that I threatened to destroy the program," although how this violated Title IX (or would have even been an intelligible threat from a single faculty member) was left mysterious.

Ben-Atar "went through a Kafkaesque process in which I was never told exactly what I supposedly did wrong, nor was I ever shown anything in writing." Only later, when the official report was issued, did Ben-Atar learn that "the charge was religious discrimination born out of my opposition to the ASA [American Studies Association] boycott." He was never given the opportunity to defend himself, and it painfully dawned on him that "[a]dministrators and colleagues failed to protect my First Amendment rights and fed the assault on my character." While the Title IX coordinator's report cleared him of that charge, it concluded that he must be guilty of something, since he had hired an attorney, and recommended that he be disciplined. In the end, he was not, but the provost expressed dismay that Ben-Atar intended to go public with his story, which he did, because of "the message conveyed to me and to all those daring to deviate from the new anti-Zionist orthodoxy: if you dare to speak up, we'll come after you; we'll spread false rumors and innuendos; we'll portray you as a sexist bully; we'll destroy your reputation; and we'll make you an outcast in your own department and university."

But there was a larger issue at stake for Ben-Atar: "Antisemitism is protected speech" on campus, whereas speech combating anti-

operation in Gaza inflamed anti-Israel rhetoric on her campus. Blackmer arrived at work one morning to find her office door defaced "with profane, hateful language that was anti-LGBTQ, antisemitic, and anti-Zionist." Justifiably agitated, Blackmer called the campus police. But it was the police officer's response that truly distressed her:

Throughout the interview, she seemed to assume that I had been the victim of *only* homophobic animus. All other threats and defacing were ignored, as if incidental, accidental, and, indeed, nonsignifying. I realized she could understand homophobia but, like my students, not anti-Zionism—which was *not* a recognized form of hate speech, as too many pro-Israel students, faculty, and staff at American college campuses have learned to their dismay.



Banner advertising the Duke-UNC Consortium for Middle East Studies Conference "Conflict over Gaza: People, Politics, and Possibilities," March 2019.



Students for Justice in Palestine at UC Berkeley, September 2014. (Photo by Ariel Hayat.)

Semitism is not. This is what Corinne E. Blackmer, "an out lesbian, an observant Jewish woman, and a Zionist" professor at Southern Connecticut State University, discovered in March 2008, when an IDF

This, despite the fact that her car "had been daubed with mud in the shape of a swastika."

It is axiomatic in progressive circles that targeted minorities have the right to define their experience of

oppression and discrimination. However, what one finds again and again in the 31 first-hand case studies of incidents of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism in this book is university officials at every level, from police officers to provosts and presidents, who are profoundly uninterested in the victim's interpretation of what happened to them. As Blackmer writes, "They took all the liberal ideals of inclusion and respect for plurality in which I believe so deeply and used them against the Zionist and Jewish components of my identity." Nor—despite their insistence on making a rigorous distinction between these two components of identity—are campus radicals particularly good at actually keeping it. In one well-publicized incident, Molly Horwitz, a Jewish Latina student who ran for the Stanford senate, was asked during her electoral campaign, "Given your strong Jewish identity, how would you vote on divestment [from Israel]?"

Moreover, the rhetoric used to attack Zionists and the State of Israel is often replete with anti-Semitic tropes, and not only from historically ignorant 20-year-olds. In 2016, Professor Jasbir Puar gave a now infamous presentation at Vassar College in which she alleged that the Israeli government and IDF were engaged in a secretive systematic plot to stunt the growth of, maim, and harvest the organs of Palestinians, thus colonizing not only their land but their bodies. Leaving aside the outrageous slander of such an accusation—devoid of any empirical evidence—Puar's talk was deeply troubling because it repackaged the traditional blood libel myth of ritualized Jewish murder propagated by Christians from the Middle Ages well into the modern era.

At Stanford, during a debate over a proposed resolution condemning anti-Semitism, one student senator insisted that saying "Jews control the media, economy, [and] government" is not anti-Semitic because it legitimately questions today's power dynamics. In other instances, rhetoric that echoes the Holocaust is maliciously deployed—for instance, equating Gaza with Auschwitz. A recent poster at Columbia University from Students for Justice in Palestine announcing Israel Apartheid Week featured a cartoon of a goose-stepping Israeli soldier chasing a young Palestinian graffiti artist. He throws his spray can at the soldier as he flees, giving the soldier a bump on the head that looks suspiciously like a horn.

When the German philosopher Fichte, over two centuries ago, warned that European Jews often acted like a "state within a state," he was questioning their loyalty, questioning whether they would put Jewish interests before German ones, much as Molly Horwitz's interrogator suspected that her loyalty to Israel superseded her professed goal of furthering the welfare and ideals of her fellow Stanford students. When the USSR stepped up its persecution of Soviet Jewry in the late 1960s, it was ostensibly over the politics of Israel, loosely framed in a Marxist understanding of history and identity. The Soviet government branded Israel a bourgeois imperialist state that economically oppressed indigenous Arabs, leaving its Jewish citizens under a cloud of suspicion, especially those who sought to emigrate. Finally, the most infamous anti-Semitic document in history, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, purports to be the manifesto of a Jewish cabal intent on conquering and controlling the world through the political, economic, and ideological instruments

of modernity, such as capitalism, liberalism, communism, and the media.

The use of the word “Zionist” instead of “Jew” gives today’s campus anti-Semites plausible deniability, even though the charges they propagate are often little more than recapitulations of racist tropes with a long and sordid history. And much like the anti-Semites of yesteryear, today’s anti-Zionists claim to be fighting a universal battle for the oppressed, “packaged as a self-sacrificing stand for the sake of humanity,” as Ben-Atar puts it. “We’re fighting an asymmetric war because the Zionist Jew in fact is *not* privileged,” writes Brown student Jared Samilow, because “[w]e can be attacked, and we are attacked, but we can’t effectively respond

without being accused of supporting injustice and inflicting psychological distress on other students.” Nor are these attacks all merely verbal. Three years ago at the University of California, Irvine, more than 50 SJP protesters converged on a classroom where a film about young Israeli soldiers was being shown, screaming “Long live the Intifada!” and trying to force their way into the room. One young moviegoer who had stepped out to call her mother was

blocked from reentering the classroom as the mob yelled, “If we can’t go in, you can’t go in.” They then chased her into another building where, to quote an official report, she “hid in terror, crying on her cell phone to her mother who called the police while the protesters searched for [her].”



A poster from Jewish Voice for Peace at Columbia University announcing Israel Apartheid Week, 2109.

Much as 19<sup>th</sup>-century anti-Semites saw the Jews as being the chief perpetrators and beneficiaries of the widespread misery unleashed by political modernization and industrialization, today’s anti-Zionists have centered the Jewish State—a tiny entity that allegedly wields a disproportionate amount of power through its covert machinations—in their cosmology of global oppressions. Social justice and liberation entail the liquidation of Jewish power.

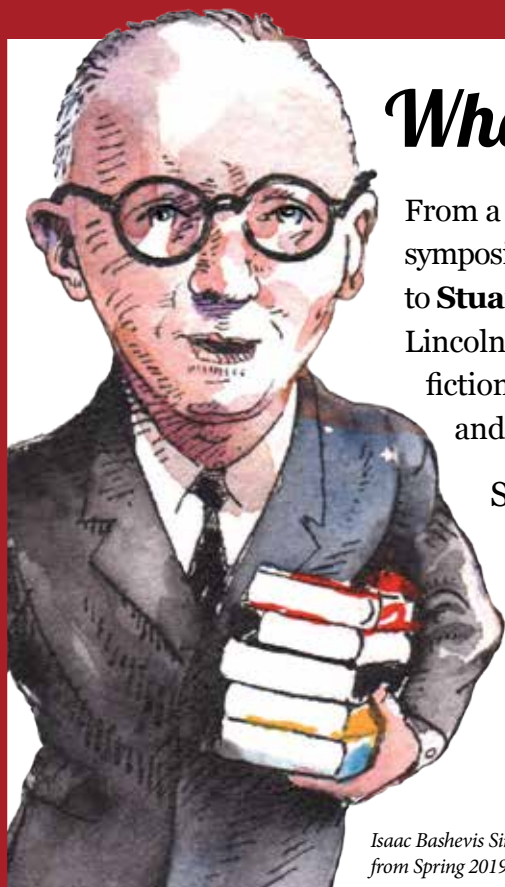
If the legacy of anti-Semitism has influenced campus discourse on Israel, the reverse is equally true: The battle over Zionism documented by Pessin and Ben-Atar is increasingly being waged in American politics and on social media. As Cary Nelson argues, the failed student BDS resolutions have “turn[ed] some students against Israel . . . [t]hose students become tomorrow’s teachers, businesspeople, professionals, religious leaders, and politicians.” The inexorable migration of activism from the classroom and the quad to the public sphere and Twitter has been inflamed by the presidency of Donald Trump. Social justice activists view Trump’s pro-Israel policies as a core element of his America First program. “No ban, no wall from the U.S. to Palestine” is just one of the many simplistic catchphrases frequently heard today at political rallies. Some have gone even further, such as the anti-Zionist group Jewish Voice for Peace with its “Deadly Exchange” platform. Through a carefully choreographed video, JVP argues that American Jewish organizations, including the ADL and Birthright, recruit American police forces to undergo “racial profile” training by the IDF in Israel, in order to better control, detain, deport, and extrajudicially execute people of color in overpopulated American cities. Israel and its emissaries abroad are thus actually *responsible* for exploiting and exacerbating American racial violence through a secretive program, much as the mythical early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Elders of Zion surreptitiously wielded global power from the shadows.

“If the Palestinians stand . . . as symbolic of all the victims of ‘the west’ or ‘imperialism,’” writes David Hirsh, “then Israel is thrust into the centre of the world as being symbolic of oppression everywhere.” In this sense, the Palestinian is the universal victim, the 21<sup>st</sup>-century incarnation of the Marxist’s proletariat whose liberation would lead to the liberation of all. All that stands in the way is the Jewish State and the diasporic communities who advocate for its existence. Social justice and freedom will only come when Jewish self-determination is undone and Israel is forced to vanish into history.

But it is primarily the Jews of the diaspora, not Israel, who are paying the price for the BDS movement because its goal, write Pessin and Ben-Atar, is “to change the conversation about Israel and Zionism” in America, not to actually help the Palestinians. In fact, they go on, “they have changed the conversation quite significantly. It is now permissible to say things about Israelis and Jews . . . that not long ago were impermissible.” Indeed, if this were about the politics of the State of Israel and not about Jews qua Jews, why in the world would a Palestinian rapper gleefully evoke Mel Gibson’s notorious anti-Semitism, successfully encouraging a room full of North Carolinian students and academics ostensibly there to learn about Gaza to ridicule the very idea of falling “in love with a Jew”?

Jarrod Tanny is associate professor and Charles and Hannah Block Distinguished Scholar in Jewish History at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington. He is the author of *City of Rogues and Schnorrers: Russia’s Jews and the Myth of Old Odessa* (Indiana University Press) and is currently working on a study on Jewish humor in post-World War II America and its relation to the European Jewish past.

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# On a Story by Delmore Schwartz

BY RUTH R. WISSE

“In Dreams Begin Responsibilities” is one of those astonishing literary works born in a rush of inspiration that stakes out the genius of a young new writer. Sholem Aleichem describes writing “*Dos meserl*” (“The Penknife”) in a single night, and, though he later revised it slightly, it remains his most self-revealing story. Franz Kafka was still in a state of exhilaration as he recorded in his diary that during the previous night of September 22–23, 1912, he had written “*Das Urteil*” (“The Judgment”) in a single sitting from 10 at night to 6 o’clock in the morning. In Delmore Schwartz’s case, we have not his own description but that of his then closest friend, William Barrett, who dropped in on him one morning in 1935, when they were both 22, and was handed a freshly typed story. Barrett was totally unprepared for the jolt it gave him. “[Here] was something completely formed and wonderfully perfect.” All three stories, including Delmore’s—Schwartz is one of those artists one inevitably finds oneself calling by his first name—reflect the nocturnal conditions of their composition, as though writing through the night had induced a dreamlike opportunity for uninhibited thought and feeling. Each was also about an initiation into maturity, but “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities” was destined to be more than a personal breakthrough. It became a founding document of a new intellectual movement.

The origins of the literary community that came to be known as the New York Intellectuals are usually traced to the founding of *Partisan Review* in 1934 as an organ of the communist John Reed Club of New York, whose motto was “Art is a weapon in the class struggle.” The Bolshevik revolutionaries who created the Soviet Union intended to change the entire world order, and they established the Communist International (Comintern) in 1919 to “struggle by all available means, including armed force, for the overthrow of the international bourgeoisie.” The Comintern spread its ideas in America through Moscow-directed publications like the *New Masses*, the *Daily Worker*, and the Yiddish daily *Di Freiheit*. While the John Reed Clubs were not technically American affiliates of the Comintern, they too were expected to follow the Communist Party line, and the *Partisan Review* editors dutifully took up the challenge, promising to “combat not only the decadent culture of the exploiting classes but also the debilitating liberalism which at times seeps into our writers through the pressure of class-alien forces.”

Nonetheless, before long *Partisan Review* editors William Phillips (born Litvinsky) and Philip Rahv (born Ivan Greenbaum) tired of being political hacks, closed the publication and severed ties with the movement. It being America, they were not sent to the Gulag but, as Phillips would later recall, merely “called every dirty name in the Communist political lexicon. . . . People we had known for years stopped talking to us; when we met them in the street they looked the other way.” This experience of

expulsion must have helped them consolidate their own cluster of writers and thinkers to form the first European-style intelligentsia in America.

Two years after closing the earlier magazine, the same editors used private funding to revive it un-

**Delmore’s story was given pride of place in the first issue of the new *Partisan Review*, ahead of a poem by Wallace Stevens, an essay by Edmund Wilson, not to speak of an essay by Pablo Picasso.**

der the same name. Although they continued to proclaim that “[a]ny magazine, we believe, that aspires to a place in the vanguard of literature today, will be revolutionary in tendency,” they renounced all party supervision:



Delmore Schwartz in Cambridge, Massachusetts, ca. 1940s. (Photo by Gertrude Buckman.)

[W]e are also convinced that any such magazine will be unequivocally independent. *Partisan Review* is aware of its responsibility to the revolutionary movement in general, but we disclaim obligation to any of its organized political expressions.

Phillips and Rahv would remain in the leftist camp on their own cultural terms. No longer heading up a communist outpost, they formed an American bridgehead for European ideas.

The corrosive effects of Soviet oversight had been felt most keenly in literature and the arts, whose standards of excellence were always at odds with, and often in defiance of, political requirements. Now free to publish writers outside the com-

munist orbit, Phillips invited the politically unaffiliated Delmore Schwartz to contribute. Delmore’s story was accepted just as he had shown it to Barrett two years earlier, and it was given pride of place in the first issue of the new *Partisan Review*, Decem-

ber 1937, ahead of a poem by Wallace Stevens, an essay by Edmund Wilson, book reviews from Sidney Hook, Lionel Trilling, and others, not to speak of Pablo Picasso on the “Dreams and Lies of Franco.” The story may have sent a clearer message about the nature of the launch than the somewhat turgid statement of aims the editors had trouble hammering out. It announced *youth*: Delmore was then 24 years old.

“In Dreams Begin Responsibilities”—the title adapted from William Butler Yeats—was an ideal story to introduce literary modernism, the second of the two Ms that were said to govern the magazine (Marxism, albeit not the official Soviet line, still being the first). Modernism in literature can be understood most simply as a reaction to the writing that emerged from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century belief that society was knowable and could be represented through characters and events that mirrored real life. Born of what Irving Howe calls “a breakup of the traditional unity and continuity of Western culture,” modernism challenged our cognitive and moral sense of security. Responding to new findings of psychology and physics, incorporating new media such as telegraph and film, and unsettled by the horrors of industrial warfare, modernist works challenged bourgeois contentment. Here, in fact, was the where the two Ms met: Both were antibourgeois to the same degree. Delmore’s story fit the bill; it was also brilliant. Irving Howe was stunned when he read it as a teenager, and others, too, “remembered the story long after forgetting everything in the first issue.”

The opening of the story plunges us into a strange situation:

I think it is the year 1909. I feel as if I were in a motion picture theater, the long arm of light crossing the darkness and spinning, my eyes fixed on the screen. This is a silent picture as if an old Biograph one, in which the actors are dressed in ridiculously old-fashioned clothes, and one flash succeeds another with sudden jumps. The actors too seem to jump about and walk too fast. The shots themselves are full of dots and rays, as if it were raining when the picture was photographed. The light is bad.

The narrator feels he is watching one of those old-fashioned grainy movies, yet the film itself positions

us precisely in Brooklyn, New York, on a Sunday afternoon, June 12, 1909. A man is on his way to pick up his date. Once he passes the scrutiny of her family, the couple goes off to spend the day at Coney Island. At the amusement park, they walk along the boardwalk, ride the merry-go-round, and go for dinner at a restaurant, where the man proposes marriage and the woman accepts. After that, they have their picture taken, and the young woman wants to have their fortunes told. But instead of the romantic follow-up that we might have expected, tension grows between them until the man marches off and the fortune-teller holds the woman back from going after him. The odds for this union are not good.

Our emotional attachment in reading this story is not to the couple but to the narrator as he reacts to what he sees happening on screen. He is the child who will result from the events of that day, desperately eager for the people he identifies as his father and mother to pay closer attention to what is at stake in their courtship. The film is, quite literally, the young man's projection of how he came into being, but, whereas psychoanalysis is intended to bring the understanding that helps cure neurosis, our narrator's projection is an inexorable sequence of frames that predetermines what no amount of self-understanding can change.

When the narrator's mother comes downstairs all dressed up for her date, her father observing the interaction between the pair does not like what he sees. "He is worried; he is afraid that my father will not make a good husband for his oldest daughter."

At this point something happens to the film, just as my father is saying something funny to my mother; I am awakened to myself and my unhappiness just as my interest was rising. The audience begins to clap impatiently.

Once the technical problem with the projector is taken care of, the onscreen romance resumes, but we are now aware of the son's uneasiness about the process that brought him into being.

Several things are happening at once—the film is being shown in the theater, the audience is there to be entertained, and the narrator, the person speaking to us, is growing ever more anxious. He interrupts the film whenever he can no longer bear to watch the unfolding action, that is, when he sees what his parents fail to see for themselves. At one point, his mother and father lean on the rail of the boardwalk and absently stare at the ocean.

[T]he waves come in slowly, tugging strength from far back. The moment before they somersault, the moment when they arch their backs so beautifully, showing green and white veins amid the black, that moment is intolerable. They finally crack, dashing fiercely upon the sand, actually driving, full force downward, against the sand, bouncing upward and forward, and at last petering out into a small stream which races up the beach and then is recalled. My parents gaze absentmindedly at the ocean, scarcely interested in its harshness. The sun overhead does not disturb them. But I stare at the terrible sun which breaks up sight, and the fatal, merciless, passionate ocean, I forget my parents. I stare fascinated and finally, shocked by the indifference of my father and

mother, I burst out weeping once more.

The old woman sitting next to him in the theater tries to calm him, but he has to go to the men's room, "stumbling over the feet of the other people seated in my row." He can neither influence his parents retroactively nor find any companionship in the audience around him.

The power of the descriptive prose tells us that the young man must be a writer—or a poet. Indeed, *Partisan Review's* editors and their circle knew that in writing this story, Delmore—described by his biographer James Atlas as "one of the most self-conscious writers who ever lived"—was drawing on his own family life, and, through the presence of the theater audience, admitting the author's anxiety into the story along with that of the son's.

He was born in Brooklyn in 1913, and the unsettled quality of his life began in childhood with the separation of his parents when he was seven and his younger brother four. His mercurial father made money in real estate, and Delmore was raised



Rose and Harry Schwartz, ca. 1910, Brooklyn, New York. (Courtesy of Syracuse University Archives.)

by his mother with expectations of wealth that crashed with his father's death just after the market crash of 1929. Everything we know from independent sources confirms the author was portraying his actual mother and father in this story according to their personalities and temperaments, and probably piecing together this day of their courtship from details gleaned, mostly from his mother, over the years. He apparently showed it to her soon after he wrote it, and Atlas tells us that there is a typescript of the story on which his mother scrawled:

Dear Delmore  
If there is another word besides wonderful I dont know I dont remember telling you all these so accurate. Please save the story and bring it home for me. There are moments in my life, that [sic] I believe all my struggles are worthwhile.  
Mother

It is impossible to know how much of Delmore's own later psychological struggles derived from his innate brain chemistry (Atlas diagnosed him as bipolar) and extravagant drug and alcohol abuse, and

how much from his upbringing or self-invention, but in the story he traces it back to the circumstances of his conception. He is trapped in the life spawned by the pairing of this mismatched man and woman.

Our narrator dreams that he is viewing this film not privately or with people who care for him (say, in a home movie) but in a public theater where the rest of the audience is interested only in the story and cannot put up with his agitated reactions. He is uneasy about turning personal life into fiction, about having *his* life displayed. But he cannot have it both ways—had his parents not met and married, he would not be alive, and had he not created this work, we would not be reading him.

On the vertical scale, free will does not extend to the predetermined parts of one's identity, and horizontally, creation stops at the point that the artist releases his work to the audience. One might as well invoke Ecclesiastes: "Only that shall happen / Which has happened, / Only that occur / Which has occurred; / There is nothing new / Under the sun." However, this is not a work of Solomonic composure but acute distress.

The intense subjectivity of "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities" signaled the *Partisan Review's* defiance of communism's collectivist assumptions, political priorities, and narrative style. Its pessimism reflects the Marxist analysis of American doom, albeit without attribution to socio-economic causes. The culprit here is not failed capitalism but the "American dream" and a father who "has always felt that actualities somehow fall short." On that fateful day, he isn't ready for marriage, yet he thinks of "big men he admires who are married: William Randolph Hearst, and William Howard Taft, who has just become President of the United States." Caught up in possibility, he ignores probability—he does not take realistic measure of himself.

This view of America was already familiar from, most famously, the great Jay Gatsby, whose dream blindsided him to the selfish depths of his society. Delmore may have been saluting James Joyce's *Ulysses*, much beloved by Jewish intellectuals for its portrayal of a Jewish father, Leopold Bloom. Stephen Dedalus, the symbolic son "Poldy" Bloom acquires in place of the biological son he has lost, declares, "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake"—the very sentiment of Delmore's narrator, who is struggling to awake from the nightmare of his own personal history. In the compressed scheme of this story, the son is the outcome of the father's irresponsibility. America is built on endless opportunity. Classical tragedy is based on fatal probabilities. The young man in this movie theater experiences the American dream as a tragedy.

It comes as no surprise that when he wrote this story Delmore was reading Kafka's *The Trial*, in which the narrator wakes up on the morning of his thirtieth birthday to find himself under arrest. In Kafka there is no named city, no established time, no patronym or firm identification, and no actual crime or possibility of exoneration. Josef K.'s main problem is deracination, and the resulting insecurity of his status determines his doom: He is killed "like a dog." Delmore revises Kafka in the process of adapting him to liberal, transparent America. We are given to know that the father will not become a mature husband and that his son will grow up unhappy. One can see Willy Loman waiting in the

wings as the American Jewish father, along with Alexander Portnoy as the American Jewish son.

It is only at the point of ending that this story veers from its pervasive fatalism. Our narrator has been distraught that these two incompatible people are joining in a marriage which will produce two children with “monstrous” characters, yet when the father seems about to walk away from the marriage their son shouts in fear, “What are they doing? Don’t they know what they are doing?” shocking the audience and bringing the usher with his searchlight down the aisle to drag him away. The usher has the final word:

“What are *you* doing? Don’t you know that you can’t do whatever you want to do? Why should a young man like you, with your whole life before you, get hysterical like this? Why don’t you *think* of what you’re doing? You can’t act like this even if other people aren’t around! You will be sorry if you do not do what you should do, you can’t carry on like this, it is not right, you will find that out soon enough, everything you do matters too much,” and he said that dragging me through the lobby of the theatre into the cold light, and I woke up into the bleak winter morning of my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, the windowsill shining with its lip of snow, and the morning already begun.

Thus, the child, monstrous or not, was born unto them after all, and on this day of his majority he is risen from his nightmare into a crisp winter morning, with the shining lip of snow on the windowsill suggesting a new departure. What is more, perhaps this dream will beget responsibilities, one of them being this American Jewish cautionary tale.

**M**y pared-down account of the story is perhaps enough to show why it struck its immediate readers so forcibly and how it became a milestone in American—and Jewish—literary history. It is a sobering study of no-longer-immigrants who have not yet found their balance in the new land. The narrator’s cries in the dark theater cannot affect the course of events. The artist baring his suffering cannot expect anything from an audience that appreciates the entertainment but is indifferent to his pain.

While the ominous force of the story derives most obviously from the young man’s condition and sense of himself, it is hard to imagine that someone of Delmore’s intelligence and sensibility was not affected as well by what he knew of the mounting dangers to the Jews of Europe. Rarely has a sense of foreboding had greater justification or found subtler expression. The story admired for its personal singular intensity is also an augury of desperate times.

The story’s relation to modernism is likewise instructive. In many ways it satisfies Ezra Pound’s directive to “make it new”—it tells a real story in an imagined context, introduces the medium of film into the medium of fiction, arrests and manipulates the normal narrative sequence, and comments on the story while telling it. But Delmore also avoided some of the pitfalls of modernism. He evokes the reality of a Jewish family in Brooklyn, and if he does not emphasize their Jewishness it is only to the degree that they no longer live by its mores. In giving us an actual family that matters very much to him, he overcomes one of the handicaps of modernist writing that too often fails to fully engage us emotionally. We do not

care as deeply about Clarissa Dalloway or even Molly Bloom as we do about Elizabeth Bennet or Dorothea Brooke. Writing from the depths of his experience, Delmore’s Jewish modernism was specific enough to be recognizable and deeply affecting.

He was, in fact, the first in that *Partisan Review* coterie to recognize that literary modernism confronted Jews with a special problem. Some of its greatest practitioners were openly anti-Semitic, and

## The artist baring his suffering cannot expect anything from an audience that appreciates the entertainment but is indifferent to his pain.

the movement’s antipathy to family, community, and nation made it generally antagonistic to the Jewish people. Jews were inherently bourgeois.

Here a brief sidebar may be in order. In 1938, the year after the publication of this story, Ezra Pound published *Guide to Kulchur*, which contained scurrilous remarks about the Jews. Pound was then in Italy, politically associated with fascism, on behalf of which he later broadcast during the Second World War. Delmore wrote Pound to say that his arguments were illogical and contradicted views the poet had expressed elsewhere.

A race cannot commit a moral act. Only an individual can be moral or immoral. No generalization from a sum of particulars is possible, which will render a moral judgment. In a court of law, the criminal is always one individual, and when he is condemned, his whole family is not, qua family, condemned. . . . Furthermore, this view of individual responsibility is implicit in the poetry for which you are justly famous.

But I do not doubt that this is a question which you have no desire to discuss with anyone who does not agree with you, and even less with one who will be suspected of an interested view. Without ceasing to distinguish between past activity and present irrationality [in other words, though you may still be a great poet] I should like you to consider this letter a resignation: I want to resign as one of your most studious and faithful admirers.

If Pound had left moral responsibility behind, Delmore had not. “If he is attacked as a poet,” he later wrote when Pound was charged with treason for his wartime broadcasts from Italy, “then we will certainly defend him strongly and at length. But . . . no one’s actions can be defended on the ground that he is a great poet.” Respect for writing did not mean absolving the writer. Quite the contrary, it meant distinguishing the man from his art, and between the good and the rotten in both.

**D**elmore’s signature story never specified exactly what responsibilities begin in dreams, though I infer they include mature self-knowledge and strong family loyalty, among other solidly Jewish and traditional American values. Perhaps most

important is the very emphasis on responsibility as the goal of the American dream rather than whatever else was floating around in the minds of the young man and woman on their critical date. “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities” makes no false images and bows to no foreign gods. Its self-exploratory voice paved the way for younger writers—Isaac Rosenfeld and Saul Bellow, who read and loved the story when it appeared, and after them, Philip Roth. The kind of anguished interior monologue that comedians like Lenny Bruce and Woody Allen would later spin for laughs, Delmore spun into American Jewish highbrow fiction. His voice was the voice of the eternal Jewish son who never becomes a Jewish father.

Alas, the story’s sense of doom was realized in Delmore’s life. After an impressive career as poet, writer, and critic, he spun out of control in a way that Saul Bellow captures in his novel *Humboldt’s Gift*, which is an elegy for Delmore and a meditation on his legacy. While describing the last days of Delmore’s fictional embodiment, Von Humboldt Fleisher, Bellow’s narrator breaks off to say:

I cannot accept the view of death taken by most of us, and taken by me during most of my life—on esthetic grounds therefore I am obliged to deny that so extraordinary a thing as a human soul can be wiped out forever. No, the dead are about us, shut out by our metaphysical denial of them. As we lie nightly in our hemispheres asleep by the billions, our dead approach us. Our ideas should be their nourishment. We are their grainfields. But we are barren and we starve them. Don’t kid yourself, though, we are watched by the dead, watched on this earth, which is our school of freedom.

Bellow took the death of Delmore very hard and so, too, did that founding group of New York Jewish intellectuals for whom he had been the golden boy. They were all individualists, but they recognized that this youngster was more so. They were still oriented toward the future while he saw the black waves beating against their shore.

While his peers cut their teeth on Trotsky, he was able to identify with the doomed children of the tsar, who “Played with a bouncing ball / In the May morning, in the Czar’s garden, . . . / While I ate a baked potato / Six thousand miles apart, / In Brooklyn, in 1916, / Aged two, irrational.” It is astonishing to think that he should have expressed a kinship between the Jewish family that saved itself by coming to America and the family of the great oppressor from whom they fled until we realize that the destiny of those soon-to-be-executed children most closely approximated how he felt about his threatened self. That poem—every bit as astounding as this signature story—connects the bouncing ball to the “wheeling, whirling world” in which the innocent are overtaken. There too, as in this story, the son is overtaken by the terror of destiny.

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# Visiting Yemen in the 1980s: A Photo Essay

BY MYRIAM TANGI

In 1982, I organized an evening dedicated to artists at the first Festival of Jewish Culture in France, created by the filmmaker Emil Weiss. The theme of the program was “Tradition and Modernity,” and among the artists I invited was a young photographer named Frédéric Brenner, who had just finished an as-yet unpublished series of images of Meah Shearim. Although I was primarily a painter at the time, I had already begun experimenting with photography, and I could see how extraordinary Brenner’s work was.

The next year we started traveling and working together on what would become the 20-year “Diaspora” photography project, which Brenner had just begun and which culminated in the *Diaspora: Homelands in Exile* book and traveling exhibition.

Our first trip together was to the Jewish community of Djerba, an island off the coast of Tunisia, on Sukkot in 1983. It was there that I realized that I, too, should bring my camera on these trips, first to capture Frédéric from backstage, in the act of taking pictures, but also to take photos myself. In October, when we made our first trip to Yemen, I brought my camera, as well as my paint brushes.

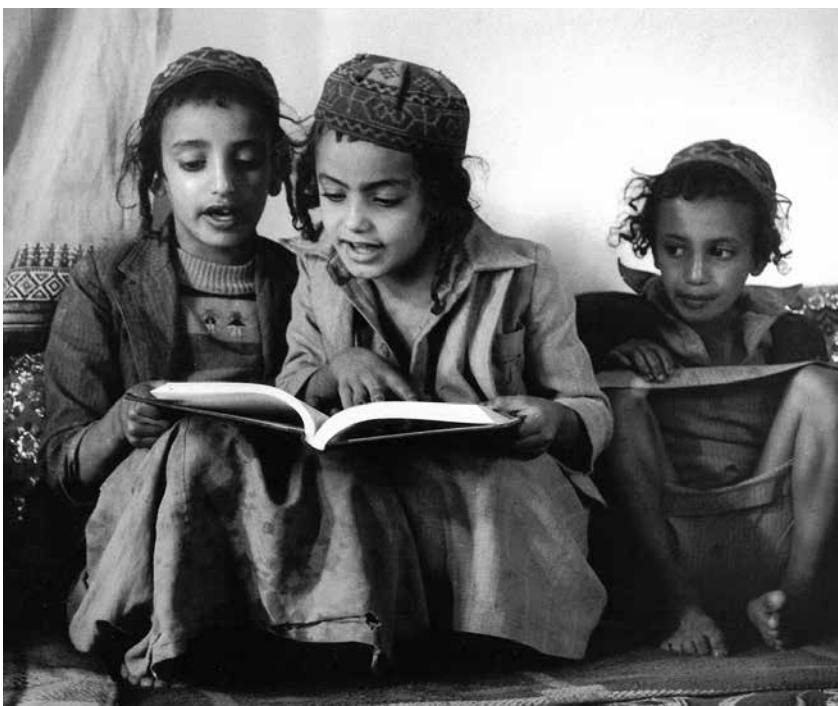
We had learned of the last Jewish communities of Yemen from the architects Pascal and Maria Marechaux, who studied the traditional earth architecture of Yemen, touring the country on a motorcycle to see the gorgeous painted houses and the unique mud-brick buildings, some of them hundreds of years old and 70 feet high. They had come across small Jewish communities here and there in their travels. These were the remnants of

an ancient community that, by legend, goes back to the Queen of Sheba’s visit to King Solomon or, perhaps, to the period immediately following the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem.

In 1949 and 1950, the vast majority of Yemenite Jews, almost 50,000 of them, had been spirited to Israel on transport planes flying out of Aden in the famous Operation *Kanfei Nesharim* (“On Eagle’s



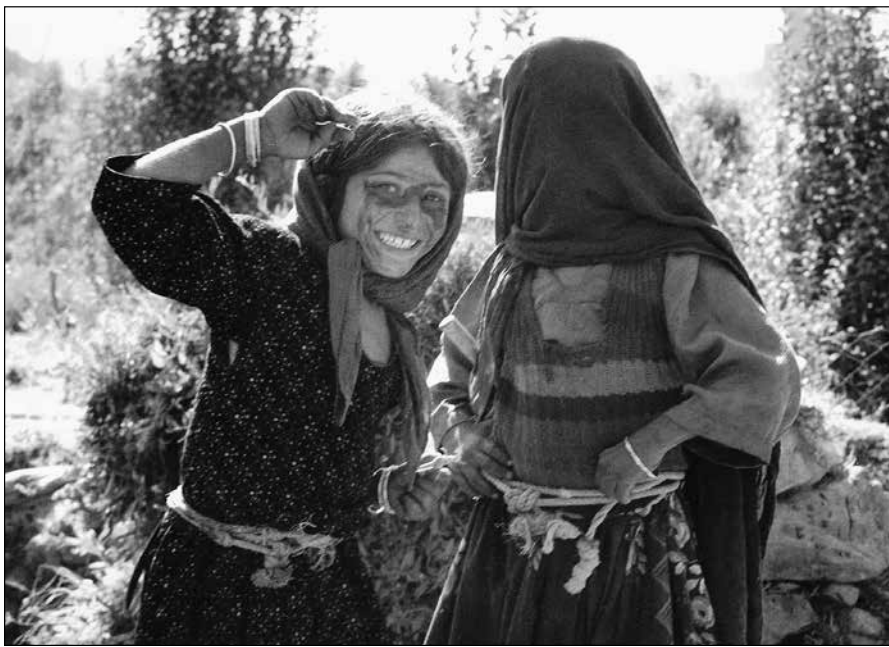
Left: A man and his two daughters, 1983. Right: A young girl in flip-flops with her sibling, Al Ajar, Haïdan, Saada district, 1983. (All photos courtesy of Myriam Tangi.)



Three young boys studying, Al Ajar, Haïdan, Saada district, 1984. The middle boy, Lewi Faez, arrived in Israel in 1992.



Two men and a boy, outside the village of Al Ajar, Haïdan, Saada district, 1984.



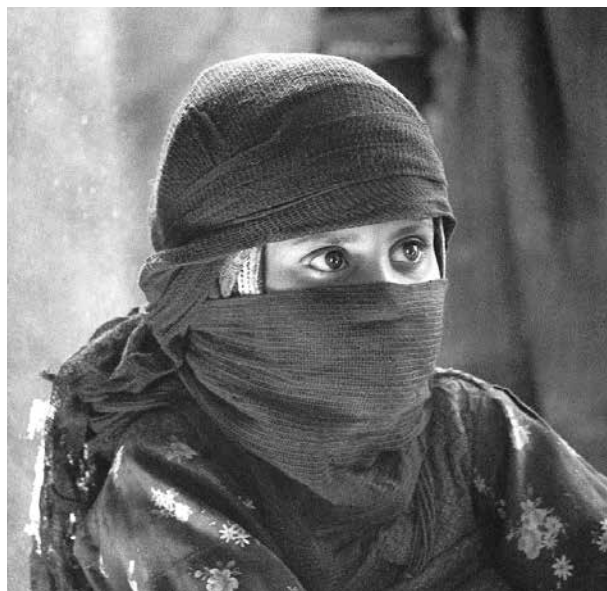
*A Jewish girl, left, with her Arab friend, Al Ajar, Haïdan, Saada district, 1984.*



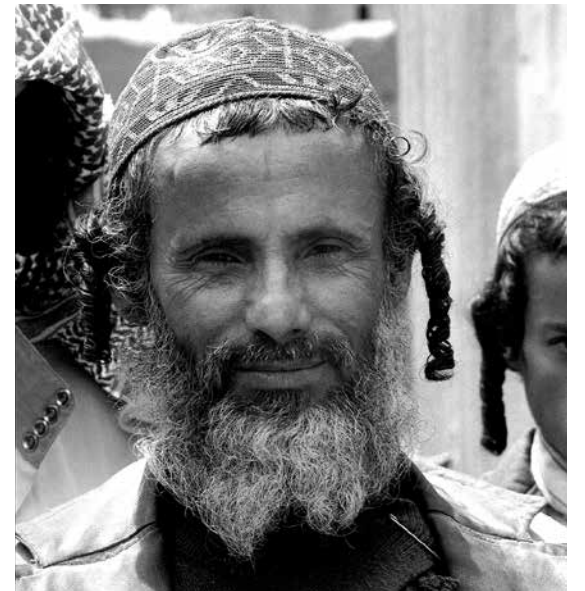
*Jewelry craftsmen, Al Ajar, Haïdan, 1986.*

Wings,” an allusion to Exodus 19:4). Very little was known of those who remained, and few foreigners traveled to Yemen.

We applied for tourist visas, and, when we arrived, we made our way to different villages across the country, including Beit Sinan in the Arhab district, about an hour north of Sana’a, the capital. We could not tell our guides or hosts that we were interested in meeting Jews, both for their safety and our own. Instead, we would visit the local sheikh and ask him, through our interpreter, about his village. Since Jews were restricted to certain trades, most famously jewelry making, we would say that we wanted to buy jewelry. It was not at all surprising or suspicious that tourists would want to buy some of the exquisite silver filigree bracelets or necklaces for which these great craftsmen were famous. (Other crafts that were considered beneath Muslims and hence practiced by Jews included metalworking,



*Left: A young Jewish woman, partially veiled, in the village of Beit Sinan, Arhab, 1983. Right: An older man, Wadi Amlah, 1984.*



*Young Jewish boys outside the village of Al Ajar, 1983.*

leatherworking, and, among the women, basket weaving.)

Jews had the traditional status of *dhimmi*s, protected but decidedly second-class citizens, as non-Muslims living under Islamic law. As such, they were not allowed to own land, and, more visibly, Jewish men were not allowed to wear the *janbiya*, a short, curved dagger that all Yemenite Muslim men wear. Muslim men could also enter a Jewish home at any time, unannounced, except on Shabbat.

Nonetheless, the day-to-day relations between local Jews, the sheikh, and their Muslim neighbors often seemed warm, even friendly, and the pace of life was slow. From the outside, it often looked idyllic: children learning with their teacher, all sharing the same book (many learned to read upside down, a practice for which the Jewish community was apparently famous). In the long, slow afternoons, the men would talk and chew khat leaves.

As a woman, I could spend time with the Jewish women and sometimes photograph them while they were working (cooking, sewing, making baskets) or in

the home. As we traveled, we observed that the villages closer to Sana'a had stricter dress codes. The Jewish women in outlying villages did not wear a niqab, which covered the whole face, as all the

After this three-week trip, we knew that we had to return. There was simply so much to see and understand of Yemenite Jewish life, its beauties and its difficulties. Moreover, photographs of this sort can-

since we did not have a translator, we decided that I would translate. I had a largely passive understanding of Judeo-Arabic from my parents, who were Moroccan Jews, and so I took a crash course in the Yemenite dialect with a professor in Jerusalem, the month before our trip. It was wonderful to speak directly with the Yemenite Jews, and since we knew the places and the people already, we spent more time just being there, waiting for the right moment to take photos. I even had time to paint.

## Relations between local Jews, the sheikh, and their Muslim neighbors often seemed warm, even friendly; from the outside, it often looked idyllic.

Muslim women did. Instead, they wore veils that covered only their hair, but as one neared the capital, the veils grew larger.

Once, I saw a woman making a basket, and the whole scene presented itself to me, but I realized that I did not have time or space behind me to step back in order to capture both her face and her handwork in a full portrait. I quickly decided to make two linked pictures, one of her face and the other of her hands.

Unlike in Yemeni Muslim society, Jewish men and women ate together at family meals and, in general, participated more together in family life. Frédéric and I were able to share a memorable Shabbat meal with the Lewi family in “the village of the Jews,” Al Ajar. It was a four-hour drive up steep mountain roads east of the city of Saada to get there, but it was a rare and emotional moment for all of us.

not be taken until one has established relationships, developed a rapport, and found—or failed to find—the perfect moment. Sometimes one really does find that moment and the image seems to capture a person—this particular Jew, this particular way of life—but often one does not and feels the need to return, to try again.

We returned during Purim 1984, and again in 1986, after our wedding. On that trip,



*A group of young girls, Al Ajar, Haïdan, Saada district, 1986.*



*The author with villagers, Al Ajar, Haïdan, Saada district, 1984.*



*A woman weaving a basket, Wadi Amlah, 1984.*

We estimated that there were between three hundred and four hundred Jews left in Yemen when we visited. In 1992–1993, some two hundred Yemenite Jews were brought to Israel in a covert operation coordinated by the Jewish Agency. In 2016, a group from the town of Raydah and a family of five from Sana'a, in the midst of Yemen's ongoing civil war, were also brought to Israel. It was reported that there were still some 40 to 50 Jews remaining in Yemen, living in a compound next to the American embassy in Sana'a, but it is not clear if that is still the case. The photos of Yemenite Jews that we took 30-odd years ago record a world that no longer exists.

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# "Love Between Writers": Saul Bellow and Bette Howland

BY JACOB HOWLAND

**Y**ou and I are able to track each other in words to perfection. I guess that's what love is between writers. Or perhaps what love is—period.

—Saul Bellow, March 30, 1990

My mother, the writer Bette Howland, kept among her possessions an old postcard with a photo of stained glass from Canterbury Cathedral. The 13<sup>th</sup>-century "Miracle Glass" shows men carrying shovels and digging into the ground. "WILLIAM OF GLOUCESTER buried beneath a fall of earth, is dug up alive," the card's legend explains. William had been excavating an aqueduct when the accident occurred; St. Thomas of Canterbury appeared in a woman's dream to tell her that he still lived. Bearing a Southampton postmark of July 8, 1968, the card is inscribed as follows:

There are always  
some who have  
to be dug out  
S. B.

At the time she received that postcard, Bette was occupied with her own fruitless digging.

Alone in Saul Bellow's apartment a few months later—a place, she told him in a letter dated January 21, 1970, that is "[t]o you . . . a sanctuary but to me a mausoleum"—she swallowed an almost lethal dose of pills. According to Bellow's friend Walter Pozen, quoted in the second volume of Zachary Leader's indispensable *The Life of Saul Bellow*, the two "had a long romance, and when they broke up she tried to commit suicide." (She was not the only woman whose relationship with Bellow set sail in the fair breeze of erotic attraction but foundered in a storm of hurt feelings.) Subsequently confined to a psychiatric wing of Billings Hospital, she nevertheless seems to have taken to heart the advice Bellow offered in his letter of July 24, 1968: "One should cook and eat one's misery. Chain it like a dog. Harness it like Niagara Falls to generate light and supply voltage for electric chairs." The fellowship of buried lives she observed on the ward in any case furnished the raw material for her first book, *W-3*, published by Viking in 1974. Here it is also possible to speak of a miracle, although Bette's salvation came not from a saint but from a muse. She wrote herself out of the grave.

Bette continued to struggle for Bellow's attention even after her near suicide. The previously quoted January 21 letter briskly clarifies her disappointment with him:

What I don't understand is this—you misjudge me if you think it was necessary to tell me that you loved me, because I thought you

understood that I belonged to the Truth Party too—I know how to honor it. I know how to respect. I am not only hurt in the way as usual between men and women; but as a colleague,

**Bette's salvation came not from a saint but from a muse. She wrote herself out of the grave.**

an ally. That is the particular quality of bewilderment and indignation I hope you can distinguish as you file me away. I had hoped to have a real friendship, a life-long friendship.

These words seem to have moved Bellow, for he did not file her away. As Leader wrote to me in 2018, Bette became "an important figure in Bellow's life."



The 13<sup>th</sup>-century "Miracle Glass" shows men carrying shovels and digging into the ground to search for William of Gloucester. (Courtesy of the author.)

He cared for her deeply and was a great champion of her writing."

My mother died in late 2017, many years after her books had gone out of print. But two years earlier, Brigid Hughes, the editor of the literary magazine *A Public Space*, came across *W-3* in the \$1 bin at Manhattan's Housing Works Bookstore and included Bette's work in an issue on forgotten women writers. Prompted by this to look through Bette's papers, my wife and I discovered a cache of letters and postcards from Bellow that formed the basis of an article I published in *Commentary* ("Chicago Love Letters: Bellow and Bette," October 2015). Now, *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*, a collection of Bette's stories that includes those in *Blue in Chicago*, has appeared as the inaugural volume of *A Public Space Books*, and plans are in the works to reissue *W-3* and *Things to Come and Go*.

Last year, my brother Frank and I discovered 29

more Bellow letters and postcards tucked away in a cardboard box in the attic, and, inspired by the find, I found most of Bette's half of the correspondence in the Saul Bellow archive at the University of Chicago's Regenstein Library. Their exchanges reveal a friendship that, while not without unrealistic expectations and occasional recriminations (not least on Bellow's side), was rooted in mutual admiration and a shared experience of the struggles and pleasures of authorship—a friendship that was, as Bette had hoped, both real and lifelong. One can also hear their inimitable voices. As everyone knows, Bellow was incapable of writing a boring sentence, and so was Bette.

Bellow wrote the earliest letter in the box during his 1973 residence at the aptly named Monk's House, Virginia and Leonard Woolf's former home in Sussex, England, where he was trying to finish *Humboldt's Gift*. The letter sounds themes that echo throughout the correspondence: the solitude, even loneliness, of literary creation; the sense that writers, being outlandish by nature, do not so much inhabit worldly spaces as haunt them.

Perhaps under your influence, I've taken 3 weeks of solitary days and dinners, and nights. It saddens; it clears the head, but if eternity is like this, I quit. When I think of Heaven, I see Heavenly hosts. Even Hell is Italian i.e. basically sociable, in Dante.

I have flowers and birds all day. No people—spooks at night. I appease the last by standing on my head. At night I say to them "You're no deader than I am." Or, "I'm as dead as you are anytime." What I mean by this,

I don't quite know. Perhaps that intimacy for me is the condition of normal existence & this privation is death. And the writing also belongs to intimacy. But this austerity is good for me. That's it—good, painful & good.

As Bellow indicates, Bette's routine was one of literary monasticism. "You are to solitude what Linus Pauling is to Vitamin C," he wrote on January 31, 1980. "You understand I say this sympathetically not satirically. We know too well what it is to be mewed up, bagged cats who never get let out." "I know your habit when you settle in," Bellow observed in his letter of April 12, 1979, "something between a homemaker and a holy anchorite. When you set up your bed, your shop, your shelves of books, you tend to lose all sense of time."

Plato writes in his *Ion* that "a poet is a light and winged and holy thing, and unable to make

poetry until . . . he should be out of his mind.” This is about half right. My mother was winged but not light in soul, and *her* divine madness, like Bellow’s, consisted in a peculiarly mindful reckoning with demonic human forces. She made cozy nests in isolated locations—an A-frame on an island in Maine, a Quonset hut on the Michigan shore, farms in Pennsylvania and Indiana—filling each with home-made bread, yogurt, beet borscht, and innumerable notebooks and marked-up typescripts until she felt compelled to move on. And what Bellow calls her “shop,” a workspace posted with 3 × 5 cards inscribed with quotations in her beautiful hand (“The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the motions of your hands and feet in the water, make the deep deep sea keep you up. Conrad *Lord Jim*”), was a scene of quasi-religious devotion to her craft: “Ardor” and “vocation” were two of her favorite words.

Although Bellow regularly complained about Bette’s falling out of touch for long stretches—his short note of August 28, 1978, stated that “I am too parsimonious in the matter of letters to write without knowing where you are,” to which she replied on September 11, 1978, that “It’s OK, a letter to me will not float adrift like a note in a bottle”—he, too, tended to lose track of the days and weeks. “I do it myself,” he admits in the letter that compares Bette to an anchorite, “and it explains why I am such a dilatory correspondent. I never quite see how time is flying and before I’ve known it I’ve defoliated three or four calendars.” But in her letter of September 11, Bette confesses to being lost in space as well as time—at least the metaphysical space in which we strive to locate the substance and human meaning of our lives. “As my grandmother used to say—you told me it was a translation of a Yiddish expression—I don’t know where to put myself. I think it’s the old story—as a writer one really has no life, and really no place to put oneself.” But her instincts on the matter are sound. She goes on to characterize a letter she received from James T. Farrell (whose *Studs Lonigan* she adored) as “full of affection for one writer to another, a sense of fellowship, which is about what you end up with.” “There is only one place to put ourselves, entrust ourselves,” she concludes, “& that is in & to the affection of friends. I place myself in your affections, my dear old friend, & remind you that you are always in mine.”

“If you don’t succeed [as a writer],” Bette wrote on August 2, 1979, “then you’re nothing. You don’t even have a life; since writers don’t. You don’t even have a—what—a personality, a character.” On some level, Bette always hungered for the black bread of ordinary existence.

**B**ette did eventually find a place of her own as a writer. She did so in part by triangulation, continuously calculating her intellectual and literary trajectory in relation to Bellow and his landmark distillations and expressions of the vast and vital tradition of American literature. Starting in the early 1960s, the two critiqued each other’s work—sometimes with brutal honesty, at least on her part. My brother recalls Bellow leaving the apartment in anger after she criticized something he’d read to her from the manuscript of *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*.

No less important, Bellow generously fulfilled his role as mentor. To the extent that he could, he made a place for Bette, promoting her writing and

helping her to win major fellowships (a Rockefeller, Guggenheim, NEA, and MacArthur “genius grant”), to attend writers’ colonies whenever she wished, and to land a temporary position at the University of Chicago’s Committee on Social Thought, though not a permanent one. These beneficences lifted her

## “I know your habit when you settle in,” Bellow observed in his letter of April 12, 1979, “something between a homemaker and a holy anchorite.”

to higher altitudes, but there she experienced unanticipated turbulence. Proudly talented, ambitious, passionate, and once spurned, she was naturally both grateful for Bellow’s help and resentful of it.

“I send you a blurb [for *Blue in Chicago*] which is both objective and passionate,” Bellow joked on December 19, 1977; the blurb stated that “Bette Howland



Portrait of Saul Bellow, 1964. (Photo © Jeff Lowenthal / Bridgeman Images.)

writes of Chicago as only a Chicagoan—one who has paid the price—can write. Her book is passionate but objective—objective but eloquent.” Around this time, he also recommended her for the Guggenheim Fellowship she received the following spring. And when she complained of poor treatment by her publisher and that her friend Joseph Epstein had said nothing to her about *Blue*, Bellow replied on April 17, 1978, with bracing encouragement.

Yours will be one of those slow-growing reputations and your experience will be like mine. For fifteen years no one paid the slightest attention. Publishers save their money for the winners. And they are plungers. Everything on the favorite’s nose. For some years yet you will be running in the dusty rear. . . . If these resemblances don’t comfort you for Joseph Epstein’s lamentable coolness you’d better reorder your priorities.

Bette’s response of June 26, 1978, acknowledges her substantial debt to Bellow in a way that combines flattery and self-promotion (the letter is in part a piece of salesmanship) with indictment. For in speaking of the suffocating throng that chases after him—one imagines a multitude of grime-streaked

women struggling for breath—she turns his horse-racing analogy into an implicit accusation:

I want to tell you, Saul, I do have my priorities straight. . . . There are a lot of us choking in the dusty rear; but I am the one, of all of them, who has had your constant friendship, your encouragement, and your example. And believe me, that doesn’t count for nothing. I know what to make of my advantages—it won’t be lost on me. You didn’t put your money on the wrong horse.

The tone of these remarks is not entirely fair; she was not just a bet (or investment) to be listed in Bellow’s ledger of accounts. That said, he was a trustworthy partner in Bette’s own business, unfailingly honoring her various, sometimes last-minute requests for reference letters. Writing to him in Vermont on August 14, 1979, she asked that he immediately “tell Ms. Sarah de Kay [his assistant] to pull out the standard Bette Howland hand-out letter” and mail it to Millay Colony. He replied on August 29 with chastising good humor:

Ah, what a character you are! A letter from the file in Chicago-and-back-and-out, all by Sept 1? Not with ten Sarah’s on the alert. I did get *another*, for its purpose, and got it in to the mails, in time, I trust, and much amused—bedeviled amusement. Which of us is Crazy Kat and which is Officer Pup? You may remember Ignatz the mouse zinging bricks with deadly aim at the Pup’s head while Crazy, adoring, clapped hands and gazed into the heavens.

**B**ette could make like Ignatz when she wanted to. She needed—demanded—a relationship with Bellow, but always (at least after the crisis of 1968) on her own terms. But Bellow needed her attention and approval, too, and occasionally zinged a few bricks of his own to get them.

In late 1981, Bette twice asked Bellow to send *The Dean’s December*. When the book appeared to unusually critical reviews, she wrote on January 30, 1982, to offer support.

As far as the book goes, I think you should stand up, face the music—in short, stick out your tongue. Publishing a book is no crime (even though it makes me feel I’ve done something wrong & I don’t know what). Have read a couple of reviews of *Dean’s December* (& have already cancelled a magazine subscription because of one); I read them for the quotes from you—things you say about your craft—messages to those who have ears to hear. This always refreshes & reassures me that all is well.

Bette nevertheless let most of the year pass without offering any substantive opinion of Bellow's new book. In a letter of October 10, 1982, she asks if he'd be willing to read the manuscript of her new book (published the following year under the title *Things to Come and Go*). She wonders whether he received the copy she'd mailed of her story "The Life You Gave Me," and in a postscript, she mentions that my brother Frank was "falling out of his seat reading 'The Dean.'"

Bellow's response, dated October 28, 1982, and



Bette Howland, 1985. (Courtesy of the author.)

typed in evident haste, reproaches her for ignoring him, for being "spacey" and inhabiting an "imaginary sphere" outside of time, and especially for her own lamentable coolness regarding his book. The letter is worth quoting in full.

Dear Bette,

I never like to say no to you. After all you are one of my protégés, the oddest of them all in fact, and the office of protector, you will not deny, I have filled rather well. In my time I was a protégé myself, and I know how bitter the role *can* be. But let's get away from the abstract words and deal briefly in facts. There are protégés and protégés; and protégés and [sic] protégés. I take a recent instance: I went to some trouble to get you into the Ragdale Residence (or whatever they call it). You were in the suburbs for several months and I was in the city. You phoned in once to say that you were around and that I would hear from you. That you were around is certain because I met the Mrs. from the Foundation (what's her name?), and she told me that you were hard at work. Why didn't you let me treat you to a hamburger downtown, or to a pizza at the Medici? And why do you send me Frank's comment on *The Dean's December*, but pointedly refrain from saying anything at all? It gives you an air of fiddling with the peg that holds back the blade of the guillotine. I am not at all worried about my neck, which is heavily armoured, but I think that if you can maneuver yourself into the

position of a disinterested party, you may begin to see your behavior as I do—spacey. I did read your piece in *Commentary*, and of course I liked it, but I saw no reason in the world why I should tell you so. Besides, you were well aware that I would like it and you were only asking for a maraschino cherry.

But perhaps it is only your singular sense of time. When it comes to time you make Proust look like a stick-in-the-mud. You are in some kind of imaginary sphere in which you and I suffer no changes and you appear to be perfectly sure that when we next meet, (a decade from now) we will be exactly as we once were. We won't, I assure you.

Well to hell with all these proud idiosyncracies [sic] of yours. If you send your G. D. manuscript I will read it. Don't call it either *The Life You Gave Me* or *Things to Come and Go*. Rotten titles, both of them.

Yours earnestly,  
Saul

Like Bette's "Truth Party" letter, Bellow's rebuke seems to have hit its mark. In an undated holiday card written sometime after November 1982 (he mentions a story published that month in the *Atlantic*, which can only be "Him with His Foot in His Mouth") his mood is expansive and astronomical, as at the end of *The Dean's December*: "I wanted to say, though, how pleased I am that you wrote to me. Right from the center of the Bette galaxy where all the sweetest intelligence is, and the best judgment." He nevertheless returns to the old plaintive leitmotif of the letters, shrouded here in a haze of self-deprecation. "What I conveyed to you in a cloud was a dim thought about the defective time sense of people who write fiction. Maybe they have a confused conviction that their friends will be there, dusty but faithful like the Little Toy Soldier on the mantelpiece."

Over the next few years, Bellow became intimately acquainted with time's brutal march. He wrote on June 30, 1983, to acknowledge Bette's greetings on his sixty-eighth birthday. "We *are* near and dear friends, and I was pleased, excited, touched by your note—Incredible! that I should have reached such an age. I never reckoned on it. Thank God, I am not quantitative in outlook. It would have made heavy counting." But as his marriage to the astronomer Alexandra Tulcea began to unravel, pleasure and excitement gave way to a sense of cosmic isolation. He wrote on July 11, 1984, to say that, "It would do me good to hear from you. These are intriguing difficult days. I feel like a most complex telescope situated in the arctic circle. I can see celestial fires but it's a comfortless environment, the immediate one. Won't you write me a nice human letter?" By November 29, Bellow's mood had not improved. Shedding his "garment of self deception," he admits to being depressed:

What I suffer from isn't a clinical depression, it's a life-summary-uneasiness of considerable magnitude and comes with a full inventory of mistakes I can't expect now to correct. . . . There's also sickness, madness, senility, death. My brother Sam is in Sloan-Kettering having a tumor removed from his intestines. Only too probable that it's a metastasis.

As Leader writes in his biography, the following year was Bellow's nadir. "My brother S is in decline," he informed Bette in his letter of March 16, 1985. "My brother M has just had cancer surgery again. My first wife, Anita, died last Sunday. The Angel of death is recalling our model. When he laps me I think it likely that I will be found at my Smith Corona." Three months later, on June 25, he delivered even worse news.

Within two weeks—late May and early June—both my brothers died, both fully aware that death was coming. Morris said, "It's curtains", and Sam, "Get these hysterical women out of here so I can do it quietly."

I came to Vermont last week, and here I am trying to re-assemble myself. My existence? It feels more like being. The numbers on the chronometer read 70, and perhaps reassembly (with ingenious substitutes for missing parts) is not a firm possibility. I am not actually sick but I am beaten low. One can and does prepare for one's own death; out of egotism, you neglect to do it for the others.

I loved them both, loved all of them.

Bette replied with heartfelt condolences on June 30. She also informed him that she was rereading his books, starting with *Humboldt's Gift*, and "I have finally figured it out."

From composers, we expect almost as a matter of course that their work will develop over time; & from artists, too—some enrichment and maturing. We don't expect as much from writers, especially in America. . . . What I have figured out is that you are one of the rare ones. The pace of your production has quickened, your prose has too (though that one wouldn't have thought possible). That is the nature of your gift; that, moreover, is what it's *about*. Which is just to say—I'm really looking forward.

This letter seems to have cheered him, and a photo she sent didn't hurt, either. "As for the picture, it is beautiful," he wrote on September 12, 1985. "It would have knocked a Titian or a Delacroix to the ground. When he got up, he would set out to find you. B. Howland *en plein essor*, in full feather, eyes, brows, mouth and hat, bearing a clear winner. Chalk up one victory over Life, that dirty fighter. I take great pride in you."

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*Bette Howland's letters are quoted courtesy of the Special Collections Research Center at the University of Chicago Library.*

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# Learning Yiddish After 60

BY DAVID J. FRIED

Since I was a child, I have always wanted to know Yiddish. Not learn it, not study it—just wake up one day knowing it. When I was about 10, I had a brilliant idea. If my parents would agree to speak only Yiddish with each other, it would just come to me without effort. When I made the suggestion, there was no discussion—discussion was not a thing in our house. I got “the Look,” and we were done.

But now, at 68, I have learned a fair bit of Yiddish, and all since I turned 60. I speak it—a little. I understand much, but by no means all, of what I hear; I read perhaps three or four pages at a time. But I’m still poking along, and I intend to do so indefinitely.

Why have I spent my time on this peculiar hobby? I don’t entirely know, and I have no “just-so” story about how my entire life has led me to this moment. Of course, I’ve had plenty of practice answering the question. Many people have asked me—in fact, everyone I know who isn’t actually studying Yiddish asks. The question is always followed by, “Why do you want to learn a dead language? Who are you going to speak it with?” These are very good questions. I never try to argue that Yiddish is not dead and may be spoken for centuries yet, because, in the common-sense way that they mean, Yiddish is certainly in its last throes.

Yiddish was more present in my early life than in that of some of my contemporaries. My father’s parents got here very late in the great migration of Jews to the United States—my grandfather in 1913 or 1914, my grandmother in 1917. My grandfather Avrom traveled from Babruysk in what is now Belarus to New York, where he became a baker. He left behind my grandmother Anna, intending to send for her and their infant son—my Uncle Sam. Anna was an orphan who had been apprenticed to a bagel baker. At five foot seven inches, she was a Valkyrie among Jewish women. Anna may have spent her childhood in hell baking bagels, but at least someone fed her. Next to my grandpa Avrom, she looked like one of those giant mantises that eats its mate after copulating, only fatter.

But World War I broke out, and the ordinary emigration routes through Hamburg, Trieste, and Liverpool were barred. So in 1916, Anna set out with baby Sam across Russia to Harbin in China; then on to Nagasaki and Yokohama, Japan; by ship to Seattle; and by train to the Lower East Side. Whenever she ran out of money, she waited for my grandfather to send more—through the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) way stations, I now realize.

The story of my grandparents’ meeting after so many years always required a little Yiddish in my father’s telling. Anna asked Avrom what he did. “I’m a baker.” “And what do you earn?” “Thirty rubles.” “*Draysik rubl a kheydesh*?” (Thirty rubles a month?) “*Neyn, draysik rubl a vokh*.” (No, 30

rubles a week.) “*Oy, du bist a noged*.” (You’re a prince!) My father was born nine months after this conversation.

My father, naturally, spoke only Yiddish until he went to school. He returned after the first day with much information about the “*kindergortn mentshn*.” Of course he learned English after that without an

My grandparents were gone by the time I was 11, and after that I rarely heard my father or anyone else speak Yiddish, except to keep secrets from the children. Dad was no Yiddishist, although he disliked it when people like his brothers called the language “Jewish.” He could not read or write it, but he always claimed to speak a “*tife yidish*” (deep Yiddish) and

**Yiddish always felt very present to me, hovering just beyond the edge of intelligibility, as if only the thinnest of veils kept me from understanding everything.**

accent, if someone who grew up on the Lower East Side and in Brighton Beach could be said to have no accent. Dad always spoke Yiddish with his parents, but by the time I came to consciousness, they lived mostly in Miami Beach, where my grandma had acquired a small hotel.



Sholem Aleichem’s *Motl Peysi dem khazans* in the 1953 edition of *Motl Peysi dem khazans*. (Courtesy of the Yiddish Book Center.)

Thus, my only real exposure to Yiddish was for a week or so in the summer, when my father and I went to the Catskills to help Grandma open her bungalow colony. I thought it was paradise. I now realize that my mother never came along because the whole place was a squalid throwback. (I’m glad I never saw the hotel.) And I couldn’t really speak to my grandparents at all, although my grandma always celebrated our arrival by baking a *khale in mitn vokh* (a challah in the middle of the week), which in some Yiddish songs is an emblem of the *goldene medine*.

I think he was telling the truth. He was even uncool enough (in his generation) to take my mother on a date to see the Yiddish *King Lear*.

My mother, on the other hand, could understand Yiddish but didn’t speak it with any real fluency. Her parents came to America separately as young teenagers. My grandpa Joe had been a *yeshive bokher*, who decided, the moment he reached New York, that he would never speak Yiddish again. He died before I was born, but by all accounts he was pigheaded enough to keep his vow. The Yiddish in Mom’s house came from a stream of immigrant relatives and refugees who kept the couch warm through the 1930s, and that’s how she learned the little she knew.

Although I only understood a word here and there, Yiddish always felt very present to me, hovering just beyond the edge of intelligibility, as if only the thinnest of veils kept me from understanding everything. Yiddish somehow underlay everything that was said in our family, every joke, every argument, every bit of rhetoric. As a teenager, I once slammed the kitchen door and was rewarded by my mother saying, “Your head should hit the floor with that sound . . .”

Actual Yiddish did surface now and then. My mother successfully disposed of my Ayn Rand period, when I was 11, with four words. I was excitedly explaining the plot of *Atlas Shrugged* to my parents. When I paused for breath, my mother looked at my father and said, “*Nu, herts zikh tsu?*”—“Are you listening to this?” Her intonation alone returned me to the Democratic Party.

It’s not surprising I wanted to know a language with such power. In college, however, I was deflected by Hebrew. I spent my senior year abroad in Israel with the soon-abandoned notion of making aliyah. I acquired a reasonable spoken Hebrew, although to this day I can just puzzle my way through a newspaper article. I like Hebrew, and I’m very glad to have some, but my feeling about it at the time was like how I felt about Israel itself: “Really nice country, but where are the Jews?”

When I returned to New York in 1971, I hypothesized that the Jews might still be living in Yiddish-

land, perhaps beyond the Sambatyon, which for my part I would happily cross on *Shabes*. So I acquired a guide in the form of a copy of *College Yiddish*, the first (and, at that time, the only) “modern” Yiddish textbook in existence, by Uriel Weinreich, originally published in 1949.

I opened *College Yiddish* over the years many times. It actually answers the question where the Jews are in its very first page: “*Yidn voynen af ale kontinentn*”—Jews live on every continent.

Decades passed, and I learned no more Yiddish. What I needed above all was motivation, and I finally found it when I turned 60. When I was a teenager, I read Melford E. Spiro’s book *Children of the Kibbutz*, about communal child rearing in Israel. I learned from *Children of the Kibbutz* that many of the Hebrew-speaking children believed that they would go on speaking Hebrew until they were old, when they would suddenly begin to speak Yiddish. Recalling this, I realized that I wished more than anything to be an old man transformed into a Yiddish speaker.

I enrolled in a Yiddish class at the Arbeter Ring (Workmen’s Circle) in Brookline, Massachusetts. I decided that since I was comfortable with the *alef-beys* and already had a Yiddish vocabulary that extended at least 50 words past “*khutspe*,” I would join the “Advanced Beginners.” I found I could sound out the words quickly enough, and when I did, noises that closely resembled Yiddish tumbled out. Apparently, I had a Yiddish-speaking dybbuk, although I didn’t really understand a word he was saying.

The teachers conferred and informed me that I really should go upstairs to the literature class. When I got there, I found people, many older than me, some of whom actually spoke Yiddish. This was terrifying. More terrifying was that they were reading Sholem Aleichem—*Motl Peyse dem khazans* (Motl, the Cantor’s Son). They were reading about Motl’s older brother Elye and his efforts to earn “*a hundert rubl a khoydesh*” through various get-rich-quick schemes, like selling *kvass* on the street. “*Hundert rubl a khoydesh*”—I was saved by my grandfather the *noged*!

I started to read. Then, and for many weeks, I found myself crossing wide and turbulent streams of Yiddish, in which I landed, every dozen feet, on a familiar Hebrew word. Blah-blah-blah—“exaggeration,” blah-blah-blah—“Pale of Settlement,” blah-blah-blah—“preacher.”

The funny part was that my comrades in the class among them generally understood 11 words out of 12, but were often defeated by that Hebrew word. Thus, I gradually became a resource rather than a burden. The class served up well-known stories like Peretz’s “*Oyb nisht nokh hekher*” (“If Not Higher Still”) and lesser-known material like an astonishing

if imperfect story about the last days of Jewish Vilna, “*Tamare di hoykhe*,” by Avraham Karpinovich.

These courses did not teach themselves, of course. My teacher over several terms was Lillian (Leye) Leavitt. Over time we read such texts as *Got fun nekome* (God of Vengeance), although I personally never made it to the good part, and “*Yentl der yeshive bokher*” (“Yentl, the Yeshiva Boy”) where I did. Leye got her Yiddish, like virtually every native speaker of my generation, from her Holocaust-survivor parents, and she studied with Ruth Wisse at Harvard.

But it was clearly time to acquire some grammar and a more-than-random vocabulary. A trip to the Israel Book Shop in Brookline acquainted me with Sheva Zucker’s *Yiddish: An Introduction to the Language, Literature & Culture*. To say that it is a very good textbook doesn’t capture what the book did for me. It encompasses a world of Jewish culture in 20 lessons on Purim, Passover, the Sabbath,



A still from the film *The Dybbuk*, 1937, based on S. An-sky’s Yiddish play.

marriage, the Holocaust, and more. My key decision, after struggling through a few lessons, was to buy the 19 accompanying CDs, which include every song, reading, and story, as well as every exercise in grammar and usage. I listened to them during my commute to work—perhaps an hour a day most weekdays. I don’t know how many times I listened to excerpts from Yehoash’s translation of *Megilas Ester*, followed by the song “*Homentashn*”; or a story from I. B. Singer’s “*In mayn tatns beys-din shtub*.” Ten or 15 times for each is a good guess. I sang songs like “*Di mezinke*” until I knew them by heart. I particularly enjoyed one disc devoted to Yiddish dialects, including readings of the same material by trained and untrained voices from different regions.

Listening over and over, I began to feel a certain melancholy. The chapter on what I learned to call the “*khurbn*” rather than the Shoah is naturally affecting, but I began to dread particularly the farewell letter of Shmuel (Arthur) Zygelbojm, written before his suicide in 1943 in the full knowledge of the extermination of the Jews of Poland. For my part, I find the bombast of the “*Partizaner lid*” difficult to bear, and worse on the tenth hearing. I hope it lifted the spirits of those who first sang it, but it seems so . . . German.

But even the unit on *Shabes* has its sorrows, although it is centered on Peretz’s wonderful story “*Der oytser*” (“The Treasure”). A song about how one must borrow to be prepared for the Sabbath, another bitter song about making *havdole* with nothing in the house for the week to come, another about the misery of a little boy who begs his grandmother not to recite *Got fun Avrom*, thus ending the *Shabes*. And grandma also sheds a tear . . . but it’s all authentic Yiddish, and it’s at the furthest remove from the tediously cheery dialogues of most language textbooks. And I hasten to say that there is a lot of laughter in the book, much of it supplied by Sholem Aleichem.

After a year of this on-the-road study plan, I got out of the car feeling that with considerable qualifications I now knew Yiddish, having learned it more or less as I wished to when I was 10—with no apparent effort. In fact, I find myself in an all-too-familiar American Jewish position. In Yiddish, I am still an *amhorets* (ignoramus), but anyone who knows enough to call himself an *amhorets* is not one.

So, having crossed the Sambatyon into Yiddishland, where am I going? Anywhere at all—it’s all good, and it stretches on forever. I read, slowly, whenever I get a chance. My beach and pool reading for this summer is *The Dybbuk*, and if the weather holds I’ll finish it soon. I am up to the trial and exorcism scenes at last. Did An-sky intend those scenes to be amusing? I find them so. I can’t stop smiling at the formidable self-possession of the exorcist-rebbe. He doesn’t even summon the dead to trial himself; he just delegates his *gabbai* to go to the cemetery with his stick as his warrant. The rebbe even has time for points of rabbinical etiquette, like asking the *rov* of the town for permission to conduct the excommunication . . . of a ghost. And his judgments, like God’s, are true and righteous altogether.

Why *The Dybbuk*? Because it’s available with an English translation on facing pages (what we used to call a “trot”). The principle of no effort still applies. I can read Yiddish without a trot if I have to. I made it through 30 pages of Chaim Grade’s *Tsemakh Atlas* once. I subscribe to *Afn shvel* (On the Threshold), the literary magazine of the Yiddish League, mostly in support of Sheva Zucker, the editor. I open it, even. But that’s all work.

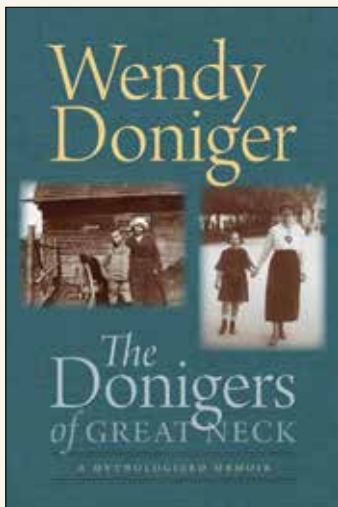
So why study Yiddish? Learning Yiddish has certainly been a sentimental journey for me. But classic Yiddish literature—even Sholem Aleichem!—is bracingly unsentimental, as well as thrilling in its unfamiliarity. I have literally never read anything like *The Dybbuk*. And the mental and conceptual world inhabited by its erstwhile speakers really does make Yiddish literature untranslatable.

And yet, I have a confession to make. My father has been dead for 25 years now, but he and I speak all the time. Now that I know some Yiddish, we have two languages to converse in. He’s always very impressed when I offer to make him a “*prezhenitse*” or some “*opgefrishte broyt*”—an omelet or some French toast. “How do you know that?” he marvels, before he points out that, as a Litvak, I should really say “*breyt*.”

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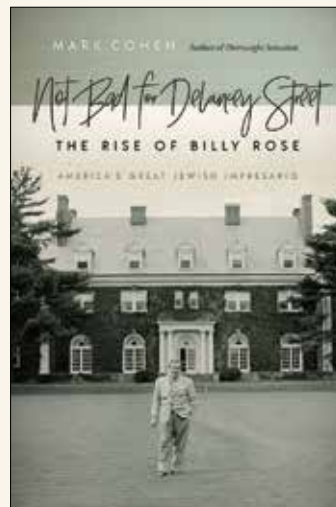
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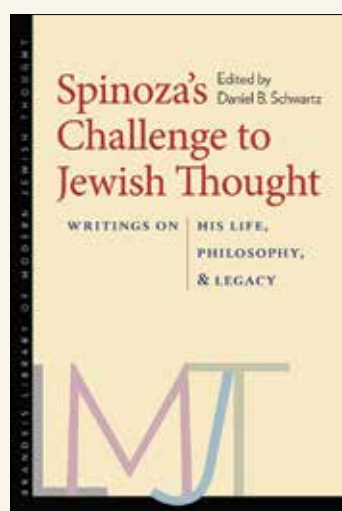
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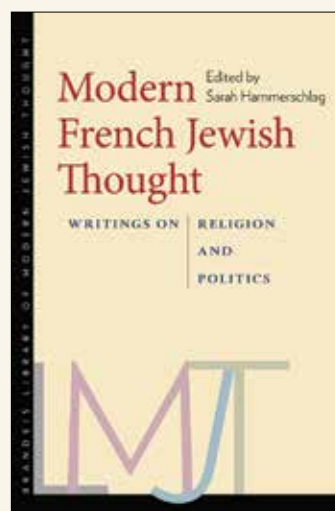
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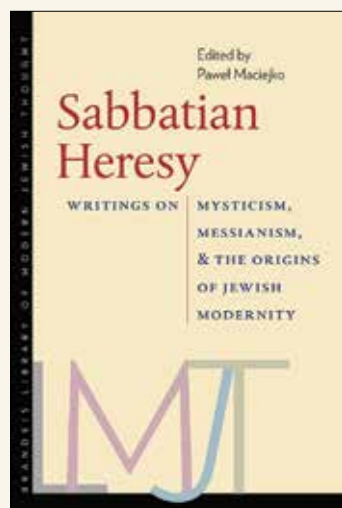
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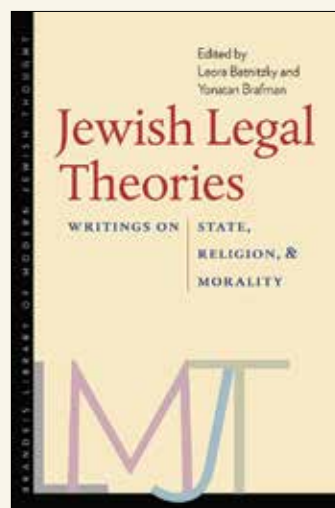
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