Abraham Socher  Exit, Loyalty . . . Crowdsource? (How Not to Save the Jewish People)

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Reimagination?

Daniel Gordis’s insightful but somewhat simplistic account of recent developments in American Jewish life ("A Failure of Reimagination?“ Fall 2019) draws too sharp a distinction between Israel and the diaspora. He does so, for example, in his contrast between a culturally depleted American Jewish community narrowly focused on nothing more substantial than Jewish politics and a religiously and culturally dynamic Israeli Jewish population. I take Gordis’s concerns seriously, but I am less pessimistic about our situation. Many American Jews agree that Judaism must be tethered to content—religion, way of life, identity. They understand that progressive politics cannot replace Jewish knowledge, Torah, Jewish culture, and traditions—what my colleague Zvi Gitelman calls “thick culture.” Jews yearn for authentic experiences and are awakening to the realization that Judaism means commitment, learning, and community. Among those renewing American Judaism are different people than you might expect. Their numbers may be limited, but I see new people coming to my Modern Orthodox synagogue and young people flooding our Jewish studies courses at Tulane, engaged in community building and Jewish thought. This is not taking place on the scale that it is in Israel, but it is a sign that the “ever-dying” nation once again refuses to die. It is a sign that in the American Jewish world outside the politically leftist hubs, the battle is far from lost.

Brian Horowitz
Tulane University

Rabbi Gordis calls for a reimagined form of American Judaism, unshackled from myopic political imperatives and informed by ancient religious roots. Such a revitalization must entail a dialectic melding of the moral foundations of the American enterprise and the ethical wellsprings of Jewish tradition. In the first instance, one might initiate that synergy by seeking hermeneutic correspondences between the Bill of Rights and those mitzvot governing relations among human beings. At a deeper level, one might attempt to replace the entire notion of legalistic commandments with the democratizing idea of a compact—on the one hand, the US Constitution, and on the other, a covenant with God rather than a directive from some deity. What could be more eternally Judaic yet more emblematic of America’s Enlightenment origins than that?

Donald Mender
Rinnebeck, NY

Daniel Gordis is a scholar of unusual breadth and love for the Jewish people. But his recent article is out of touch with progressive Judaism in the United States. Despite his monthly visits, he has not observed what is going on with liberal Judaism.

To discount the progressive acceptance of women clergy and gay marriage as “politics” is both insulting and wrong. It is a moral stance. The discrimination sanctioned by halakha makes about as much moral sense as the doctrines around agunot and maimnerin, which also ought to be discarded. A people that are to be a light unto the nations cannot be so regressive. Deborah could be a judge in ancient Israel but could not be a rabbi today. Why not? We no longer have the wise scholars like Rabbeinu Gershom, who ruled that polygamy is forbidden even though it clearly is approved in Torah. The ameliorative doctrines of darkei noam and others could have been used creatively to address such discrimination, but today’s rabbis lack the imagination to do so.

Gordis ignores trends in modern North American Reform Judaism. The 1885 Pittsburgh Reform platform is all but a dead letter. Services are now conducted mainly in Hebrew. Congregations sing prayers. Support for Israel has become a key tenet of Reform and progressive Jews. Travel to Israel has become much more the norm. Ties to the small but increasingly vibrant Reform movement in Israel continue to intensify. Rabbis do comment on Torah portions, and no, they are rarely if ever fired due to politics. On these bases alone, no one would mistake us for plain old liberals. But they missed that this was Judaism as pure popular culture. Any mention of Zion in the liturgy was omitted from the English, as was any reference to Jewish peoplehood. The content of the ceremony was something a Protestant minister could have easily delivered. And that, I fear, is equally true of the Judaism as politics that has begun to emerge in America.

Jewish religiosity in America once evoked reverence, a sense of subservience to a particularist tradition that has a genuine capacity to make demands of us, fealty to an intellectual and textual tradition that gets us to think differently than we would have had we not studied it, and loyalty to a tradition that can lead us to question our instincts and to wrestle with those doubts in the context of community and teachers to whom we cede authority simply by virtue of their knowledge and wisdom. Did all Jews, or even most, participate in these discussions? Of course not. But their rabbinical schools and their communities’ thought leaders were consumed by them, and that helped shape the discourse of American Jewish life.

I do not believe that all changes liberal American Judaism has wrought have been “politics,” as some thought I claimed in my article. I was clearly insufficiently precise. As a student, I was actively involved in the drive to get the Jewish Theological Seminary to admit women to the rabbinical school 35 years ago, and we saw that drive as a religious requirement. It is quite possible—and I should have noted this—that what strikes me as political today may strike others as deeply religious. That’s a fair and important critique.

Brian Horowitz is quite correct that there are pockets of great Jewish learning and vibrancy in American Jewish life. I noted that in my essay and gave examples. The abiding question is whether they are sufficiently numerous and sizable to sustain the American Jewish project as we know it. I suspect that they are not, that communities investing in Judaism’s “thick culture” (a phrase more correctly credited to Clifford Geertz almost half a century ago) are rather the exception that proves the rule.

The Judaisms emerging in both Israel and America, in which most Jews now live, are radical departures from what came before. In Israel, where a national sense of purpose (and danger) and a population that is 80 percent Jewish shape the conversation, something new and fascinating is emerging. Is it sustainable? Only time will tell, but there are reasons to be bullish. In America, where Jews account for 2 percent of the population and the pressure to conform has always shaped Jewish life, the challenge is much greater. My hope was that pointing to a new trend of leaving behind both peoplehood as a value and the reverence and even surrender that are components of rich religious life might enable us to ask ourselves whether we ought to be equally bullish about American Jewish life writ large, and, if not, how we might engender a conversation, perhaps like the one Donald Mender suggests, that can help chart our path forward.

Romania, Romania . . .

Dara Horn’s “Romania!” (Fall 2019) resonates with me. I was long perplexed by the fact that the Congress of Berlin in 1878 made such an issue of the treatment of Jews by Romania. How did we judge to capture the attention of Western European governments and the great and powerful Bismarck and focus them all on the treatment of Jews by Romania? Part of the

(continued on page 24)
God Is in the Crowd: Twenty-First-Century Judaism
by Tal Keinan
Spiegel and Grau, 352 pp., $28

Tal Keinan’s God Is in the Crowd leads with a strong hook:

I awoke to the smell of ammonia. I was on my feet, but couldn’t remember where. . . . I exhaled instinctively . . . and held my breath for as long as I could. When the air rushed back in, the wet burlap hood fastened around my neck pressed against my cracked lips. I tasted urine, and the reality began flooding back. I was hunched low, in an underground cell, my shaved head scraping through the burlap against a jagged stone ceiling.

Orientation: I remembered that my dungeon cell was four stories underground. I had counted my steps over the days. I could faintly hear the echoes of angry curses issued in Arabic, iron doors slamming, beatings, and cries. They were likely coming from minus two, where I believed my teammates were being held.

Not a single member of the community that had raised me to adulthood knew where I was. I was more alone than I had ever been, but driven by a conviction that escalated my solitude. . . . This was the right place for me. . . . I took a moment to recognize the absurdity of my gratitude at the threshold of the interrogation chamber, and caught myself smiling softly under the hood.

That conviction was born at . . . Phillips Exeter Academy in 1986.

It is a bit of a surprise to open a big-think policy book on the fate of the Jewish people as a whole and voices his concerns on both the Israeli and the American fronts. Keinan describes his own father’s mute fury when his older brother announced his engagement to his non-Jewish girlfriend. Eventually, he took Tal and his three brothers out for dinner to finally, incoherently, tell them how important being Jewish was to him.

It was Passover, and we were eating pizza as we debated the value of Jewish tradition. The unintended irony was completely consistent with our upbringing. . . . Where was the line between observing a kosher Passover and marrying out of the tribe? Were we Jewish, but were we not American as well?

Keinan is clear that he does not fault those Jews who find love outside the faith, as, eventually, each of his three brothers did. However, he correctly insists, the implications for American Jewry as a whole are stark. According to the 2013 Pew Center study of American Jewry, 58 percent of American Jews who get married marry non-Jews (subtract Orthodox Jews from the equation and the number skycrocks to over 70 percent). Among the 42 percent of American Jews who do marry other Jews (and this includes converts to Judaism), the average number of children is 1.9, which is the same rate for Americans as a whole.

If this trend continues, and there is every reason to think that it will, “the size of the next generation of American Jews who have two Jewish parents will be only 36 percent the size of today.” The following generation, Keinan writes, will be 13 percent the size of today’s—almost complete collapse. This may unfairly discount the Jewish lives and identities of the children of intermarriage, but there are numbers on that too, and they aren’t encouraging. In short, the grand story of American Jewry, which now accounts for almost half of world Jewry, will be effectively over within the space of a lifetime, save for a few small enclaves of committed Jews, the majority of them Orthodox, and most of those haredi. One is reminded of the economist Herbert Stein’s famous law: “If something cannot go on forever, then it will stop.”

What of Israel, where the other half of world Jewry lives? Simplifying for an American popular audience, Keinan divides Israeli Jewry into three ideological camps: Secularists, Territorialists, and Theocrats. In the Secularist group, he includes not only the heirs of Herzl and Ben-Gurion but all those Israeli Jews, including Modern Orthodox ones, who believe in a fairly strict separation between religion and state. Territorialists are those Religious Zionists who insist that Judea and Samaria should be wholly annexed on theological grounds regardless of the consequences. The Theocrats represent the rapidly growing haredi population, whose primary allegiance is to their own community and their conception of Torah.

Keinan is a frank secularist, but his definition of secularism is overbroad, since it includes all Israelis who accept a (mostly) secular state, religious pluralism, and the possibility of territorial compromise. While he describes the selfless idealism of some of his Religious Zionist fellow soldiers with real admiration, he argues that annexing the territories would quickly lead to a non-Jewish majority in Israel. He evinces no understanding of, or sympathy for, the Theocrats, who are, on Keinan’s account, haredi free-riders who take a disproportionate amount of government services while refusing to serve in the army and failing to adequately contribute to the economy. Moreover, in addition to what economists call rent-seeking, their political activity is primarily aimed at coercing their fellow citizens to conform to their strict construals of Jewish law concerning matters of personal status, such as marriage, divorce, and conversion. (Keinan and his wife avoided an official rabbinate marriage by having a civil marriage in New York before their non-state-recognized Reform marriage in Israel.)

Even though the Secularists bear “the bulk of both the defense burden and the economic burdens that underpin Israel’s survival,” they are losing, demographically and politically, and this very loss further undermines their commitment to the Zionist project. He points out that half of all first graders in Is-
rael are now either haredim or Arab Israelis, meaning that absent a huge cultural shift, they won't be receiving a draft notice in 10 years. “In light of the looming defeat of their vision,” Keinan writes, “it is becoming difficult for Israel’s Secularists to just shoulder this growing burden.” After all, why not just leave for America? (This won't strengthen American Jewry, by the way. As Keinan notes, expatriate Israelis are even more likely to intermarry than American Jews.)

Keinan’s analysis alternates between the anecdotal and the schematic, and his broad characterizations obscure a great deal. It is true, for instance, that the secular ideology of the Zionist founders is no longer ascendant, but that doesn’t mean that a majority of the country now rejects the idea of a modern pragmatic state. There are also relevant developments that he does not discuss, including the rise of the new “Jeweshri” identity described by Shmuel Rosner and Camil Fuchs, which combines a soft traditionalism with unwavering patriotism, and some encouraging signs of haredi integration into general society. He also ignores recent strategic developments in the Middle East, especially the Sunni states’ new posture toward Israel and the chaotic state of Palestinian politics, which impact when and how to negotiate over the territories regardless of whether the Territorialists are right in their eschatological interpretation of history. But he’s also not wrong about the danger of the cultural and political divides by which Israel is riven. The Jewish state is lurching toward what, as I write in early December 2019, looks like one of three bad options: an unstable “unity government” of fierce opponents, a narrow government that isn’t much more stable, or a third election in 11 months.

If American Jewry is on the verge of evaporating while Israel is about to implode, what is Tal Keinan’s solution?

In 1906, the British statistician Francis Galton went to a county fair where some 500 people were placing bets on the weight of a fat ox. Some of the contestants were farmers and butchers, but nonexperts who just liked a good bet also competed. No one could guess the weight of the ox, but when Galton averaged all the guesses, he found that their collective wisdom was that the ox was 1,197 pounds. It weighed 1,198. As James Surowiecki wrote in his bestselling book, The Wisdom of Crowds, Galton had stumbled on “the simple but powerful truth that . . . under the average that we used to aggregate guesses forced the predictions, and prescriptions of the subject matter. The machine would rank the input . . . by means of an objective logic. . . . It would continually aggregate and reconcile these inputs into a constantly evolving Crowd Wisdom.

The problem with this is not the sci-fi conceit or even its sheer incoherence—how exactly does one teach one’s children “constantly evolving Crowd Wisdom,” and why?—but rather the premise that if we just had good enough data on what most Jews think Judaism should be, to the extent that they have thought about it at all, then that’s what it should be.

In the absence of a “wisdom machine,” Keinan ran a poll of varied Jewish acquaintances asking them to list 10 identifiers that “form the de facto pillars of contemporary Jewish identity.” The top five results were justice, education, challenge and dissent, ritual and tradition, and community (neither God nor Torah made the list). On this basis, he proposes a world Jewish tax that would fund summer camps, a high-school tikkun olam project, and college tuition for all participating Jews (has he heard about Jewish life on American college campuses?). In other words, more of the same at the cost of, he estimates, $13.75 billion.

It’s a shame, really, because there are parts of a better, more thoughtful book lurking in this sleek bestseller festooned with celebratory blurbs by stel- lar Jewish writers, academics, pundits, and rabbis. They can be found in the passages in which he charts his own fascinating Jewish journey and takes with ultimate seriousness the idea that both Israeli and American Jewry need a fundamental reorientation. As he writes in the final sentence of the book, “If Rabbi Yehuda, and all the successive generations of more than three thousand years of religious, cultural, and moral data points.” But charting a moving average to eliminate “noise” and smooth the trend line presupposes that the data points are just that: points on an x/y graph. But how does one graph, to put a simple case, a biblical verse through its various commentaries and literary uses? The ungraphable details matter; one might even say that God is in them (and not in the graphable crowd).

Nonetheless, Keinan finds it “difficult to ignore the neatness of the theory that Crowd Wisdom served as Diaspora Jewry’s method of governance,” and thinks he sees Surowiecki’s three criteria for wise crowds working through Jewish history.

Dispersion created . . . independence. Communities in the Russian Pale, for example, were cut off from the ghettos of Western Europe . . . Each interpreted its Talmud independently. . . . Jewish communities in the Diaspora were culturally diverse. Bankers in the Venetian ghetto were affected by their interactions with the Venetian business community . . . making their experiences distinct from Ottoman Jews . . . [they] formed a mosaic of diversity. Periodic migrations and expulsions over the centuries forced the aggregation and reconciliation of ideas that had diverged in isolation. The simple average that we used to aggregate guesses at the number of gumballs in a jar was an unsophisticated operation. This qualitative Jewish reconciliation would have been far more complicated, but it served the same function.

Real history is not so neat. The ghettos of Western Europe were largely gone by the time of the Russian Pale (that’s the beginning of the story of Emancipation and assimilation, and Keinan is grappling with their effects); Shylock certainly had distinct experiences from Rabbi Joseph Karo, but what of it? And though migrations and expulsions do mark the medieval and early modern Jewish experience, a strong web of scholarly, business, and personal ties connected Jewish communities. When Maimonides answered the questions of the Jews of Southern France from his home in Cairo, their exchange was certainly “far more complex” than counting gumballs, but it did not, even remotely, “serve the same function.” In his zeal, Keinan seems to have forgotten that both the miracle and the limitation of crowd wisdom is that there is spontaneous coordination without conversation. It works for markets, but tradition and the scholarship that sustains it are not a market function.

Nonetheless, Keinan suggests that the “evolving Jewish moral code” is like a “moving stock average of more than three thousand years of religious, cultural, and moral data points.” But charting a moving average to eliminate “noise” and smooth the trend line presupposes that the data points are just that: points on an x/y graph. But how does one graph, to take a simple case, a biblical verse through its various commentaries and literary uses? The ungraphable details matter; one might even say that God is in them (and not in the graphable crowd).

The climax of the book is Keinan’s description of a closed-door Israeli Air Force meeting after a 2002 attack on a Hamas terrorist in Gaza whose operations had killed hundreds of Israelis. The terrorist, Salah Shehade, was killed, but so were civilians. Israeli Air Force commander Dan Halutz led the meeting, which Keinan describes as turning quickly from a tactical debriefing to an impassioned moral discussion. It ended without consensus (27 pilots later publicly resigned), but all voices were heard.

“We knew,” he writes, “we would never have perfect answers, but through some invisible cognition, the community’s combined struggle for an answer had come close . . . This is how Diaspora had worked.”

This may, or may not, have much to do with how the diaspora worked, but it has nothing to do with strangers counting gumballs or a market achieving equilibrium. A town-hall meeting like this might be better described in Hirschman’s terms: Keinan and his fellow fighter pilots had (like American Jews) three options: loyalty, exit, or voice.

Unfortunately, Keinan’s proposal for the revitalization of Jewish life is high-tech gumball counting:

Imagine a machine designed . . . for applying the wisdom of a large crowd . . . This machine’s inputs would consist of the textual opinions, insights, predictions, and prescriptions of the subject community. The machine would rank the input . . . by means of an objective logic. . . . It would continually aggregate and reconcile these inputs into a constantly evolving Crowd Wisdom.

If American Jewry is on the verge of evaporating while Israel is about to implode, what is Tal Keinan’s solution?

Abraham Sacher is the editor of the Jewish Review of Books.
Overturned Tables

BY NOAH BENJAMIN BICKART

Paula Fredriksen has been at the forefront of the study of early Christianity since the late 1980s. Her books on Jesus, Paul, and even Augustine are all attempts to situate these figures in their relevant Jewish contexts. "When Christians Were Jews" is a crisp, accessible synthesis of her views on the Jewishness of Christian origins, not only during the lifetime of Jesus but throughout the early history of the community that, in retrospect, is called the church. When, in Fredriksen's estimation, were "Christians" still "Jews"? She focuses on the four decades between Jesus of Nazareth's execution, sometime in the early 30s C.E., and the production of the canonical gospels in the wake of the destruction of Jerusalem.

To show this, Fredriksen peels back the layers of retrojection found in the book of Acts—the second act of the author of Luke. She compares this reconstructed version of the history of these Jesus followers with Paul's letters, along with some choice readings of texts from the Dead Sea Scrolls. She begins with the Jesus movement's migration from the Galilee to Jerusalem and reconstructs the story of a group that is at first devastated by the apparent failure of their eschatological hopes but then reenergized by their collective experience of the risen Jesus. This only confirms their belief that the world was indeed about to end—now. Or at least momentarily, after their leader returned.

When this immediate arrival also failed to materialize, the community adapted. They changed their expectations from "now" to "soon" and, through midrashic readings, transformed their crucified Jesus into the messiah, son of David. As the movement expanded beyond Judea, flourishing in the synagogues of Syria and Asia Minor, it encountered ethnic Judeans along with "god-fearing" Gentiles, who had long been a part of Jewish life in the Roman east and were open to their message.

It is at this earliest stage of Christian history that Fredriksen is most radically revisionist, for her formation of the Jesus movement is primarily based on an unconventional reading of the gospels. Among the four canonical gospels, the so-called synoptic gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke are interconnected. Fredriksen follows the scholarly consensus that posits that both Luke and Matthew relied on Mark for the basic structure and content of their own presentations of Jesus's life, mission, and death, adding to it from time to time from other traditions of what their teacher

When Christians Were Jews: The First Generation
by Paula Fredriksen
Yale University Press, 272 pp., $27.50

It was only in the second generation of "Christianity" that Jesus became Christ.
When its Jewish leader died on the Roman cross, the Jesus movement faced a crisis. If their leader was dead, his prophecy of the end of the world must not have been true. Unlike a slew of other messianic movements in this period (including the figure Fredriksen calls "John the Baptist") that did not outlast the life of their leader, the Jesus movement found an explanation for why Jesus’s death did not invalidate his prophecy: His death was temporary. His imminent second coming would usher in the fulfillment of his eschatological prophecy—now. Yet their hopes were dashed once again. As the years dragged on and history progressed as usual, the movement needed yet another adaptation of Jewish ideology to explain their situation. They settled on messianism, which was not part of Jesus’s original teaching. “None of the gospels,” Fredriksen points out, “depicts Jesus as forthrightly teaching that he is the Messiah… Had Jesus of Nazareth actually and forthrightly claimed the role for himself—a teaching that the later gospel writers would have happily used, had it existed—the evangelical depictions would be more uniform.” And yet the gospel writers and Paul, each in his own way, make an argument that Jesus is the messiah. Thus, it was only in the second generation of the movement that Jesus became Christ. “[F]rom...
this time onward,” she writes, “scripture increas-
ingly provided a matrix of meanings available
to those who sought to make sense of their new
circumstances.” Learned men who knew Jewish
techniques of reading into and out of scripture
developed the messianic ideology that was then
reprojected onto the past through the creation of
the gospels.

Fredriksen has another novel claim. Most schol-
ars see a dichotomy between Paul’s letters on the one
hand and Matthew’s gospel on the other. The former
are usually understood as products of a thoroughly
Gentile church, whereas the latter seems to speak to

Many Romans who were not
ethnic Judeans were attracted
to Jewish practices.

a decidedly Jewish, albeit Jesus-worshiping, group.
Minimally, scholars have tended to see these two
as separate streams of early Christianity and maxi-
mally as overtly antagonistic toward one another.
But Fredriksen argues that there was no daylight
between Paul and the early Jerusalem church. It was
just the difference between those who lived in the
diaspora and those who lived in Judea—all these
early Christians regarded themselves as Jews.

Jews, especially those outside of Judea, had
long had to negotiate their status as members of
the broader Roman world while standing apart
from it. They accommodated the public life of the
Roman city, with its polytheism, refraining only
from active participation in cultic practices. Like-
wise, many Romans who were not ethnic Judeans
were attracted to Jewish practices. Synagogues in
Syria, Asia Minor, and elsewhere already had a
class of adherents who worshipped the God of Is-
rael without having been circumcised or obligated
to observe the Sabbath. Paul’s insistence that these
Gentiles need not undergo circumcision or follow
the law was neither a rejection of the law for ethnic
Judeans nor a radical shift in the audience of the
Christian message.

As with other competing forms of 1st-century
Judaism, the Temple’s destruction in 70 C.E. changed
everything for early Christianity. The Jerusalem
church, comprised of many of Jesus’s earliest follow-
ers, went up in the same smoke as the Temple. In the
ensuing centuries, the vast majority of Christians
were Gentiles who imposed an anti-Jewish agenda
on the events and texts of their past. Fredriksen peels
away these later theological layers to present an early
Christian community that was decidedly Jewish.

If anything is missing in her excellent book, it
is a more robust engagement with rabbinic texts.
Though redacted and published (orally) later than
the Greek and Qumran texts she uses, the Mishnah
and Tosefta contain 1st- and 2nd-century material
that buttresses her claims about what 1st-century
Judaism looked like and how early Christians fit in.
But those are Jewish texts, and this is really a book
about Christian ones. The ways did part eventually.

Noah Benjamin Bickart is a visiting assistant professor
of Jewish and interreligious studies at John Carroll
University. He is working on a book on the scholastic
culture of the Babylonian Talmud.
Tradition and Invention

BY ELISHEVA CARLEBACH

The idea that Jews had a tradition of political thought, as well as an active political life that continued in various shapes and forms over the vast expanse of their diaspora existence, is a new one. It is difficult for most people living today to imagine a time when the notion of Jews as a people who had lived without a continuous political life for two thousand years was virtually a matter of common consensus. Christians conceived of Jews as having exhausted their right to a political existence following their rejection of Jesus as their savior. The figure of Synagoga adorning so many medieval cathedrals always appears bereft of her crown and holding a broken staff or lance to symbolize this loss of sovereignty. Jews were entitled to practice their religion but were politically subordinate within the orbit of Islam as well.

Any overt expressions of political ambition, such as messianic movements, were brutally suppressed. The most notable of these movements was that of Shabbtai Zevi in the 17th century. Whether this upsurge represented the culmination of medieval messianic dreams or the inauguration of a modern revolt against a powerless life in the diaspora is still a matter of scholarly debate. But however one characterizes the Sabbatean movement, it barely altered the perception that Jews were a people without politics.

In the modern era of civic and legal emancipation, the Jews often acquired equal rights as citizens of the nation-state under the explicit condition that they surrender all vestiges of autonomous political life. As the Count of Clermont-Tonnere famously declared in 1789 during the debate over Jewish citizenship in the French Assembly: “The Jews should be denied everything as a nation, but granted everything as individuals,” a bargain that French Jews tried hard to accept. Nevertheless, antisemitic classics produced in this period, such as Protocols of the Elders of Zion and Jacob Braffman’s Book of the Kahal, depicted a unified Jewish people as politically vibrant, xenophobically separatist, and globally ambitious. These works inverted the picture of political quietism and harmlessness projected by Jewish leaders. Even (or particularly) within the 19th-century movement to develop and promote the academic study of Jewish culture, history, and religion, known in German as Wissenschaft des Judentums, Jewish political life barely registered as a subject. If the term “politics” entered into discussion, it almost always meant the negotiations between Jews and a non-Jewish political entity and only rarely something that Jews practiced themselves.

If Jews were included in early 20th-century discussions of political communities, it was generally concerning their right to preserve their language and culture, along with other minorities, at a time when empires were being dismantled. The neglect of the idea of Jewish political life largely persisted until the rise of Zionism and the subsequent establishment of the State of Israel. In short, the idea that the Jews possessed a distinctive political tradition during the two millennia of diaspora only arose around the emergence of a modern sovereign Jewish state. All of which is to say that The Jewish Political Tradition confronts the reader with an almost seamless new scripture on Jewish politics.

The imposing volumes of The Jewish Political Tradition confront the reader with an almost seamless new scripture on Jewish politics.

In his introduction to the first volume, Walzer wrote that “the tradition as a whole is our subject in these volumes” (my emphasis) and described their project as threefold: an act of retrieval, integration, and criticism. That is, it would retrieve “central texts and arguments” of Jewish political thought and make them available to new generations of readers. “Never before,” Walzer wrote, “has the tradition been looked at . . . with our specific set of questions about political agency and authority in mind.” But it would also “take . . . Jewish thought out of its intellectual ghetto,” by integrating it with “Greek, Arabic, Christian, and secularist modes of thought.” Finally, their project would not simply accept the arguments and doctrines of this tradition but rather “argue and . . . encourage others to argue about which of them can usefully be carried forward under the modern conditions of emancipation and sovereignty.”

The project is animated by the presiding intellectual spirit of Michael Walzer, the eminent political theorist and moral philosopher, who has coedited each of the volumes along with the scholars of Jewish thought Menachem Lorberbaum and Noam Zohar. Each volume collects texts around a central theme: the first, authority; the second, membership; and the present volume (for which coeditor Madeline Kochen joined the three founding editors), community.
a rich range of beautifully translated texts, culled with evident care and discernment. These sources are accompanied by brief reflective essays from leading American and Israeli jurists, philosophers, and political thinkers. Thus, in the new volume on community, Judge Jed Rakoff writes on the courage and responsibilities of judges; the noted Harvard political theorist Michael Sandel discusses the parallels (or lack thereof) between community and nation-state bonds; and Fania Oz-Salzberger contributes a

commentary titled “Tzedakah, Zionism, and the Modern Jewish Citizen.”

However, the problem with the project is more fundamental than its gathering of experts in other fields (after all, outsiders sometimes see things that the experts have missed). In his foreword to the first volume, the late David Hartman, founding director of the Shalom Hartman Institute, writes:

Israel's loss of sovereignty and its exile from the land did not mean the end of this community. Rabbinic Judaism developed a comprehensive tradition. Yet such a presentation inevitably violates the true meaning of the texts, which were written in wholly different historical contexts and distinct literary genres. Rather than being presented as part of conversations that took place in response to specific challenges in other times, places, and political configurations, they appear here only as snippets in intertextual dialogue with one another.

Moreover, no attempt is made to differentiate between ideas expressed in biblical and Second Temple texts when Jews had at least some measure of sovereignty and those that developed during a period of extensive communal autonomy within another state such as the geonic period or, finally, those that arose in vulnerable Jewish communities, some of them living on the verge of expulsion. It is hard to see how a usable tradition can be retrieved with such methods. It is here that the perspective of historians could have come in handy, but no historians of the Jewish political experience itself appear in the pages of this volume.

In a project whose stated goal is to provide inspiration and guidelines for a thriving state, the absence of lived historical context is particularly puzzling. The book contains, for instance, no echo of the world documented by the Cairo Geniza, with its multiple competing Jewish communities (rabbinic-Babylonian, rabbinic-Palestinian, and Karaites) and its (sometimes polygamous) family structures, deeply embedded in the caliphal framework. The emphasis on text over experience produces a far more idyllic image of Jewish politics past than history itself actually reflects.

The illusion of continuity of a tradition over time and the presentation of texts without a sense of the historical context in which they were produced (or even the approximate dates when they were written) deprives the reader of insight into one of the most remarkable aspects of exilic Jewish life over the past two millennia: the repeated invention and reinvention of Jewish political life. The Jews who fashioned new organizational structures and new kinds of relationships with governing authorities in Abbasid Babylonia, in Umayyad Spain, and in the newly settled Rhineland communities in the 10th century inherited no usable template from antiquity. The achievement of the Babylonian exilarchs and geonim and of Rabbeinu Gershom and his contemporaries and successors was a grand rethinking of what it would take to establish Jewish collective life in new and unfamiliar circumstances.

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decisions, the majority of texts issuing from a kahal were written by scribes at the behest of lay leaders. Voluntary societies, chevrot, we are told, were “governed by a book of rules drawn up . . . by the founders—a kind of constitution (which the kahal never had).” But many kehillot, such as Krakow, for example, did draw up founding documents, takkanot, with preambles and governing principles that resemble constitutions in this period.

Such blind spots lead to significant errors of generalization. Thus, the third volume’s introduction claims that “the family generally is shielded from communal interference and regulation.” In fact, documents from the archives of hundreds of kehillot demonstrate the opposite. No marriage could proceed, no family could be formed, without the consent of the kahal. It extended its protection to certain families but not to others, and acted in the place of families when they could not care for their dependents.

The absence of kehilla-generated material is particularly glaring in the final chapter of the book, devoted to “the courts.” We now know a great deal about the procedures of Jewish courts in early modern Europe, the ways they adapted to the broader legal environment, and how they dispensed justice, but no hint of what Simha Assaf described decades ago or what Jay Berkovitz and Edward Fram have written more recently intrudes here. Drawing a direct line from antiquity to the 20th century without elucidating the shifting contextual frameworks ignores the genius and persistent innovation of Jewish community life when it arguably reached its apogee in “the days of the kahal.”

Instead of instances of kahal governance and legislation, we get an encomium to the Council of Four Lands (Va’ad Arba Aratzot) that misunderstands its function and role. The councils instituted by the Polish government in the 16th century to collect taxes more efficiently from Jews ultimately served other purposes as representatives and intercessors for Jews. They had no real authority over Jewish communities, and their resolutions were not binding. None of the councils ever presented themselves, nor were they ever conceived in their own time as a representative body of all Polish Jews. When they address questions of “percent- age of suffrage”—how many Jews participated in the vote or its decision procedures—the editors demonstrate that they subscribe to an even more idealized picture of the council than the 17th-century chronicler Nathan ben Moses Hannover, who is criticized by the editors for romanticizing the institution. The moment the Polish government decided to disband the council, it disappeared. No effort was made by Jews to continue its other functions privately.

The retrojection of notions of “suffrage” into the discussion of the Council of Four Lands exemplifies the teleological cast of the entire project. An underarticulated argument inspires the compendium: From its inception as theocracy, Jewish political life has always been advancing toward democracy. The idea of a continuous political arc diminishes the value we can attribute to the creation of new forms of Jewish political organization, from the exilarchate and kahal councils to what historian Yosef Yerushalmi has called “Israel, the unexpected state.”

Despite often extremely harsh conditions, ranging from outright physical violence to existential negation of all their claims to a place in history, Jews fashioned means to persevere, to organize social structures, to elaborate their traditions, and even to create monumental works of jurisprudence, liturgy, art, and philosophy. The materials in these volumes have to be understood as much more than the unwitting foundations for a modern Jewish state. They are—despite having emerged mainly outside the context of a state, or perhaps because of it—important achievements that stand as remarkable in their own right and in the absence of any subsequent vindication by the Jews’ ultimate acquisition of a more conventional sort of political power.

Sit in on a meeting of the board of any Jewish organization or watch the Knesset Channel for an hour, and you will find ample confirmation that Jewish politics—voluntary and local or governmental and national—is messy. This is not necessarily a bad thing. It is, in fact, the hallmark of democracies and a point of pride for many Jews. (Amy Gutmann’s essay in this volume, “Meaning and Value of Deliberation,” provides an eloquent reminder of why this must be so.) The decorous tone of the sources and essays that have appeared in the first three volumes of The Jewish Political Tradition dulls some of this vibrancy. Reading them, one can forget about the unexpected twists and turns of history and the spirited inventiveness at the heart of Jewish political life. It might have been different if a historian or two had been invited to participate in the project.

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Pancho Villa and the Star of David Men

BY ALLAN ARKUSH

Making Judaism Safe for America: World War I and the Origins of Religious Pluralism
by Jessica Cooperman
New York University Press, 224 pp., $39

In March of 1916, the still slightly infamous revolutionary general and politico Francisco “Pancho” Villa, angry at the United States for supporting his rival for the Mexican presidency, led an assault on Columbus, New Mexico, killing 23 Americans, including soldiers of the 13th US Calvary. Properly outraged, President Woodrow Wilson ordered General John J. Pershing to Mexico to capture or kill Villa, but he never did. Jessica Cooperman’s fine new book about World War I and American Jewry begins with Pershing’s unsuccessful Mexican campaign because it set the stage for the larger story she has to tell. Among the ten thousand Regular Army troops and the hundred thousand National Guardsmen who participated in the “Punitive Expedition,” there were approximately 3,500 Jews. The American Jewish community’s efforts to look after them established a precedent for the much larger project of supporting American Jewish soldiers during World War I.

Encouraged by the War Department, the Young Men’s Christian Association had stepped in to protect Pershing’s men from what many perceived to be a greater menace than Pancho Villa: red-light districts in the border towns. The Knights of Columbus promptly sent men to the scene to provide Catholic soldiers with more congenial assistance than they were likely to receive from a Protestant organization. So did the Young Men’s Hebrew Association, which established a branch near the Mexican border where Jewish soldiers could seek “recreation without temptation.” Jewish leaders (like the Catholics) were almost as fearful of young recruits being lured to join the Protestant majority as they were of them succumbing to the bad influence of bars and bordellos. But more planning would be needed to provide Jews with the same level of services as the Young Men’s Christian Association was already making available for Protestants.

The (Reform) Central Conference of American Rabbis took responsibility for High Holiday services (attended, on occasion, by more curious or idle Gentiles than Jews), but the YMHA had only “limited success in instituting morally uplifting programs for Jewish soldiers on the Mexican border.” The Gentiles, in the opinion of the War Department, didn’t in the end do much better, but this didn’t lead to the conclusion that pastoral work wasn’t worthwhile. The lesson learned from the Mexican experience was that a greater effort would have to be made during World War I to surround soldiers with “clean and wholesome influences.” In 1917, this became the task of a new government agency: the Commission on Training Camp Activities (CTCA).

American Jews were eager to do their part for the troops, but they had to work hard to persuade the authorities that they could or should. “[W]ithin days of the United States’ declaration of war, the third of the American Expeditionary Forces, had demographics on their side. Their demands for a representative on the commission could “not be ignored without jeopardizing their support for the draft and the war.” American Jews didn’t have that kind of leverage.

Shortly after the United States entered the war, a small group of prominent Jews led by Cyrus Adler, the acting president of the Jewish Theological Seminary, formed a broad-based organization to unify “Jewish efforts in connection with welfare work among military personnel” called the Jewish Welfare Board (JWB). They were largely ignored by the commission until they were able to call attention to the emergence of a socialist rival, the People’s League for Jewish Soldiers of America. This seems to have convinced the government that the JWB was its necessary partner (but not, however, to give it a seat on the CTCA). Including “the JWB alongside the YMCA and the Knights of Columbus in the War Department’s program for soldiers’ welfare work” and thereby “granting nonsectarian status to Jews and Catholics represented,” in Cooperman’s opinion, “a significant shift in the structure of American definitions of religion.”

But that did not necessarily mean a shift toward defining religion the same way the Jews did. Consider the question of kashrut, which was a major issue at a time when considerable numbers of Orthodox Jews were being conscripted. Should the JWB be lobbying for the supply of kosher food at army bases? The Orthodox representatives on the JWB thought so. At a JWB Executive Committee meeting a few weeks into the war, Rabbi Bernard Drachman argued that the government should “supply kosher food to Jewish soldiers, as is being done in Austria.” Dr. Adler was, of course, more moderate, suggesting “that if the government could not do so, this Board could undertake the matter of supplying kosher food wherever it was requested at its own expense, provided that a specific fund was raised for this purpose.” Reform members of the board objected to the idea of catering to mainly Orthodox concerns “and goluth [diaspora] sentiments,” rather than the actual needs of American Jewish servicemen.

Knowing that kosher food was a lot to ask for, the board raised the issue with the government gingerly, prefacing its request with the statement

Poster by Ernest Hamlin Baker illustrating the United War Work Campaign, which brought together seven organizations into one large funding drive, November 1918. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.)
that Jewish legal authorities had long ago made it clear that "religious laws may be set aside in the defense of one's country." This was too meek for many in the Orthodox community, but too much for soldiers like a certain Captain Horowitz, who argued, among other things, that "[t]he prescribed ration is wholesome as well as sufficient; the prescribed components have been determined with scientific accuracy to balance the whole; we cannot in reason insist on the 'kashruth.'" This was also the opinion of the higher-ups in the War Department, who had the decisive say in the matter.

Even if the JWB couldn't help Jewish soldiers keep kosher, it could provide the kind of activities that the YMCA provided: lectures, movies, and dances (with the right sort of women). And it could reinforce the patriotic message by stressing "that through engaged adherence to the tenets of Judaism, Jews could become better citizens and better Americans." One of the most important actions it took to foster such adherence was to lobby successfully for the appointment (for the first time since the Civil War) of Jewish military chaplains to serve in the US Army.

Once the necessary legislation had been passed, the JWB assumed responsibility for selecting the men who would fill the limited number of positions that had been created. The board made reasonable efforts to select a denominationally diverse crew of rabbis, but the criteria imposed by the government and endorsed by the board itself effectively ruled out anyone who lacked a good secular education, and thereby excluded practically all of the available Orthodox rabbis. The vast majority of the 25 candidates who were eventually approved were graduates of the Reform Hebrew Union College.

Since a couple of dozen chaplains obviously couldn't handle the job of providing religious services for tens of thousands of soldiers, the board hired an additional 30 or so "camp rabbis"—usually rabbis from communities near military bases—as well as hundreds of more- or less-qualified field workers, who became known as "Star of David men." Together, they "led the majority of religious and social services provided by the JWB."

As part of its effort to direct the work of its cadres, the board produced a magazine, the Welfare Board Sentinel, for distribution in military camps. Its very first issue contained a "Decalogue for Jewish Soldiers," written by Rabbi William Rosenau. The first commandment read "I am America, thy country, which brought thee out of bondage to liberty"; its fourth prohibited taking the name of America in vain; and its fifth was to honor "thy Superior Officers." Cooperman may go too far when she maintains that this strange piece of overzealous rhetoric actually displaced "God and sacred texts," in Rabbi Rosenau's eyes, "as the ultimate source of freedom and righteous behavior," but it certainly placed patriotism on a dangerously high pedestal. She doesn't go too far, though, when she observes that the "first commandments surely spoke to concerns about the 18 percent of all American soldiers—and possibly as many as one-third of all Jewish soldiers—born in other countries."

One man who took this sort of thing very seriously without substituting America for God was a young Reform rabbi named Elkan Voorsanger. The son of a prominent San Francisco rabbi, Voorsanger was serving as an assistant rabbi in St. Louis when the United States entered the war. He immediately gave up his clergy deferment to fight in a war that

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Voorsanger won a French Croix de Guerre and a Purple Heart and became the JWB's poster boy, but he wasn't by any means typical.

What was the impact of the JWB's work on more ordinary Jewish soldiers? Cooperman gives us a chapter full of complaints. Orthodox soldiers, their parents, and their rabbis grumbled that "JWB workers lacked the experience to lead even Reform services and had 'insufficient knowledge of Hebrew to conduct orthodox service.'" Reform Jews, including a young recruit named Jacob Rader Marcus, who ultimately became the leading American Jewish historian of his day, complained that the prayer book patched together by the JWB was incoherent, and that the JWB's attempt to "legislate Judaism" left everyone dissatisfied. Zionists complained that the assimilationist JWB "cancelled everything that was genuinely Jewish from its program," and the socialist-leaning Forverts complained that the soldiers had "no Yiddish books to read . . . no Yiddish entertainments, theatrical performances, concerts and the like." Eastern European Jews, in general, as Cooperman puts it, "feared that the JWB was working against the real interests and needs of Jewish soldiers, which they understood as based on cultural distinctiveness rather than shared American identity."

Nothing would substantiate their fears as much as the JWB's position with regard to the "welfare huts," which were supposed to serve as the headquarters for its workers' activities, as well as their homes. Partly for the sake of convenience, but more
for ideological reasons, the JWB preferred sharing space with the YMCA to having huts of its own. Religious distinctiveness was fine, but “the prospect of separate Jewish soldiers’ welfare huts threatened to cross the line from drawing strength and pride from one’s tradition to outright advocacy of segregation.” The JWB was strenuously opposed to what some of its leaders decried as “Yiddishisation” and a return to the “ghetto.”

However, sharing space with the YMCA had its problems. There were many complaints that “the YMCA used its huts not in the interest of religious pluralism but in order to pursue its evangelical work.” And this may have been the least of it. Here’s the not untypical complaint of a soldier at Camp Devens in Ayer, Massachusetts:

At one of the large YMCA hall[s] there are seated about 100 Jewish soldiers with prayer books in their hands. Along the sides of the room, Gentile soldiers are writing letters, smoking, chewing and conversing among themselves. Behind the Jews there are seated or standing several hundred other Gentile soldiers who are either exchanging stories, smoking or staring in wild-eyed wonder at the strange sight of a Jew leading the prayer as he stands with a shawl thrown over his shoulders. Many snicker and grin, as they hear a Hebrew word, or as they see the Jews rise and sit again and again. In this environment a Jewish soldier is expected to say Kaddish!!! And to crown all of this, a moving picture show is always scheduled to take place in the same hall just as soon as the Jewish services are ended.

Young Jacob Marcus, who knew the overall situation quite well, proclaimed in print, “You must build Jewish shacks because the men in the ranks want them.”

The JWB leadership eventually bowed to this pressure. It sought and received government permission to erect 51 buildings in training camps across the country. Happily, the government agreed to pay for light and heat in these structures, just as it did for the YMCA. To advertise its success to the Jewish public, the JWB produced a poster displaying a “homey JWB building filled with soldiers in uniform,” some listening to a piano played by a young woman and others studying a text. The poster “announced in Yiddish, ‘Mir haben fur ze a heim geboit’ (We have built them a home).” This was clearly a deviation from the board’s previous policy, but it wasn’t really self-ghettoization. It just added a splash of ethnicity to the religious pluralism that the JWB had sought to foster from the beginning.

The idea of a “tri-faith” America did not become part of the American civic consensus until after World War II, when it was popularized by the Jewish thinker Will Herberg, but, as Cooperman shows, it began much earlier. The “battle for American religious pluralism was waged by the Jewish Welfare Board during World War I,” she writes, “and against unlikely odds, the JWB won.”
Law, Lore, and Theory

BY LAWRENCE KAPLAN

Halakhah: The Rabbinic Idea of Law
by Chaim N. Saiman
Princeton University Press, 320 pp., $29.95

Chaim Saiman’s lucid and learned new book offers a conceptual introduction to the halakhah, Jewish law. Its “core argument” is this:

Halakhah exists on a spectrum or continuum. At one pole, it functions . . . [as] a system of rules designed to govern human behavior . . . But the book’s central concern is with the opposing pole, which is far more challenging to describe. Here, halakhah functions as Torah, as an object of worship, and even as literature . . . In a sense, we can think of the two poles as establishing the goalposts, while the “game” of halakhah, and indeed its lived history, plays out on the field between them.

As opposed to the more mundane function of the first, regulatory pole, the second pole accords transcendent significance to the halakhah—indeed, makes it more than just Jewish law in the narrow sense. As Saiman explains:

the study of Torah . . . competes not only with other spiritual pursuits such as prayer and good works, and not only with other intellectual interests like studying philosophy, art, or science, but with virtually every other human activity—up to and including the basic human need of earning a living!

Saiman begins his discussion by analyzing the idea of halakhah as found in rabbinic literature. He contrasts the halakhic consciousness of the rabbis to the religious consciousness of the Bible, which focuses on a few central themes: worshipping one God, avoiding idolatry, honoring Shabbat, preserving sexual morality, and taking care of the less fortunate. For the rabbis, “living God’s will requires con-

Thus, for example, the rabbis tried to define such general biblical injunctions as procreation or the prohibition of work on the Sabbath with “exacting precision . . . Early halakhic texts establish the basic framework, while subsequent layers analyze, debate, and expand its details and applications.” To focus on Sabbath law: The rabbis in the Mishnah break down the general biblical prohibition of work into 39 distinct categories, one of which is writing, defined as writing two letters (the minimum number of letters necessary to form a word in Hebrew) using permanent liquid. Later rabbinic texts take all sorts of unusual cases into consideration, a process continuing down to today. As Saiman notes, "In the modern era, halakhists discussed whether it is permitted . . . to play Scrabble (generally okay, but in the Deluxe Edition, the board’s grooves hold the letters in place more permanently and may thereby produce a ‘writing’)."

Saiman points out that this “exclusive focus on the precise details of religious practice” left the Pharisees, the forebears of rabbinic Judaism, open to Jesus’s critique that they mistook “the legal trees for the spiritual forest.” Although he himself is thoroughly committed to rabbinic Judaism, Saiman does not casually dismiss Jesus’s critique. “A quick glance at the Mishnah,” he writes, “reveals that Jesus was not wholly off base”:

He chastises the Pharisees for fussing over questions like the tithing of herbs—and it is true, the Mishnah does not find these questions the least bit trivial. As Mishnah Ma’aserot (3:9) explains, if “savory, hyssop, and thyme” are deemed foods, they require tithing; if they are merely plants, they will be exempt.

Saiman notes that the traditional rabbinic response to Jesus’s critique is to argue that “law is not everything” in Judaism. This response contends that “Jesus and his latter followers failed to appreciate the different elements of the Jewish tradition that complement the law,” including the biblical narrative, aggadah (the nonlegal parts of rabbinic literature including allegory, stories both playful and didactic, and narrative theology), midrash, and the mystical tradition. While granting that this response possesses “much truth,” Saiman astutely notes that it “concedes the central claim: insofar as the subject is the corpus of halakhah, Jesus was correct.” Saiman takes the opposite tack:

Precisely because halakhah loomed so large in the rabbinic consciousness, it became the medium through which the rabbis did in fact engage the weightier matters of the law. This is true not only of halakhah—law in the narrowest sense of the term—but also the way the rabbis’ project merges halakhic dialogue with storytelling, biblical exegesis, and theological reflection.

Halakhah is not only regulation; it is Torah in the broadest sense. That is to say, Torah is also storytelling, biblical exegesis, theological reflection, moral instruction, education, and more. It is not, as the traditional response to Jesus’s critique would have it, a group of separate, secondary religious disciplines, but arises out of the halakhic discussions themselves.

The first two parts of Saiman’s book are devoted to a series of illuminating readings of rabbinic texts where we can see this integral connection between technical halakhic discussion and what has sometimes been called “meta-halakhic” thought. These parts contain such chapter titles as “Halakhah as Torah,” “Halakhah as Theology,” “Halakhah as Education,” and “Halakhah as Aggadah.” Given the fluid nature of the talmudic discussions, the distinctions between the materials treated in these chapters are often not very clear. The epigraph to the chapter “Halakhah as Aggadah” is a quote from Bialik’s classic essay about those two rabbinic categories of discourse, in which Bialik writes that a “living and vital halakhah is an aggadah that was or that will be. And the same is true in reverse.” One might say that Saiman aims to demonstrate the truth of Bialik’s poetic conceit in concrete rabbinic detail.

One fine example of this interplay between technical, even arcane, halakhic analysis and broad religious reflection can be found in the chapter “Halakhah as Torah.” Deuteronomy 21 mandates that if a murder victim is found outside a town and the killer is unknown, the elders of the nearest town must assemble in a dry riverbed, ceremonially hack a calf’s neck, and then wash their hands as a symbolic gesture of atonement. The Mishnah (Sota 9:4) raises a question about this practice that, as Saiman notes, seems like “a parody halakhic legalism”:

From which part of the corpse do they measure? Rabbi Eliezer says: from his navel. Rabbi Akiva says: from his nostrils.

That is, in the—to say the very least—unlikley event that the corpse was exactly equidistant between two
towns, save for the trifling distance between the navel and the nose, from which of the two does one measure to determine which town is closer? What is going on here? Saiman points to the explanation of this debate offered by the Babylonian Talmud (Sota 45b):

One master [Rabbi Akiva] holds: the primary element of life is in his nostrils. And one master [Rabbi Eliezer] holds: the primary element of life is in his navel.

As Saiman eloquently explains, “[T]he issue is not how we measure a man’s corpse but how we measure the human essence.”

[The Talmud] turns a superficially trifling legal question into a broadly philosophical one: Is man a primarily physical being—created from the navel on out? Or is man fundamentally a spiritual being—measured from the breathing passages?

And he points out, this “broadly philosophical” debate fits nicely into its halakhic context, “as the ceremony of the hacked calf is specifically designed to draw attention to the uniqueness of the human being.” As Saiman notes, in Christianity such questions were addressed in theological discussions, and in our modern world they are addressed “in the humanities, the social sciences, biology, or neuro-psychology. But for the rabbis the relevant context is halakhah.” This is very well said. He might have further underscored the point if he had examined the parallel passage in the Jerusalem Talmud (Sota 9:3), which he quotes, as more than a mere variant of the discussion in the Babylonian Talmud:

Rabbi Eliezer says: from his navel— from the place that the fetus is created.

Rabbi Akiva says: from his nostrils— the place where the face is recognized.

Following Saiman’s philosophical lead, we might construe the Jerusalem Talmud’s version of the debate as follows: What is it that is so morally abhorrent about the crime of murder? Is it that the murderer destroyed a human life—the biological life that develops out of the navel? Or is it that the murderer destroyed this unique human life—that is, this person who is uniquely identified by his face? As the Talmud states elsewhere, everyone’s face is different. In short, what we have here is an implicit disagreement between the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds as to the philosophical significance of the seemingly trivial halakhic debate between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva.

As Saiman demonstrates again and again, halakhic discussion ranges far beyond narrow legal issues. Thus, he shows that a debate regarding a small detail of Sabbath law “initiates a discussion over the ideals of manhood; intellectual versus physical prowess; the relationship between poverty and politics; the possibilities of human perfection; and the true end of human history.” While Saiman writes that his book is aimed “at readers who might not know much about either Jewish law or the state of academic scholarship on the subject,” even accomplished talmudists who are familiar with the texts Saiman cites will benefit from his skillful organization of material and his incisive analyses.

Saiman’s discussion of halakhah in the post-talmudic period is a genuine tour de force. Here he uses his description of the two poles of halakhah as regulatory law and halakhah as Torah as an organizing framework to characterize much of this literature down to the present day. He notes that among the rishonim, the early medieval rabbinic scholars (10th–13th centuries), none quite maintained the balance found in the Talmud between applied and nonapplied halakhah, halakhah and aggadah, the dialectical give and take of discussion and firm legal conclusions, though some came closer to that balance than others.

Rabbi Isaac Alfasi of Fez and Lucena (1013–1103) stood at the first, regulatory pole. He was the author of the first great “summarizing commentary,” Sefer ha-Halakhah . . . [which] skips over the aggadic portions of the Talmud . . . and deals only with the legal sections deemed then-currently applicable . . . offering a synopsis of [these sections’] central arguments.” At the other pole are the tosafists (literally, glossators), the 12th- and 13th-century Ashkenazic commentators on the Talmud.

Later rabbinic texts take all sorts of unusual cases into consideration, a process continuing down to today.

In contrast to Alfasi’s practical approach to the study of Torah, the tosafists adopted a devotional view. Tosafot, however, like Alfasi, “rarely addresses the Talmud’s aggadah, nor does the commentary discuss biblical narrative, spin aphorisms to encourage religious devotion, or contemplate theology or religious philosophy.” Thus, while the tosafists developed and expanded halakhic argument, so as to transform the Talmud—as one 16th-century authority colorfully put it—into a globe, it was a legalistic globe.

In his great code of law, the Mishneh Torah, Maimonides (1138–1204) sought to codify the entirety of halakhah, both practical and nonpractical, in this respect following the lead of the Talmud itself. But his aim was to produce a well-ordered code out of the literary riot of the Talmud:

Maimonides starts from Rîf’s assumption that the Talmud needs to be pared down to legal rules, but then invents his own method for recording and classifying them. Whereas Rîf excerts Talmudic deliberations, Maimonides eliminates them entirely. Further, though
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Mishneh Torah issues thousands of declarative rules . . . it offers no halakhic defense of its conclusions . . . . The treatise [unlike Alfasi] also departs radically from the Talmud's more haphazard organization . . . presenting halakhah in a conceptualized framework, marked by principles, corollaries, and exceptions.

Although Maimonides departs from the Talmud in both its organization and form of discourse, not only does he follow the Talmud's lead in addressing the entirety of halakhah, both practical and non-practical, but he also skillfully interweaves a great deal of what Saiman has referred to as "halakhah as Torah" together with his strictly halakhic presentation. Perhaps because in the Mishneh Torah such discussions are far more philosophical and less fanciful than those found in the Talmud, this point of contact between the Mishneh Torah and talmudic literature goes unnoticed by Saiman.

Saiman uses the medieval halakhic continuum he has drawn between Alfasi and Maimonides on the one hand and the Tosafot on the other to locate a wide variety of other key commentators and codifiers. Here, as elsewhere, his discussions are truly illuminating, but even a reader only cursorily acquainted with post-talmudic rabbinic literature might wonder at the lack of any discussion of Rashi's commentary on the Talmud. This commentary is, along with Maimonides's Mishneh Torah, universally acknowledged as one of the two most significant works of Jewish law written by a single individual. Saiman justifies this gap by his need to focus on the book's primary task of showing how the concepts of halakhah as Torah and halakhah as regulation "played out at critical junctures in the development of halakhic thought."

I would claim, however, that, to the contrary, Saiman's framework deepens our appreciation of the significance of Rashi's commentary. For it, as Saiman rightly claims, none of the monumental works of the rishonim that he surveys maintain the Talmud's fine literary balance, Rashi's commentary does just that. Like the Tosafot, and unlike Alfasi, Rashi covers not only the tractates dealing with applied practical law but also those dealing with laws that are no longer applicable, such as those of the Temple service. But unlike the Tosafot, Rashi's unrivaled line-by-line commentary covers the totality of the text, skipping nothing and explaining whatever requires explanation, aggadah as well as halakhah. Finally, in contrast to Alfasi, who radically abridges the talmudic dialectic, Maimonides, who goes further and eliminates halakhic study, always standing as a bulwark against the reduction of halakhah to regulatory law.

Note, however, what has happened in the course of Saiman's survey of post-talmudic literature. His survey's goal is to show that while halakhah in this period "began to journey away from the give-and-take of the Talmudic sugya toward codification and standardization . . . the idea of halakhah as Torah continues to present itself at critical junctures." However, while in his readings of rabbinic texts in the earlier part of the book, "halakhah as Torah" referred to rabbinic storytelling, biblical exegesis, theological reflection, moral instruction, education, and the like, in his survey of post-talmudic literature, "halakhah as Torah" becomes research into "foundational questions of halakhic jurisprudence." But jurisprudential theory and conceptual insights are not edifying stories, daring literary interpretations, or deep theological reflections.

In a chapter called "Halakhah's Empire," Saiman discusses the method of talmudic analysis whose leading practitioner was Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik of Brest-Litovsk, or Brisk, who lived in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In this method, Saiman notes, the idea of halakhah as a rigorous theoretical system "reaches its fullest articulation." "Briskers' systematically probe all halakhic rules to reveal their conceptual, jurisprudential underpinnings. This method of study supplemented by the glosses of his Polish contemporary Rabbi Moses Isserles, took center stage. These codes, Saiman observes, "offer the starkest contrast to the idea of halakhah-as-Torah. . . For [their] express interest is to frame halakhah as black-letter directives that govern Jewish life of the exilic present." Saiman, however, argues that the broader conception of halakhah had become so dominant that even legal codes like these never quite realized their purely regulatory goal. For example:

In several instances, a section of Tur begins by stating a broad rule derived from the Mishnah that sounds as if it will apply in many cases but is then significantly narrowed as the paragraphs proceed. In several laws relating to relationships between Jews and non-Jews, this prolixity is taken to an extreme. Not only is the scope of the halakhah cut back, but Tur concludes that in the present era the laws do not even apply.

What is striking and revealing, Saiman points out, is that the Tur accords the same importance to these now moot talmudic laws as it does to the regulatory rules concerning these matters currently in force. Precisely because these talmudic laws are still Torah, the obligation to study them leads the Tur to grant them a prominent place and the Tosafists follow suit.

As Saiman shows, the same process is at work in the Shulchan Arukh and its commentaries. While the Shulchan Arukh itself, Saiman notes, is "considerably more code-like than the Tur," and the primary interest of some of its commentaries is "applied halakhah in its most straightforward sense," most commentators vacillate "between citing responsa addressing practical issues and extended elaboration of talmudic concepts." Such theoretical commentary reached its apogee in the Ketzot ha-choshen, by the brilliant 18th-century talmudist Rabbi Aryeh Leib Heller. While formally a commentary on the Shulchan Arukh, it was, as Saiman notes, focused on "using legal rules to discuss foundational questions of halakhic jurisprudence."

Perhaps the closest the Talmud ever came to being displaced in Jewish history was in the late Middle Ages when two principal halakhic codes, Rabbi Jacob ben Asher’s Arba’A Turim (Four Rows), known as the Tur, written in Spain in the 1300s, and Rabbi Joseph Karo’s Shulchan Arukh (Set Table), written in Safed in the 1500s and then
presupposes halakhah as a regulatory system but displays a singular lack of interest in it. As Saiman states:

The Briskers . . . adopted the Talmud’s practice of writing on non-practiced halakhah, melding various halakhic disciplines into a single framework and investigating long-rejected views alongside views codified in the Shulhan Arukh . . . [saying] little about which view is correct. And while Briskers surely assumed their readers were fully committed to halakhic practice, the paradigmatic encounter with halakhah was as a medium of Torah study.

But the Briskers’ idea of halakhah as Torah is opposed not only to halakhah as a regulatory system but also to Saiman’s first idea of halakhah as Torah, the kind of broad, free-ranging, playful, poetic reflection found in the Talmud. The Brisker method is exceptionally formal and severely self-contained, rejecting any historical, contextual, or realist approach to the halakhah. Indeed this method views any attempt to psychologize or sociologize the halakhah as—to cite Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik (1903–1993), the grandson of Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik and one of 20th-century America’s most influential halakhists and theologians—"strangling its very soul."

It is only in the last chapter of the book that Saiman notes that he has, in fact, been operating with two different concepts of “halakhah as Torah” and seeks to reconcile them. In this chapter, Saiman discusses the attempt on the part of some Religious Zionist jurists and halakhists to update the halakhah so as to enable it to “play a decisive role in the governance of the Jewish State.” But, Saiman queries, given the broad, even extralegal nature of halakhah as he has described it, can it “become, or merge with, modern state law?” Saiman reminds the reader of the moralizing language halakhah uses, the role it assigns rabbis as “teachers, scholars, spiritual guides, and theologians,” and the Talmud’s favoring of “legal argument, literary nuance, and cultural exploration over black-letter rules . . . [a] structure [that] can effectively foster moral development and impart religious meaning.”

How, for instance, could a state adopt the Mishnah’s two-tiered approach to an employer’s obligation to feed his employees? On the “hard” legal level, the master owes his worker no more than a basic meal, but on the “soft” educational level, the Mishnah urges employers to remember that workers deserve more than the minimum obligatory amount. Incorporating such an approach, Saiman argues, “would lead to uncertainty over what the law is.” But just sticking with the “hard” legal level “would decouple the halakhically inspired statute from the moral and spiritual teachings of the Mishnah.”

Do such moral and spiritual teachings have much to do with the Brisker method, which transforms “the Talmud’s oftentimes fuzzy categories into hardened legal constructs”? Saiman began by describing the conceptions of “halakhah as regulatory system” and “halakhah as Torah” as the two opposing goals posts between which the game of halakhah and traditional Jewish life are played, but now there appear to be three goalposts: a regulatory one and opposed to it two others, a moralizing aggadic one and a rigorous theoretical one.

But, to return to the book’s beginning, while halakhah as Torah in the aggadic moral sense may respond to Jesus’s critique of the law as unspiritual, can the same be said of halakhah as Torah in its rigorous, abstract, theoretical sense? How can it be considered spiritual? Perhaps to extricate himself from these difficulties, late in the book Saiman suddenly affirms that “even the Brisker’s rigid categories can be shown to address a range of spiritual and social considerations both precluded and preluded by the method’s founders; of late, there has been a move to steer a renewed form of Brisker analysis farther in this direction.” In support of this contention, he refers the reader in a footnote to several recent studies. Indeed, there has been an ongoing effort over the past few decades by talmudic scholars from differing camps and ideological orientations to analyze talmudic and medieval halakhic texts using some form of Brisker legal categories, and then to move from and through these “hardened legal constructs” to values and “soft norms.” But Saiman never really discusses or engages in such an analysis. Indeed, his description of Brisk as a rigid self-contained method of legal analysis tends to undercut it.

Nonetheless, Saiman’s conceptual overview of halakhah is illuminating, and his discussions of specific texts are not only uncommonly lucid but studied with insights. It is not too much to say that upon concluding the book, we realize that all along we have been engaged in fulfilling the commandment of talmud Torah.
Israel's Sea Change

BY MATTI FRIEDMAN


For early Zionists, the sea was a way to get to Israel from Europe, but once you arrived, there wasn’t much point in thinking about it further.

At the time, the land’s main port, Jaffa, was controlled by Arab porters and sailors. Few Jews had anything to do with the water at all. The early Zionists were focused on redeeming the soil, and their ideal was the farmer. The sea was a way to get here from Europe, but once you were here—lifted physically and humiliatingly from your ship and into a small boat at Jaffa by Arab porters—there wasn’t much point in thinking about it further. The future lay inland.

The slow change in this attitude can be credited, as in many other aspects of the Zionist enterprise, to individual enthusiasts. A key character in this case was Meir Gurvitz, a math teacher in Tel Aviv in the 1910s and 1920s who was described by contemporaries as an affable maritime fanatic: “Indeed, the man was wild for one thing, the sea, and he wished to infect others with his madness.” Born in Estonia, trained in Paris and Geneva, with a doctorate in marine studies from Seattle, he was described by one of his students as “an unusual man, wearing, always, a black suit, with a jacket zipped to his neck” who would “walk alone back and forth in the yard, and appeared to be murmuring in an eternal mysterious monologue.”

It was in large part thanks to Gurvitz’s efforts...
that the Pioneer Motor Boat Co. was established in 1919, with one ship, Hehalutz (The Pioneer), a converted sailboat that had been rigged with a 30-horsepower engine originally built for a truck. (One of the crewmen was another exceptional character, Arie Bayevsky of Helsinki, a former Russian navy captain who had converted to Judaism and embraced Zionism, and was “part of nearly every idea in the maritime enterprise in the Land of Israel in the twenties and thirties.”) Hehalutz made runs around the eastern Mediterranean, even helping evacuate Christian victims of a Muslim mob attack in Sidon and Tyre. But it wasn’t much of a ship, and it sunk at Jaffa in 1921 after just two years at sea. Many of the early maritime enterprises had that kind of end.

Jewish maritime efforts ended up succeeding, Cohen-Hattab tells us, it was thanks in part to two important competitions. The first rivalry was with the Arab sailors, workers, and unions who controlled the sea and the Jaffa port, and who became more hostile as Jewish immigration increased. When Arab workers wouldn’t repair Jewish ships, the Jews built their own shipyard in Haifa in 1933. When the Jaffa port became less accessible to Jews and was eventually closed to them altogether amid the anti-Jewish and anti-British riots of 1936, the Zionists opened their port in the city they’d just raised from the sand, Tel Aviv.

The first captain in charge of the port was another of Zionism’s great nautical pioneers: Volodia Itzkovitz, who’d been the only Jewish cadet at the Odessa naval academy and was by then going by the name Ze’ev Hayam, literally, “Wolf of the Sea.” The docks were inaugurated with ecstatic parades and speeches, and this, Cohen-Hattab believes, was the true moment of revolution:

The establishment of the Tel Aviv port facilitated— for the first time—a vision of the Mediterranean Sea as the continuation of the land. It could now be seen not only as a natural boundary but rather as a space connecting the Land of Israel to the world, linking the Yishuv in the Land of Israel to Diaspora Jewry across the sea.

The same Ben-Avi who’d bemoaned the lack of Jewish sailors 20 years before was inspired, once again, to pick up his pen. He was in a better mood this time. “The west is our foundation, it is our window to the expanses of the entire world and our gateway to the very land we yearn for,” he wrote. “What Venice and Genoa did for Italy, and Hamburg and Bremen for Germany, Copenhagen for Denmark, New York for the United States—Tel Aviv will do with its perfect port for renewing Judah.”

Like many of the Zionists’ maritime fantasies, that one, too, didn’t quite materialize: The Tel Aviv port was active for a few years until World War II only slightly less bitter, was between the dominant Labor Zionists, led by Ben-Gurion, and their rivals, the Revisionists of Vladimir Ze’ev Jabotinsky. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Revisionists took the lead in maritime activities and accused the socialists of shamefully neglecting the sea. One of the most vocal Revisionists, Capt. Jeremiah Helpem, linked this to ideology: The socialists, he thought, were discouraging fishing as too individualistic and too distant from the communal lifestyle of the kibbutz. The Revisionists set up a sea training school at Civitavecchia, Italy, where cadets practiced on a boat called Theodor Herzl under the tutelage of an Italian captain until the operation was shut down by Mussolini in 1938.

When, in 1937, a group of the school’s 45 graduates sailed to Palestine aboard the Sara A in a demonstration of their nautical prowess and triumphantly arrived at Haifa, only Revisionist representatives came to greet them. The mainstream leadership and press ignored their rivals’ event, an insult that cut the Revisionists deep. The same pettiness was visible in the ongoing argument over which movement was the first to land a ship of illegal immigrants. (According to the author, it appears to have been the Revisionists with their ship Kawkab in January 1934.)

The Labor Zionists, for their part, established fishing collectives like Ein Gev on the Kinneret, Sdot Yam on the Mediterranean, and Hulata on Lake Hula. When war with the Arab world began to loom in the 1940s, young members of those communities would go on to play key roles in the naval arms of the military underground, like the Palyam, which would evolve after 1948 into the Israeli navy. Cohen-Hattab describes these and other strands in the story of Zionism at sea—the advent of a holiday called “Sea Day,” for example, and the construction of a club for Jewish seamen at the Haifa port, complete with what every sailor hopes for on shore: wholesome cultural activities and a library.

He recounts the arrival of a crucial group of recruits to the national effort: experienced longshoremen from the great port of Salonica, Greece, which had once been so dominated by Jews that it closed on the Sabbath. We see how, in fits and starts over the three decades of British rule, the Zionist movement grasped the importance of raising Jews with sea legs. Maritime enterprise, Cohen-Hattab writes, had gone from utterly neglected to no less than a “deciding factor” in Israel’s creation. “[A]t its birth,” he writes, “it already had a national shipping company, control over the land’s three active ports, a flourishing fish-farming industry, a nautical training school—and a maritime sensibility that would serve it well in the years to come.”

As Zionism’s Maritime Revolution demonstrates, none of this was inevitable. And, as in the story of the Kedmah’s malfunctioning refrigerators and unruly crew, none of it was smooth. But it happened. Only 38 years went by between Ben-Avi’s lament about the failed Zionist fishermen of 1912 to the day in 1950 when President Chaim Weizmann, en route to a vacation in Europe, drove to an Israeli port, walked up the gangplank, and was greeted by a Hebrew-speaking crew. “It is a pleasure,” Weizmann declared: “a Jewish ship.”

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Wink-Wink, Win-Win?

BY SHLOMO BRODY

When the State Winks: The Performance of Jewish Conversion in Israel
by Michal Kravel-Tovi
Columbia University Press, 320 pp., $65

Just how great is the conversion crisis in the State of Israel? Consider, for example, the remarks of a well-known conversion court judge in Israel quoted in Michal Kravel-Tovi’s admirable anthropological study of state-sponsored religious conversions in the State of Israel:

Conversion is not only a human need for many of the new immigrants, it is a need of our times, a national, existential matter of the highest level.

The question of conversion has plagued Israeli public discourse since at least 1957, when the National Religious Party protested that roughly 10 percent of immigrants from Russia and Poland were not Jewish under strict halachic standards. This led to a major coalition crisis and Prime Minister Ben-Gurion’s famous inquiry to 51 scholars, from Rabbi Aharon Kotler to Isaiah Berlin, asking them to define “who is a Jew.” Ben-Gurion underlined the national importance of his query, writing, “In Israel efforts must be made to increase shared and unifying properties and eliminate as far as possible those that separate and divide.” But Israel has never fully resolved this issue, leaving marriage and divorce in the hands of the Orthodox Chief Rabbinate while using much looser standards of Jewish heritage to grant automatic citizenship under the Law of Return.

As Kravel-Tovi notes, the problem has become more acute in the wake of mass immigration from the former Soviet Union over the last generation. These immigrants and their descendants, welcomed after years of Communist oppression, now include roughly 350,000–400,000 Israelis who are fully integrated socially into Israeli society but cannot marry Jews in the State of Israel because they are not Jewish by Orthodox standards. It is estimated that this number of “non-Jewish Jews,” to use sociologist Asher Cohen’s apt term, grows every year by ten thousand, many through immigration and others by virtue of birth to non-Jewish mothers.

At this stage, legislative proposals to enact stricter immigration standards under the Law of Return (proposed by the chief rabbis) or to create marriage options (proposed by liberal democrats) won’t solve the underlying social chasm created by the fact that halakhically traditional Israelis will not marry these immigrants or their children unless they convert. In fact, surveys show that Israelis, religious and nonreligious alike, believe in religious endogamy. In fact, surveys show that Israelis, religious and nonreligious alike, believe in religious endogamy.

Ben-Gurion himself had a solution for this problem: Anyone who lives in Israel and ties their personal fate to the national destiny of the Jewish people is a Jew. He saw this nationalistic paradigm as the biblical model, exemplified by Moses’s wife, a Midianite, and Ruth the Moabite, ancestor of King David, who never immersed in any mikvah. Yet this model was rejected by Orthodox scholars, Zionist and non-Zionist alike, who affirmed the talmudic model of conversion that required acceptance of the commandments. Ben-Gurion felt the rejection of his approach within his own family. His granddaughter Galia Ben-Gurion, the child of Mary Callow, a Gentle British nurse who married Ben-Gurion’s son, Amos, in 1946 in Liverpool, had trouble getting married in Haifa in 1968 until she and her mother were converted under Orthodox auspices. Callow herself had undergone a speedy conversion by the visiting American Reform rabbi Joachim Prinz in 1946 in response to the future prime minister’s pleas. (Prinz would later write in his memoirs that this conversion violated “every possible ruling” yet worked out as Callow remained loyal to Israel and the Jewish people.) One might see this as a symbolic sign that Ben-Gurion’s model lost, for in this very period the Law of Return was amended to clarify that a non-Jew could change their status only through religious conversion.

Yet today, the majority of Israelis who require conversion under Orthodox standards have no interest in observing the commandments, strictly or otherwise, as confirmed by the extensive interviews done for Kravel-Tovi’s book. State officials, as she documents, may deem conversion as a “national mission,” but as any good liberal will tell you, the state cannot compel worship of the heart. This is the difficult paradox of Israel’s state-sponsored Conversion Administration, which is depicted at length by Kravel-Tovi as a form of “biopolitics,” a term popularized by the French theorist Michel Foucault. In this system, conversion is no longer a matter of individual conscience. Instead, [1] constitutes a domain of practice through which the state engages with questions, anxieties, and ideals concerning its population.

How do the rabbis of the Conversion Administration achieve this goal given the actual motives and expectations of individual converts? Using a term deployed by a prominent Religious Zionist educator, Kravel-Tovi calls the system a “wink-wink” form of conversion. In her depiction, the well-rehearsed conversion candidates learn to dress and speak in a way that will allow the rabbinic judges to ignore the fact that these are generally Israelis who are seeking the social benefits of recognized Jewish identity without undergoing any major internal transformation. “Both sides,” she writes of the convert and the court, “shoulder the burden of constructing believable performances.”

Not all of the rabbis who cooperated with Kravel-Tovi’s research were pleased to read descriptions of the “passwords” and “biographical scripts” used by aspiring converts to convince their rabbinic “audiences” that they were “genuine enough.” Kravel-Tovi insists, however, that she is not depicting either converts or rabbis as sophisticated deceivers. Instead, each side is balancing a
complex set of desires while aiming for a win-win resolution. While primarily seeking acceptance and a greater sense of belonging, the candidates who successfully completed the process often did deepen their appreciation of Jewish culture, history, and even ritual. The rabbis, in turn, could justify their lower conversion standards by citing legal loopholes while taking comfort in the fact that they had strengthened the Jewish identities of Israelis who do not regularly interact with religious society. As she notes, some rabbinic defenders of the system have argued that it is no different than other halakhic legal fictions like selling chametz before Passover. In a world of biopolitics, "winking" is the way the state, its civil servants (rabbis), and its citizens (the converts) maneuver in order to meet formal rules while pragmatically seeking to address complex social dynamics.

A weakness in Kravel-Tovi’s study is that it adopts an entirely external perspective on the Conversion Authority without paying sufficient attention to the ideological battle over the impact of nationalism on Jewish law in general and conversion standards in particular. To understand this debate, we should first note an important insight of Israel’s first Ashkenazi chief rabbi, Yitzhak Herzog: Jewish law has no mechanism for legal naturalization except the acceptance of the yoke of the commandments. In short, if you want to be a member of the tribe, you need to pledge allegiance to the Constitution, namely, the Torah and its 613 commandments. (There is a talmudic precedent for a non-Jew to become a ger toshav, a resident alien, by accepting the seven Noahide laws, but this model was not historically developed, and, in any case, a ger toshav would still not be permitted to marry a Jew.)

Herzog’s premise helps explain the position of many Orthodox authorities, haredi and Religious Zionists alike, that there can be no conversion without a full-fledged intent to observe Jewish law. Just as a country wouldn’t give citizenship to an immigrant who intends to flaunt some of the nation’s laws, so too Judaism does not accept a potential convert who does not pledge total commitment to the norms. Moreover, in religious terms, converting those who are not sincere does no favor to the potential convert, who would immediately be considered a willful sinner upon the completion of this process.

What about the crisis facing the State of Israel, with its hundreds of thousands of non-Jewish immigrants? Perhaps, some Orthodox authorities speculate, there will eventually be a massive movement of repentance to complete Jewish observance. Alternatively, a few in this camp have even whispered that such Israeli citizens will never feel at home and eventually will move elsewhere. In the interim, those who care about this problem will try to make sure their children do not marry Israelis of questionable halakhic status. It’s an unfortunate situation, but, these rabbis argue, there’s no existential threat. In any case, the bigger danger is the watering down of Judaism and what it means to be a Jew.

A second group of Orthodox leaders agrees that a convert must accept the commandments but asserts that we do not need to deeply scrutinize their religious commitment. They may be accepted as long as they generally intend to observe the basic facets of Jewish law, even if their observance may be lax in certain areas. There is, however, significant disagreement within this group as to what fraction of observance is sufficient. This is not surprising, since most of these opinions were framed in response to modern intermarriage in the diaspora. They were aimed at bringing Gentile spouses into (and keeping their Jewish spouses within) the Jewish fold while maintaining social taboos that spurned intermarriage. No definitive consensus emerged within this group about the minimum requirements, as each rabbinic authority decided for himself what level of commitment was sufficient.

Needless to say, not every conversion done under these circumstances inspired lasting commitment, causing angst in their converting rabbis along with further opprobrium from the more conservative legal camp. Many of the leaders of Israel’s Conversion Authority have placed themselves within this pragmatic school of thought. It’s therefore not shocking that Kravel-Tovi found them ambivalent about the goals and success of their program, especially since her interviews showed that the converts usually returned to their secular lifestyles once they had completed the conversion process.
Yet the nationalist line of halakhic thinking asserts that even in this most sensitive area of personal status, the Zionist project impacts religious standards. For if you do nothing about the crisis of Jewish identity, which is critical for national cohesion, there will be a concomitant crisis of Jewish non-Jews, whether as immigrants or converts, become assimilated into the broader culture. This was precisely the problem of conversion in the diaspora, where Jews were a small minority, but it is the solution in today’s Israel, which integrates Judaism into daily life. After all, Israeli citizens observe many traditional Jewish norms by default. They purchase kosher food in supermarkets, speak Hebrew, mark the Jewish festivals as national holidays, celebrate symbolically significant rituals like circumcisions and the Passover Seder, and place mezuzot on their doorposts. Perhaps most significantly, they serve in the army and protect the Holy Land. There may be a “wink-wink” approach in the conversion courts, but it is in the service of an emphatic head nod to the gathering of the exiles, the miraculous restoration of Jewish sovereignty, and the creation of a Jewish civic culture.

Kravel-Tovi believes that the rabbis who interviewed are finding wiggle room within the “socio-culture. Jewish non-Jews, “ there will be a concomitant crisis of legal standards. For if you do nothing about the crisis of personal status, the Zionist project impacts religious standards. For if you do nothing about the crisis of

Conversation standards. For if you do nothing about the crisis of personal status, the Zionist project impacts religious standards. For if you do nothing about the crisis of

Jewish sovereignty, and the creation of a Jewish civic culture.

Shlomo Brody is the founding director of the Tikvah Overseas Students Institute and a postdoctoral fellow at Bar-Ilan University Law School. His first book, A Guide to the Complex: Contemporary Halakhic Debates (Maggid), received a 2014 National Jewish Book Award.

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(continued from page 4)
A Life of Dialogue

BY YOAV SCHAEFER

Martin Buber: A Life of Faith and Dissent by Paul Mendes-Flohr
Yale University Press, 440 pp., $26

Gershon Schocken, the longtime editor of the Israeli daily Ha'aretz, once recalled taking a walk with the great Hebrew novelist Shmuel Yosef Agnon, during which they discussed the many controversies in Israel surrounding Martin Buber. “Agnon abruptly stopped, looked, and said: I would like to tell you something. There are people about whom you must decide whether you love or hate them. I decided to love Buber.”

Paul Mendes-Flohr’s new biography of Buber, the first to appear in English in more than 30 years, is not exactly an act of love, but it is the culmination of an ardent, lifelong preoccupation with the philosopher, extending from his 1972 doctoral dissertation to his current work as editor in chief of the 22-volume German edition of Buber’s collected works. Deftly setting Buber’s philosophical and theological writings within the context of both European and German Jewish intellectual and cultural life in the early 20th century, Mendes-Flohr’s book is an excellent general introduction to the life and thought of one of the 20th century’s most important thinkers. It also documents Buber’s concern with the spiritual and ethical character of the Zionist movement and, following its establishment, of the State of Israel. This led him to become, in Mendes-Flohr’s words, “a self-conscious outsider in the context of pre- and post-1948 Zionism.”

Born in Vienna in 1878, Buber suffered a terrible blow three years later when his mother left him and his father to elope with a Russian officer. She left without saying goodbye. Soon after, his father sent him to live with his own parents in Lemberg, in Galicia (modern-day Lviv, Ukraine). His grandfather Solomon Buber was a wealthy philanthropist and independent scholar of the “science of Judaism,” known for his scholarly editions of classic collections of midrash; his grandmother Adele was an autodidact who took charge of the young Buber’s education and instilled in him a love for languages. Buber became fluent in seven of them—including German, Hebrew, Yiddish, Polish, and English—and learned to read several more. He also received a traditional Jewish education, studying classical sources and rabbinic literature with his grandfather and great-uncle, a prominent Talmud scholar. What the young Buber didn’t receive was anything that could even begin to alleviate what he later described as the “infinite sense of deprivation and loss” with which his mother’s desertion had left him. Indeed, Mendes-Flohr, following Buber himself, attributes much of his lifelong effort to probe the depths of the interpersonal dimension of human life to his childhood experience of abandonment.

At age 14, Buber left his grandparents’ home and the largely traditional world in which he had been raised to live with his father, who had remarried. As Buber gravitated, like so many of his contemporaries, toward the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche. In fact, Buber was so taken with Thus Spoke Zarathustra that he resolved to render it into Polish—abandoning the project only after learning that a prominent Polish poet had already started to translate it. Buber’s early writings are shot through with Nietzschean motifs and language, exalting “the will to power and the rebirth of the instinctual life,” in defiance of modern rationalism. Buber remained at heart, Mendes-Flohr writes, “an Apostle of Zarathustra,” even though he would distance himself from Nietzsche’s teachings later in life.

Buber went on to study philosophy, literature, and art history at the universities of Vienna, Leipzig, Zurich, and Berlin. His two most important teachers were Wilhelm Dilthey, best known for his distinction between the methods of the natural and human sciences as well as the two kinds of knowledge they produced, and Georg Simmel, one of the founders, together with Max Weber, of the new field of sociology. Like many other contemporary intellectuals, Buber became disenchanted with what he considered the hollow intellectualism of modern thought and sought redeeming value in mystical traditions. Liberated from the illusion of multiplicity and the constraints of time and space, Buber wrote, the mystic comes to experience “the unity of the self with the world.”

Buber’s call for a “Jewish renaissance” provided a generation of young Jews estranged from their liberal-Jewish inheritance with a vision of Judaism with which they could identify. Buber had by this time shed any concern with Judaism and could be accurately described by one of his cousins as someone who demonstrated a “typical Jewish anti-Semitism.” What brought him back—not to his religion but to his people—was Zionism. In 1899, he founded a chapter of the Zionist Jewish Students Association in Leipzig. He was motivated not by political concerns but, following the cultural Zionist thinker Ahad Ha’am (Asher Ginsberg), by a commitment to Jewish spiritual and cultural rebirth. For Buber, Mendes-Flohr writes, “Zionism was, first and foremost, a spiritual fulcrum by which to overcome the personal—indeed, existential—condition of the modern Jew.” Theodor Herzl, impressed by the 23-year-old Buber’s charisma and eloquence, appointed him in 1901 to serve as editor in chief of Die Welt, the official organ of the World Zionist Organization. But after only four months, Buber abruptly broke with Herzl and resigned from his editorship, apparently over tensions between what he considered the misguided political goals of the mainstream Zionist movement and the cultural Zionism of the “Democratic Faction,” to which he belonged.

Buber gradually withdrew from Zionist activity, ceasing to be involved in the movement altogether by 1905. Although he would remain committed to the cause of Jewish cultural and national renewal for the rest of his life, he would do so from the margins.

Buber’s call for a “Jewish renaissance” provided a generation of young Jews estranged from their liberal-Jewish inheritance with a vision of Judaism they could identify with. Adopting his teacher Georg Simmel’s dichotomy between “religion” and “religiosity,” he juxtaposed what he regarded as the sterile rationalism and rigid

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found it “utterly scandalous” that his friend could see in the war’s carnage and destruction the “spirit of genuine community.” Landauer found particularly abhorrent Buber’s claim that Jewish soldiers had enlisted en masse not out of a sense of compulsion but in order to fulfill some paramount, cosmic mission.

Buber’s major contribution to philosophy was to insist that the human social world of relationships was the primordial ground of philosophical inquiry.

Landauer’s harsh rebuke provoked, according to Mendes-Flohr, “a radical transformation in Buber’s thinking” Buber moved away from the mystical and heroic voluntarism of his youthful writings and toward the philosophy of dialogue for which he would earn great renown. In subsequent years, political and social issues, absent from his youthful writings, would become central to his thought.

In the years following World War I, Landauer’s unique brand of mystical and communitarian anarchism would serve as the foundation for Buber’s political thought, “especially regarding the salience of interpersonal relations in shaping spiritual and communal life.” Buber first outlined his political ideas in a speech in 1918 that he later dedicated to Landauer, who had been brutally beaten to death during the Bavarian Revolution in May 1919. Along with several prominent Protestant theologians, Buber played a central role in founding the religious-socialism movement. At the same time, he developed his own version of cultural and humanitarian nationalism, which was focused on guarding Zionism against the moral and spiritual degeneration of modern European nationalism. “I don’t know anything of a ‘Jewish state with cannons, flags, and militarydecorations,” he wrote to Stefan Zweig.

Buber became a key figure in the Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus, a school of Jewish adult education founded by the young philosopher-educator Franz Rosenzweig in Frankfurt in 1920. It attracted many of the leading Jewish intellectuals of the time. The two philosophers were “drawn to one another by a compelling intellectual and spiritual affinity,” Mendes-Flohr writes. In 1922, Rosenzweig was diagnosed with ALS and was soon confined to a small attic apartment, where Buber would visit him regularly. Although by then Rosenzweig could only write with the help of his wife, Edith, and a specially constructed typewriter, in 1925, the two men began work on their monumental translation of the Hebrew Bible into German. Buber would continue the translation project alone following Rosenzweig’s death in 1929, completing it in 1961.

Buber’s 1923 classic Ich und Du (I and Thou) famously begins by declaring that “The world is twofold for man in accordance with his twofold attitude.” The book would earn him worldwide recognition. In it, he distinguished between two fundamental modes of relating to the world. There is the “I-It” mode by which one relates oneself to one’s surroundings—including other human beings—as objects of use or experience. By contrast, there is the “I-Thou” mode, in which “one does not experience, but meets, the Other” in an unmediated relation of true reciprocity and recognition. Following the publication of I and Thou, Mendes-Flohr writes, Buber devoted his life to elaborating the thesis that “true life is realized in the I-Thou encounter.”

We might say that Buber’s was a philosophy not of existence but of coexistence. Like no thinker before him, he highlighted the way that relationships and dialogical interactions between human beings not only give meaning and purpose to our lives—they are constitutive of life itself. Human beings, Buber taught, are shaped by and through their relationships with others, without whom their lives would be meaningless, empty affairs. This philosophy of dialogue must also be viewed as an attempt to overcome the epistemological starting point of modern philosophy, which, ever since Descartes, had grounded reason in the reflexive, self-given certainty of the isolated thinking subject. Buber rejected the ideas that human beings were simply free-floating minds and that Cartesian doubt of everything but one’s own thinking was possible. The “life of dialogue,” he insisted, is a fundamental orientation toward the world as a place in which human beings are, at every moment, addressed—by others, by the world, by God, whom Buber called “The Eternal Thou”—and given the opportunity to respond out of the fullness of their beings. Buber’s major contribution to philosophy was to insist that the human social world of relationships was the primordial ground of philosophical inquiry.

The most important “Thou” of Buber’s life, both intellectually and personally, was for six decades Paula Winkler. She was a Bavarian Catholic by birth but was as religiously
unaffiliated as Buber himself by the time they met in a seminar in German literature at the University of Zurich during the fall semester of 1899. She had a “bohemian, exotic flair” and had recently been “the only beautiful woman” (at least according to the philosopher Theodor Lessing) in a mystical colony in south Tyrol led by a Jewish-born Muslim sage named Omar al-Raschid Bey. They fell in love and had two children before they were married. Buber initially concealed all of this from his grandparents for, as Mendes-Flohr puts it, in an obvious understatement, “knowing that Martin had two children out of wedlock with a non-Jewish woman would surely have confirmed his grandparents’ fears that secular studies would lead him astray.” Only in 1907, after his grandfather had passed away, Paula had converted to Judaism, and the couple had gotten married, did Buber let his grandmother in on the secret. For the next 50 years, Martin and Paula shared not only a romantic bond but an intellectual partnership. An accomplished writer and author herself, Paula took an active role in her husband’s work. She was, Mendes-Flohr writes, “Buber’s most trusted critic and intellectual collaborator.”

Buber remained in Germany for as long as he could after Hitler’s rise to power, organizing “spiritual resistance” against the Nazis. He left Germany just in time, in 1938, moving to Jerusalem, where he would spend the rest of his life as a professor of social philosophy at the Hebrew University. Buber never managed to fully master spoken Hebrew, and his friends often joked that, as Mendes-Flohr writes, “his elementary Hebrew would allow his audience finally to understand what he had to say.”

Buber’s friends joked that his elementary Hebrew allowed his audience to finally understand him.

al and territorial sovereignty, fearing that it would inevitably lead to a violent conflict with Palestine’s Arab population. Even before he moved to Palestine, Buber had been active, together with other leading Jewish intellectuals associated with the Brit Shalom (covenant of peace), a movement to establish a binational state in Palestine for both Jews and Arabs. He continued to advocate for binationalism on both moral and political grounds even after the Holocaust. In November 1946, he defied the official Zionist leadership by appearing independently before the Anglo-American Inquiry Committee to present a program for a binational state. In his testimony before the committee, Buber declared that the Zionist project “must not be gained at the expense of another’s independence.”

Nevertheless, Buber’s political radicalism was tempered by the constraints of reality. “I have accepted as mine the State of Israel,” he declared after the state’s establishment in May 1948. “I have nothing in common with those Jews who imagine that they may contest the factual shape which Jewish independence has taken.” Instead, he insisted that henceforth the “command to serve the spirit is to be fulfilled by us in this state.” He took his cue from the prophets of Israel for whom, Buber wrote, “compromise with the status quo is inconceivable,” but who made no attempt to “escape from it into the realm of a contemplative life.”

Even so, Buber was fully prepared to remain, as Mendes-Flohr puts it, “a self-conscious outsider” in the fledgling state. He continued to protest Israel’s policies toward Palestinian Arabs who lived within its borders and to voice his concerns for the ethical character of the country. His status as a dissenter reached its peak with his opposition to the trial and subsequent execution of Adolf Eichmann—a stance for which he was widely criticized. But at the age of 84, Mendes-Flohr writes, “Buber had long reconciled himself not to belong.” Nevertheless, when he died in 1965, thousands attended his funeral services at the Hebrew University. Among the mourners were not only Gershom Schocken and S. Y. Agnon but Israel’s prime minister, Levi Eshkol, who delivered one of the eulogies, and its president, Zalman Shazar, who was a pallbearer.

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Nothing but Blue Skies

BY STEPHEN J. WHITFIELD

Irving Berlin: New York Genius
by James Kaplan
Yale University Press, 424 pp., $26

In 1932, when an aesthete from Iowa named Carl Van Vechten was visiting Vienna, he reported back home that “they don’t play Johann here anymore; it’s all Gershwin and Berlin.” Such exaggeration was defensible. American popular music had already been circumnavigating the globe for about two decades. That same year Arthur Koestler was staying in a guesthouse in the Soviet republic of Turkmensia, with Langston Hughes occupying the room next door. Through the wall, Koestler could hear a gramophone playing Sophie Tucker’s “My Yiddishe Mame” (words by Jack Yellen, music by Jack Yellen and Lew Pollack). This ballad, which Tucker made her signature, exemplified an explosion of talent—almost entirely Jewish—that was unprecedented in the history of the nation’s music. Who deserves the most credit for such ubiquity, for such enchantment? Who were the very greatest songwriters of the last century? The jury is still out. Jerome Kern, the Gershwins, Rodgers and Hart, Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, Cole Porter, and Stephen Sondheim all have generated Tin Pan Alley hits before Ronald Reagan was born and was still writing lyrics when the elderly Reagan occupied the White House.

Berlin was generating Tin Pan Alley hits before Ronald Reagan was born and was still writing lyrics when the elderly Reagan occupied the White House.


Americans dreaming of a white Christmas, the theological dimensions of that holiday could easily recede into a democratic ecumenism, and even Americans unable to accept the historical actuality of the Resurrection could blend into an “Easter Parade.” Berlin placed his own faith in the validity of popular taste; he could not imagine any artistic ideal independent of the marketplace. “The mob is always right” was the credo that Berlin honored without ambivalence (and even when the mob was stalled in a cab in Manhattan traffic—wrote in 15 minutes. Yet perspiration was far more common than inspiration; perhaps no one on Broadway ever worked harder so that the results would seem effortless. (An insomniac, Berlin often worked through the night.) So rapid was his ascent that only 14 years after “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” created an inter-

song in American history up to that time, “Alexander’s Ragtime Band.” It is actually a march, not ragtime—not that he cared about distinctions of genre or the fine points studied in conservatories. In fact, this “New York genius” never learned to read or write music. He played almost only the black keys on the piano, tuned to the key of F-sharp, and used a transposing instrument designed with a lever under the keyboard so that he could play tunes in the other keys. To transcribe what he heard in his head for purposes of notation and orchestration, Berlin was therefore obliged to hire secretaries (one of whom was a kid named George Gershwin).

Yet Berlin mastered the trick of achieving simplicity without descending into banality; of making topical songs seem timeless, and of concocting love songs as though no one else had thought of treating romance as a subject. He managed to work so fast that only two months were needed to provide the score for Annie Get Your Gun, which ran for 1,147 performances. Among its unparalleled eight “standards” was “Anything You Can Do,” which Berlin—
the Lower East Side accounts for the early, satiric melting-pot songs, replete with the stereotypes clinging to the Italian, Irish, and Jewish newcomers. But what, other than his genius, explains the shimmering urbanity and sophistication of, say, “Puttin’ on the Ritz,” “Top Hat, White Tie and Tails,” and “Cheek to Cheek”? So sinuous a line from Berlin’s plebeian origins inspired one observer to marvel at “Park Avenue libretto / By children of the ghettos.”

In beginning the lyric for “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” with “Come on and hear! / Come on and hear!” Berlin produced the secular equivalent of the Shema, the “Hear O Israel!” that he would have chanted with his father, a part-time cantor. On the Lower East Side, Moses Baline had to be versatile too. He was also a kosher poultry inspector and a house painter, but he died before his son Israel (Izzy) Baline reached adolescence. Berlin busked, ran away from home for a couple of years, then moved to the fringes of the music industry and eventually into the refuge of Tin Pan Alley. Berlin completely abandoned the practice of Judaism, and Kaplan unsurprisingly finds no significant liturgical influences on Berlin’s music. None of the artists and entertainers who started out in the tenements over a century ago propelled themselves further away from the old neighborhood. Twice married outside the faith, Berlin did not raise his three daughters as Jews.

Berlin is not thereby excluded from Yale’s Jewish Lives series. Along a spectrum of biographies with rabbis and scholars at one end and Benjamin Disraeli and Sarah Bernhardt at the other, Berlin Lives series. Along a spectrum of biographies with rabbis and scholars at one end and Benjamin Disraeli and Sarah Bernhardt at the other, Berlin is far closer to England’s Anglican prime minister and France’s convent-raised actress.

Berlin produced the secular equivalent of the Shema, America, “ which was written in 1918 but was then relegated to his trunk of unreleased songs. That was the same year that Berlin, who had landed in New York at the age of five, became a naturalized citizen. Twenty years later, in the fall of 1938, under the ominous shadow of a war that threatened Western civilization itself, he introduced a revised “God Bless America.” It soon became inescapable, despite arriving a little too late to serve as the national anthem. Congress having already picked “The Star-Spangled Banner” seven years earlier. Nevertheless, in the fall of 1954, when the American Jewish Tercentenary Dinner was held in New York, with President Eisenhower delivering the main address, Berlin highlighted the gala by singing “God Bless America.” For someone who claimed that his earliest memory of Israel was the shock of a pogrom, the composition of this song seems overdetermined. That a believer in the nation’s majority faith is unlikely to have written “God Bless America” is evident in the sort of deity that Berlin invokes. In asking that the nation be given divine guidance and protection, the song leaves no one out (except for atheists and agnostics) and certainly doesn’t exclude the Jews. Contrast Berlin’s lyrics with those of “My Country, ’Tis of Thee” and “America the Beautiful,” both of which stem from Protestantism and mention the Pilgrims. “God Bless America” betrays no hint of the existence of any particular faith. Its blessings are nondenominational. At least by inference, everyone in Berlin’s America should feel at home; no one should feel an outsider.

Within the historical limits of Berlin’s long life, he could be considered liberal on the race question too; perhaps his Jewish roots have something to do with that sensitivity. To be sure, his early catalog included what were then called “coon songs,” and he waited too long to detach himself from the vaudeville tradition of minstrelsy. But news reports of the violence inflicted upon black southerners impelled him to write a poignant indictment of lynching called “Supper Time,” which Ethel Waters sang in the 1933 Broadway revue As Thousands Cheer. That was six years before Billie Holiday made famous Abe Meerson’s more searing “Strange Fruit.” In As Thousands Cheer, Waters was stuck with a lesser billing because she was black, but the four songs that she sang in that revue buttressed her later claim that no one ever gave her better material than Irving Berlin. A decade after that revue wowed Broadway audiences, a segregated military fought the Axis powers. Minor breaches of Jim Crow were permitted only at the very end of the war, but in This Is the Army, Berlin’s 1943 wartime revue, he made sure that the touring company of the show was fully integrated. It was the army’s only such unit until President Truman ordered the desegregation of the armed forces in 1948. But as Berlin would later write, “There’s No Business Like Show Business.”

And it was a business, which Berlin conducted with considerable shrewdness. He proved to be a zealous guardian of the rights to his oeuvre, carefully monitoring how his genius could be converted into a revenue stream. Yet he was capable of remarkable gestures of generosity, such as assigning the royalties of “God Bless America” to the Boy Scouts and the Girl Scouts, and sending the proceeds from This Is the Army to the Emergency Relief Fund. But Berlin also operated in an environment favorable for its competitiveness. Even the figure responsible for more hit songs than any other American had ever written could sense the fragility of success, the danger of missing the next sudden shift in the popular mood. Berlin found revues, which are star-driven, more congenial than what he called “situation music, and dance. With Annie Get Your Gun, he finally achieved that ideal, which is what Broadway audiences had come to expect. By the 1950s the creative juices were drying up, and two decades later, he had turned into a cranky recluse at Beekman Place, conducting his business by telephone.

George Gershwin, Berlin’s one-time assistant, was fated to live little more than a third as long, but his capacity to write orchestral pieces and even an opera made Berlin look, by comparison, like no more than a spectacular tunesmith. His final decades bring to mind Frost’s “Provide, Provide” : “No memory of having starred / Atones for later disregard / Or keeps the end from being hard.”

Irving Berlin directs the “girls” for his musical, This Is the Army, New York, May 1942. (Everett Collection/Alamy.)
The Fix Was In

BY RICH COHEN

The City Game: Triumph, Scandal, and a Legendary Basketball Team
by Matthew Goodman
Ballantine Books, 448 pp., $29

F orget the Giants/Dodgers one-game playoff that ended with Bobby Thomson’s ninth-inning homer, the “shot heard around the world,” in 1951. Forget the Max Schmeling/ Joe Louis heavyweight rematch in Yankee Stadium in 1938, in which a black American dismantled the Nazi myth. Forget the perfect game thrown by the Yankees’ Don Larsen in the 1956 World Series. The high point of midcentury Gotham sporting life came in the spring of 1950, when the City College of New York Beavers basketball team, with a starting lineup consisting of three Jews and two blacks, wiped the floor with the top-ranked Kentucky Wildcats en route to the NIT championship in Madison Square Garden. Final score: CCNY 89, Kentucky 50.

It was not just the manner of victory, the fact that CCNY was a team with a revolutionary style characterized by the fast break, which reflected the speed and panache of the city playgrounds. Nor was it the David-versus-Goliath nature of the triumph, the fact that CCNY, a tuition-free refuge for ethnic overachievers, had been quota-ed out of the Ivy League, had taken down the basketball elite. It was that this game, coming at a time when being black or Jewish was exactly the wrong thing to be, seemed less a meeting of schools than a clash of civilizations: old versus new, South versus North, prejudice versus tolerance.

Kentucky was coached by a legendary coach named Adolph Rupp, who had never rostered blacks and didn’t like to play against schools that did. As for Jews, it’s like my father said when I asked if he’d faced antisemitism when he moved to Jersey City, Illinois. “They didn’t even know what we were.” But Rupp had no choice. If he wanted to win the NIT tournament, then more prestigious than the NCAA, he had to beat CCNY, which was in the midst of perhaps the greatest season in college basketball history—it ended with a “grand slam,” that is, championships in both the NCAA and NIT tournaments.

The telling moment came before the game even started. “As referee Jocko Collins prepared for the opening toss, the City College players extended their hands to their Kentucky counterparts,” Matthew Goodman writes in his terrific new book The City Game: Triumph, Scandal, and a Legendary Basketball Team. “The pregame handshake was a standard ritual, a simple gesture of courtesy and sportsmanship, but this time was very different: This time three of the Wildcats turned away. . . . It was as though a lightning bolt, brief and unexpected and frightening, had pierced the arena.”

I’ve heard stories about this game, this team, and these players all my life. Though I grew up in the sticks, my father is from Brooklyn (if you’d asked me, at age 10, what my father did for a living, I’d have said, “He’s from Brooklyn”). Goodman’s book adds detail to the stories my father told and explains what happened before and after, but the essentials remain the same. This is playground lore, the world as it was seen from Gravesend Bay in the 1940s and 50s, when some of the city’s best basketball was being played at the Jewish Community House of Bensonhurst, where my father saw a 17-year-old Sandy Koufax, a member of the J’s all-star team, dunk over the center of the New York Knicks in a charity game. To my father, and probably to Koufax, too, CCNY’s defeat of Kentucky was an event of near historical importance. He knew every player on that team, even the subs, and described them as Homer described the crews of Athenian warships. Ed Warner, a six-foot-four power forward from DeWitt Clinton High, “smooth as silk, hard as glass.” Floyd Lane. Irwin Dambrot. Ed Roman, the Hebrew behemoth, who played high school ball at William Taft in the Bronx. “Roman was the most dominating force in the game.” There was one player from Lafayette High School, my father’s alma mater, named Norm Mager, a six-foot-five forward, who “if he was now like he was then could start on any team in the NBA,” and two players from rival Erasmus High, Alvin Roth and Herb Cohen.

The fact that several of these players had been corrupted by bookies and gamblers; the fact that, even as they went through that magical 1949–1950 season, they were being investigated by undercover cops; the fact that they’d taken money to shave points, to win but not cover the spread, would not diminish their achievement, but merely complicate and darken it. The revelations made the CCNY Beavers something more than a newspaper story—this was literature, human nature, life. You thought you knew what it meant, but it turned out to mean something else too. “Even Fats Roth dumped,” my father would say.

Goodman, whose previous books include Eighty Days: Nellie Bly and Elizabeth Bisland’s History-Making Race around the World, spent years researching The City Game, and the result is a sports-writing masterpiece. Although sports writing is banished to a ghetto-like section in stores and libraries, it can give you everything. All the emotions people hide in normal life are exposed on the fields and the courts of the world. That’s why so much of the best literature has been a variety of sports writing. Hemingway’s war stories are really sports writing another way (as he knew)—ditto, I’d argue, the stories of James Salter and Hunter S. Thompson, not to speak of Tolstoy.

In The City Game, Goodman has found a cast of characters as rich as any novelists, starting with coach Nat Holman, who took the CCNY job with a mission in mind: Hed not only build a quality program but use it to show that the castoff refuse of Gotham could compete with anyone. The big schools, the state universities that had money and recruiting tools, had become the dominant powers in the game. These are schools we still associate with basketball: Kentucky, Syracuse, Ohio State. Standout players came from prep schools where boys were taught to shun excesses of style and personality. Holman wanted to work in tougher clay, which he knew held find in New York’s outer boroughs, where veins of talent went unrecognized.

Basketball had been invented by James Naismith in Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1891 to keep kids in shape during the winter, and in the 1920s, Nat Holman had been its first great star. Growing up in a tenement on Norfolk Street in Manhattan, Holman learned the game on the Lower East Side, “playing one-on-one against other neighborhood kids in Seward Park playground for a nickel or a dime or sometimes an ice-cream cone,” Goodman writes. “From 1921 through 1929, he was the featured player for the Original Celtics, a touring team, that over the course of Holman’s career compiled a staggering record of 720 wins against only 75 losses.”

He was a (Jewish) prince of American sport, an ambassador no less than Connie Mack or George Halas. Holman’s picture had even been on a Wheaties box. He was also, as Goodman shows, kind of a jerk. As such, he tended to stay above the nitty-gritty, which was farmed out to his assistant, Bobby Sand, who did everything for Holman—scouted and recruited kids, ran practices, drew up plays. According to Goodman, Bobby Sand was the real author of Holman’s book, Scientific Basketball.

“Sand had heavy eyebrows and a round face like a fellow City College graduate, Edward G. Robinson,”
Goodman writes, "He had a perpetual five o'clock shadow (he had begun shaving even before his bar mitzvah), and his clothes, no matter how new or recently ironed, always seemed rumpled. At five foot seven, he was shorter than the young men he coached and stockier, and his voice was redolent of his Brooklyn upbringing, in which the game they played was 'basket-ball.'" And he was a genius: "He was fluent in five [languages] and could read four more." After playing on the 1937–1938 team nicknamed the Mighty Midgets, Sand got a doctorate in economics from Columbia; he later taught at City College. He had a sickly wife and infant daughter and was stretched very thin, but Goodman portrays a man obsessed with basketball:

At home, eating an orange, he'd move pits and pieces of peel around on the counter, lost in thought: he was working out long progressions of moves, imagining the opponents' responses for each and the most effective counterresponse in turn, like a chess player trying to read the future from the position of the board.

It was Sand who sold Holman on the fast break, an innovation the head coach at first dismissed as unsound. Until then, basketball tended to move at a stately pace. Absent the shot clock, which was not introduced in college until the 1980s, players would pass the ball around for a minute or more, in search of a perfect opportunity, which might be a "two-handed set shot in which the ball was pushed from chest level," Goodman writes.

Holman's brand of basketball, which would vanish within a decade, was terrestrial, with both feet set firmly on the polished maple floor. Sand convinced Holman that CCNY had to innovate to compete at the top level, which meant the fast break, wherein a team would "move like a chess player trying to read the future from the position of the board." Goodman writes.

Holman convinced Holman's brand of basketball, which would vanish within a decade, was terrestrial, with both feet set firmly on the polished maple floor. Sand convinced Holman that CCNY had to innovate to compete at the top level, which meant the fast break, wherein a team would "move like a chess player trying to read the future from the position of the board." Goodman writes.

A strength of Goodman's book is the way it combines the story of the team but also the history of the game: the book showcases landscapes of New York City, like the Jewish Alps; the tenements, with their Yiddish-speaking residents; the playgrounds, where children played basketball in the streets; and the stadium, where the St. John's University basketball team played.

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The book also explores the point-shaving scandal of the 1950s, which "dispersed with individual recruiting and just imported the entire Bradley starting five from Peoria." Of course, their real job was basketball. They were ringers, brought in to play in the local league and entertain the guests (Wilt Chamberlain had a gig like this at Kutsher's a few years later). Of course, bookies and gamblers need to get away too, so that's how the connections were made: "I'm not asking you to lose, kid; just don't win by so much."

A strength of Goodman's book is the way it combines the story of the team but also the history of the game: the book showcases landscapes of New York City, like the Jewish Alps; the tenements, with their Yiddish-speaking residents; the playgrounds, where children played basketball in the streets; and the stadium, where the St. John's University basketball team played.

Goodman tells the story of the team but also the story of the cops, detectives, prosecutors, and politicians who profited from or uncovered the fix. The US attorney's investigation into illegal gambling—it went far beyond basketball—would entangle big fish, including New York mayor Bill O'Dwyer. In the end, 13 college players were indicted, including "six from Long Island University, four from City College, two from Manhattan College, and one from New York University." But City College got the headlines because City College was the best team in the country, as well as a symbol of the city itself. Most of the Beaver players ended up with suspended sentences, but point guard Alvin "Fats" Roth and tournament MVP Ed Warner were sentenced to six months in jail. As Goodman shows, the judges seemed inclined to be harsh with these two not because they were more culpable but because they weren't good students, citing Roth's "faked transcript (Coach Holman's handwriting) and Warner's low IQ scores. Roth's mother was seriously ill, and he was granted an extension of bail to visit her. Eventually, a deal was worked out for him to join the army rather than going to jail. Warner, who was black, went directly to Rikers Island. Warner surely could have played in the NBA, but he was permanently banned by the league, though he and several other players did end up playing in the minor league Eastern Basketball Association.

Along the way, the book illustrates several hard truths about the world and the way it works. Take St. John's, which was a dominant basketball power in the 1950s. St. John's players, who were likewise corrupted, were let go soon after their arrests and never charged. Why?

According to Goodman, it had to do with the relationship between the US Attorney Frank Hogan, "an observant Catholic," and New York's Cardinal Spellman. "The story I got was that Hogan wanted to run for governor," sportswriter Jerry Izenberg said later. "Spellman called Hogan and said, 'You know, I can get you every big Catholic donor. Period. But that team is not to be touched.'" The account of basketball writer Charley Rosen, who spoke with numerous players and coaches of the time, differs slightly. Goodman goes on, "According to Rosen, Spellman sent a Catholic detective to Hogan to [pass the word to lay off the Catholic schools]. They couldn't risk a face-to-face meeting even on a phone conversation." The result?

"Unlike City College and Long Island University, which never again regained their status as major basketball powers, St. John's continued to maintain a top-flight basketball program."}

The other truth? It's impossible to control a product when everyone is getting rich but the people doing the work, in this case, the players, which explains the scandals that still plague college sports. Most of the CCNY players apologized, hung their heads, and begged forgiveness. Some were less remorseful. Shooting guard Herb Cohen probably expressed the sentiments of many amateur athletes when he recalled, "I would look up and the stadium was always full, 18,000. . . . And I would think to myself, 'Every one of those people paid to get in tonight.' And where did that money go? Not to me—I was getting maybe five bucks from selling my tickets."

"I didn't care," Cohen said, when asked if he felt bad about shaving points. "I spent the money on clothes. I earned it; I spent it; that's all. Fuck them."

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History of Mel Brooks: Both Parts

BY JESSE TISCH

Funny Man: Mel Brooks
by Patrick McGilligan
Harper, 640 pp., $40

In the 1940s, when Mel Brooks launched himself into comedy, he invented a persona: “Crazy Mel.” Perhaps you remember Crazy Mel: He was exuberant, reckless, loud—a wild, comedic id. Carson loved him. So did his audience. When Crazy Mel wasn’t vamping on TV, he was mugging in photos, including one gloriously zany shot in which he appears wild-eyed and open-mouthed, like a zoo animal hit with a tranquilizer dart. Silently, he conveys shock, fear, and aggression. “Tragedy is when I cut my finger,” Brooks once said. “Comedy is when you fall into an open sewer and die.”

That crazy photo appears, fittingly, on the cover of Funny Man, a rich and revealing biography of Brooks by Patrick McGilligan. It’s an ancient human truth that comedians get away with murder, and here’s proof, 640 pages of it. Consider Brooks’s films, which serve up whatever comic mischief your inner teenager craves. For schlock, Spaceballs. For sheer chutzpah, The Producers. For cheeky homage, Young Frankenstein, High Anxiety, and Silent Movie. For inspired, juvenile hokum—well, pretty much all of them.

If you love Brook’s comic anarchy, you might hope for an appreciative biography. But McGilligan, a seasoned chronicler of Hollywood lives, is a cool, methodical narrator with a well-hidden ruthlessness. In Brooks, he has a fine subject, a well-known but not terribly well-understood creative genius. Brooks’s exuberance is legendary; his colossal egotism can be inferred—you don’t conquer Hollywood and Broadway without a healthy self-regard. But the rest of Brooks’s character may come as a harsh surprise. That he slavishly pursued wealth and fame, and was often selfish, spiteful, and cruel—Crazy Mel, minus the impish charm—is the main revelation here, served in huge, unsavory spoonfuls.

Funny Man tells the improbable story of how Melvin Kaminsky, the short, unbookish, unhandsome son of Kitty Kaminsky, became a comedy icon, an Emmy, Grammy, Tony, and Oscar winner. He was Kitty’s fourth son, supremely coddled and cared for. “I’d had such a happy childhood,” Brooks claimed, and maybe so, though its outlines were Dickensian. The Brooklyn Kaminskys were poor (“so poor, we do not even have a language—just a stupid accent!” wails a woman in History of the World: Part I). The family was grieving a tragedy—the death of Brooks’s father when Brooks was two. The main absence-presence in Brooks’s life, his father haunts this biography, as he apparently haunted Brooks long into adulthood.

Brooks’s school years were no easier, and McGilligan presents a far darker portrait than a previous biography. It’s Good to Be the King. School was misery—you had to sit still and be quiet—and stifled Melvin’s creative urges. He courted the jocks, becoming their jester and mascot. “Pretty soon, I came to hate them all,” he later recalled. “I really hated them for what they made me be.” Perhaps it was survival instinct. A small, sensitive child who wasn’t smart or athletic but sang “Toot, Toot, Tootsie” and “If You Know Susie” with crack timing and crowd-pleasing gusto, he must have been a magnet for bullies.

As McGilligan has it, Brooks’s defining qualities—exuberance, charm, anger, and a deep insecurity—were all present in his teenage years. Brooks was an incorrigible goofball, but he was fundamentally serious about comedy in a way that mirrored the seriousness of the times. In early 1945, just before D-Day, Brooks enlisted in the army and shipped out to France. Like so many soldiers, he returned scarred, damaged, prone to mood swings and depressions. He’d seen devastated French villages, streets strewn with fresh corpses. In early 1945, just before D-Day, Brooks enlisted in the army and shipped out to France. Like so many soldiers, he returned scarred, damaged, prone to mood swings and depressions. He’d seen devastated French villages, streets strewn with fresh corpses. In early 1945, just before D-Day, Brooks enlisted in the army and shipped out to France. Like so many soldiers, he returned scarred, damaged, prone to mood swings and depressions. He’d seen devastated French villages, streets strewn with fresh corpses.

“Tragedy is when I cut my finger,” Brooks once said. “Comedy is when you fall into an open sewer and die.”

He had quick reflexes, a wonderfully malleable face, and could think seriously about utter silliness.
yet hidden. The attraction to Caesar was powerful. "There's something big, you know, emotionally missing from my life," Brooks once said. "[Making] alliances with father figures was always very important to me." Brooks cultivated Caesar, becoming a "sort of groupie"—really, a stalker—who shadowed Caesar everywhere, pitching sketch ideas. His persistence worked: By the early 1950s, Brooks was writing for Your Show of Shows, a Jewish-in-everything—but-name comedy revue hosted by Caesar.

The Brooks who charmed and bullied his way into Caesar's writing room left an impression on everyone. Brooks was bumptious, crass, effusive, dismissive, chronically late, and wholly undisciplined. He was also very, very funny and ferociously driven. Funny Man is, among other things, a rather ugly portrait of ambition as a deranging and disfiguring force. Brooks stole jokes, jeered at his fellow writers, and dynamited their work. "I needed a success," he later said. "I wanted to be famous." That might explain why, when a senior writer threw lit cigars at his face while yelling "You're fired!" Brooks didn't think of quitting.

In the competitive hothouse of the writing room, Brooks was "evasive, unapologetic, belligerent," McGilligan writes. Often, he was erratic and hostile. He used to bare his teeth like a rodent if you crossed him, said a coworker who recalled his "towering" rages. "That's not funny!" Brooks would shout during joke sessions. "You don't know what's funny?" In more tranquil moods, he delivered his verdict quietly: "All shit." Serene or volcanic, Brooks radiated anger. Friends withdrew; coworkers urged therapy.

McGilligan shapes his narrative around these episodes; a coy biographer, he withholds insights, revealing character through action and anecdote, like a novelist. As Funny Man makes clear, there were two Mel Brookses: one cruel and peremptory, the other charming and jocular. The second Brooks drew people to him; he was energetic, funny, avid, joyful. He banished boredom from his life and other people's. ("Oh good! The party's about to begin," said a writer, and Brooks would think when Brooks came home at night.) Most of all, he seemed grandly, enviably free saying, doing, and making whatever he wanted. People loved sharing that freedom. They felt more alive in his presence.

The delightful Brooks, such grand company, gets short shrift in Funny Man, elbowed aside by the angry, belligerent Brooks. Beneath anger, there's usually pain, and in Brooks's case, there were reservoirs of it. In the 1950s, while writing Your Show of Shows, Brooks suffered frequent nervous breakdowns. There were bursts of hypomania; sudden, acute bouts of mourning; and at least one episode of paranoid psychosis. Finally, Brooks submitted to therapy. "All I did was cry," he recalled of his psychoanalytic sessions. "For two years. I did nothing but sob." Brooks's dark night of the soul lasted six years.

By all accounts, Brooks learned much about himself, trading misery for ordinary unhappiness. What all that therapy didn't do was change Brooks. He seems to have suffered from a looming sense of emptiness, an affliction not to be therapized away. In the showbiz mindset he carried with him, attention is oxygen; wealth is validation; prizes and praise are sustaining. The problem, McGilligan makes clear, is that no amount of applause could satisfy Brooks; his needs were bottomless. Even after he won an Academy Award for his short film The Critic, Brooks often felt neglected and unappreciated.

By that point, he'd pulled his life more or less together, leaving his wife for the actress Anne Bancroft, a showbiz pairing that somehow worked. With Carl Reiner, whom he had met when they both worked on Your Show of Shows, he created the 2000 Year Old Man, a kvetchy, old Jew based on Brooks's real-life uncle. In 1968, he filmed The Producers, conspiring Zero Mostel for the Max Bialystock part. At first, Mostel was appalled: How could he, a Jewish actor, play a scheming, vulturous Jew—an antisemitic stereotype? Eventually, though, he yielded to Brooks's importunate charm. "Mel has great craziness," he later said, "which is the greatest praise I can have for anybody."

McGilligan is a shrewd biographer, if somehow immune to Brooks's screwball charm. Too bad. A more appreciative approach might have better captured Brooks's comedy. Brooks called his humor "big city, Jewish" and "energetic, nervous, crazy." The critic Vincent Canby praised its "juantic highs"—its speed, volume, risk-taking. Of course, not everyone enjoyed the carnival ride. "He has been conducting a vocal reign of terror," Pauine Kael, a chatterbox herself, once complained. "It lasted hours. I felt like I was at the movies!"

But with Brooks, excess was always the point. An enemy of solemnness, of piety and cant, of represenation and restraint, he was built for overflow. Just as surely, Brooks has a counterphobic streak, veering toward danger, accident, and death. Consider the 2000 Year Old Man, whose antic chatter about lion attacks and fried food (equally lethal, he implies) seems like an anamnet against anxiety. Long before Seinfeld, it brought a distinctively Jewish voice to mainstream America. At first, Brooks worried it was too Jewish—how would it play in Peoria? Pretty well, actually: The album sold a million copies. To Gentile ears, it didn't sound Jewish or ethnic. It merely sounded funny.

By that point, he had become "Mel Brooks," having abandoned Melvin Kaminsky somewhere along the Palisades Parkway en route to the Catskills. This act of self-creation was also, of course, an act of defiance. How would that have worked out? Thankfully, we'll never know: Brooks refused, dumping the producer. His great puzzle of Brooks's life is his anger, which he seems to have countered every rebuff with stories are myriad, yet all alike. As a director, Brooks tyrannized crews, belittled writers, sent actors into therapy, and behaved like he had in Caesar's writing room. His sets resembled a family where the father had gone crazy.

The roots of Brooks's anger are surely complex, yet clues are scattered throughout his interviews. "I always felt it was my job to amuse those around me," Brooks once said. "Don't ask why. You don't need to be a Freudian to see how such a burden could stir up intense resentment, even rage, at an audience. Brooks's response to critics—those professional dupes who offered approval and gratitude—often went beyond annoyance into fury. "I have a body of work!" Brooks once screamed at Roger Ebert. "You only have a body!" Deprived of affection, he turned from "Good Mel" into "Rude Crude Mel," as McGilligan pithily puts it.

Brooks is his own subject, such as it is, came through in his directing. (Brooks wasn't a writer, strictly speaking, but a talker, a human gesyer of dialogue who relied on stenographers.) He certainly was a perfectionist, an exacting editor, a fanatic about casting. Actors earned their roles through intense, exhausting auditions that included long interviews. ("It lasted hours. I felt like I was at the Mayo Clinic," Madeline Kahn recalled.) Once scripts were prepared, Brooks tolerated no meddling by big-shot producers. Universal's Lew Wasserman balked at Springtime for Hitler and offered a compromise: Springtime for Mussolini. How would that have worked out? Thankfully, we'll never know: Brooks refused, dumping the producer. He would mock Hitler into oblivion, he later said.

Brooks seems to have countered every rebuff with similar stubbornness. McGilligan quotes Anne Bancroft: "No man had ever approached me with that kind of aggression." And: "The man never left me alone." How might that courtship have gone in 2019, we wonder. Brooks seemed to interpret the word "no" to mean "maybe" or "convince me" and then coaxed, pressured, and hectored until he got his way. Of the Brooks–Bancroft union, McGilligan says little—like all marriages, it is mysterious from the outside—though he implies that Bancroft was a civilized force, quite a task for any wife, but especially Mel Brook's.

Of Brooks's first marriage, we learn slightly differently. The great puzzle of Brooks's life is his anger, the intense, hair-trigger temper that sent actors scurrying for cover. It's a riddle McGilligan
more, none of it pretty. Brooks gave his account in a screenplay, *Marriage Is a Dirty Rotten Fraud*, written in the messy aftermath. McGilligan portrays a jealous, resentful husband who found marriage stifling (“I needed more attention from the world, and less attention from a wife,” Brooks once said). Though the marriage was a quagmire, divorce freed neither party, certainly not Baum. In McGilligan’s account, Brooks never stopped punishing her, shirking alimony while stashing his millions in dodgy shell corporations. The couple had three children; Brooks maintained an aloof interest in their lives after moving to Hollywood.

Politically, Brooks was a liberal—or so people assumed after *Blazing Saddles*. In fact, Brook’s films reveal something else. Brooks’s instincts—his “curious inner compass,” as the critic Kenneth Tynan put it—were mainly comedic: If a joke landed, he used it. On a deeper level, he gravitated toward risk, mischief, transgression—in a word, excitement. At the deepest level was a ferocious need for self-expression. “I’ve got to get this stuff out of my system,” Brooks once said. It was perhaps that simple. His talent needed a vehicle; his manic energy needed an outlet. Lord knows what might have happened had it remained bottled up.

With *The Producers* (1967), he unbottled it, gleefully tossing every rude, raucous, just plain wrong joke he could think of into the mixture. McGilligan’s account of that film, which gave Brooks his foothold in Hollywood, is wonderful. Arriving on set, Brooks was so nervous he yelled “Cut!” instead of “Action!” on his first take. The entire film seemed doomed, but soon enough, the crew was swept up in Brooks’s reckless audacity. “Oh my god, are we allowed to show this?” the choreographer wondered. Brooks, by being his wild, anarchic self, answered yes, everything is allowed, for me and for you. By most accounts, Brooks was a madman on set, yet even then, the crew was swept up in Brooks’s energy needed an outlet. Lord knows what might have happened had it remained bottled up.

A more confident Brooks began working on *Blazing Saddles* in 1972. The film skewers Westerns, and with them, the entire mythology of the American West. The writing process was unusually intense. Brooks described it as therapy, but it was more like an exorcism: “It just got everything out of me: all of my furor, my frenzy, my insanity, my love of life and hatred of death.” Though some critics griped—“He can be vicious and get away with it because he is Mel Brooks,” Kael complained—the film is wonderful. On his first take. The entire film seemed doomed, but soon enough, the crew was swept up in Brooks’s reckless audacity. “Oh my god, are we allowed to show this?” the choreographer wondered. Brooks, by being his wild, anarchic self, answered yes, everything is allowed, for me and for you. By most accounts, Brooks was a madman on set, yet even then, the crew was swept up in Brooks’s energy needed an outlet. Lord knows what might have happened had it remained bottled up.

Nearby, a clumsy, bewildered Moses drops the 15, make that 10, commandments. And, talking over them all, is the 2000 Year Old Man, oozing ire and venting shpilkes.

Even second-rate Brooks has its goofy delights. I’ll never stop laughing at Brooks’s cameo as a Rabbi Tuckman—“purveyor of sacramental wine and mo- hel extraordinaire!” —in the0 harmlessly nutty *High Anxiety*. Entering Sherwood Forest, his0 mule ambles along in a loose zigzag. “You’re fershtik!” he taunts the creature, wagging a rabbinical finger. “You drunken mule, you!” To the Merry Men, he explains what mohels do, using a tiny guillotine as a prop. They become suddenly less merry. If *Funny Man* neglects Brooks’s comedy, it also sidesteps its many meanings. True, explaining humor is almost always a bad idea. Still, a little analysis wouldn’t have killed McGilligan (or his readers). Brooks’s comedy raises serious questions, or perhaps varieties of the same question. Who deserves mockery? Should comedy have a moral conscience? What does it do? Is it harmful? If so, why? If not, why not? And, how do we decide? McGilligan sidesteps its many meanings. True, explaining humor is almost always a bad idea. Still, a little analysis wouldn’t have killed McGilligan (or his readers). Brooks’s comedy raises serious questions, or perhaps varieties of the same question. Who deserves mockery? Should comedy have a moral conscience? What does it do? Is it harmful? If so, why? If not, why not? And, how do we decide? McGilligan sidesteps its many meanings. True, explaining humor is almost always a bad idea. Still, a little analysis wouldn’t have killed McGilligan (or his readers). Brooks’s comedy raises serious questions, or perhaps varieties of the same question. Who deserves mockery? Should comedy have a moral conscience? What does it do? Is it harmful? If so, why? If not, why not? And, how do we decide? McGilligan sidesteps its many meanings. True, explaining humor is almost always a bad idea. Still, a little analysis wouldn’t have killed McGilligan (or his readers). Brooks’s comedy raises serious questions, or perhaps varieties of the same question. Who deserves mockery? Should comedy have a moral conscience? What does it do? Is it harmful? If so, why? If not, why not? And, how do we decide? McGilligan sidesteps its many meanings. True, explaining humor is almost always a bad idea. Still, a little analysis wouldn’t have killed McGilligan (or his readers). Brooks’s comedy raises serious questions, or perhaps varieties of the same question. Who deserves mockery? Should comedy have a moral conscience? What does it do? Is it harmful? If so, why? If not, why not? And, how do we decide? McGilligan sidesteps its many meanings. True, explaining humor is almost always a bad idea. Still, a little analysis wouldn’t have killed McGilligan (or his readers). Brooks’s comedy raises serious questions, or perhaps varieties of the same question. Who deserves mockery? Should comedy have a moral conscience? What does it do? Is it harmful? If so, why? If not, why not? And, how do we decide? McGilligan sidesteps its many meanings. True, explaining humor is almost always a bad idea. Still, a little analysis wouldn’t have killed McGilligan (or his readers). Brooks’s comedy raises serious questions, or perhaps varieties of the same question. Who deserves mockery? Should comedy have a moral conscience? What does it do? Is it harmful? If so, why? If not, why not? And, how do we decide? McGilligan sidesteps its many meanings. True, explaining humor is almost always a bad idea. Still, a little analysis wouldn’t have killed McGilligan (or his readers). Brooks’s comedy raises serious questions, or perhaps varieties of the same question. Who deserves mockery? Should comedy have a moral conscience? What does it do? Is it harmful? If so, why? If not, why not? And, how do we decide? McGilligan
The Warning Song and the Medlars: Two Stories

BY GLIKL BAS LEYB, WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY CRAVA TURNIAKNSY

I t this brilliant and original 17th-century Yid-
dish writer, who was born in Hamburg in 1645
and died in Metz in 1724, had seen the various
renditions of her name in published versions
of her work, she wouldn't have recognized herself.
Not in the name Glikl Hamel, and even less in the
more commonly used and far more aristocratic ap-
pellation Glikl von/of Hameln, since these epithets
substitute the name of her birthplace, Hamburg,
with that of her husband, Hamel, which became at-
tached to his first name, Chaim, only after he had
left the place and settled elsewhere (for what good
is it to be called Hamel when you live in Hamel?).
Furthermore, such regional epithets were in those
times used among Jews only for men, not for wom-
en. A woman's name was, first of all, tied to her fa-
ther (in our case: Glikl bas Reb Leyb) and then, after
marriage, to her husband (Glikl eishes Reb Chaim
Hamel). If the husband died first—which Chaim
did—she was identified as his widow (Glikl, almo-
nes Reb Chaim Hamel), unless she married some-
one else, which Glikl did in 1699.

No less than by the strange name, Glikl would
have been startled by the titles and genre descrip-
tions given by scholars, translators, and publishers
to her writing: *zikronot* or *zikhrayyot*, memoirs or
*Memoiren, Denkwürdigkeiten, Tagebuch*, autobiogra-
phy, "The Life of," and even "The Adventures of Glikl
Hamel." She herself gave her book no title. Nor did
she describe it by genre. Failing to do so was unusual
in those days, when most Yiddish books were ex-
plicitly named by genre: *Mesholim*, *Shpilkhines*
*Tagebuch*, *Mesholin*, *Tidebuch*, *zikhroynes*,
*takdimim*, *medokhim*, *takdimim*, *zikhroynes*
*supplications*.

Why did Glikl refrain from giving her book a title
or naming its genre? Was it only because she did not
intend to have it published? Most Hebrew and Yid-
dish manuscripts—even if not directly intended for
publication—were at that time given a title page or
at least a title. But even later on, when Glikl's grand-
son supplied the copy his father had made from her
manuscript with a regular title page, he too abstained
from providing a title. He did adorn the page with a
biblical verse in the conventional manner, but when
referring to the work itself called it simply *ha-ksav*
*(the writing)*. Not only did Glikl refrain from grant-
ing a title to her book, but throughout her writing she
avoided labeling it in any way, referring to it only as
"it," "this," "such," or "what I am writing."

"I intend, God willing, to leave all this for you in
seven little books, if God grants me life"—she says.
"Therefore I think it would be most appropriate to
begin with my birth." Glikl's "seven little books" (by
which she means chapters) are so utterly different
from anything known in the Jewish world until
then that it is not surprising that she did not have a word for it.

All we know about Glikl's short childhood—for
a girl betrothed at the age of 12 and married at the
age of 14 was considered an adult—comes down
to no more than a few sentences: "I was born in
Hamburg, but I heard from my dear parents and
others—I was not yet three years old when all the
Jews of Hamburg were served with an edict of ex-
pulsion and forced to move to Altona," and "It was
in my childhood—I was about 10 years old—when
the Swede went to war with His Majesty the King of
Denmark. I cannot write much news about it since
I was a child and had to sit in *chered*. That she did
attend a traditional elementary school in the heart

of 17th-century Ashkenaz may strike the reader as
surprising, but, in praising her father, she also re-
marks, "He gave his children, boys and girls alike,
an education in higher matters as well as in practi-
cal things." Did these higher matters include all the
subjects of the contemporary curriculum for boys or
just a few of them? And what does "practical things"
mean—writing, arithmetic, correspondence skills,
household chores, bookkeeping basics, rudiments of
trade? And what kind of *chered* was it? Who taught
what to whom and for how long? Glikl does not pro-
vide any direct answers to these questions, but the

Bertha Pappenheim, posed as her ancestor Glikl
das Leyb in a portrait by Leopold Pilichowski.
(Wikimedia.)

Title page appended to the complete copy of the
manuscript. (Universitätsbibliothek Johann Christian
Spenckenberg, Frankfort am Main.)
form and content of her writing attest to her skills and disclose many of the sources of her knowledge. Once Glikl decided to make her birth the starting point of her book, she necessarily had to draw upon the memories of others. The subject matter of these early episodes is mainly family stories, events in the Jewish community of Hamburg-Altona, and the figures of her direct ancestors. As a result, Glikl presents us with a wide gallery of male and female figures, most of whom she never met, but whose images—construed from the stories she heard—still thrilled and charmed her at the time of writing no less than they did in childhood. Most of these stories have a strong didactic flavor, but they also give a flavor of the Jewish experience of that time and place.

Altuna by Hamburg by Georg Balthasar Probst. (Staatsarchiv Hamburg.)

This is certainly the case with the first selection below, which tells the story of how Glikl’s father was saved by his clever trilingual stepdaughter from being cheated by a Gentile client who had pawned something with him and was scheming to get it back without repaying the loan. Although she was not there (Glikl was the daughter of her father’s second wife), she skillfully conjures the scene, using direct speech and subtly varying the language used by the characters. Thus, the father and daughter use the Hebrew—Yiddish word maschon/maskn for “pledge,” while the German word Pfund is used by the client. The client’s angry reference to the young girl as a makhon/mashkon (whore) is also implicitly refuted by Glikl’s description of her as a bnde (maid). Here and elsewhere, a careful reading shows that Glikl’s text is not only a unique historical source; it is a subtle work of literary art.

When it comes to the narrative of her life, there is no doubt that marriage and a home of her own played a central role in the emergence of Glikl’s self-conscious identity as an individual and its consolidation into a genuine partnership of two. Glikl’s keen sense of partnership is clear from the start: “My husband, of blessed memory”—she recollects—“was very preoccupied with his business affairs; although still young, I did my part by his side. I do not write this to praise myself—my husband, of blessed memory, did not take advice from anyone but did whatever the two of us decided together.”

That is why no reader wonders at the reply of her dying husband when asked about his will: “I don’t know what to say. My wife, she knows everything. She should continue just as she was doing before.”

Glikl does much more than that: She takes on the business herself, puts into practice her remarkable financial expertise and her competence in commerce, develops new original enterprises, and sees the business in precious metals and jewels grow and prosper under her sole management.

Even though Glikl explains right at the outset, time and again, that her writing was induced by her mournful state of mind after the loss of her husband, she does not follow the common practice of other 17th-century women of focusing primarily on the portrayal of the devoted and adored husband and to append to it, with appropriate modesty, a brief portrait of themselves. Glikl and her personal life story take center stage.

Although Glikl had 14 children, 13 of whom survived to adulthood, her normal pregnancies and births are merely mentioned in their proper place within the chronological sequence of events, and only when they involve an irregularity—in illness, danger, death, a miraculous recovery or a funny episode—do they become worthy of detailed description. One such episode is her famous account of when she and her mother gave birth and were nursing infants at the same time in the same house, a remarkable event even then in a time of young marriages (and hence young grandparents). Another is the story, excerpted below, of the medlas (an acidic, curiously shaped spring fruit once commonly cultivated and eaten throughout Europe), which combines medical folk wisdom about women’s cravings with a vivid evocation of the experience of pregnancy and motherhood.

Because of the limited and often misleading information available concerning the education and spiritual world of Jewish women in the early modern period, the modern-day reader of Glikl’s work is likely to find the author’s decision to write, or even her literary, somewhat surprising. In fact, many—if not most—of her female contemporaries were literate, not only those of similar socio-economic status. The very existence of a lively Yiddish literature offers clear evidence of this, for women were the most significant portion of its intended readership. It is reasonable, then, to assume that other women of her station had a similar education and that among them were others who, like Glikl, put ink to paper to tell the story—or episodes—of their life, yet only Glikl’s work has reached us.

The original text of Glikl’s handwritten manuscript has not been preserved, but two copies, both made by her youngest son, Moshe, were passed down within the family from generation to generation, eventually finding their way in the late 19th century to the scholar David Kaufmann, who published the memoirs with some annotations in 1896. Since then, one of the copies went missing but for a small four-leaf folder, which is now held in the National Library of Israel in Jerusalem. The other (virtually complete) copy is preserved at the University Library Johann Christian Senckenberg in Frankfurt-am-Main.

Glikl’s work is known mainly in translation because the original was reprinted only once, and its original language, Old Yiddish, was no longer understood by the general public even at the time of its publication by Kaufmann. A transcription into German was made by Glikl’s descendant Bertha Pappenheim (1859–1936). Pappenheim, a feminist who founded the Jewish Women’s Association, also posed as Glikl for a well-known portrait painted by the artist Leopold Plichowski.

The brief entry on Glikl’s death in the Metz Burial Society Register records only that Mrs. Glikl (†), the wife of the deceased community leader Reb Hitz Levy (her second husband), died and was buried with a good name on Thursday, the second day of Rosh Hashanah of the year 5485, and lies at the right side of the widow Gelle. The longer entry in the Metz community Memorbuch describes her husband elaborately as a pious, generous woman and good housewife who was “most wise in the trade of precious gems and also most learned in the rest of the respectable virtues.” No mention is made of her writing. In this, she is officially remembered like other women of her time and place, which only underlines the significance of her “seven little books” as a fascinating and extraordinary historical source.

The text from which these excerpts are taken is from the newly published Glikl: Memoirs, 1691–1719, which I edited and annotated; the English text is translated by Sara Friedman and adapted from my 2006 critical edition with Hebrew translation. As such, it is the first fully faithful English rendition of Glikl’s work.
gentlemen, seeking to redeem his pledge. My father, of blessed memory, suspecting nothing, goes upstairs to get the pledge. His stepdaughter was standing at the clavichord, playing the instrument so as to render the gentleman’s wait less tedious.

The two gentlemen, who were standing near her, start conferring together: “When the Jew comes back with our pledge, we’ll grab it from him without giving him the money and get out of here.” They were speaking French, never dreaming that the maiden could understand them. As my father, of blessed memory, comes back with the pledge, she starts singing (a popular Hebrew song) loudly: “Beware! Not the pledge! Today—here, tomorrow—gone!”

In her haste, the poor girl couldn’t express herself any better. So my father, of blessed memory, says to the gentleman: “Sir, where’s the money?” Says the man: “Give me the pledge.” Says my father, of blessed memory: “I’m not giving any pledge; first I must have the money.” One of the men then turns to the others and says: “Fellows, we’ve been duped, the whore must know French,” and with that they bolted from the house, shouting threats. Next day the gentleman returns alone, pays my father, of blessed memory, the principal with interest, and redeems his pledge, saying: “Useful for you—you invested wisely when you had your daughter learn French,” and with that he went on his way.

After my husband returned from Hanover, where his father’s bequest was divided, as you have heard—this was about twelve weeks after his death, and I was pregnant with my son Reb Yosef Segal. Throughout the pregnancy my husband hoped fervently for a boy who would bear my husband’s father’s name again, as indeed happened, thanks be to God. Here I wish to set down a lesson for my children, one that is actually true: When young pregnant women spot different fruits or any other kind of food, whatever it be, and they entertain even the slightest desire for it—let them not ignore this—they should eat of it and not follow their foolish heads. Ah, it will do no harm. It might actually at the prescribed time, thanks be to God. The circumcision ceremony was lavish, the likes of which I’ve been thinking what could have caused those blotches and the weakness, and I’ve been wondering if I was at fault when I wanted medlars and couldn’t get them, since I ended up giving birth that same night. I want to send the woman out to get a few shillings worth of medlars. I want to smear some of the fruit on the baby’s mouth; maybe God will have mercy and there will be an improvement.” My mother was angry at me, saying: “You always have this kind of nonsense in your head; the weather looks as if earth and sky were about to melt together, the woman won’t go out in this weather—in any case, all this is pure nonsense.”

I said: “Dearest mother, please do me a favor and send the woman; I’ll pay her however she wants, as long as I get those medlars. If I don’t get them I won’t have a moment’s peace.” So we sent for the woman and told her to go get some medlars. The woman hurried off—it was a long way, and the kind of weather that night you wouldn’t turn even a dog out of doors. It seemed to me a long time before the woman returned, as whenever you want something very badly—every minute seems like an hour. The woman finally returned with the medlars.

Of course, medlars are not the proper food for a newborn baby, because of the sourish taste. I instructed the nurse to loosen the baby’s swaddling clothes and sit down with him near the stove and smear some medlar pulp on his mouth. Although everybody laughed at me for this nonsense, I remained obstinate until it was done. The minute the nurse smeared the medlar pulp on the baby’s mouth, he opened his little mouth greedily as though wanting to swallow the whole thing at once, and then he was sucking and swallowing the pulp of an entire medlar, when just a moment ago he wouldn’t open his mouth even for a drop of milk or for the sugar-water you give babies. The nurse then handed the baby to me in my bed to see if he would nurse. The minute he was at the breast he started suckling like a three-month-old.

By the time of the circumcision ceremony, all the blotches had disappeared from his face and body except for one spot on his side, the size of a broad lentil. The baby was healthy and well for the circumcision, a beautiful baby boy, circumcised that same night. I want to send the woman out to get a few medlars and couldn’t get them, since I ended up giving birth that same night. I want to send the woman out to get a few shillings worth of medlars. I want to smear some of the fruit on the baby’s mouth; maybe God will have mercy and there will be an improvement.” My mother was angry at me, saying: “You always have this kind of nonsense in your head; the weather looks as if earth and sky were about to melt together, the woman won’t go out in this weather—in any case, all this is pure nonsense.”

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Remembering Harold Bloom

BY NEIL ARDITI

Inevitably, at some point in every semester, I share with my students my impersonation of Harold Bloom. Face buried in one trembling hand (the other holds open a book), I shut my eyes in great long blinks, between which I stare wide-eyed at the air in front of me. "I reread this passage this morning," I say, or as best I can, incant, pausing almost between each word, "and it..." wounded me. Why?

My performance has become exaggerated over the years, but it conveys something of the impact of Bloom's classroom presence on me and generations of his students. We were at first amused and finally devastated by the urgency, the veritable spiritual crisis, that attended his encounter with the passages of poetry and prose that he loved. He grappled with them like Jacob wrestling with the angel. Whatever the cost (it seemed considerable), we wished to be transported to the heights of the literary sublime, where he always seemed to reside. And so we went back to our rooms and returned to the texts, whether Shakespeare or the Bible, Whitman or Kafka, Freud or Wallace Stevens. We read them again and again—this time with feeling, as the bandleader says—hoping to see for ourselves what had moved them like Jacob wrestling with the angel. Whatever the cost (it seemed considerable), we wished to be transported to the heights of the literary sublime, where he always seemed to reside. And so we went back to our rooms and returned to the texts, whether Shakespeare or the Bible, Whitman or Kafka, Freud or Wallace Stevens. We read them again and again—this time with feeling, as the bandleader says—hoping to see for ourselves what had moved them like Jacob wrestling with the angel. Whatever the cost (it seemed considerable), we wished to be transported to the heights of the literary sublime, where he always seemed to reside. And so we went back to our rooms and returned to the texts, whether Shakespeare or the Bible, Whitman or Kafka, Freud or Wallace Stevens. We read them again and again—this time with feeling, as the bandleader says—hoping to see for ourselves what had moved them like Jacob wrestling with the angel. Whatever the cost (it seemed considerable), we wished to be transported to the heights of the literary sublime, where he always seemed to reside. And so we went back to our rooms and returned to the texts, whether Shakespeare or the Bible, Whitman or Kafka, Freud or Wallace Stevens. We read them again and again—this time with feeling, as the bandleader says—hoping to see for ourselves what had moved them like Jacob wrestling with the angel. Whatever the cost (it seemed considerable), we wished to be transported to the heights of the literary sublime, where he always seemed to reside. And so we went back to our rooms and returned to the texts, whether Shakespeare or the Bible, Whitman or Kafka, Freud or Wallace Stevens. We read them again and again—this time with feeling, as the bandleader says—hoping to see for ourselves what had moved them like Jacob wrestling with the angel. Whatever the cost (it seemed considerable), we wished to be transported to the heights of the literary sublime, where he always seemed to reside. And so we went back to our rooms and returned to the texts, whether Shakespeare or the Bible, Whitman or Kafka, Freud or Wallace Stevens. We read them again and again—this time with feeling, as the bandleader says—hoping to see for ourselves what had moved them like Jacob wrestling with the angel. Whatever the cost (it seemed considerable), we wished to be transported to the heights of the literary sublime, where he always seemed to reside. And so we went back to our rooms and returned to the texts, whether Shakespeare or the Bible, Whitman or Kafka, Freud or Wallace Stevens. We read them again and again—this time with feeling, as the bandleader says—hoping to see for ourselves what had moved them like Jacob wrestling with the angel. Whatever the cost (it seemed considerable), we wished to be transported to the heights of the literary sublime, where he always seemed to reside. And so we went back to our rooms and returned to the texts, whether Shakespeare or the Bible, Whitman or Kafka, Freud or Wallace Stevens. We read them again and again—this time with feeling, as the bandleader says—hoping to see for ourselves what had moved them like Jacob wrestling with the angel. Whatever the cost (it seemed considerable), we wished to be transported to the heights of the literary sublime, where he always seemed to reside. And so we went back to our rooms and returned to the texts, whether Shakespeare or the Bible, Whitman or Kafka, Freud or Wallace Stevens. We read them again and again—this time with feeling, as the bandleader says—hoping to see for ourselves what had moved them like Jacob wrestling with the angel. Whatever the cost (it seemed considerable), we wished to be transported to the heights of the literary sublime, where he always seemed to reside. And so we went back to our rooms and returned to the texts, whether Shakespeare or the Bible, Whitman or Kafka, Freud or Wallace Stevens. We read them again and again—this time with feeling, as the bandleader says—hoping to see for ourselves what had moved them like Jacob wrestli...
In the 1980s, when I was his student, Bloom was in the midst of remaking himself into a critic for the common reader. It was a transformation that began with a flurry of entrepreneurial activity. In my final year at Yale, I started working at “the factory,” as Bloom called it: a branch of Chelsea House Publishers that had opened in New Haven, employing at its peak 16 full-time staffers and a small army of Yale graduate students as research assistants. The goal was to replace the popular Prentice Hall series Twentieth-Century Views, editions of modern essays on major literary authors (and works) that could be found in both college and high-school libraries. The difference was Bloom. Twentieth-Century Views had employed a different editor—an expert on the subject—to introduce each volume. At “the factory,” we assembled bibliographies and (with Bloom’s final approval and occasional tweaking) tables of contents for what would amount to over six hundred volumes, every one of them introduced by Bloom. He had always been prolific, but now he was writing at an uncanny pace. He frequently referred to his need to provide lifelong support for a disabled son as his primary motive, but he also seemed to revel in his new role. Who else could have played it? Who else could claim to read four hundred pages an hour with retention? Who else had something to say about every writer in the Western literary tradition from Homer to Philip Roth? What other literary critic had that kind of strength? “I am writing an introduction a day!” he trilled, not a little astonished. 

In retrospect, Bloom was warming up for his role as the defender of the literary canon. Within the academy, the very idea of literary value had come under suspicion. The “great books” were increasingly described by scholars as products of their historical moment, no different in kind from other anthropological artifacts. Many went further, regarding them as cultural propaganda, monuments to a history of social and political oppression. Having spent a decade plumbing the mysteries of literary strength, Bloom now sought to defend it against its detractors. In his bestseller The Western Canon (1994), he unapologetically celebrated the literary originality of 26 of the world’s most famous writers, lashing out against what he called “the School of Resentment.”

One afternoon, a story was making the rounds at “the factory” that had everyone amused. Bloom had been interviewing an applicant for an editorial position. At one point, she expressed anxiety about the longevity of the Chelsea House project. She wasn’t looking for a temporary job. Bloom assured her that she had nothing to worry about: He had been told by a fortune-teller that he would live until 103 years of age. As the years ticked by and Bloom continued to teach and publish into his late eighties, I began to take the fortune-teller’s prophecy for granted. He seemed unstoppable, and indeed he was, until the end. He taught his last class four days before his death, at the age of 89, and published nine books in his final decade, six of them in the last three years of his life. After a fall robbed him of his power to write longhand, as was his custom, he turned to dictation—which I still find strange. Yet the power to go on exploring literature remains strong.

Again, on the morning of his 87th birthday, he wakes and on to Shakespeare, Cervantes, Montaigne, Milton, and the Hebrew Bible through Dante and Chaucer and on to Shakespeare, Cervantes, Montaigne, Milton, and the tradition of Western literature that culminates in Proust and Joyce.”

It is a remarkable and revealing passage in many ways, not least of all because it moves, almost without pause, from the 87-year-old author’s childhood memory of his mother’s face, “as I had seen it lighting the Shabbat candles and reciting the Berakhot: ‘Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe . . .’ “A reverie took shape in me,” he continues, “on the secular blessing given to me and to my students by the highest literature, from Homer and the Hebrew Bible through Dante and Chaucer and on to Shakespeare, Cervantes, Montaigne, Milton, and the tradition of Western literature that culminates in Proust and Joyce.”

The public career of critical theorist and the private one of a court personage,” with a genius for literary irony. It is tempting to say that, having treated the literature of English Romanticism as his Torah, Bloom now treated the Torah as literature and Kabbalah as literary criticism. But for Bloom, the distinction between sacred and secular texts had no meaning.

I saw Bloom for the last time in the spring of 1998. I was finishing my dissertation at the University of Virginia when he came to lecture on King Lear. (His great tome Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human would appear later that year.) Onstage, he seemed in pain, repeatedly begging our forgiveness for “this grotesquery,” by which he meant the frequent flapping of his left arm like a broken wing. Time had not been kind to his shoulder, he explained. All of it strangely abetted his talk, which was darkly magnificent. He was becoming Lear, or so it seemed, consumed by his own, and his subject’s, Jobian afflictions. But at the reception after the lecture, he was all smiles, babbling at great length with the infant child of a former student. At dinner at a restaurant later that evening, he seemed as light-hearted and affable as Falstaff, ordering several bottles of wine for our table (“This one is going to be a real treat for you!”) and holding forth, incessantly, with humorous stories about writers he knew or had known.

That Bloom could be Lear in the afternoon and Falstaff in the evening will surprise no one who has spent time in his presence. Oscillating between melancholy and glee, but displaying both moods with theatrical exuberance, he had always been, from the moment I encountered him, both a literary critic and a literary character. Literature had created him. He was a creature of it. And he created himself through it. In this regard, among others, he resembled his hero, Samuel Johnson. Over the years, and particularly in the weeks since his death, I’ve found myself exchanging stories and anecdotes with friends and colleagues who studied with Bloom or came in contact with him at one time or another. He made Boswells of us all.

But in the end, he became his own Boswell. Bloom was fond of quoting Oscar Wilde’s statement that criticism is “the only civilized form of autobiography,” dealing, as it does, “not with the events, but with the thoughts of one’s life.” He used it again as his epigraph to Possessed by Memory (2019), his most recent book and the last to be published in his lifetime. By Wilde’s definition, of course, all of Bloom’s criticism is autobiographical. But Possessed by Memory pushes the genre of literary criticism to its autobiographical limit and beyond, shuttling between memoir and exegesis. It is a mode that comes naturally to Bloom: He had been inching toward it for years.

In one of the book’s most poignant passages, from a chapter titled “More Life: The Blessing Given by Literature,” he is flooded by childhood memories of his mother:

Last night, in the small hours, an image of my mother came back to me. Vividly I saw myself, a few of three, playing on the kitchen floor, alone with her as she prepared the Sabbath meal. She had been born in a Jewish village on the outskirts of Brest Litovsk and remained faithful to her traditions. I was the youngest of her five children, and I was happiest when we were alone together. As she passed me in her preparations, I would reach out and touch her bare toes, and she would rumple my hair and murmur her affection for me.

Neil Aird is a professor of literature at Sarah Lawrence College.
Remembering the Plutocrat and the Diplomat

BY ABIGAIL GREEN

There’s a grand new building on Berlin’s Museum Island: the James Simon Galerie. Some people think it’s an architectural masterpiece, but the Berliner Zeitung dismissed it as “the most expensive cloakroom in the world.” A dramatic expanse of glossy white stone skirting the river Spree in the heart of the German capital, the James Simon Galerie is, perhaps, both of these things. For it is unquestionably a beautiful building. The sleek white colonnade and imposing stairway echo the classical idiom of the great museums that surround it, but in a chilly, deliberately modern key. And yet it is only an adjunct to them, a place for visitors to enter, buy tickets, leave their coats, and move on. It is a building that towers over you as you approach it. But viewed from across the water, it appears as a sliver of contemporary elegance overshadowed by the massive stone bulk of the Pergamon Museum to which it gives access, a building whose properly monumental scale reflects the drama and ambition of the famous archaeological reconstructions within.

At 134 million euros, the James Simon Galerie is certainly a costly undertaking, one that asserts Berlin’s ambition to be a capital of world culture like London, New York, and Paris. It is the city’s answer to the dramatic glass pyramid that now serves as a gateway to the Louvre, just as the iconic bust of Nefertiti—royal wife of the pharaoh Akhenaten and stepmother to his son, Tutankhamun—is regularly described as “Berlin’s Mona Lisa.”

For much of this time, Simon was buying great art—but always with an eye to giving it away. His personal collections of Renaissance and German art were foundational for the creation of what is now the Bode Museum. For an arriviste European state like Wilhelmine Germany, the ability to showcase internationally significant collections of oriental art and antiquities alongside canonical masterpieces provided a country repositioning itself as a major world power with essential cultural capital, much as it does today. The 10,000 objects Simon donated to Berlin’s state museums during the Wilhelmine and Weimar years—even as his business crumbled after the First World War—were a significant part of that endeavor. Unsurprisingly, however, his generosity was excised from public memory by the Nazis. In this—as in the style, if not the scale, of his giving—James Simon was not alone. To the powers that be in Berlin, the James Simon Galerie is a very conscious attempt to put this right. It is, in the words of Michael Eissenhauer, director-general of the city’s national museums, intended as “a tribute to him and the Jewish bourgeoisie in Berlin, many of whom gave generously to the state museums in their own right. How many museum-goers will understand it in that way is a different matter.

For the James Simon Galerie is a vast but empty shell. The minimalism of its neoclassical exterior is reflected in an austere, functional interior. Millions of tourists and Berliners will pass through this building every year as they visit the city’s famous museums, but only a large stone sculpture of a reclining lion hints at the glories within. As for James Simon, it’s unlikely that many will give him a thought.

Visiting this summer, I did not see anyone take the time to identify the massive bronze inscription that outlines the foundational contribution of this “Berlin entrepreneur, art-collector and philanthropist” to the state museums. Since most of the tourists were
foreigners and the inscription is only in German, that may not be surprising. Yet even German tourists will likely struggle to grasp the meaning of this commemorative act. For while Nefertiti features here in the list of Simon’s most significant donations, there is not even a passing allusion to Simon’s Jewishness. The reclining lion—commissioned by Simon’s Jewish contemporary, the liberal newspaper magnate Rudolf Mosse—carries a similarly oblique message. The description refers to the lion’s history of expropriation under the Nazis and subsequent restitution but gives no sense of who Mosse was. Nor does the interactive display in the basement, which outlines the history of Berlin’s state museums, provide enlightenment on either of these issues. A video installation did tell the Simon story at the grand public opening in July, but it was—quite literally—a three-day wonder.

Only the initiated know that if they really want to remember Simon, they should leave the crowds queuing for the Pergamon Museum and make their way along the river to the Bode Museum, the Pergamon’s undervisited sister. Here, in the James Simon Kabinett, they will find a more meaningful act of restitution. Back in 1904 when Simon gave his personal collection of Renaissance art to the state, he stipulated that these works, which he had loved, should be exhibited together in the same room for a hundred years. Needless to say, they were not. Only in 2019 was the collection redisplayed in its original format and location.

The unexpected density of objects, the confusion of paintings, furniture, and sculptures; the magnificent wooden table at the center; and the lack of labels all give this room a warm, inviting quality that even the presence of a few reproductions does nothing to dispel. For the museum’s founding director, Wilhelm von Bode, the domesticity of the room reflected the collection’s origins and its donor’s sensibility. Visitors nowadays may struggle to see a room that includes Andrea Mantegna’s Madonna with Sleeping Child as home-like, yet it does conjure up the taste and culture of a man and a particular historical moment. Leaflets available in English explain the nature of Simon’s original gift and the Nazis’ refusal to honor the museum’s commitment to its most notable “Jewish patron.” By contrast, the failure to provide adequate context for Berlin’s grand gesture denudes the James Simon Galerie of meaning. And herein lies a paradox, since for contemporary Germany, the significance of this gesture lies precisely in Simon’s Jewishness.

Without the terrible memory of Germany’s Nazi past, it is unlikely that the city would have thought to remember James Simon so emphatically. Other Jewish donors gave generously to great national museums elsewhere in Europe, yet their generosity is now largely forgotten. The German-born chemist and industrialist Ludwig Mond, for instance, left 42 Renaissance masterpieces to the National Gallery in London, including paintings by Raphael, Titian, Bellini, and Cranach. Like Simon, he wanted them to be displayed together, and in 1928, a special room was built for this purpose at the expense of his estate. But after the Second World War, the National Gallery chose to break up the Mond bequest, and few now recall its existence. Edmond de Rothschild, too, left his peerless ensemble of great master drawings to the Louvre, which also benefited from the generosity of his cousins Adolphe and Adèle. Meanwhile, 150 French museums received some sort of gift from Edmond’s brother Alphonse as part of a systematic program of cultural decentralization that enriched around half of the country’s museums. As Tom Stammers rightly remarked, “The Rothschilds did not so much buy into French civilization as constitute it through their munificence.” While this because they identified with Germany, Britain, and France—and because they valued the prestige that came through association with these institutions. It symbolized, among other things, a precious kind of acceptance. Nor was their generosity uncontroversial. Back in the early 1900s, antisemitic voices did not hesitate to denounce Bode, the Berlin museum director with whom Simon worked closely for decades, for cultivating a clique of Jewish donors to whom he extended cultural respectability and commercial opportunities. The idea of belonging to a specific category of “Jewish patron” would have been abhorrent to these men. (Historians, of course, may well conclude that this is precisely what they were.)

Nowadays, of course, we share these sensibilities: first because the liberal project of citizenship

Lying Lion by August Gaul sits watch in the foyer of the James Simon Galerie, May 2019. (© Staatliche Museen zu Berlin/David von Becker.)

The reconstructed Ishtar Gate, Pergamon Museum, Berlin. (Wikimedia.)
supposedly renders Jewishness irrelevant, and second because, in a post-Holocaust Europe, the idea of publicly flagging an individual as Jewish seems distasteful, to say the least—a return to 1941, as one

Viewed from across the water, the James Simon Galerie appears as a sliver of contemporary elegance overshadowed by the massive stone bulk of the Pergamon Museum.

French museum administrator once memorably told me. But while this desire to avoid “essentializing Judaism” may be understandable, it is surely out of place in a city like Berlin, where memorials to victims of the Shoah feature so prominently. By and large, this is a place where dead Jews are remembered precisely because they are dead Jews.

There is a more fundamental point here, however. If we celebrate the German patriot but not the German Jew, we miss the essence of James Simon as a man and as a philanthropist. He was a social philanthropist as well as a donor to Berlin’s museums and a sponsor of archaeology in what he and his contemporaries called the orient. From the 1880s onward, Simon took an active interest in a wide range of initiatives to improve the lot of Berlin’s lower classes. He regularly gave a third of his annual income to charity. Holiday camps and convalescent homes for the young, care homes for children at risk of exploitation, even a remarkably elegant swimming pool in the city center that somehow survived the war: All these were the fruits of his generosity. And like other members of his Berlin Jewish circle—Rudolf and Emilie Mosse, for instance, or Franz von Mendelssohn—Simon’s generosity was humanitarian not just in its aims but also because it explicitly benefited all Berliners. Yet this was a period when Jews faced specific challenges, particularly in Eastern Europe. Simon, an active member of the Berlin Jewish community, became a leading figure in the world of international Jewish philanthropy before and during the First World War. In this, of course, he had much in common with other members of the Jewish superelite who gave so generously both to national museums and to local social causes.

Jewish historians—who may never have encountered Simon—might be familiar with his close friend Paul Nathan, founder and long-serving director of the Hilfsverein der Deutschen Juden, a Jewish solidarity organization and German counterpart to the French Alliance Israélite Universelle. Like the Anglo-Jewish activist Lucien Wolf, with whom he collaborated, Nathan was a liberal politician and the driving force until his death in 1927, whereas Simon kept himself in the background.” In short, the two men operated as a double act.

Such partnerships between members of the Jewish superelite, like Simon, and Jewish diplomats, like Nathan, were an essential structural feature of these big international Jewish philanthropic organizations: The plutocrats bankrolled the diplomats. Simon also worked with Nathan to establish the Technion in Haifa, Israel, a scientific institute in the German mold that remains a beacon of Israeli science—he contributed 100,000 marks to the cost, and the land on which it was built was purchased in his name.

But Simon was more than just a financial backer for the Hilfsverein, which raised a total of 47 million marks for Eastern European Jews in Russia and Palestine between 1901 and 1918. His wealth and social status gave him contacts with the Prussian elite, which Nathan—a campaigning liberal journalist with unrealized political ambitions—lacked. Thus, Simon cultivated a friendship with Kaiser Wilhelm, which, although too weak to elicit a public expression of support in the growing climate of antisemitism in 1914, was sufficiently warm for the exiled emperor to send a wreath to Simon’s grave in 1932. Wilhelm even suggested appointing him to the Prussian Upper House—a suggestion Simon refused for fear of stimulating antisemitism. Unsurprisingly, then, it fell to Simon to liaise with the Foreign Office over the Hilfsverein’s activities and periodically seek its support.

Perhaps it is precisely this closeness to the German establishment that explains Simon’s absence as a significant figure in studies of this period in Jewish history. Paul Nathan does appear in studies of the Hilfsverein. Paul Nathan: Publicist, Politiker und Philanthrop 1857–1927 by Christoph Jahr is the first scholarly biography of this important figure. Before there had been only the intimate but uncritical pen-portrait published
two years after Nathan's death by his protégé, the German Jewish journalist Ernst Feder. It seems extraordinary that Jahr's biography of Nathan, which is admirably concise, had to be actively commissioned by the James Simon Stiftung at very considerable cost as part of its campaign to revive the memory of Simon's friend. For it is clear that Nathan led an important and amply documented life.

The sense that a generation of brilliant liberal talents had been blocked from fulfilling their potential was widespread at the time; Jews like Nathan felt it particularly acutely.

Jahr consulted both parts of Nathan's extensive personal archive—not just the half in Berlin, but the other, much less accessible half in Moscow. This enabled him to bring the man to life in a way I would have thought impossible, at once admiring of his very considerable humanitarian achievements but aware that he was difficult, nervy, and by no means always likable.

Nathan was devoted to his mother, with whom he continued to live as an adult. He also had a long relationship with Hedwig Böbel, a woman of lower social status. After his mother's death, he saw Böbel almost daily. At first, Nathan hid her from his acquaintances; then, once she began to visit his home, he resisted her attempts to extract money from him. Finally, he dropped her altogether after she caught a sexually transmitted disease from one of her other (secret) lovers.

Paul Nathan is divided into five sections: “Time and the Man,” “Journalist,” “Politician,” “Philanthropist,” and “Legacy.” This thematic approach might have reinforced the tendency to situate Nathan within two entirely separate historiographies: on the one hand, the literature on international Jewish relief before, during, and after the First World War; and on the other hand, the literature on the decline of German liberalism in the postunification era. Instead, it brings them together, for Nathan was a pivotal figure in both international Jewish relief and German liberalism as it declined.

He played a key part in the international struggle against antisemitism and internationally coordinated efforts to relieve the crisis faced by Russian and Polish Jews in an age of pogroms, war, and revolution. Yet he was also a central player in the left-liberal milieu of Wilhelmine Germany. A close collaborator of Theodor Barth, a leading figure on the Berlin city council, and one of the founding members of the German Democratic Party in 1918, Nathan eventually switched his allegiance to the Socialists and died—like many other members of his circle—a disappointed man in 1927. The sense that a generation of brilliant liberal talents had been blocked from fulfilling their potential was widespread at the time; Jews like Nathan felt it particularly acutely.

Nowadays, historians are aware principally of his humanitarian activities, and in the long term, they were much more significant. But the truth is that Nathan's liberal activism came first: Only once he recognized that a parliamentary career was impossible and that the political journal to which he had dedicated his life was failing did he devote himself full time to Jewish activism and diplomacy. Jahr's portrait of Nathan bridges both dimensions of his life and allows us to see the connections between them. It is precisely these connections that are missing from the one-sided picture of James Simon presented at the gallery that bears his name.

Jahr notes that Nathan is a forgotten figure in Israel, although he did much to shape the emerging Yishuv, not just through the Technion but also through a network of Jewish schools that, although they taught German, were instrumental in spreading Hebrew as a language for everyday use. This is a country forever building, yet not a single street carries Paul Nathan's name. As a German Jew who opposed Zionism, his memory sank without a trace. The same was, until recently, true of Simon in Germany.

The James Simon Galerie may have transformed this situation, but it still tells less than half the story. Simon was a German patriot, but he was also a German Jew—and, in a way absolutely typical of his milieu, he was as profoundly Jewish as he was German. In the early 20th century, it was possible for Jews such as Simon and Nathan to be both passionately committed to the German nation-state and Jewish internationalists in the modern sense of the word. In failing to recognize this fundamental truth, the James Simon Galerie is simultaneously a very high-profile official act of commemoration and an act of erasure.

Abigail Green is a professor of modern European history at the University of Oxford. She is writing a history of Jewish liberal activism since 1848 and is leading a major research project on Jewish country houses.
If the 32-year-old Mark Twain had not visited Jerusalem in 1867, near the very start of his career, would he still have become the American Sholem Aleichem?

That was the admittedly odd question going through my mind as I viewed the remarkable exhibit *Mark Twain and the Holy Land*, on display at the New-York Historical Society until February 2, 2020. It celebrates the 150th anniversary of the 1869 publication of Twain’s second book, *The Innocents Abroad, or The New Pilgrim’s Progress*, the author’s wry-eyed travelogue of the five-and-a-half-month luxury steamship cruise that would carry him and his fellow shipmates across the Atlantic Ocean, through the Mediterranean Sea, and on to its ultimate destination, the Holy Land.

Although relatively few readers today would rank this volume as their favorite among Twain’s works—that honor would more likely go to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Life on the Mississippi*, or *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*—it was, in fact, his bestselling book over the course of his lifetime and remains one of the bestselling travel books of all time. In achieving literary fame so early in his career—his only previous book was *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County, and Other Sketches*—Twain jumped onto his own trajectory of authorial celebrity, his name (or pen name, his birth name being Samuel Langhorne Clemens) recognized throughout the world. So well-known was he that, legend has it, upon meeting Sholem Aleichem in New York in 1906, the great Yiddish writer and humorist was introduced to him as “the Yiddish Mark Twain.” In response, Twain is said to have graciously quipped that, no, it was he who was “the American Sholem Aleichem.”

While neither Sholem Aleichem nor his most famous character, Tevye the Dairyman, made it to the Holy Land, Mark Twain did. The American literary critic Leslie Fiedler may have had Twain’s collegial quip in mind when, in the afterword to the tattered paperback copy of *The Innocents Abroad* I took down from my bookshelf, he described the comic voice Mark Twain used here as that of a “schlemiel . . . a wandering jester.”

It is this Twain, the roving author in all his sardonic splendor, who is on display in both the exhibit (organized in partnership with the Shapell Manuscript Foundation) and the book itself. Twain stepped aboard the steamship *Quaker City* on June 8, 1867, his fare of $1,250 (comparable to around $20,700 today) paid for by the San Francisco news-paper *Alta California* in return for twice-weekly dispatches about the trip for the paper; it was these columns that he subsequently reworked into the book published in 1869.

The exhibit is relatively small, filling a single gallery. But, the array of 19th-century photographs depicting the sites of Jerusalem and its surrounding environs, the numerous original manuscripts and letters in Twain’s own hand, and the various period maps, postcards, prints, travel posters, and souvenirs brought home (most notably a pair of velvet slippers embroidered with golden thread) take you through the journey as surely as Mark Twain does in his distinctive narrative voice.

An atmospheric oil painting depicts the *Quaker City* steamship itself, with its prominent broad sidewheel and two tall steam pipes emitting wisps of black smoke, as it sits in calm blue waters with misty mountains in the background. As for the *Quaker City*’s journey, a large map spread across one wall allows you to trace the itinerary of the 163-day trip halfway around the world and back via steamship, train, caravan, and horseback. It details stops in the Azores, Tangiers, Spain, France, Italy, and Greece. Then Twain was on to the Black Sea ports...
of Constantinople, Odessa, and Sevastopol. There were debarkations at Smyrna, Beirut, Damascus, Jaffa, Jerusalem, and finally Egypt, before heading back across the Atlantic Ocean to Bermuda, and then New York, where the intrepid travelers arrived safely on November 19.

Twain sent characteristically cantankerous descriptions home from all these stops. The vaunted beauties of Italy’s Lake Como are nothing, he contends, compared to the transparent waters of Lake Tahoe, where, he says, “one can count the scales on a trout at a depth of one hundred eighty feet.” He grows weary of the endless parade of religious-themed paintings he encounters throughout Europe: “[T]o me it seemed that when I had seen one of these martyrs I had seen them all. They all have a family resemblance to each other.” In Constantinople, he finds that “[m]osques are plenty, churches are plenty, graveyards are plenty, but morals . . . are scarce . . . . They say the Sultan has eight hundred wives. This almost amounts to bigamy. It makes our cheeks burn with shame to see such a thing permitted here in Turkey. We do not mind it so much in Salt Lake City, however.”

But the voyage’s main attraction was the Holy Land. Pleasure trips to Palestine, which was then a province of Syria and under Ottoman rule, were still novel, with the Quaker City excursion at the cusps of an emerging travel trend. Many of Twain’s 70-some fellow passengers on the trip were pious, sober-minded Protestants who frowned on Twain’s gambling, drinking, smoking, and cursing. Twain not on the point of crying over a holy place, he was on the brink of killing an Arab. More surprising things happened to him in Palestine than ever happened to any traveler here or elsewhere.

Similarly, Jerusalem itself seemed “[s]o small! Why, it was no larger than an American village of four thousand inhabitants,” he wrote.

What seemed to rankle most—and brought out some of Twain’s most biting satire—was the fanciful commentary provided by local guides eager to show the travelers sites such as “the tomb of Adam.” He writes, “How touching it was, here in a land of strangers, far away from home and friends and all who cared for me, thus to discover the grave of a blood relation. True, a distant one, but still a relation.”

Religious skeptic though Twain was, he was well schooled in the Bible. His mother, to whom he remained devoted throughout his life, had seen to that. Indeed, one of the most striking items on display is the present he brought back for her from Jerusalem: a King James Bible handsomely bound in oak, olive wood, and balsam wood. The cover, front and back, is engraved with the word “Jerusalem” in Hebrew, with the inscription, “Mrs. Jane Clem—from her son—Mount Calvary, Sept 24, 1867.”

It was Twain’s drollery, balanced between his skeptical respect for the Bible and his irreverent view of humanity, that led to the success of The Innocents Abroad, suggested Jonathan Sar- na, professor of American Jewish history at Brandeis University, at a program related to the exhibit at the New-York Historical Society. But beyond Twain’s 1867 voyage, Sarna commented, it was his travels to Europe in the 1890s that brought to the fore his rejection of anti-semitism. In Paris, he was shocked by the visceral antisemitism exhibited in the Dreyfus affair. Visiting Vienna, he was condemned by the increasingly antisemitic press there for meeting with leading Jewish intellectuals such as Sigmund Freud and Theodor Herzl.

Back home, Twain published his well-known 1898 Harper’s essay, “Concerning the Jews.” There he writes: “A few years ago a Jew observed to me that there was no uncourteous reference to his people in my books, and asked how it happened. It happened because the disposition was lacking. I am quite sure that (bar one) I have no race prejudices, and I think I have no color prejudices nor caste prejudices nor creed prejudices. Indeed, I know it.” More proof of that assertion arrived a decade later, when he wholeheartedly accepted his daughter Clara’s marriage to the Russian Jewish pianist and conductor Ossip Gabrilowitsch.

But why be surprised? He was, after all, the American Sholem Aleichem, and the Yiddish Mark Twain would not have expected anything else.

Diane Cole is the author of the memoir After Great Pain: A New Life Emerges and writes for the Washington Post, and elsewhere, and also serves as the books columnist for Psychotherapy Networker.
"He Called Me Jim"

BY STEVEN J. ZIPPERSTEIN

I n a particularly self-lacerating moment in The Shadow in the Garden: A Biographer’s Tale, James Atlas describes what it felt like—at least, in his darker hours—to labor on the life of Saul Bellow for nine years:

Most of the time, I didn’t mind our unequal status and talents: Go, you be the genius. But sometimes I felt: What about my life? Doesn’t it count, too? There comes, inevitably, a moment of rebellion, when the inequality begins to chafe. Biographers are people, too, even if we’re condemned to huddle in the shadow of our subjects’ monumentality.

Atlas’s death of lung disease this past September at the age of 70 felt all the more jarring because he managed to combine a young man’s brashness and raw vulnerability with a literary and historical hunger so sincere, so winning, as to overshadow all else. His memoir is full of recollections of meandering in second-hand bookshops, dead time between projects, a failure as a novelist and poet, and the hectoring that yielded him a job at the New York Times Magazine. And yet, he produced two illuminating, memorable literary biographies.

Of his attraction to the brilliant, ill-fated poet Delmore Schwartz, whose much-acclaimed biography he completed at the age of 28, he admits:

My connection with Delmore was overt—so much so that I sometimes wondered if I was writing my autobiography. . . . Delmore’s attachment to the innocence of early childhood, his unrealizable expectations, his piercing loneliness, his book hunger, his literary ambition, his dread of failure, his sense of the sadness of life. . . . these were traits and longings we shared.

Atlas’s model for telling his own life was Richard Holmes’s Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer, where, in a cluster of beautifully etched chapters, Holmes describes biographical endeavors achieved as well as aborted. In contrast to Holmes, whose personal revelations are oblique, decidedly British, Atlas lays himself bare to his readers. He goes so far as to admit to the discovery, late in life, of a diagnosis of bipolar disorder, and of near-disastrous missteps that, time and again, were checked by a level-headed, spouse.

Given his impatience and an aggressiveness that dampered only in his sixties, it was by no means inevitable that Atlas would become a literary biographer. But at Oxford, he became the student of Richard Ellmann, author of a magisterial biography of James Joyce. In Ellmann, he found someone of singular talent who chose to devote his life to writing the lives of others. Not only would Atlas go on to write superb biographies himself, he would launch Penguin Lives, a publishing enterprise of dozens of brief books, many of them extraordinary.

He spent his professional life living with and overshadowed by complex, overwhelming literary giants. As Atlas himself recognized in his brief and touching Audible book, Remembering Roth, released earlier this year, there was some truth to Philip Roth’s grim, fictionalized portrait of him as a young man in Exit Ghost, published in 2007: “the tactless severity of vital male youth, not a single doubt about his coherence, blind with self-confidence and the virtue of knowing what matters most. The ruthless sense of necessity. The annihilating impulse in the face of an obstacle. . . . Everything is a target; you’re on the attack; and you, and you alone, are right.”

Roth was outraged by the tone and content of Atlas’s biography of Bellow. Roth’s ire may also have been fueled by the fact that he had, at least according to Atlas, been the one to suggest that he write the book. Moreover, Roth was now himself the subject of a biographical endeavor by a handpicked author, Ross Miller, who had once been a close friend. That project had soured and then been dropped.

Atlas acknowledges in his memoir that by the time he nearly finished his 700-page Bellow tome, he found himself unable to sequester not only his dislike for his subject’s tendency to betray wives, lovers, and friends, but his sense that he, too, had been betrayed. What he had expected of Bellow, oddly enough, was for him to become a father figure; that he might play Boswell to Bellow’s Johnson. In The Shadow in the Garden, Atlas quotes the famous passage in which Boswell recalled that “we embraced and parted with tenderness” with still-palpable yearning.

MUCH of the edginess—and also the indisputable energy—in Atlas’s Bellow is the by-product of just this discomfort. Yet, on my initial reading, I found the book disconcerting. I had first met Atlas while writing my biography of Isaac Rosenberg, a brilliant writer and childhood friend of Bellow’s who died young and tragically. We developed an easy, amiable relationship that deteriorated when, in the pages of this magazine, in a review of Benjamin Taylor’s 2010 edition of Saul Bellow: Letters I summed up Atlas’s portrait of Bellow as that of “a crabbed man as vain as a movie star, and as promiscuous as an alley cat.” Atlas took offense.

Soon afterward, at the launch for Roth’s final novel, Nemesis, he yelled at me as I stepped off the stage. A few years later, at Roth’s final reading at the 92nd Street Y, I found myself seated in the large hall right next to him. At first, he refused to shake my hand, but then, once we started to talk—at first haltingly, then more and more warmly over the years—we managed to renew a friendship that only deepened. (Atlas’s recollection of that encounter is more rancorous than mine.) My sense of his Bellow had by then changed, in part because Zachary Leader’s subsequent, minutely detailed, authorized two-volume account largely substantiated Atlas, albeit without his petulance. Leader’s narrative prose is cool and meticulous; there is nothing cool about Atlas’s language. In Bellow, as in nearly everything else he touched, one sees Atlas’s fingerprint smudges, his overheatedness, his tendency to take all-too-quick offense. If, as Richard Holmes has observed, biography is an uneasy mix of fiction and history, few in recent years have proven themselves better suited to expose this uneasiness than Atlas—and to show the bruises.

One last glimpse of his rueful self-awareness: He recalls the first phone conversation he had with Bellow to discuss the prospect of writing his life. “He told me to come the next day from one-thirty to three p.m.” And then, Atlas adds—this a glimpse of how he had forever sought to be treated, yet with an awareness of how infrequent such moments were to be—“He called me Jim.”

Steven J. Zipperstein is the Daniel E. Koshland Professor in Jewish Culture and History at Stanford University. His latest book, Progrom: Kishinev and the Tilt of History, has appeared in paperback. He is currently at work on a biography of Philip Roth for Yale’s Jewish Lives series.
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