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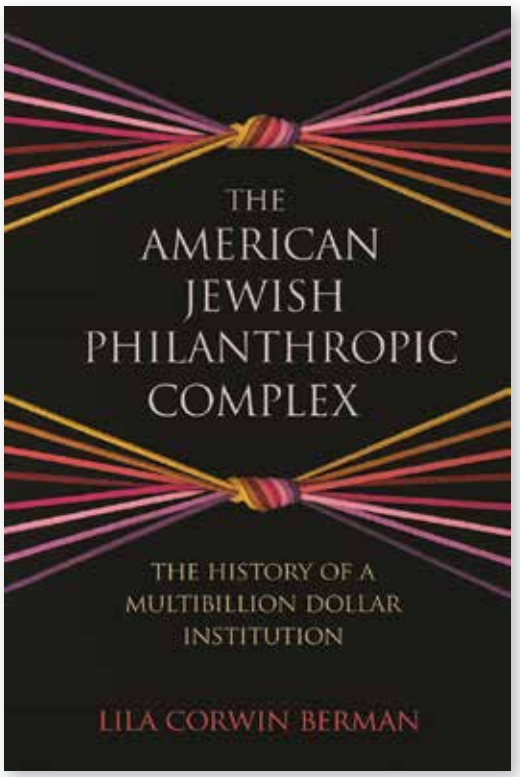
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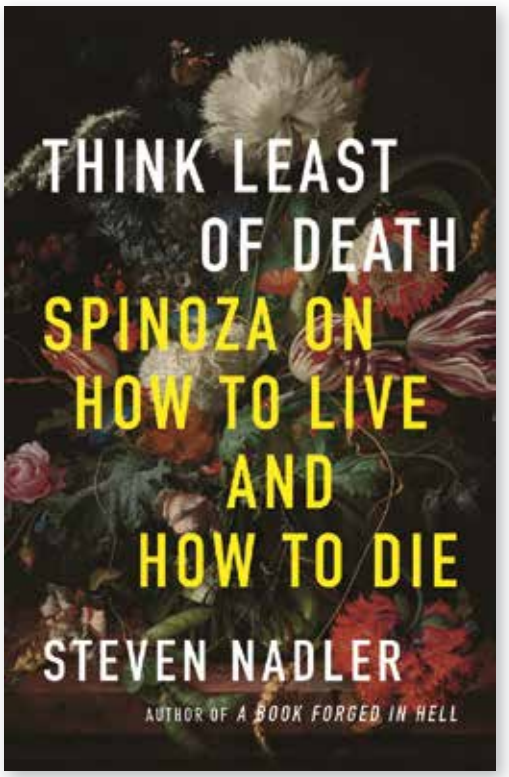
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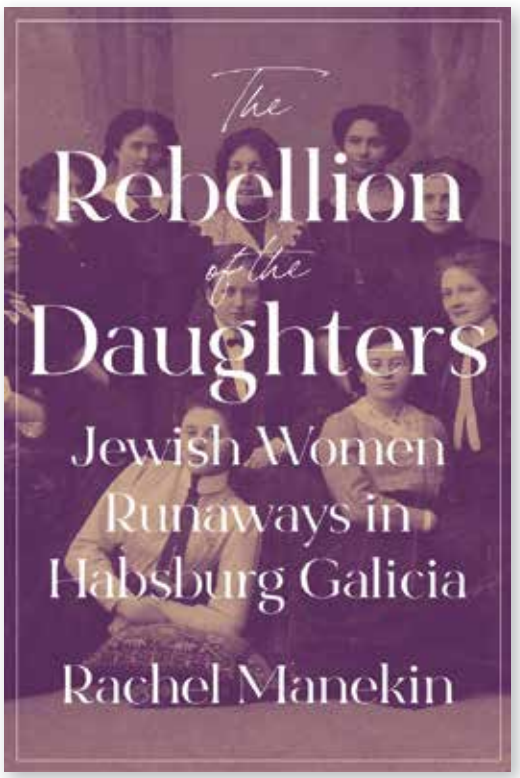
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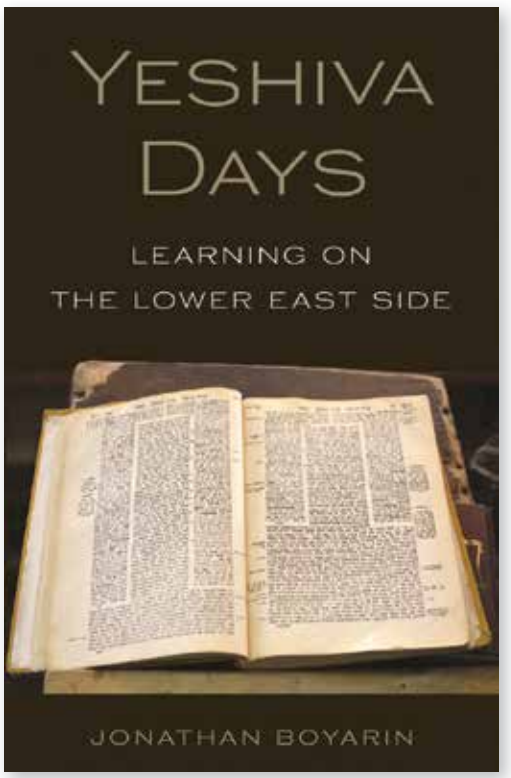
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On the cover: *What A Class* by Mark Anderson.

The Coffee a Good Schmooze Demands

One of the reasons I demand a print copy of *JRB* is to be able to save the artwork by Mark Anderson: engaging, complex, often funny (the *cheder* boys with an iPad is a fave). Yet, when I received the Summer issue here in Jerusalem, I knew something was off in the depiction of Spinoza and Roth's time-traveling conversation. Yes, the dairy restaurant was a bit updated, though the missing tile in the floor was spot on. But those tiny espressos that Ben and Phil are nursing are just wrong! Sharing a plate of blintzes during a good schmooze demands a big, round, white saucer (with perhaps a blue band two-thirds up the thick china) of perked Joe with plenty of room for dairy (milk or cream).

Pamela Pelcovits
via email

Jenna Weissman Joselit, in her review of Ben Katchor's *The Dairy Restaurant* ("The Milchik Way," Summer 2020), writes that the author "painstakingly recreates a lost world." She also mentions a couple of New York dairy restaurants that, alas, no longer exist. I don't know if either reviewer or author has visited Toronto lately, but, among others, the United Bakers Dairy Restaurant has been a landmark of the city's Jewish community since 1912. Owned and operated by the Ladovsky family for four generations, the "United" provides the same food and ambiance about which both book and the reviewer wax nostalgic.

A newspaper review of the United preserved at the entrance to the restaurant bears the headline: "Don't sit down until you've said hello." Table-hopping is a fixture of a trip to United Bakers—except during the current COVID-19 pandemic, when, sadly, patrons are confined to their own booths or takeout.

Customers of the restaurant include families with young children as well as their grandparents. I have no doubt that neither Katchor nor anyone else will have to write an "obituary-like description" of Toronto's United Bakers.

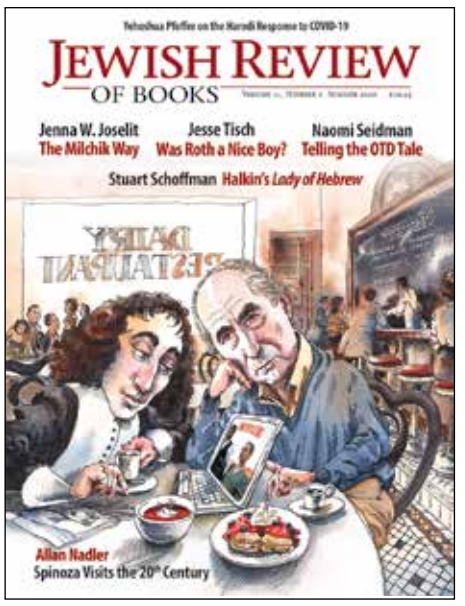
Michael S. Cole
Toronto, Ontario

Unjustified Resentment

In Stuart Schoffman's review of Hillel Halkin's *The Lady of Hebrew and Her Lovers of Zion* ("Lives in Translation," Summer 2020), he quotes Halkin's view that "it is too easy to say that anti-Semitism has nothing to do with who the Jews are or have been. A people can't go on believing for thousands of years that it is chosen from all the nations and behaving as though it were without incurring resentment."

I've never understood this particular justification for Jew-hatred. The gospel of John has Jesus saying, "No one shall come to the Father but by me," yet no one gets mad at Christians or justifies hatred of them because it says that in their New Testament. Of course, they think that if they didn't think that they wouldn't be Christians—ditto for Islam's conviction that Muhammad's is the definitive prophecy.

The Enlightenment was supposed to have been the moment when everyone learned to let everyone else live with their own religious truths, as long as they didn't impede anybody else's belief in their religious truth. It seems to have worked pretty well for



most people, most of the time, though less well for the Jews than for everyone else. But I see no reason why we, in our own minds and our own books and book reviews, should understand our own religious conviction as any less entitled to respect than anyone else's. I'm not sure what form of error it is to believe otherwise, but I am sure it is an error.

Jerome M. Marcus
via jewishreviewofbooks.com

Whose True Voice?

Wendell Berry explains his admiration for the Amish by saying that they have rejected the blandishments of modernity in order to preserve values that they prize as central to a life well lived. They have, so to speak, chosen to choose what serves their way of life and what doesn't. The ultra-Orthodox discussed in Naomi Seidman's review of *Unorthodox* ("My Scandalous Rejection of *Unorthodox*," Summer 2020) have also chosen to choose, although their choices are different. Regardless, these dissenters from modern life deserve our respect. They are traveling a tough road in order to preserve a spiritual vision of life's possibilities.

In that sense, the ultra-Orthodox help to keep "less observant" and secular Jewry grounded. We need somebody to live out the full Judaic religious/cultural synthesis—Judaism as a total way of life. Without that to refer to, so to speak, we risk dissolving in the soup of multicultural America, our candle lighting, our renewal movements, our Torah study groups just added ingredients to spice up our American lives a bit. I'm not advocating that we all become ultra-Orthodox. They don't have all the answers. But we should acknowledge a debt of gratitude to them and the key role they play in American Jewish life.

Part of doing that is resisting narratives, even ones generated by other Jews, in which the ultra-Orthodox are seen as only oppressive, enforcing a rigid conformism in which individuals have no voices of their own, and I take it that this is part of Seidman's point. But let's not forget that in the final analysis, ultra-Orthodox communities were formed originally to pursue transcendental goals. Only their members can tell us if attaining states of transcendence—of spiritual flight—is still a living possibility, or if their lives too have been ossified by Weberian "routinization." It's interesting, in that light, that the truly transcendent moment in *Unorthodox* is, as Seidman somewhat cynically notes, not when Esty finally gets herself free but when, during her audition, she switches from the classical repertory to a Hasidic song, full of longing and a kind of melancholy joy. Might we infer that that song, so expressive of the world she comes from, is sung in her true voice?

Mark Roller
via jewishreviewofbooks.com

Naomi Seidman's review of *Unorthodox* was uncommonly perceptive. There is the added and uncomfortable issue that the show posits that cosmopolitan Berlin, rather than Israel, represents a viable future for Jews longing to be free. The German director Maria Schrader indicates that the music conservatory represents her aspirational vision of post-war Germany with people coming together from all over the world to create beautiful music, including a musician from Israel, who turns out to lack any social skills as she cuts the heroine Esty to the quick with her cruel critique of her musical talent. I found the implicit anti-Zionist and antinational bias coming from a German director, no matter how liberal, to be rather too rich.

Edward Abrahams
via jewishreviewofbooks.com

Yesterday's Today

Your non-Yiddish readers may enjoy hearing a bit more about the term *Nekhtiger Tog*, explicated as "Yesterday's Today" in Allan Nadler's translation of Yoysef Tunkel's hilarious "Spinoza in Warsaw" (Summer 2020). First, *Der Tog* (The Day) was an influential New York Yiddish daily, viewed as the Yiddish *Times*; I'm not sure if there was one in Warsaw too. The words *haynt* and *nekhtn* mean "today" and "yesterday" in Yiddish. *Hayntiger tog* (literally "today's day") is emphatic: "This very day." *Hayntige teg* is "these days." I have never heard *nekhtige teg* ("yesterday's days"). But *a nekhtiger tog* is a well-known Yiddish idiom of extreme negation, meaning something like "forget about it," as in, "So, after all that, did he finally get the job?" "*A nekhtiger tog!*" Readers would have savored the pun.

Arnold Wishnia
Setauket, New York

Correction

In our Summer 2020 issue, the year of death of Yoysef Tunkel had two transposed digits. While we wish he could have entertained us longer, he died in 1949, not 1994.

The *Jewish Review of Books* mourns the passing of

ז״ל

Ruth Gavison

1945–2020

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Belt, Road, and Risk

BY DAN BLUMENTHAL

Last year, the National Defense Authorization Act included an aside about the Sixth Fleet's port of call in Israel:

> The United States has an interest in the future forward presence of United States naval vessels at the Port of Haifa in Israel but has serious security concerns with respect to the leasing arrangements of the Port of Haifa as of the date of the enactment of this Act; and should urge the Government of Israel to consider the security implications of foreign investment in Israel.

The Shanghai International Port Group has a 25-year lease, beginning next year, to operate a new port in Haifa. This is part of China's "Belt and Road Initiative," its investment in land and sea routes which it hopes will establish the infrastructure of a global trading network with China at its hub. What concerned the Senate was that General Secretary Xi Jinping's economic initiatives and goals merge with those of his intelligence services and military. The Haifa port, as it happens, is next to Israel's main naval base.

Tensions around the Haifa port reflect broader US concerns over China's investment in Israel. While in that country in March 2019, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned that "if certain systems go in certain places then America's efforts to work alongside you will be more difficult." He also advised:

> Intelligence sharing might have to be reduced, co-location of security facilities might have to be reduced, we want to make sure countries understand this and know the risks.

When Prime Minister Netanyahu visited the White House shortly thereafter, President Trump was said to have put the same point more bluntly: Washington's security will be compromised if Jerusalem and Beijing grow too close.

The good news for American-Israeli relations is that the two countries are starting to manage their differences over China, including developing security protocols at the port. But this issue isn't just about a port, and, given China's ambition to lead a new world order, it won't go away. Since 2005, China has invested almost $10 billion in Israel and is likely to invest more. It also has more than one thousand students attending Israeli universities, most of whom are studying science, technology, and engineering. Of course, one thousand students and $10 billion are mere drops in the bucket for China, but they are significant for a small country like Israel. Indeed, it is easy to understand why isolated and beleaguered Israelis welcomed this attention from a great power with no antisemitic historical baggage.

How wary should Israel be of China's tightening embrace? And how worried should America be, given how much it shares with Israel in terms of military technology and intelligence?

While Sino-American tension had been building for a decade, the rivalry intensified after Xi Jinping alarmed Washington in 2017. China's "paramount leader" announced that China seeks to "become a global leader in terms of composite national strength and international influence." In the new world order that Xi envisions, China would surpass the US in military-technological power and replace US alliances with a network of China's main strategic partners.

China's desired global order would be more closed and authoritarian.

Israel should certainly be more concerned about China than it has been since it has been a prime beneficiary of the existing system that China seeks to overthrow. If China succeeds, the global order will be more closed, authoritarian, and divided into exclusive spheres of influence. But there is little Israel can do to affect a major-power competition over the future of the international system—that's Washington's job. What Israel can do is pay much more attention to Chinese attempts to leverage commercial, educational, and cultural ties to expand its political influence and further its espionage.



The port of Haifa, in northern Israel, July 2019. (Jack Guz/AFP via Getty Images.)

Israel, of course, has some of the best intelligence services in the world, but they are used to combatting imminent, existential threats, not soft subversion. The US and its allies are slowly uncovering the intricate webs of the Chinese Communist Party's networks of political influence and destabilization. Here, Australia provides a cautionary example. In June, the home of Shaoquett Moselmane, a legislator from New South Wales, was raided by the Australian Security Intelligence Organization. He has since been suspended from the New Labor Party, pending an investigation into whether he was a paid agent of the Chinese government. If so, he would not be the first Australian legislator to have been suborned by the Chinese. Senator Sam Dastyari resigned from Parliament in December 2017 after it was revealed that he had taken money from a donor who was close to the Chinese Communist Party. Both legislators consistently took the Chinese line on Hong Kong, the South China Sea, and other issues of interest to China.

In Australia, as elsewhere, China has also employed students as spies. According to the authoritative work of Australian journalist Clive Hamilton:

> Australian institutions—from our schools, universities and professional associations to our media; from industries like mining, agriculture and tourism to strategic assets like ports and electricity grids; from our local councils and state governments to our political parties in Canberra—are being penetrated and shaped by a complex system of influence and control overseen by agencies serving the Chinese Communist Party.

The US is uncovering similar networks of Chinese influence. A few examples from the recent past: A Chinese scholar at the University of California, Los Angeles, was convicted in June of shipping banned missile technology to his homeland, and a student at Chicago's Illinois Institute of Technology was charged last year with helping to recruit spies. More infamously, Charles Lieber, the chairman of Harvard's Department of Chemistry

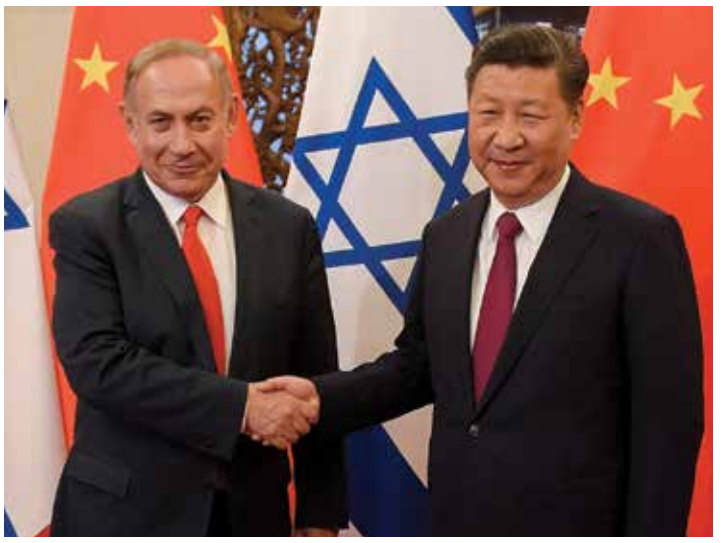
and Chemical Biology, was arrested in January for his alleged paid secret involvement in Beijing's "Thousand Talents Plan." Its goal, in the words of the US National Intelligence Council, is the "legal and illicit transfer of US technology, intellectual property and know-how."

Of course, China is much more interested in Australia, a major country in the Asia-Pacific region, not to speak of America, its global rival, than in Israel. Still, given Israel's technological sophistication and its close strategic alliance with America, Israel now must prepare itself for a complicated subversive threat.

Nonetheless, in contrast to the challenge of espionage and political subversion, China's military and geopolitical threats to Israel should not be overstated. The Middle East is not on the frontlines of the Sino-American geopolitical competition; compared to Asia and even Europe, the Middle East remains mostly a gas station for Beijing. In 2018, the value of China's economic activity in Europe was almost double that of its investment in the Middle East ($48 billion vs. $26.6 billion).

What about China's relationship with Israel's archenemy Iran? While China is reportedly considering a $400 billion, 25-year investment deal with Iran, the plan warrants skepticism. Chinese state-owned enterprises cannot afford to be sanctioned by the United States for entering the Iranian market. Moreover, the ultimate Chinese interest in the Middle East is to keep the oil freely flowing from the Gulf; Beijing is extremely unlikely to risk its good relations with Saudi Arabia by becoming too close to Iran. In short, Chinese oil interests should not be a serious Israeli concern. Jerusalem will have to accustom itself to a Chinese regional military presence, such as its base in Djibouti, but none of this poses much of a threat to Israel or the American-Israeli alliance.

In 2016, China announced that it would strengthen "multi-level cooperation along [the Belt and Road Initiative] by encouraging academic exchanges, joint national labs, international talent development, and long-term technology transfer and innovation networks" with Israel. There are well-funded scholarships for Chinese students to study in Israel, and Chinese and Israeli universities have set up collaborations in cutting-edge areas like artificial intelligence research, precisely the technology that the United States worries China will use for military purposes.



Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, left, and General Secretary Xi Jinping, Beijing, March 21, 2017. (Etienne Oliveau/Pool Photo via AP.)

However, technology cooperation is not yet driving Sino-Israeli commercial relations. Chinese investments make up anywhere from 10 to 20 percent of total foreign direct investment in Israel, but so far, the most substantial investments have not been in the technology sector. Rather, Bright Foods bought control of Tnuva, Israel's largest food company; ChemChina purchased the remaining 40 percent stake in a crop protection company called Adama, giving it total control; and Alpha Frontier made the single largest Chinese investment in an Israeli company: $4.4 billion in Playtika, a company that makes video casino games.

Still, there are reasons for concern. First, China often uses nontechnological commercial activity as a Trojan horse to gain leverage in a target country. As small countries depend on Chinese investment, over time, Beijing demands more technology. Second, between 2013 and 2018, major Chinese technology companies have made investments in Israeli technology that do, in fact, have potential national and internal security applications. A notable example is the controversial telecom company Huawei's 2016 acquisition of Israel's HexaTier, a data cloud computing company. That same month Huawei also acquired IT research firm Toga Networks. Although Huawei will never get a backdoor into the Israeli telecommunications system as it has elsewhere—the Shin Bet keeps it under close watch—the United States looks askance at any relationship with Huawei, which it rightly regards as a tool of Chinese intelligence agencies.

Israelis should also familiarize themselves with the independent US Intellectual Property Commission, which estimated in 2017 that IP theft cost the US economy more than $255 billion annually. The IP Commission concluded that China alone was responsible for 50 to 80 percent of all counterfeited goods, pirated software, and theft of trade secrets. As a small "start-up nation," whose success is built on innovation, Israel is, if anything, more vulnerable than the United States.

America and Israel are now working more closely on Chinese investments in the Jewish state, and Israel is trying to establish a regulatory structure that can review foreign investments and exports for their national security impact. But Israel clearly still has work to do on both fronts. Moreover, as Pompeo's comments this spring underscore, the US views *any* sign that an ally is getting too close to China as deeply problematic. Israeli policymakers should think long and hard about the danger of allowing its nascent relationship with China to drive a wedge between Washington and Jerusalem. Given the range and magnitude of threats China can pose to the Jewish state, Israeli leaders should ask if Chinese money and scientific collaboration are really worth it.

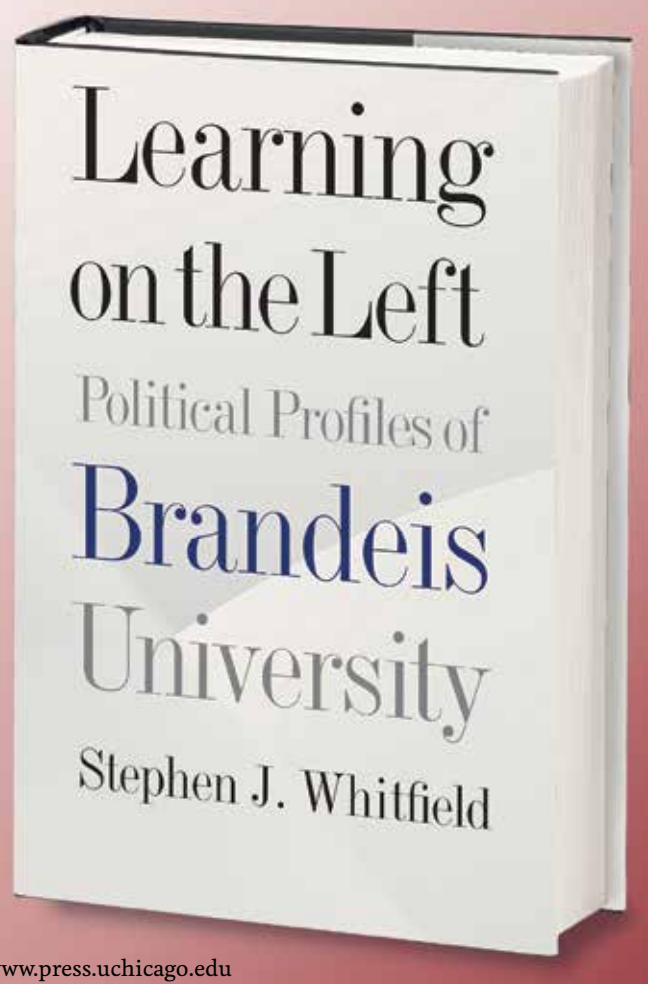
Dan Blumenthal is the director of Asian studies at the American Enterprise Institute. He served in and advised the US government on China issues for more than 10 years. He is the author of the forthcoming book The China Nightmare: The Grand Ambitions of a Decaying State *(AEI Press), out November 17.*

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Take Your Son . . .

BY ABRAHAM SOCHER

Unbinding Isaac: The Significance of the Akedah for Modern Jewish Thought
by Aaron Koller
Jewish Publication Society, 264 pp., $40

Genesis 22 tells us that "God tested Abraham." That test began with something close to poetry. In the straightforward translation with which Aaron Koller prefaces his thought-provoking new book, God says:

> Now take your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the hills, which I will tell you there. (Gen. 22:2)

Why this stately threefold description—"your son, your only one, whom you love"—before Isaac is finally named as the sacrificial victim? Rashi famously paraphrases a midrash that reads the verse as suppressing Abraham's part of a dialogue, as if the readers of Genesis were overhearing just God's half of a phone conversation:

> He [Abraham] said to Him, "I have two sons." He said to him, "your only son." Abraham said, "this one is an only child of his mother and that one is an only child of his mother." He said to him, "the one you love." He said to him, "I love both of them." He said to him, "Isaac." And why didn't He reveal it to him from the beginning? In order not to suddenly shock him into confusion and incompetence, and so that he would cherish the commandment and receive a reward for each clause.

In filling in the uncanny gaps and silences of the "Binding of Isaac" (*Akedat Yitzchak,* or simply the Akedah), this midrash and many others tend to demystify it. Abraham, whose only quoted response to God throughout the ordeal is "*hineni*" (literally "here I am," or in the Bible scholar E. A. Speiser's crisp translation, "ready"), becomes a puzzled, obstinate father. In another ancient tradition, which Rashi earlier quotes, God's unfathomable demand is given an exculpatory backstory that cribs from Job: he was tricked into making it by Satan, who questioned Abraham's priorities. Such interpretations betray an anxiety about the Akedah's disturbing power, giving motives and alibis to its protagonists and depriving it of its uncanny force.

Rashi's question about the phrasing of God's request of Abraham is not the first one that occurs to the modern reader of the most terrifying verse in the Hebrew Bible. Nonetheless, the midrashic revelation of a father who insists that he loves both of his sons equally and is perhaps desperately stalling the horrific demand that he can somehow feel coming is, as we now say, relatable. Then again, why should Abraham feel such a demand coming?

In a famous passage, which Koller quotes, Immanuel Kant argued that Abraham should have replied in indignant astonishment "That I ought not kill my good son is quite certain. But that you, this apparition, are God, of that I am not certain." As a child of the Enlightenment, of which Kant is a founding father, I find it easy to agree with him, and yet one also feels that it is a little too easy to do so, that we ought to at least understand what is going on in the biblical narrative before dismissing it. After all, Isaac was not merely Abraham's "good son" or even just the only son (of Sarah), whom he loved, he was the child for whom Abraham had waited a lifetime and through whom God had promised that his line would be continued and become a great nation. Moreover, the idea that God is, in one sense or another, owed not only the first fruits of one's field but the firstborn of every womb, "man and beast," is shot through the Hebrew Bible, as are dramas regarding favorite sons.

What should we make of the fact that just as the hill on which Abraham bound Isaac is said to be the Temple Mount, the Akedah itself is near the center of Judaism?



Sacrifice of Issac ***by Caravaggio, ca. 1603. (Gallerie degli Ufizzi, Florence, Italy.)***

To return to Rashi's commentary, why should Abraham be more richly rewarded for forcing God to come to the point? The strangest rabbinic answer to that question of which I am aware is that of Rabbi Isaac of Volozhin, the son and successor of Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, the leading disciple of the Vilna Gaon and the founder of the first modern yeshiva. In a textually ingenious, if perverse comment, Reb Itzele, as he was known, argued that Abraham's part of the dialogue should be reread as an argument to sacrifice *both* of his sons. The surprise is that this topsy-turvy version actually works: at each step of the midrashic dialogue, Abraham can now be heard not as dimly groping his way towards understanding God's awful meaning but as understanding it immediately—and then zealously bargaining to sacrifice both Isaac and Ishmael. This is certainly not what either the ancient midrash or the medieval commentator imagined when they staged the scene, but did Reb Itzele nonetheless get something right about the disturbing presuppositions beneath the biblical text? Namely, that Abraham fully acknowledged he had an impossible debt to God that he was prepared to repay.

And what should we make of the fact that just as the hill in Moriah on which Abraham bound Isaac is said to be the future Temple Mount, the Akedah itself is near the center of Judaism? It is recited daily in morning prayers and read publicly on Rosh Hashanah as a reminder to God to deal with his people mercifully because of the merit of "our father Abraham."

Aaron Koller doesn't mention Reb Itzele's odd commentary (no one does), but a 19th-century Christian contemporary of his is at the heart of Koller's argument about the troubling place of the Binding of Isaac in modern Jewish thought. That contemporary is, of course, Søren Kierkegaard.

As Koller takes pains to point out, Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* is an extraordinarily complex book, in which he works and reworks the story of Abraham's trial. The book's title comes from Paul, who told the Corinthians that he did not come to preach to them with reason but rather in "fear and

trembling." Kierkegaard's argument similarly dwells insistently in the absurdity of faith. If one doesn't have the courage to say that "faith can make it into a holy deed to murder one's son," Kierkegaard says, then it would be better to be done with the story altogether and let the moral "judgement fall on Abraham as on anyone else," as Kant had argued.

> The ethical expression for what he did is that he was willing to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he was willing to sacrifice Isaac; but in this contradiction lies the very anguish that can make one sleepless; and yet without that anguish Abraham is not the one he is.

Who was Abraham, according to Kierkegaard? He was a "knight of faith," not because he resigned himself to sacrificing his child—Agamemnon could do that—but because he did so while, in an acrobatic "double-movement" of faith, also believing, absurdly but wholeheartedly, that Isaac would be returned to him.

As Koller points out, this is a thoroughly Christian reading, which presupposes the idea that Isaac's almost-sacrifice and last-second salvation at the hand of "an angel of the Lord," set the historical stage for the death and resurrection of Jesus. In the New Testament's Epistle to the Hebrews, we read: "By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. . . . He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back." (Heb. 11:17-19) But it is hard to find any hint of this kind of faith in Genesis 22.

Koller makes two other important points about Kierkegaard's interpretation. First, he argues that, for Kierkegaard, the story of the Akedah is essentially about surrendering one's beloved for the higher love one owes to God, rather than about taking that person's life. "The violence in Genesis 22," he writes, "is beside the point in *Fear and Trembling*." This is true at some level. As Clare Carlisle's new biography makes vividly clear, when Kierkegaard wrote of Abraham sacrificing Isaac, he was often thinking of how he had just cut off his engagement to Regine Olsen in obedience to some inner spiritual imperative neither she nor his bourgeois contemporaries understood. Nonetheless, I think Koller overstates the point. After all, Kierkegaard repeatedly describes Abraham's almost-act as "murder." Moreover, he prefaces *Fear and Trembling* with several midrash-like variations on the story, including the following:

> When Isaac saw [Abraham's] face a second time it was changed, his gaze was wild, his mien one of horror. He caught Isaac by the chest, threw him to the ground and said: 'Foolish boy, do you believe I am your father? I am an idolater. Do you believe this is God's command? No, it is my own desire'. Then Isaac trembled and in his anguish cried: 'God in heaven have mercy on me, God of Abraham have mercy on me; if I have no father on earth, then be Thou my father!' But below his breath Abraham said to himself: 'Lord in heaven I thank Thee; it is after all better that he believe that I am a monster than that he lose faith in Thee.'

So, Kierkegaard is attuned to the violence at the center of the Akedah. Still, Koller has a point, which I would amend to say that Kierkegaard had little interest in that violence *as a sacrifice*. Nor was he interested in the specific religious logic of biblical sacrifice.

Koller's second criticism is morally trenchant and central to the argument of his book: Kierkegaard, and the many interpreters who have followed him in concentrating on Abraham's existential dilemma, reduce Isaac to "a mere prop in the story." He brings out the monstrosity of this position in a brief, illuminating discussion of Caravaggio's painting, *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (1603). In Caravaggio's painting (actually his second work with that name to depict the scene), Abraham is holding a terrified teenaged Isaac's neck down on the rough stone altar. The young man stares out at the viewer helplessly, as the ram who will become his substitute ambles placidly into the picture, and an urgent angel grabs Abraham's knife-hand. "Caravaggio," Koller writes, "uses Isaac's eye to break the illusion of tranquility . . . Isaac's screaming gaze forces us to grapple with the fact that as Abraham is becoming 'our father,' Isaac is being murdered."



Søren Kierkegaard in the Coffee-house ***by Christian Olavius Zeuthen, 1843. (Museum of National History, Denmark.)***

As Koller points out, the Jewish tradition, by contrast, did not forget Isaac. Indeed, when the Akedah came to be taken as a paradigm for Jewish martyrdom, Isaac's willingness to die for God became at least as important as his father's willingness to kill for Him. Thus, Ephraim of Bonn's searing Akedah poem, written in the wake of Jewish martyrdom in the Second and Third Crusades, depicts Isaac as his father's willing partner. In Judah Goldin's translation of Shalom Spiegel's classic study of the poem and its sources, Isaac says, "Bind for me my hands and my feet / Lest I be found wanting and profane the sacrifice." A later stanza describes Isaac dying on the altar before being revived by a "resurrecting dew"—at which point his zealous father tries to kill him again before being stopped by the angel a second time. In the dark midrashic tradition this poem draws upon, Isaac becomes the story's spiritual hero (though this version, too, lets Abraham off the hook).

A key element of Koller's book is his critique of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the central figure in 20th-century Modern Orthodoxy and the intellectual and spiritual leader of its flagship institution, Yeshiva University, where, as it happens, Koller now teaches. In a number of Soloveitchik's essays, Koller astutely points out, he "describes religion in general as exemplified by retreat, recoil, sacrifice, and self-defeat and describes all of these as exemplified by the Akedah." In short, he seems to have followed Kierkegaard in reading the Akedah as a parable for the existential crisis of the figure he famously called "the lonely man of faith." Certainly, as Koller points out, his descriptions of the Akedah are often openly borrowed from *Fear and Trembling*:

> The enormous feat of the knight of faith was demonstrated not in his actual compliance with the divine order but in the manner in which he behaved in the face of the most puzzling divine absurdity. . . . Abraham did not realize the absurdity and paradoxicality of the divine order, which canceled all previous promises and covenants. . . Abraham was great in his acting in accordance with the logic of the absurd.

This passage occurs in the course of a more than 700-word footnote in which Soloveitchik says the Akedah showed that the covenantal relationship was one in which "Man sacrificed himself to God, and God dedicated Himself to man." The man in question is Abraham; Isaac, who was bound to the altar, is never mentioned.

In another essay, in which Soloveitchik takes the Akedah to be the paradigm for prayer, he does talk of Isaac, but in a way that underlines Koller's critique of Kierkegaardian moral blindness. When the angel intervened and a ram was substituted for his son, Abraham's "external drama changed, but the internal drama remained the same."

> Isaac, bound on the altar, turned into a ram, and Isaac was a ram, slaughtered, his blood sprinkled, his body burnt, the ashes piled on Mount Moriah for generations. The binding of Isaac, which plays such a prominent role in the Jewish liturgy and world-view, means: the binding of man and the sacrifice of him . . . The spirit of man, clothed in the body of an animal, is sacrificed to God. . . . Build an altar. Arrange the pieces of wood. Kindle the fire. Take the knife and slaughter *yourself* for my sake—thus commands the awesome God. (Italics mine.)

Koller does not deny that such passages may articulate something deep about the kind of passionate prayer that calls for self-negation, but he is at his strongest in showing just how morally troubling and textually implausible they are as readings of Genesis 22.

Later in the book, he quotes Soloveitchik's contemporary Emmanuel Levinas's perceptive criticism of Kierkegaard to great effect. "Perhaps," Levinas wrote of Abraham's response to the intervening angel, his "ear for hearing the voice that brought him back to the

ethical order was the highest moment in the drama." Whereas Soloveitchik writes of Abraham's response to the angel as almost irrelevant ("the internal drama remained the same"), Levinas focused on the redemptive third act of the Akedah and the "others" who were there with Abraham at the top of the mountain: the restraining angel and the terrified Isaac.

Koller frames his critique of Soloveitchik and other Jewish Kierkegaardians in terms of the dire public consequences of their approach to religion. "Reading Genesis 22 with Kierkegaard," he writes in the concluding chapter, "leads to an inability to explain why someone whose religion obligates them to marry more than one person, or to refuse contraceptive coverage [to others], or to deny vaccinations to their children, or to shoot a mosque full of people, or to fly a plane into a building full of people is wrong."

It's an extraordinary list. One wouldn't have thought that the Catholic Little Sisters of the Poor should be grouped with mass murderers, regardless of what one thinks of their position on employee health care plans. To be fair, Koller immediately notes that he is not drawing an equivalency among the religious bad actors he lists. But he does insist that the stakes are high, because "many people do seek guidance in biblical stories." However, he cites not a single instance when anything remotely like such religious terrorism or even incivility has actually been justified by an existentialist reading of the Akedah.

Koller's framing leads one to expect to read of some deeply problematic halakhic ruling or theologically driven moral lapse on the part of Soloveitchik or some other prominent Jewish Kierkegaardian. The closest he comes is to quote an academic article that mentions an Israeli rabbi who wrote, "Are we not obligated to the Torah's laws even when they appear, in human eyes, to be unethical norms?" I have no doubt that I prefer Koller's religious humanism to the apparent position of this unnamed (and almost certainly un-Kierkegaardian) rabbi. Still, the reader was certainly led to expect more. Moreover, while Jewish law, like all legal systems, may come into tension with the dictates of morality, it cannot be equated with the existential brain-fire of some "lonely man of faith." Perhaps the problem in "reading Genesis 22 with Kierkegaard is just that it is ultimately a bad reading, textually and morally obtuse, as Koller has shown, but without implications for public policy.

Unbinding Isaac is a lucid thesis-driven tour of some of the most important interpretations of the Akedah. Although I don't know if it was, I imagine it as one of those books that began as a terrific undergraduate class in which a central question is traced through a dazzling, dizzying series of texts and thinkers, ending with a sketch of the teacher's own speculative answer.

Koller's reading of the Akedah takes off from the interpretation of the 14th-century commentator Joseph ibn Kaspi. Ibn Kaspi took Maimonides's somewhat counterintuitive statement in the *Guide of the Perplexed* that Abraham's hearing of God's original demand was a lower form of prophecy than his response to the angel who stayed his hand. The first was like an equivocal dream vision, while the second was a more direct prophecy. Ibn Kaspi supported this interpretation by noting that, in fact, two different names of God are used in the story. When God makes his terrible request, He is identified as Elokim, the generic biblical term for God, but the intervening angel is described as "the messenger of the Lord," that is, the divine being as designated by His proper, or "explicit," name, the Tetragrammaton. This makes sense, Ibn Kaspi says, because Isaac's sacrifice was "in fact, not desired by the Lord." And when the "angel of the Lord" says to Abraham, "Don't stretch your hand against the boy, and do not do anything to him, for now I know that you are a fearer of God, as you have not spared your son, your only one, from me," he was speaking quite precisely because it wasn't really *the Lord* who made the original demand, it was God, or rather Abraham's dim, imperfect perception of Him.

Koller takes this claim in a more passional or personalist way than Ibn Kaspi would have been likely to when he summarizes that "God wants child sacrifice, as an expression of love and commitment. But God *more* does not want it, as a reflection of a higher value." That higher value, he goes on to argue, is the biblical recognition that children are not the property of their parents: "children, like all other human beings, cannot be mere adjuncts in someone else's religious experience." This is, I think, a profound teaching; we have all seen children—or, to put it less dramatically, their childhoods—sacrificed on the altar of parental desires, including spiritual ones. But is this the teaching of the Akedah?

I am not so sure. Or, rather, since Genesis 22 overpowers and confounds all interpretations in the end, let me briefly note some of my qualms about Koller's reading by returning to the question of how Abraham understood God's terrible request and why it would have made sense to him (or to the earliest readers of the Akedah). Koller describes the ancient desire to sacrifice one's child as a misguided "expression of love and commitment," and he describes the practice of ancient Near Eastern child sacrifice and the Bible's somewhat ambivalent attitude toward it. But he spends little time on the biblical preoccupation with firstborn and favorite sons and the way in which they specifically are owed to God. Israel itself is, after all, described as God's "firstborn son," and it becomes so only after Abraham has passed the test, because, the angel tells him, "you have not spared your son, your only one." What seems missing to me in reassuring interpretations of the Akedah such as Koller's is that they read it as eradicating the notion of a father's debt to God as a religious mistake. In contrast, the Bible itself returns to it obsessively, almost inevitably subverting or sublimating it, but never simply giving it up.

The fifth chapter of *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers) teaches that 10 things were created on the evening of the first Sabbath. Among them, some authorities include "the ram of our father Abraham," which is to say that from the outset of creation an animal substitute was intended for Isaac but not that the trial itself was a mistake. Elsewhere, we learn that the horn of that same ram was the one blown at Sinai. The blasts of the shofar at Rosh Hashanah, it would seem, recall not only the revelation at Sinai but our father Abraham's attempt to repay his terrifying, yet obscurely comprehensible debt to God.

Abraham Socher is the editor of the Jewish Review of Books.


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SEFER NISHMAT HAYIM... [Breath of Life] ben Israel, Menasseh; Amsterdam: Samuel Abarbanel Soeiro, 1651. First Edition. Idiosyncratic collection of biblical and supernatural accounts drawn from Jewish, Christian, Islamic and classical sources, selected to support Plato's idea of an eternal soul. Born a crypto-Jew in Portugal, ben Israel compiled an extensive inventory of demons, witches, *dybbuks, incubi,* etc. whose transmigrations prove the soul is independent of the body. The import of prophetic dreams, bird signs, holy names, astrology, amulets and physical maladies are covered in the treatise, which posits three requirements for proof: tradition, logic and sensory experience. He affirms free will, a providential god and the resurrection of the dead in messianic times. He established Amsterdam's first Hebrew-language press and published works for Christians in Spanish, Portuguese and Latin. Later, he helped convince Cromwell to allow the return of Jews to England. (44653) $1,500
Hebrew title page. (Kayserling p.69, 1890)

All That Is Solid

BY ADAM KIRSCH

The Lehman Trilogy
by Stefano Massini, translated by Richard Dixon
HarperVia, 720 pp., $35

From *Oedipus Rex* to *Richard III*, playwrights have been drawn to tragic downfalls. The failure of a bank doesn't seem quite as stageworthy—not even when the bank is Lehman Brothers, a century-and-a-half-old institution that collapsed in the space of a week in September 2008. The story is certainly of historic importance; Lehman's Chapter 11 filing was the biggest in American history, involving more than $600 billion in assets. More, it was the moment when the subprime mortgage meltdown turned into a global financial crisis, whose effects on politics and the economy are still being felt today. The Battle of Bosworth Field, where Shakespeare's Richard offered "My kingdom for a horse"—a kind of 15th-century credit default swap—was a local squabble by comparison.

But it's far from obvious that the story of Lehman Brothers is material for a play, much less a hit. It took a keen theatrical instinct for the Italian writer Stefano Massini to seize on the story right away, beginning work in late 2008 on what would become *The Lehman Trilogy*. The project went through several incarnations: first written as a novel in verse, it was adapted for an Italian radio play, which turned into a French stage play, before ending up as a highly acclaimed English stage version, directed by Sam Mendes at the UK's National Theatre in 2018. That production came to New York for a brief run in 2019 and was scheduled to open on Broadway when COVID-19 canceled the season.

Now Massini's original novel has been translated into English by Richard Dixon, bringing the career of *The Lehman Trilogy* full circle. The stage version is long, three and a half hours in English, but the novel is even longer, 720 pages. Fortunately, the length is not owed to detailed explanations such as the collateralized debt obligations (CDOs) the bank used to disguise bad mortgages as good investments. That story has been told in a number of nonfiction books with ominous titles like *The Devil's Casino* and *A Colossal Failure of Common Sense*.

In fact, while the fall of Lehman Brothers inspired Massini, it's barely depicted in *The Lehman Trilogy*. That's because Massini isn't telling the story of the firm so much as of the family behind it, and the last Lehman to run Lehman Brothers died in 1969. Massini's book effectively ends with the death of Robert "Bobbie" Lehman—except that in this version he achieves a kind of apotheosis, dancing the twist into eternity:

For Bobbie in the end is convinced:
now he is sure
he is quite certain
he cannot die.
The patriarchs died, yes
but at the age of 500, 600, 700
if not more
which is like saying
they too
were immortal
like the bank
and it is right
so right
since *HaShem* cannot allow
anyone who leads a Chosen People
to die.

Massini's conflation of banking with Judaism and Lehman Brothers with the children of Israel can't be pinned on the actual Robert Lehman. Born in 1891 into the family's third American generation, he left behind the milieu that the historian Stephen Birmingham called "Our Crowd"—elite German Jewish business dynasties like the Schiffs, Guggenheims, and Strauses, who worshiped at Temple Emanu-El, New York's first Reform synagogue. Robert Lehman's lengthy front-page obituary in the *New York Times* mentions Hotchkiss and Yale, his stable of racehorses, and his world-class art collection, whose Rembrandts and El Grecos are now in the Metropolitan Museum's Robert Lehman Wing. The word "Jewish" doesn't appear once.

That obituary tells a story about assimilation and social climbing that could make for a fascinating novel, but it's not the story Massini wants to tell. The play and still more the novel don't aim at historical or psychological realism. They are mythic in scale, using three generations of the Lehman family (one per section of the "trilogy") as characters in a didactic pageant about capitalism, America, modernity—and Jewishness, which plays an unsavory role in the proceedings.

Massini's conflation of banking with Judaism can't be pinned on Robert Lehman.

One of the things that makes *The Lehman Trilogy* distinctive on stage is that there is no dialogue. Rather than enacting scenes, the three actors who make up the entire cast function as a chorus, narrating the story with the assistance of a basic set and a few props. Likewise, the novel eschews traditional dialogue and scene-setting, aiming instead at an epic's scope and elevation. It's even written in verse, and while Dixon's translation reads like prose with arbitrary line breaks, it does capture Massini's rhetorical and imagistic flights:

To live in America, to live properly,
you need something else.



Simon Russell Beale, Ben Miles, and Adam Godley in* The Lehman Trilogy, *National Theatre, London, 2018. (Photo by Mark Douet.)

You need to turn a key in a lock,
you need to push open a door.
And all three—key, lock, and door—
are found not in New York
but inside your brain.

The word "middleman" might be new, but the role existed long before the Lehmans came along, and it has always inspired suspicion.

So reflects Heyum Lehmann, who lands in Manhattan in 1844 and promptly has his name changed by a customs official to Henry Lehman. The novel's opening scenes of a discombobulated immigrant in New York are familiar from many American Jewish stories, but this one soon takes an unusual turn. The third chapter finds Henry behind the counter of a dry goods store in Montgomery, Alabama, selling "seersucker / chintz / flag cloth / beaverteen / doeskin that looks like deer" to nearby planters. Soon he is joined by his brothers Emanuel and Mayer, who leave their father's house in Rimpar, Bavaria, to start over in the promised land.

Millions of immigrants made similar journeys in the 19th century, but few actually found the streets they walked to be paved with gold. The transformation of the Lehman brothers' little shop into Lehman Brothers, the financial behemoth, happened in several stages. First the brothers had the idea of taking payment for their goods in cotton, which they sold to factories for processing. Soon they were large-scale cotton brokers, managing to survive the disruption in the cotton trade caused by the Civil War and branching out into other commodities such as sugar, coal, and oil.

By then, Henry was gone—he died in 1855 at the age of 33—and Emanuel and Mayer relocated the firm's headquarters to New York, already the financial center of the United States. When Emanuel's son Philip took charge of the firm, in 1901, commodities trading took a back seat to investment banking, with Lehman underwriting the stock issues of some of the defining companies of the American century: Sears Roebuck, RCA, Pan Am. Under his son Robert's 44-year reign, the firm weathered the Great Depression and emerged even stronger. Only after his death did Lehman Brothers get its first CEO from outside the family—Pete Peterson, who appears in a fanciful cameo in *The Lehman Trilogy* as a young boy working at his family's Greek diner in Nebraska.

One way of thinking about the Lehmans' 120-year run is as a lucky convergence of talent and opportunity. Abraham Lehmann, the father of Henry, Emanuel, and Mayer, was a cattle dealer in Bavaria; maybe he too had a genius for commerce, but he had nothing to trade but cows. His sons came to America just when its industrial economy was being built from scratch—largely on the backs of slaves, whose labor in Alabama's cotton fields was the ultimate basis of the Lehman family's fortune. (The Lehmans also owned slaves themselves, though Massini barely mentions it.) The young country had a great need for businessmen who knew how to connect producers with consumers, resources with markets, investors with entrepreneurs. For three generations, the Lehmans showed a genius for making such connections.

The problem for *The Lehman Trilogy* is that while Massini recognizes this achievement, he also deeply disapproves of it. Early in the book, when Mayer proposes marriage to Babette Newgass, he tries to convince her father that he has a respectable occupation. But he has trouble describing what exactly Lehman Brothers does:

"We're right in the middle
Mr. Newgass."
"What sort of job is that
being in the middle?"
"It's an occupation that doesn't yet exist
Mr. Newgass:
we're the ones who are starting it."

The word "middleman" might be new, but, of course, the role existed long before the Lehmans came along, and it has always inspired suspicion. The slaves who grew the cotton worked hard for nothing, and the factory workers who made it into cloth worked hard for very little, but the Lehmans got rich without seeming to work at all. As Massini writes in the voice of Mayer Lehman: "First: when we were in business / people gave us money / and we gave something in exchange. / Now that we're a bank / people give us money just the same / but we give nothing in exchange. / At least not for the moment. Then we'll see."

Using money to make money—that is, investing—was viewed with suspicion until the fairly recent past; Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all banned usury. Doing away with this taboo was a prerequisite for the emergence of capitalism, which brought unprecedented improvements in the quality of human life. But suspicion of finance has never disappeared. It's a major fuel for populist movements, as when William Jennings Bryan accused American bankers of crucifying mankind upon a cross of gold. That was in 1896; in 1934, Bryan's granddaughter Kitty married Robert Lehman, a nice parable of the usual fate of populism in America.

The Lehman Trilogy is particularly informed by the idea that capitalism degrades humanity by turning everything into a commodity with a price. This charge is as old as the Industrial Revolution itself: "Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers," Wordsworth complained in 1807. Massini's Lehmans are monomaniacs of profit, devoid of emotion and obsessed with numbers. Several characters are capitalist idiot savants.

Philip Lehman, for instance, considers 12 women as marriage prospects and assigns them each a score out of 200, marrying the one who scores highest. A next-generation Mayer Lehman, distinguished from the founder by the nickname "Dreidel," spends decades refusing to speak before revealing that he has been preoccupied with counting the words he hears: "The first year I spent in here / there were three words on everyone's lips: / 21,546 times you said EARNINGS. / 19,765 times I heard INCOME. / 17,983 times RECEIPTS."

Meanwhile, Dreidel's cousin Arthur calculates "that every American / owes his bank / a lump sum figure / of somewhere around 7 dollars and 21 cents" (a nonsensical statement) and begins to think of everyone he sees as "a 7.21" in a mathematical formula:

Those 7.21s also go to church
And pray to a God (J) who in moral terms
Is comparable to
—or, at most, one step above—
Lehman Brothers;
He's the creator of 7.21s, but we are their financiers.

Of course, the characters in *The Lehman Trilogy* are under no obligation to resemble their real-life



Stefano Massini's **The Lehman Trilogy** *at the Piccadilly Theatre, London, 2019. (Jansos/Alamy Photo.)*

namesakes—that's Massini's privilege, and no doubt Richard III would have a bone to pick with Shakespeare. But it's worth noting that the actual Arthur Lehman, who died in 1936, was a founder of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, a predecessor of today's UJA-Federation, and a major benefactor of the New School for Social Research. A charitable, community-minded man, he didn't walk around thinking that he was God and other human beings were worth $7.21. No one has ever done that, except perhaps in an insane asylum.

But the point of *The Lehman Trilogy* isn't to depict actual human beings or even an actual business. It's to dramatize a thesis about the dehumanizing power of capitalism, which turns relationships into transactions. The most famous statement of this idea was made by Karl Marx in his *Communist Manifesto*: "All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all newformed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind."

Marx was born in Trier, Germany, in 1818, three years before Henry Lehman was born in Rimpar, about 200 miles away. Their contrasting roles exemplify a rift that had enormous consequences for Jews, and for the way the world thinks about them. In 1844, the same year Henry Lehman arrived in America, Marx published his essay "On the Jewish Question," putting a new Communist spin on an old Christian idea by arguing that the redemption of the world required abolishing Judaism. "What is the worldly religion of the Jew? Huckstering. What is his worldly God? Money. Very well then! Emancipation from huckstering and money, consequently from practical, real Judaism, would be the self-emancipation of our time," wrote the grandson of two rabbis.

The Lehman Trilogy draws a similar equation between Judaism and capitalism, repeatedly using the imagery and vocabulary of one to describe the other. This tendency was toned down somewhat in Sam Mendes's version of the play at the National Theatre, but in the novel, it is unavoidable. When Philip Lehman is asked by a journalist what Lehman Brothers' business really is, he responds: "Normal people, you see, / use money just for buying. / But those—like us—who have a bank / use money / to buy money / to sell money / to loan money / to exchange money." Massini prefaces this hymn to money with a description of how Philip "raised his voice / and commented on the Scripture / like a young boy at his *Bar Mitzvah* / about to be received among the adults of the Temple."

Another Lehman, Sigmund, starts out as weak-willed and ineffectual until his brothers give him a list of 120 maxims to repeat daily as a drill in ruthlessness. These consist of sayings such as "Better to lie than to disappoint," "Don't spare your enemy for what he wouldn't spare you," and "Honesty is an abstract concept." The drill works, and Massini writes that Sigmund is "transformed into a cobra / thanks to the *mitzvot* of a banking Torah."

And so on. The New York Stock Exchange is "a synagogue / with ceilings higher than a synagogue." Lehman Brothers' publicity strategy is "the bank's new Talmud." Business successes are greeted with cries of "*Baruch HaShem*," and at the end of the book, the ghosts of Lehmans past gather to recite Kaddish for their dead bank. "This is the famous Wall-Street tribe / bloodthirsty, cruel people / known for their human sacrifices," says a figure in a dream-scene parody of *King Kong*, with Bobbie Lehman playing the role of the ape.

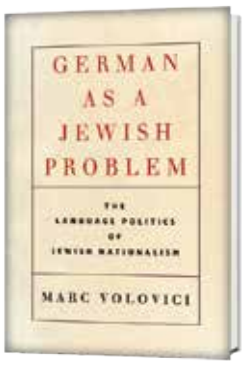
Massini seems to intend such conflations of Judaism and capitalism as a critique of the latter rather than the former. In *The Lehman Trilogy*, Jewish practice is one of the humane things that melts into air under capitalism; for instance, full-fledged mourning in the family's early years shrinks to a perfunctory moment of silence in the later ones. Massini is a Catholic, but he prides himself on his Jewish knowledge, referring to mourning as "*shiva* and *sheloshim*" and giving most chapters Hebrew or Yiddish titles. (The one in which Bobbie Lehman blasphemously calls himself immortal is titled "*Egel haZahav*," the golden calf.) But these signs of affection for Judaism strike a discordant note in a story that refurbishes the old tropes of left-wing antisemitism for a new audience.

Adam Kirsch is an editor at the Wall Street Journal*'s weekend* Review *and author, most recently, of* Who Wants to Be a Jewish Writer?: And Other Essays *(Yale University Press).*

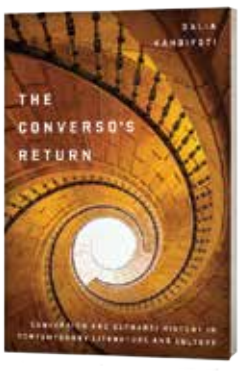
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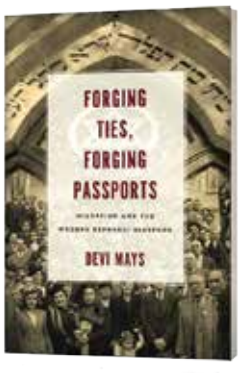
Stepchildren of the Shtetl
The Destitute, Disabled, and Mad of Jewish Eastern Europe, 1800-1939
Natan M. Meir



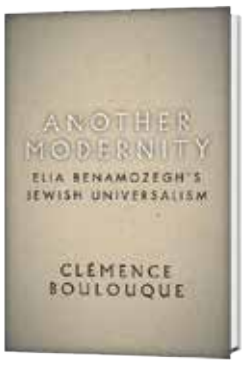
German as a Jewish Problem
The Language Politics of Jewish Nationalism
Marc Volovici



The Converso's Return
Conversion and Sephardi History in Contemporary Literature and Culture
Dalia Kandiyoti



Forging Ties, Forging Passports
Migration and the Modern Sephardi Diaspora
Devi Mays



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Crazy Rich Sephardim

BY SARAH ABREVAYA STEIN

The Last Kings of Shanghai: The Rival Jewish Dynasties That Helped Create Modern China
by Jonathan Kaufman
Viking, 384 pp., $28

They dealt in silks, spices, cotton, jewels, carpets, opium, metals, and horses; they built buildings, docks, and railways. Their reach extended from their home, Ottoman Baghdad, across the British Empire and Qing dynasty, throughout South and East Asia and beyond. They built company towns with schools, stores, and hospitals, where they trained young men to join their mercantile ranks. They commanded their own ships and forged relations with other merchants as well as with representatives of states. Over centuries, the Sassoon family crafted a global empire, which was navigated for generations in the family's native tongue, Judeo-Arabic.

The Kadoorie family would come to exceed the Sassoons in wealth, but their mercantile roots grew in soil tilled by the Sassoons. Four Kadoorie sons joined the migratory flow of young men who journeyed from Baghdad to Bombay, Shanghai, and Hong Kong (and well beyond) in the employ of the Sassoons. Most of these entrepreneurial merchants would never command more than middling wealth, but the Kadoories broke from the norm. Through investments in rubber, real estate, stocks, and electricity, the Kadoories built an empire of their own, which—whether through shrewdness or chance—proved more durable than the one that spawned it.



David Sassoon, seated, with three of his sons, Bombay, 1858. (Wikimedia.)

In *The Last Kings of Shanghai*, Jonathan Kaufman intertwines the stories of the Sassoon and Kadoorie dynasties, their foundational patriarchs, and the city in which they converged, Shanghai. It was also the city where the two families built landmark buildings (including the legendarily opulent hotels the Majestic and the Cathay), which were at the center of a glittering social scene for the city's elite visitors. For a time, Shanghai soared along with these unusual Ottoman Jewish émigrés. In the late 19th century, its infrastructure rivaled London's; by the 1930s, its skyline that of Chicago.

The Sassoons' and Kadoories' successes and failures ebbed and flowed in tandem with local, national, and imperial markets, and with the shifting tides of state power. Alas, Kaufman is not at his deftest in assessing the big picture: the historical backdrop Kaufman sketches for these "last kings" seems lifted from a 1950s history textbook. Consider his account of the initial move to Bombay (and thence into East Asia) by the scion of the Sassoon family, David Sassoon, which begins, "Through the darkened streets, the richest man in Baghdad fled for his life." In Kaufman's imagining, David's departure was catalyzed by a weak Ottoman economy, an aggressive (if not outright antisemitic) imperial state, and the gradual erasure of options for the Ottoman Jewish middle class and elite. Historians of the Ottoman Empire and Ottoman Jewry have long since upended these tropes. Their studies have shown the resilience of Ottoman society and the astonishing social mobility and imperial loyalty of Ottoman Jews. Kaufman ignores decades of such scholarship in favor of outdated works such as Cecil Roth's 1941 book, *The Sassoon Dynasty*.

In the late 19th century, Shanghai infrastructure rivaled London's; by the 1930s, its skyline that of Chicago.

Roth's account, like so much of his writing, was dizzyingly pioneering in its time. He was a feverish reader and wrote on topics as disparate as the Dead Sea Scrolls (on which he held a controversial and ultimately discredited view) and the dismantling of the Jewish cemetery of Salonica by the Greek municipality during the Second World War, a topic that would take decades to be treated with rigor again (all while boasting in the British *Who's Who* that his chief recreation was sleep). So much about Ottoman Jewish history has been uncovered, debated, and refined since Roth's day, with results he would probably relish but scarcely recognize. It amounts to laziness to rely upon his history of the Sassoons, which used the family to lionize British and Jewish achievement.

When Kaufman moves to the Chinese context, which he knows immeasurably better than the Ottoman (having written and reported on China for 30 years for the *Boston Globe* and as China bureau chief for the *Wall Street Journal* from 2002 to 2005), one might hope his grasp would tighten. But here, too, Kaufman's rendition of 19th-century geopolitics is surprisingly fusty. He frames the story thus:

> As Great Britain expanded across the globe through conquest, aggressive trade policies, rapid technological innovation, and harnessing the ambition and acumen of foreigners and outsiders like David Sassoon, China was becoming more closed, sclerotic, inward looking, and arrogant.

This idea that East Asian countries suffered a paucity of the derring-do and innovation that drove the West to greatness was a midcentury notion of scholars of China, who were themselves inspired by the thinking of Max Weber. My students would no longer stand for the caricature, and Kaufman shouldn't either.

Shanghai became a so-called treaty port in 1842 when the Treaty of Nanking ended the First Opium War, the very conflict that drove the Sassoon family out of the opium trade. As a new colonial hub, it was a city of vast inequity, with a foreign middle- and upper-class presence, growing Chinese professional and middle classes, and countless poor Chinese refugees who had fled there to escape famine and civil war. Within this maelstrom, the Sassoons and Kadoories cultivated a strategic relationship with the British that had already begun in India.

When Queen Victoria ascended to the throne in 1837, David Sassoon had taken his two eldest, Elias and Abdullah, who had been tutored in English language and history, to the Bombay waterfront to hear the proclamation:

> His sons wanted to wear British waistcoats and ties. David forbade it. All three wore the clothes of Baghdad—white muslin shirts and billowing

white trousers bound at the ankle. David wore his embroidered turban and dark robes. As a British military band played, the three joined the crowd shouting in English, "God Save the Queen!"

Kaufman describes this relationship with Great Britain as one of sincere fealty, but arguably for these families, as for so many erstwhile Ottoman Jewish families, the quest for European citizenship was strategic. Had the family's reach extended to the French Empire instead of the British, it would surely have been France that the Sassoon patriarch would have called "just and kind" in appeals for citizenship.

Without a doubt, Kaufman has a flair for the dramatic. The protagonists to whom he devotes the most time (mostly men—he's not kidding about the "kings" bit) lived very colorful lives. This is certainly true of Victor Sassoon, one of eight sons of David Sassoon, and the builder of the Sassoon's empire in China. In addition to having been a canny, Cambridge-educated businessman, Victor loved racing horses, chasing women, hosting lavish parties, and documenting his life (and lovers) with a camera. Victor's easy charm and playboy image—he seems to have always been wearing a tuxedo with "a carnation boutonniere in his buttonhole and a silver cigarette holder poking jauntily out of his mouth"—blinded many to his business talents. He had a knack for negotiation, a feel for what would prove to be in demand, and skill at assessing and managing those around him. Victor's friend and sometimes lover, the talented *New Yorker* writer Emily Hahn, wrote that Victor "liked intelligence." This taste for (other people's) smarts paid rich dividends.

Lawrence Kadoorie, too, is lavished with attention in Kaufman's account. The "Cast of Characters," with which he usefully prefaces the book, describes this Kadoorie as "sturdy, with powerful shoulders and a love for fast cars." Someone's eye, it seems, is on Hollywood.

Victor and Lawrence's halcyon Shanghai days were ended by the Second World War, which brought a tide of Jewish refugees from Europe and the threat of Japanese military might. At the height of the war, around one thousand Jewish refugees reached Shanghai each month, aided by Feng-Shan Ho, the Chinese consul-general in Vienna, who granted thousands of visas to desperate Jews. Some 18,000 of these displaced souls reached Shanghai, and the brothers Kadoorie (along with an initially reluctant Victor Sassoon, whom they pressured into helping) were their greatest benefactors.

Horace Kadoorie, the youngest of the brothers, was indefatigable in helping his fellow Jews. He sponsored a youth association that offered refugee children recreational opportunities, vocational courses, and job placements. He supported a summer camp, built a school in the family's name, and converted the family's Rolls-Royce into a school bus. Even when wartime food shortages became severe, Horace still managed to serve refugee children one meal a day. (Later, when the family had resettled in Hong Kong, he repeated his generosity with hundreds of thousands of Chinese women, men, and children who had sought refuge in the then British-controlled city.)

The Japanese occupation of Hong Kong and Shanghai's International Settlement in 1941, the Communists' resurgence, and the establishment of the People's Republic of China changed everything for the Sassoons and the Kadoories. Japanese occupation brought Shanghai to ruin and its wealthy to their knees. Kaufman's descriptions of the occupation, including Japan's internment of Shanghai's Jews and the extreme deprivation experienced by these forced inhabitants, are among the book's most original sections. While Elly Kadoorie died in Shanghai in the course of the occupation, his son Lawrence managed to use the time to dream up a way to rebuild Hong Kong. After the war, he shifted the family's investments to that city (in which Kadoories already had a financial footing, largely through their ownership of China Light and Power) and rebuilt his family empire.



Victor Sassoon with friends. (DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University.)



The Bund waterfront district, Shanghai, 1930s.

Victor Sassoon, by contrast, was forced into exile in India during the war, and subsequently compelled to turn over most of his assets—some half a billion dollars in buildings and companies—to Mao Zedong's regime. Now, Sassoon and his empire were branded imperialists and exploiters of the Chinese people. Buildings of Sassoon's that once housed his workers (and, temporarily, Jewish refugees) passed to Communist Party members.

The Kadoories, on the other hand, lived to experience a commercial and political reconciliation with China once Deng Xiaoping relaxed China's reliance on collectivism. Courted by Deng, Lawrence Kadoorie invested a billion dollars in the country, and his China Light and Power electrified Guangzhou beginning in the late 1970s. These were investments most foreign businesses would have avoided. But they more than paid off, sealing the Kadoories' place among the wealthiest citizens of present-day Hong Kong.

Like its cover, *The Last Kings of Shanghai* is a crude layering of snapshots, though many of the scenes they depict are fascinating. It is in awe of the luxury, landmarks, and encounters with power. In the Sassoon and Kadoorie families, Kaufman has landed on a gem of a subject. Alas, these towering family stories have yet to be written with the sensitivity and depth they deserve.

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Ireland and the Promised Land

BY ALLAN ARKUSH

The Invention of Jewish Theocracy: The Struggle for Legal Authority in Modern Israel
by Alexander Kaye
Oxford University Press, 280 pp., $40

Most American Jews are deeply convinced that religion ought to be a private matter, so when battles over the Sabbath or conversion or kashrut erupt in the Jewish state, they are often befuddled. Why isn't Israel more like America, they wonder. In his ambitious new book, Alexander Kaye instructively raises the question of why Israel isn't even *less* like the United States.

During the long diaspora, determining the relationship between religion and state was, unsurprisingly, never a central concern of the stateless Jewish people. Nor, as the Israeli scholar Aviezer Ravitzky has frequently observed, did any premodern Jewish thinker ever envision the creation of a Jewish state in the Land of Israel prior to the coming of the messiah. Even in the late 19th century, when many religious Jews joined the Zionist movement, few gave any thought to the kind of polity that ought to be established. There were much more urgent and basic tasks at hand. By the 1940s, however, when statehood was finally within sight, a number of leading religious Zionists began to think more concretely about the role of Judaism in the Jewish state.

They did so, naturally enough, by reaching back to the past for models. Some argued that the time had come to set up a state based on the law of the Torah, a halakhic state in which Jewish law would be the law of the land. Such thinkers saw themselves as restorers of a lost past, but Kaye argues that they were, in fact, inventing something new: the idea of Jewish theocracy. A liberal himself, Kaye clearly deplores this idea—but not primarily on liberal grounds. According to his account, these would-be theocrats, preeminently Yitzchak Herzog, the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Israel, were, in fact, rejecting the traditional Jewish conception of politics in favor of a new, foreign model.

Fortunately, there was no chance of the State of Israel becoming anything remotely like a theocracy in 1948. But in the years following Israel's failure to adopt a constitution that would have thoroughly disempowered them, theocratic ideas became deeply rooted in certain sectors of the Israeli population and continue to pose a threat to Israeli democracy. Kaye appears to believe that demonstrating the alien origins of these ideas will discredit them, but he has obscured the fact that they also have deep roots in traditional Jewish thought—and pulling up those roots isn't as easy as he would like it to be.

It was a Jew, it seems, the historian Josephus, who coined the term "theocracy," and he did so in order to characterize the regime outlined in the Torah. While Josephus's first-century Greek-language writings played no part in shaping the Jewish political tradition, the notion of theocracy emerged there afresh, in essence if not in name, in the medieval period and is most closely associated with Maimonides. This was what Ravitzky called the "unifying model," which imagined a regime presided over by an ideal ruler upholding and enforcing the Torah's divine law. Maimonides, as Ravitzky puts it, "traces the figure of a prophetic philosopher who is also sovereign king: spiritual-religious and socio-political power in one locus, with the two spheres merging into a single personality and a single legislative enterprise."

In the early 1920s, as civil war raged in Ireland between unionists and nationalists, de Valera took refuge in Rabbi Herzog's home.

Kaye gives this model very short shrift indeed. He hastens to point out that another Israeli scholar of Jewish thought, Menachem Lorberbaum, has "argued that even Maimonides did not imagine halakha as an exclusive legal system." He writes, "Lorberbaum's interpretation of Maimonides shows that even those committed to a Maimonidean position need not pursue the ideal of the halakhic state. Maimonides himself recognized an entire realm of legal and political authority that is independent of halakha." That may well be so; Maimonides is, famously, among the most subtle and difficult thinkers in Jewish history. Nonetheless, he concluded his great legal code the *Mishneh Torah* with the "Book of Kings and Their Wars," a detailed halakhic blueprint for what appears to be a theocratic monarchy—and it was this model that became, as Ravitzky puts it, "dominant . . . in Jewish literature throughout the generations."

Kaye pays much more attention to the much less famous 14th-century Spanish talmudist Nissim of Gerona. The Ran (the acronym by which he was known to tradition) was less a legal pluralist than a dualist. Presciently, he argued that the halakha "was not intended for the practical running of a state" and, consequently, that "it certainly had no claim to being the exclusive legal system for the Jewish state." Even in biblical times, the Ran argued, it was necessary to establish alongside the metaphysically perfect but practically insufficient halakha a parallel legal regime, the extrahalakhic law of the Jewish king. The Ran's position was not universally accepted, Kaye notes, but "its basic outline was widely held. Premodern Jewish religious leaders typically believed that a nonhalakhic political law had to govern the Jewish community alongside halakha" and "that the Jewish king performed that function in biblical society, and that the king's authority was inherited by Jewish lay leaders after the decline of the monarchy."

Of course, regardless of what they thought about theocracy as an ideal, in actual practice Jews were always legal pluralists. They lived for centuries under overlapping legal systems while maintaining communal institutions that "operated alongside, and sometimes in conflict with, halakha." Thus, it is not surprising that when many religious Zionists began to think about a constitution for the new state, they thought about it in pluralist terms. Kaye's survey of such thinkers focuses mainly on Reuven Margulies, Shimon Federbusch, and Shlomo Gorontchik (later Goren, who, as chief rabbi of the IDF, blew the shofar at the Western Wall in June 1967). "All of them," he maintains, argued "for a constitutional regime that gave ample room to halakhic authority without foisting its discriminatory norms on an unwilling public." This, he notes, "made it possible to give halakha a role in the state while also insulating it from the challenges of modernity."

There were, however, religious Zionist thinkers who saw things differently, but for a substantive treatment of their ideas, one has to turn from Kaye's book to Asaf Yedidya's recent *Halakha and the Challenge of Israeli Sovereignty.* Yedidya discusses all of the thinkers Kaye treats and many others, including Ze'ev Jawitz, Pinkhos Churgin, Chaim Tchernowitz, and Meir Berlin (Bar-Ilan), each of whom argued for a version of the theocratic "unifying model." Yedidya concludes that most religious Zionist rabbis, in the pre-State years, advocated a form of "legal centralism, which maintained that all legal authority in the state must derive from a single source of authority—the current halakha and its ordained commentators."

The only one of these figures to whom Kaye devotes any attention is Meir Bar-Ilan, the Lithuanian-born rabbi who was for a time the leader of the religious Zionist movement in America (Bar-Ilan University is named after him). He doesn't do so, however, until he discusses post-1948 developments, when he retrospectively notes that "as early as 1922," Bar-Ilan had "made the claim that the Jewish tradition knows of no separation between church and state." This delay in noting (without elaborating on) Bar-Ilan's theocratic leanings seems to reflect Kaye's reluctance to break the rhythm of his overall narrative, which revolves around the role played in the late 1940s by Chief Rabbi Herzog.

Herzog was a forthright proponent of Jewish "theocracy," a word he used, albeit somewhat warily, "as a blanket term for a state ruled by God's law." In August 1947, after the Jewish National Council that would form the basis of the government of Israel appointed a committee to put together a constitution, he decided to write one himself, one under

which "the entire state would be governed by a single law: halakha." Herzog knew just how far out of step with contemporary Zionist liberals and socialists he was. He was aware that "he had no option but to propose modifications to halakha in order to make it fit with modern democracy," and did everything he could to overcome such obstacles as Maimonides's prohibition of the appointment of non-Jews to political authority. Still, as Kaye points out, Herzog remained committed to the idea "that the state courts should even prosecute people for some religious transgressions, such as the public desecration of the Sabbath and sexual immorality."

All of this prompts Kaye to ask two crucial questions:

> Why did Herzog take such strong exception to legal pluralism? Why did he reject a model for the Jewish state that drew firmly on halakhic precedent, provided reasonable solutions to the challenges of accommodating both halakha and democracy, and received support from within the religious Zionist community?

Having set aside the old theocratic "unifying model" and brushed under the rug all of the earlier religious Zionist thinkers who adhered to it, Kaye seems to have no choice but to look beyond the realm of tradition for an explanation. He finds one in Ireland.

Before emigrating to Palestine in 1936, the Polish-born Herzog had been for 15 years chief rabbi of Ireland, where he was especially close to Éamon de Valera, the nationalist leader who would become the first prime minister of the Irish Free State. The two men were not only good friends, they also supported each other's nationalist cause. At one point in the early 1920s, as civil war raged in Ireland between unionists and nationalists, de Valera even took refuge in Herzog's home.

Kaye maintains that Herzog's time in Ireland must have impressed upon him the importance of legal sovereignty for nationalist movements. Moreover, just as Herzog was leaving the country, Ireland provided, according to Kaye, "a model of how to incorporate religious law into a modern democratic constitution." The new constitution "promoted religious teachings in many areas of social and political life, including constitutional law" and "enshrined religious doctrine" within itself.

Herzog was far less impressed with the all-too-secular draft of an Israeli constitution produced by a jurist named Leo Kohn, a professor of international relations at the Hebrew University, who drew inspiration from several foreign constitutions. Herzog contrasted Kohn's work with the Irish constitution, which he saw as a good, democratic precedent for an Israeli constitution that would guarantee "that the Jewish religion has a special status as the religion of the majority of the citizens." Kaye thus has reason to conclude that "Herzog's experience in Ireland goes a long way to explaining his consistent commitment to the principle of legal centralism and its indispensability to Zionist national goals." But he goes somewhat too far when he asserts that this experience "also suggests why he did not consider a 'theocratic-democratic' constitution to be paradoxical. If Ireland," Kaye asks, "could give the Catholic religion such pride of place in its new constitution, why should Israel not do the same?" Despite its recognition of the Catholic Church, Ireland was not, by Herzog's own definition, a theocracy.

Ireland wasn't Herzog's only constitutional model, Kaye admits, noting that Herzog wrote "in the midst of a global trend of postcolonial nationalists creating legally centralist states." Of course, this was also true of secular Zionist legal thinkers, who "had been educated under the auspices of the British in Palestine or in European universities that espoused the same ideology of the supremacy of the law of the centralized state." True, these jurists envisioned a very different kind of state than Herzog did, but, according to Kaye, this "masks a deeper identity," namely the ideal of "a state in which only one legal regime could rule within its borders."

This is an astute comparison, but I wonder about that word "deeper." It seems to me that disagreement about the authority of God's law is more fundamental than agreement about centralization. And even if Kaye has helped explain the departure of Herzog and his allies from some of their religious Zionist predecessors in this respect, he hasn't explained the deeper difference with them. Why did he, unlike the earlier religious Zionist thinkers Kaye discusses, adhere so strongly to the old "unifying model," in which halakha was the law of the land?



Rabbi Yitzchak Herzog speaks at a Zionist rally at the Neu Freimann displaced persons camp, Munich, 1946. (Photo by Jack Sutin, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.)

As Herzog himself well understood, there was no chance of this model being adopted in his day; the overwhelming majority of Israel's earliest citizens had no appetite for theocracy. Within the religious Zionist camp, however, Herzog's outlook quickly displaced what Kaye portrays as the previously dominant pluralists. According to Kaye, the transformation was so thorough that by the early 1950s, "the hope of the realization of a Torah state" had become "the cornerstone of religious Zionist thinking." How did this happen? Kaye doesn't say.

What he does say is that this shift was not ephemeral. Even after their hopes were dashed, "religious Zionist leaders . . . did not stop believing that the State of Israel should have a single unified halakhic law." But they did stop saying it. In public, they accepted limitations on the authority of the halakha (while continuing to struggle over specific issues), strategically reverting to pragmatic pluralism. But "among themselves, religious Zionists . . . remained committed . . . to the ideal that the entire state and its law should be governed by halakha."

Kaye doesn't object to such strategic hypocrisy. What bothers him is that in recent years it has been waning. Increasingly, religious Zionists have been challenging the authority of Israel's civil courts and even calling for the replacement of civil law with halakha. As an example, Kaye quotes Bezalel Smotrich, the leader of the small far-right Tkuma Party, who, in 2019, "publicly sought responsibility for the state's judiciary in order to implement halakhic law in Israel." He did not succeed. The final and most extreme example that Kaye brings of this theocratic trend is Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh, whose "The Way of Life Movement" calls for the overthrow of the Israeli government and its replacement by a halakhic state. These dangerous developments, Kaye concludes, "all flow directly from the legal philosophy that religious Zionists began to promote in the late 1940s." But is this really true?

Take Kaye's last and most egregious example, Rabbi Ginsburgh, who has celebrated Jewish terrorism and publicly called for the overthrow of every left-wing and right-wing Israeli government "until the rule of Torah is established in the Land." His "battle cry," Kaye writes, "is like a distorted version of religious Zionist ideology . . . it is easy to recognize the echo of Herzog and other religious Zionists of his generation." But Ginsburgh is an American-born rabbi, affiliated with Chabad, whose intellectual influences, such as they are, are elsewhere. He isn't echoing Herzog; they are both echoing something much older: the venerable, unifying, theocratic model that Kaye works so hard to marginalize in his history.

Kaye writes, in the end, that his "genealogy of the halakhic state supports the work of those who question halakhic supremacy . . . from within the Jewish tradition." That is certainly a worthy project. But even politically engaged intellectual history must do more than tell a story that includes only the intellectual ancestors with whom you agree while attributing the ideas you don't like to those outside the family.

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

Tragedy and Power

BY DENNIS ROSS

The Inevitability of Tragedy: Henry Kissinger and His World
by Barry Gewen
W. W. Norton, 480 pp., $30

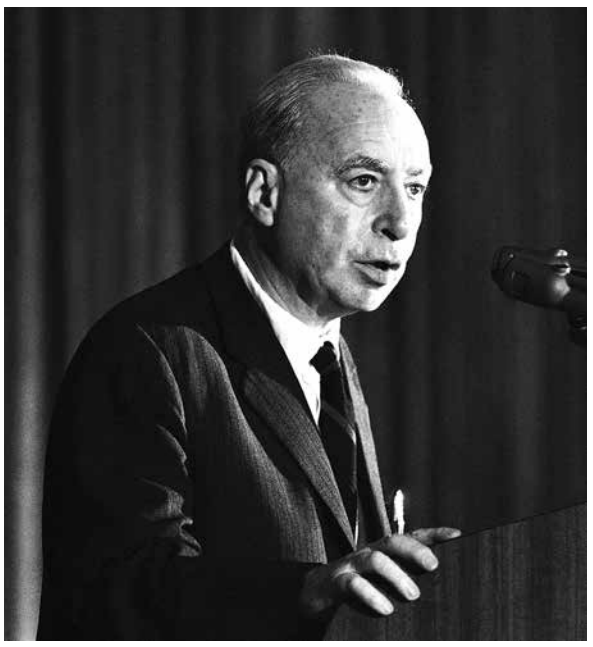
Like most other foreign policy hands of my generation, I have been fascinated by Henry Kissinger for as long as I can remember. When I read his first books, *A World Restored*, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, and *The Troubled Partnership*, in graduate school, I learned how the Congress of Vienna produced global stability and how artful diplomacy perpetuated it, how nuclear weapons transformed international relations, and how to understand and manage tensions in the NATO alliance. Later, from reading his memoirs of his time at the White House and the State Department, I gained greater insight into his pragmatic, piecemeal approach to negotiations. The interim agreements he mediated between Israel and Egypt and the disengagement he brokered between Israel and Syria after the Yom Kippur War were often on my mind during my own work as an American diplomat in the Middle East.

For the first two years of his administration, Nixon had largely excluded Kissinger from Middle East diplomacy, fearing that his Jewishness would make it hard to restore ties with Egypt and Syria. Ironically enough, it was Kissinger who renewed America's relations with both countries. His fundamental concept, with which the State Department disagreed, was that key Arab leaders needed to see that the Soviets could not help them regain the land Israel had occupied after the 1967 and 1973 wars and that the United States could. But for that to happen, America had to maintain a relationship of trust with Israel, one that would enable the Israelis to feel that we could be counted on to stand by them in the most difficult times and meet their security needs. And they also had to know that even as we brokered Israeli withdrawals, we would always have Israel's back.

These working principles remained essential to me. But I also learned something else from Kissinger: Only go for agreements that are within the realm of possibility; don't try to shoot the moon. Accept the fact that an incremental approach makes sense in circumstances where the very act of reaching an agreement about anything can show each party that *something* can be done with the other. As things proceed, limited agreements on the more fundamental issues may be attainable, and peace might even come within reach.

Kissinger eschewed a comprehensive approach to peace in the Middle East not because it was undesirable but because he knew it was unachievable. I shared that assessment until 2000, seven years after the Oslo Accords. The Israeli government believed that it was time to try to settle the conflict, and I thought a comprehensive, final deal might finally be in the cards. That turned out to be wrong, largely because Yasser Arafat was incapable of walking away from the conflict. The struggle defined him, and he could not transform himself. Now, 20 years later, with both Israelis and Palestinians having lost faith in each other, a Kissingerian approach seems the only way forward. (The recent breakthrough between the United Arab Emirates and Israel follows this approach. It did not bring peace between Israelis and Palestinians, but it did signal that other Arab states won't wait forever for that peace. Simultaneously, it showed that normalization will be linked to Israel's relations with the Palestinians. In this case, the Emirates required that Israel not unilaterally annex the territories in the West Bank allotted to it in the Trump Peace Plan. Other Arab states are likely to condition their moves on positive Israeli steps toward the Palestinians—e.g., releasing prisoners or limiting settlement activity or increasing the territory in the West Bank that Palestinian Authority can govern.)

Kissinger eschewed a comprehensive approach to peace in the Middle East not because it was undesirable but because he knew it wasn't achievable.



Hans Morgenthau, University of Chicago professor, criticizes US policy in Vietnam at a "teach-in," May 15, 1965, in Washington, D.C. (AP Photo/HWG.)

As someone who had long studied Kissinger, taught his books in my classes, and met with him from time to time, I was convinced that I understood his approach to international relations. And yet, Barry Gewen's new book comes as something of a revelation. Kissinger's life story—from his childhood in Germany to his return to Germany as a US soldier, and on to his academic triumphs at Harvard and beyond—has been told many times, but Gewen's book is more than a biography; it is a thorough exploration of Kissinger's worldview and how he came to it. For Gewen, it is impossible to understand Kissinger's conceptual approach to international politics without understanding the profound impact that living in Nazi Germany as a child, until his family fled to America in 1938 when he was 15 years old, had on him.

As a young boy, Kissinger and his family lived a comfortable middle-class existence in Furth, a city that had been relatively tolerant of Jews before the rise of the Nazis. His father, Louis, was a teacher and an observant Jew who identified strongly with German culture. He lost his job and most of his friends after the passage of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, but still couldn't bring himself to leave. Fortunately, Kissinger's mother, Paula, was less sentimental. A cousin in the United States helped the Kissingers come to America in August of 1938, not long before Kristallnacht. In all, Kissinger would lose 13 members of his extended family in the Holocaust. His father, Louis, Gewen writes, "was never the same."

> His unswerving loyalty to the Fatherland had been stolen from him, and he had nothing to fall back on. All his assumptions about himself and his life, all his expectations, had been smashed to pieces. He was a broken man.

Gewen argues that the arc of his father's life had a deep impact on the moral development of Kissinger as an adolescent, even suggesting that "it would be hard, even misguided, for any Kissinger biographer to resist the temptation of seeing Kissinger's attention to the realities of power as compensation for his father's powerlessness." He cites a letter at the end of World War II, in which Kissinger writes that "weakness [is] synonymous with death." Maybe, but even if his view of power was not some form of compensation, Kissinger had good reason to see the world through untinted glasses. In words that Gewen also quotes, Kissinger declared, "I had seen evil in the world." And, of course, he had.

Psychology, however, is only part of the explanation. To elucidate the nature of Kissinger's conceptual framework, Gewen analyzes the thinking of three other German Jewish intellectuals who also fled Nazi Germany, found refuge in the United States, and drew broad, sweeping lessons about the meaning of the collapse of the Weimar Republic and the rise of Hitler: Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt, and Hans Morgenthau. They, too, had seen evil and thought deeply about what gives rise to it. Having observed Hitler's

ascent to power, they understood the fragility and unreliability of democratic institutions.

Strauss and Arendt rejected the idea of man's essential goodness after their direct experience of his inhumanity. They were "confirmed freethinking individualists," but they didn't trust "liberals" who tolerated extremists, failing to recognize the threat they ultimately pose to the very fabric of society. They also didn't believe in utopian solutions to conflict, which they saw as inherent in human nature. They understood the yearning for peace but feared weakness in the face of totalitarian tyrants. Strauss could have spoken for both of them when he referred to the "sorry spectacle of justice without a sword or of justice unable to use the sword." Strauss and Arendt "deserve special attention," Gewen writes, "for the window they can provide into Kissinger's mind." But, he admits, neither "had any lasting ties to him." The link between them and Kissinger was Strauss's academic colleague, Arendt's close friend, and Kissinger's mentor: Hans Morgenthau.

Morgenthau arrived in the United States in 1937, a year before Kissinger, not as an adolescent but as a 33-year-old law professor whose career at the University of Frankfurt had been ended by the Nazis. He arrived in America with shaky knowledge of English and few job prospects. He turned down an offer to be an elevator operator before landing "a temporary post teaching night school at Brooklyn College." One very arduous and hugely productive decade later, he was a tenured professor at the University of Chicago. Following the publication of his masterwork *Politics Among Nations* in 1948, he became a central figure in political science. "By the time of the second edition in 1954, he was being called 'world-renowned.'"

Morgenthau was effectively the founder of the school of Realism in international relations, which Gewen sums up very well: History shows that men will always strive for power; consequently, mere good intentions cannot prevail in the anarchic world of international affairs. To prevent war, one must be prepared to wage it. Moral imperatives cannot guide policy because they tend to lead sooner or later to excesses, to absolutes. International law won't end conflicts or preclude them or even provide limits unless nation-states decide that respecting it is in their national interests. The form of government does not matter; geography, history, and national character do. Finally, democracies are no more likely to be peace loving than authoritarian states.

Morgenthau was not amoral, nor did he believe that morality had no role in international politics. Preventing war, after all, is a moral necessity, especially in the nuclear age. Morality can create boundaries, but it is up to nation-states themselves to decide whether to respect those boundaries. What can induce them to do so? The only means, Gewen paraphrases Morgenthau, for "curbing humans' unalterable lust for power" is to neutralize "it by setting off force against force through a balance of power." For Morgenthau, the balance of power "was as old as political history itself" and an "essential stabilizing factor."

In other words, "Realism" meant not fantasizing about ending conflict but limiting it, managing it, and deterring it. Nation-states were the foundational element of international relations. They would follow their interests, and those that were aggressive had to be confronted with countervailing pressure and force where necessary. Preventing powers from gaining hegemony was essential, and, while there was evil in the world, demonizing adversaries made it difficult to reach understandings when they might otherwise be necessary and attainable.

This is very much the world that Kissinger saw. The two men first met when Morgenthau was a visiting professor at Harvard in the early 1950s and Kissinger was already a legendary graduate student. Their immediate rapport led to close intellectual ties that had palpable repercussions. "Morgenthau's fingerprints," Gewen writes, "were all over Kissinger's first book," *A World Restored*. And as Kissinger said of Morgenthau years later, even after disagreements about Vietnam, Soviet Jewry, and other matters, "I never ceased admiring him or remembering the profound intellectual debt I owed him."

The balance of power has been Kissinger's guiding concept both as a historian and as a diplomat. He has never believed that democracy is a universal imperative, or in the inevitability of progress. According to Gewen, he holds that the aim of foreign policy is "not to steer the world along some preordained path to universal justice but to pit power against power to rein in the assorted aggressions of human beings and to, try as best they can, to avert disaster" and preserve equilibrium. Power is necessary, and force may be required, but force must be seen through the lens of diplomacy, not as a substitute for it: "Force might conquer the world but it could never legitimize itself" in the eyes of the defeated. Generals wage war; diplomats construct peace.



National Security Advisor Henry A. Kissinger, President Richard M. Nixon, National Security Council Senior Staff Member for the Far East John H. Holdridge, and Chinese premier Zhou Enlai in the Great Hall of the People, Beijing, during Nixon's visit to China, February 23, 1972. (Photo by John Dominis/The LIFE Picture Collection via Getty Images.)



President Richard Nixon with Henry Kissinger on the White House grounds, ca. 1974. (Pictorial Press Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo.)

When, with Nixon, he contemplated the opening to China, Kissinger said he "was thinking of China as a road to balance the Soviet Union." When clashes took place along the Soviet-Chinese border in the summer of 1969, he and Nixon "came to the conclusion, which was sort of a balance-of-power one, that if you don't know what to do, support the weaker against the stronger."

In his opening chapter on the Nixon administration's policy toward Chile and, in his later, extensive discussions of its Vietnam policy and its pursuit of détente, Gewen seeks not only to understand Kissinger's approach but to defend it. Critics have often accused him of sabotaging the democrati-

cally elected regime of Salvador Allende, but, from Kissinger's point of view, the Castro-like Allende threatened to strengthen the Soviet presence in the Western Hemisphere, which had to be stopped. In Vietnam after 1969, the United States had no good options, and Kissinger sought an exit. But it had to be one that would not weaken American credibility, since Kissinger considered it essential for our allies to know they can count on us and for our adversaries to know that they cannot challenge us.

As for the policy of détente with the Soviet Union, it was necessary for managing a world in which nuclear weapons could threaten humanity itself. But Kissinger's commitment to détente also showed how out of step he was with the American ethos of democratic exceptionalism. Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson, one of détente's fiercest critics, described the policy as "a body without a soul—a policy indifferent to human rights."

In an idealistic America, Kissinger was a realist, the proponent of a stance that, in his own words, lacked "a ready constituency." This, according to Gewen, is unfortunate. He is deeply troubled by the chaos that characterizes not just international relations but the failure of Americans to comprehend them. He sees in Kissinger's Realism "the possibility of rationality, coherence, and a necessary long-term perspective at a time when all three of these qualities seem to be in short supply."

American hegemony, Gewen says, is not sustainable or even possible, and as Kissinger long ago concluded, it was not even in our interests because it was bound to "gradually unite the world against the United States." But the balance of power is different; it is sustainable because it is largely ruled by reason and interests, and because it relies "on negotiation and compromise instead of compulsion and emotion." Kissinger argued—and Gewen clearly agrees—that the balance of power was the one system that managed to create order out of diversity, and "our age is insistently, at times almost desperately, in pursuit of a concept of world order."

Gewen's book is, then, not just an intellectual biography but an argument about what the American role in the world ought to be and the structure of international relations we should aim to achieve. Here he joins a thriving cottage industry of those now trying to define a new American approach to the world. I count at least five other schools in the mix. Like Gewen, they are responding in different ways to our overreach and the failures of globalism.

There is the America First school, which President Trump represents, and which draws its inspiration from an emerging new school of nationalist intellectuals who advocate for the importance of national sovereignty against imperial overreach. On first blush, this might sound like Kissinger and Morgenthau's Realism, but it bears little in common with their conception since there are no allies or enduring interests other than what serves the state. This leads to a transactional foreign policy that tends to be focused on short-term gains and seems clearly to fall short in dealing with global problems like pandemics.

Next, we have the "restrainers," a group represented by the recently founded Quincy Institute, which makes foreign policy arguments amenable to both Senators Bernie Sanders and Rand Paul. Both its left- and right-wing constituents are united by the view that America's pursuit of hegemony is to blame for so much of the world's disorder. Thus, the United States needs to demilitarize its foreign policy approach and cut back on its military presence overseas. The striking characteristic of this group is that it recognizes no predatory powers in the world: the actions of China, Russia, and Iran are almost inevitably understood as defensive. Strauss's recognition that there is no justice without the sword is utterly alien to this group.

In an idealistic America, Kissinger was a realist, the proponent of a stance that, in his own words, lacked "a ready constituency."

Then we have those who believe the answer lies in recognizing spheres of influence, whose most thoughtful proponent is Harvard professor Graham Allison. His fear of China's rise and the "Thucydides Trap"—the increased risk of war when a rising power seems poised to displace an existing great power—drive his arguments. For him, the key to avoiding both conflict and imperial overreach is to recognize China's and Russia's spheres of influence. There are at least two problems with this approach: First, it dooms all those countries in the Chinese, Russian, and (to a much lesser degree) Iranian spheres to their domination. Second, it assumes that the spheres of influence are static rather than expanding. This may actually increase the potential for conflict as the limits of the spheres are tested and become points of friction.

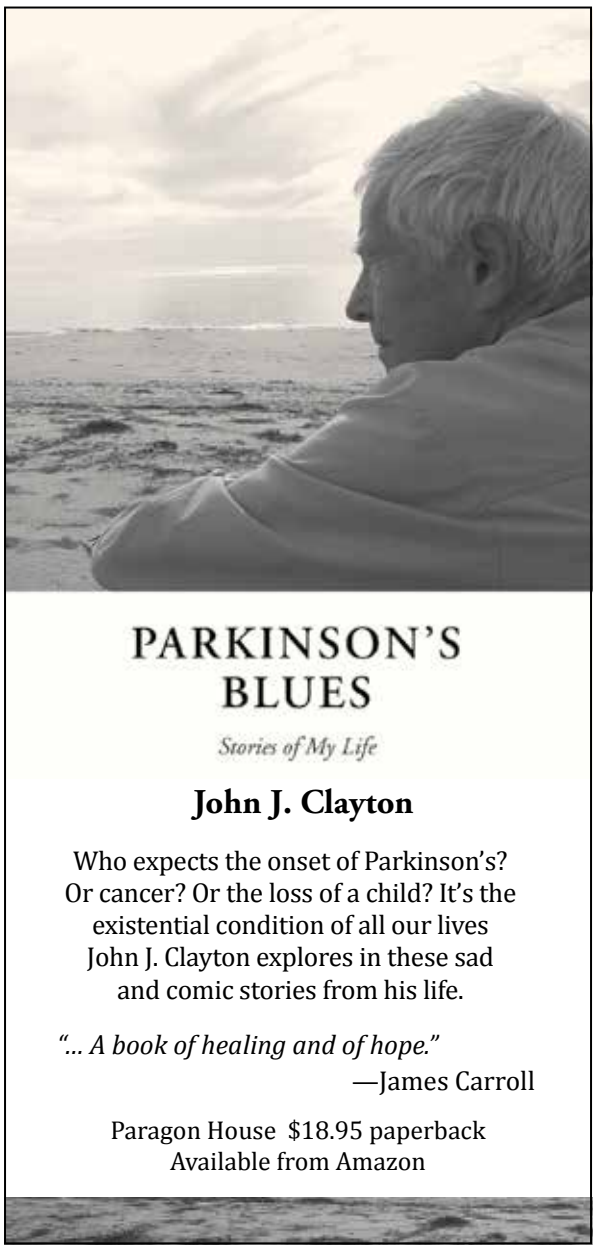
The quasi-Realists, led by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, make up the fourth school. Like Morgenthau, they are true adherents of the balance of power. They don't believe, however, that we need the military presence we presently have in Europe or Asia, arguing that our allies and partners can carry a far greater load. They are "off-shore balancers" and have their share of followers, especially when it comes to the Middle East. What distinguishes them from Morgenthau or Kissinger is their rejection of active American leadership (and the prudent use of force necessary for such leadership).

Finally, there are those, such as Robert Kagan and John Ikenberry, who remain committed to a liberal, rules-based international order. They point out that the international order that the United States put together and sustained in the seven decades following World War II provided relative peace and increased global prosperity. They do not deny that it had flaws, including US imperial overreach on the one hand and a lack of burden sharing on the other. Still, they nonetheless argue it remains far superior to any of the alternatives. Here the problem is one of convincing the American public of our ongoing responsibilities at a time of understandable fatigue. Just as Kissinger found it hard to sustain a "realist" foreign policy, the Kagan-Ikenberry school seems out of step with public and elite attitudes.

Still, the COVID-19 pandemic may well trigger a new look at the importance of the US retaining the responsibility to mobilize coordinated multinational responses to pandemics and other crises. Similarly, the need to set limits without going to war with China and Russia will also argue for a more activist international American role—one that could certainly draw lessons, as Gewen hopes, from Kissinger's balance-of-power approach.

What the quasi-Realists and the America Firsters fail to understand, it seems to me, is the role of soft power. Soft power is not just a brand that attracts others; it means America stands for certain values that lead others—certainly our allies—to instinctively embrace the objectives we establish. Despite his famously hardheaded Realism, Kissinger understood the importance of American values, often writing that America's foreign policy could not betray them. But values did not play a central role in the policies he implemented. The soft power he wielded so effectively was the perception of American competence. This, along with his deep sense of the inevitability of tragedy in international affairs, is a legacy that American foreign policy makers would do well to remember.

Dennis Ross is the author of several influential books, most recently Be Strong and of Good Courage: How Israel's Most Important Leaders Shaped Its Destiny *(PublicAffairs), with David Makovsky. Ambassador Ross held key foreign policy roles under Presidents Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Clinton, and Obama. He is currently counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He teaches at Georgetown's Center for Jewish Civilization.*



The Mayor and the Massena Blood Libel

BY GARY STEIN

The Accusation: Blood Libel in an American Town
by Edward Berenson
W. W. Norton & Company, 256 pp., $26.95

On September 22, 1928, two days before Yom Kippur, four-year-old Barbara Griffiths disappeared in the woods outside Massena, New York, a village of 10,000 residents on the Canadian border. A rumor quickly spread that echoed the vilest of antisemitic tropes of the Old World: Barbara had been kidnapped and murdered by the town's Jews, who needed the blood of a Christian child for some depraved holiday ritual. The Massena blood libel might have started with "a Greek café owner," an unidentified "foreigner," a "French Canadian," or "firefighters belonging to the Ku Klux Klan." Whoever first suggested it (swapping the old calumny about Passover for one about Yom Kippur in the process), it quickly took hold.

As the search for the missing girl went on, firefighters and villagers shone flashlights into the cellars of Jewish businesses, looking for her body. Instead of immediately squelching the false and fantastical rumors, Massena's mayor, W. Gilbert Hawes, authorized the police to investigate them. With Hawes's blessing, state troopers summoned Massena's rabbi to the town hall, where, after making his way through an agitated crowd, he was interrogated about the Jews' alleged propensity for human sacrifice on religious holidays. Fearing an imminent pogrom, Massena's small Jewish community frantically reached out to prominent Jewish leaders in New York City for help.

And then the black cloud passed, almost as quickly as it had appeared. Barely 24 hours after her initial disappearance, Barbara emerged from the woods, unharmed, and was reunited with her overjoyed parents. No one had done her ill; she had simply lost her way and fallen asleep, exhausted, in the tall grass. Yet if Barbara's ordeal was over, the story of the Massena blood libel was just taking flight. Exploding onto the front pages of newspapers across the country, it briefly became a cause célèbre, as shocked and shaken Jews expressed their outrage.

The story has now been admirably retold in Edward Berenson's *The Accusation: Blood Libel in an American Town*. Berenson, a professor of history at New York University, was born in Massena and heard about the incident from his grandparents, one of the 20 or so Jewish families who lived in the town at the time. Compactly framed and soberly presented, his highly readable account stands as an important corrective to the other book-length treatment of its subject, Saul Friedman's overwrought and (according to Berenson) unreliable *The Incident at Massena: Anti-Semitic Hysteria in a Typical American Town*, published in 1978.

In assessing what the Massena incident says about "the place of Jews in American life" and how "American attitudes about Jews compare with European ones," Berenson sharply disagrees with Friedman's central thesis. Friedman claimed Massena revealed a "cesspool" of antisemitic hatred deep in the soul of Christian America. In Berenson's judgment, this "turns the truth on its head": in fact, he writes, "the Massena blood libel ultimately showed that American civilization, at least in relation to its Jewish population, was stronger than many people thought."

State troopers summoned Massena's rabbi to the town hall, where he was interrogated about the Jews' alleged propensity for human sacrifice on religious holidays.



Barbara Griffiths, age four. (Courtesy of Barbara Klemens Griffiths.)

Surely Berenson is right about this. As is true of other antisemitic episodes in American history, such as General Grant's famous order expelling Jews from parts of Kentucky, Mississippi, and Tennessee during the Civil War, what is most extraordinary about the Massena incident is its quick, forceful condemnation by Jews and non-Jews alike. Just as Paducah, Kentucky, merchant Caesar Kaskel, despite having emigrated from Prussia only four years earlier, immediately hopped a train to the nation's capital to protest General Grant's un-American order directly to President Lincoln, so too did Massena's Lithuanian-born rabbi, Berel Brennglass, vehemently protest the gross prejudice with which he was confronted. When state trooper Corporal H. M. "Mickey" McCann asked if it was true that Jews offered human sacrifices on holy days, the diminutive rabbi responded with a tongue-lashing that may have reminded McCann, a veteran of the Great War, of his drill sergeant.

"I am dreadfully surprised," Brennglass barked, "to hear such a foolish, ridiculous and contemptible question from an officer in the United States of America, which is the most enlightened and civilized country in the world. Do you realize the seriousness of this question?" To which McCann could only meekly reply that "a foreigner" had told him so. "It is a false and malicious accusation," Brennglass assured him, adding, "We shall have to know who the foreigner is, he is dangerous and should be taught a lesson that he is in the United States of America." Imagine a rabbi giving such a lecture to a *uriadnik* in Russia or a *policjant* in Poland, where, as Berenson recounts, the blood libel continued its tragic and murderous path well into the 20th century and even after the Holocaust.

Two days after Barbara's reappearance, a contingent of officials including Hawes, McCann, McCann's boss, and the town attorney showed up at Massena's synagogue to offer their apology in person. The apology was not accepted. The congregation's leaders felt the matter was now in the hands of the national Jewish leaders they had alerted, Louis Marshall of the American Jewish Committee and Dr. Stephen S. Wise of the American Jewish Congress. Hawes then wrote a defensive letter to Dr. Wise expressing "regret" if he had caused any offense to the Jewish people, but Wise found it "too vague to constitute an apology." At Wise's urging, Governor Alfred E. Smith, at the time also the Democratic nominee for president, convened a hearing in Albany to investigate the investigators and how they had come to pursue what Smith called the "absurd" claim of ritual murder.

At the end of the hearing on October 4, Hawes finally issued a formal written apology that satisfied Wise. Hawes admitted he had committed "a serious error of judgment" and expressed "clearly and unequivocally" his "deep and sincere regret" that he had "seemed to lend countenance, even for a

moment, to what I ought to have known to be a cruel libel imputing human sacrifice as a practice now or at any time in the history of the Jewish people." "Far from giving hospitable ear to the suggestion," Hawes's apology continued, "I should have repelled it with indignation and advised the state trooper to desist from his intention of making inquiry of the respected rabbi of the Jewish community of Massena concerning a rumor so monstrous and fantastic." Corporal McCann issued his own written apology the same day, addressed to Rabbi Brennglass, saying he was "very, very sorry for my part in the incident at Massena" and now realized "how wrong it was of me to request you to come to the police station at Massena to be questioned concerning a rumor which I should have known to be absolutely false."

If the substance and cadence of these apologies sound like they could have been dictated by Stephen S. Wise himself, that is for good reason: they were. Ironically, in the most notorious blood-libel incident in American history, the propagators of the ritual murder myth served as its public debunkers. Only in America, it could be said.

"Why Massena, New York?" Professor Berenson asks. "And why there but nowhere else in the United States—and at no other time?" Here, Berenson's analysis is less satisfying.

To begin with, Berenson's premise is incorrect. Massena is *not* "America's only known instance of blood libel," as *The Accusation*'s book jacket claims. Blood libels had happened before, if infrequently—in New York City in 1850, for example, when hundreds of Irish immigrants ransacked a synagogue after rumors that Jews had murdered a Christian girl for her blood; in Clayton, Pennsylvania, in 1913, when a 16-year-old Slavic servant in a Jewish household feared she was about to be sacrificed on the eve of a bris and went into hiding, prompting claims she had been killed by Jews; in Chicago in 1919, when a mob demanded that a Jewish businessman surrender a Polish boy supposedly locked inside his dry goods store; and in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, that same year, when a Polish boy cut after falling from a tree falsely claimed that Jews had abducted him on the street, dragged him into a synagogue, and drained two bottles of blood from his leg.



The Ku Klux Klan burning crosses, Massena, 1928. (Courtesy of akg-images/Classicstock/Charles Phelps Cushing.)

The Accusation spends much of its time far away from Massena, offering a brief history of the blood libel itself, with detailed accounts of numerous specific European examples dating back to the accusation against the Jews of Norwich, England, in 1144. Curiously, however, Berenson does not describe the other American blood libels at all. He dismisses them as "isolated accusations" that provoked "little community response"—without explaining how Massena was any different, and without mentioning the strong local reaction the incidents provoked. In 1919, for example, Chicago's Jews complained to the police, as a result of which the leader of the mob and 17 of his cohorts were prosecuted. Massena is the most famous American blood libel, but it is not the only such incident, or, arguably, even the most serious one.

Berenson's answer to the question "Why Massena?" focuses on the wave of immigrants who came to Massena around the turn of the century, attracted by the job opportunities offered by a local power canal and Alcoa's new aluminum plant. Many of the new immigrants were from Italy, Greece, Poland, Romania, and Hungary, where the blood libel remained part of the folk culture. Many others were French Canadians from nearby Quebec, where anti-Jewish agitation and violence ran high in the 1910s and 1920s, with the ritual murder accusation figuring prominently in antisemitic literature.

Why did Mayor Hawes indulge such a pernicious and ludicrous stereotype about his town's Jews?

But the source of the Massena blood libel is not the most interesting or important question raised by the incident. What makes Massena unique is that Mayor Hawes, the town's top public official, gave the rumor credence and authorized the police to investigate it and interrogate the town's rabbi. Berenson, however, says little about Hawes. And much of what he does say is wide of the mark, judging from information about Hawes culled from local newspapers, including the *Massena Observer*, and other sources.

Berenson describes Hawes as a "prosperous dairy farmer who had married well and become a wealthy man" and quotes Wise's observation that Hawes had "a K.K.K. '*ponim*.'" The impression thus created—of a bigoted country bumpkin—bears little resemblance to reality. Hawes was in the dairy business, but he wasn't a "farmer." He owned and operated a dairy plant, H. & H. Dairy, which sold milk, cream, and butter. It was the first plant to pasteurize milk in Massena. Hawes did not, then or ever, live on a farm; as Berenson notes, he and his family occupied one of Massena's oldest and most expensive houses, located in the center of the village.

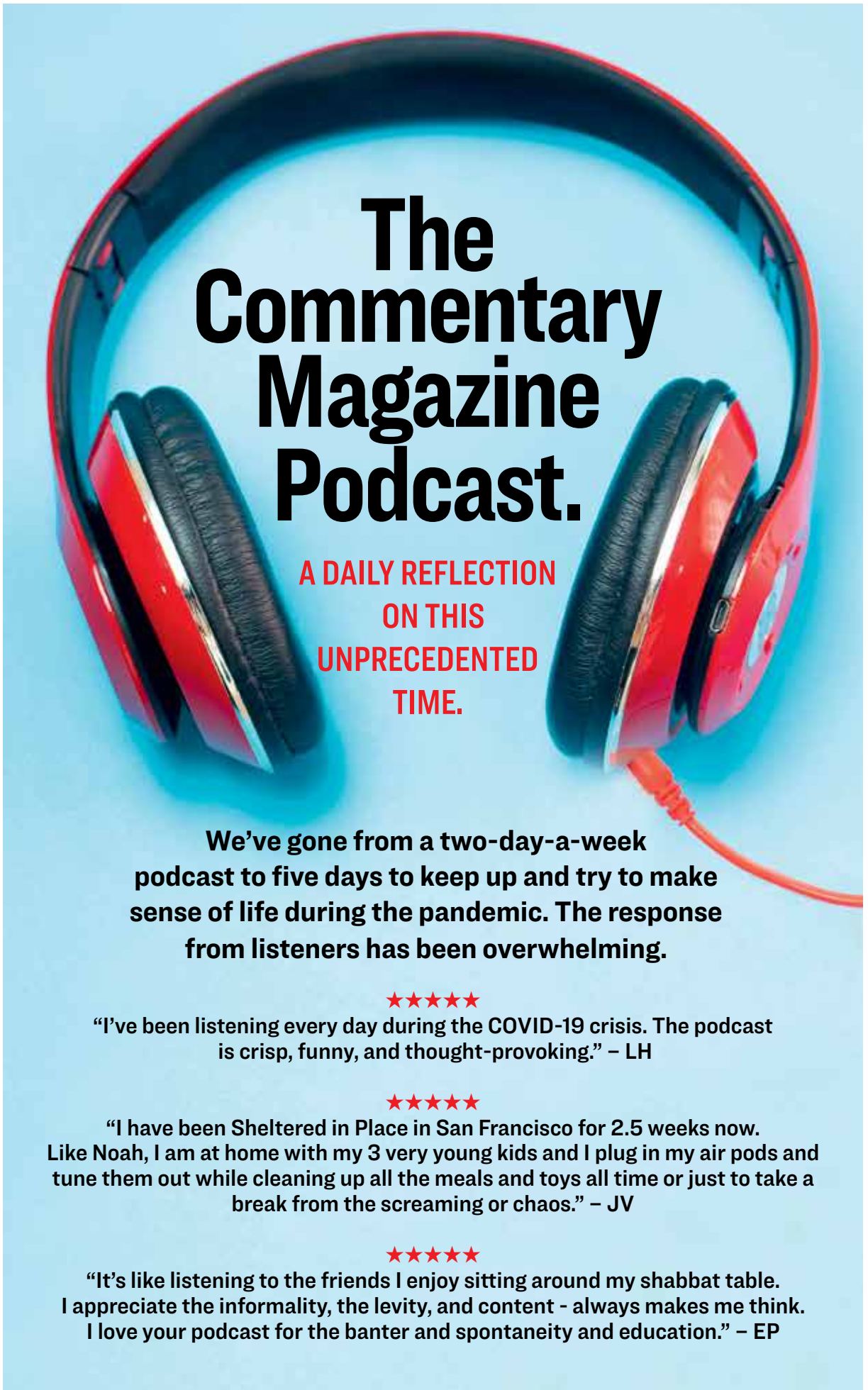
The dairy was only one of the mayor's business interests. He also owned a trucking and transport business. And he had recently purchased and planned to revive a once-famous health center at the site of Massena's natural mineral springs (he was already bottling and selling spring water tapped from the site). He was a cofounder and director of a cold storage plant and an ice cream manufacturing business, and he was an organizer and director of two different banks: the Massena Banking and Trust Company and the Massena Savings and Loan Association. Hawes was also the president of the Massena Chamber of Commerce.

A relative newcomer to Massena, Hawes was born into a prosperous family in Tarrytown, New York. The Hawes family traced its lineage to Edward Hawes, a Puritan who immigrated to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1636. His many descendants included leading citizens of Massachusetts and New York, active in the Revolutionary cause. Lieutenant Joseph Hawes, for instance, fought at Concord and Bunker Hill authored Wrentham's declaration of independence, which was issued June 5, 1776, and served in the Massachusetts legislature. A century later, the Hawes were still prominent. Mayor Hawes's father, Charles F. Hawes, acted as an agent for a major English fire insurance carrier covering Southern New York, New Jersey, and western Connecticut. He was later promoted to head agent for New England, and the family moved to Newton, Massachusetts, where Hawes attended high school.

As a young man, Hawes was more early 20th-century yuppie than yahoo. He worked in America's two most cosmopolitan cities: in Boston, for a railroad company, and then in New York, for a bank. When he married, he and his wife moved to New Rochelle, New York, which was already a tony suburb of Manhattan, with a significant Jewish population (it housed both Orthodox and Reform synagogues). Hawes did not arrive in Massena until 1918, when he was 31 years old.

Berenson suggests that Massena's native-born residents were particularly susceptible to anti-Jewish messages in 1928 because they were still reeling from the town's sudden transformation "from a largely agricultural community of Protestant, 'old-stock' Americans to an industrial boomtown with an ethnically and religious diverse population of Catholics, Protestants, Greek Orthodox, and Jews." Berenson also cites the "religious passions" unleashed by that year's presidential campaign following the Democratic Party's nomination of Al Smith, a Catholic. These are plausible hypotheses, but they have little if any explanatory power as applied to Mayor Hawes. Having never experienced life in preindustrial Massena, Hawes had no reason to be nostalgic for it. Indeed, in his businesses and as mayor, Hawes was an agent of modernization. Nor was he likely to have been so inflamed by the Republican anti-Catholic rhetoric of 1928 that he suddenly fell sway to religious bigotry. Hawes first ran for office as a Democrat, unseating the Republican incumbent, and he was a member of the relatively tolerant Congregational church.

There is, of course, no reason to believe that



Hawes was immune from the common prejudices that led to widespread discrimination against American Jews, especially those from Eastern Europe, in the early 20th century. But there is also no evidence prior to the blood-libel incident that he harbored any deep-seated anti-Jewish hatred. Hawes served alongside Joseph Stone, a prominent Jewish businessman, on the boards of the Massena Chamber of Commerce and the Massena Savings and Loan. The two men were also vice-chairmen of a charity committee. He sat with Isaac Friedman on the board of the Massena Banking and Trust Company and appointed Sam Shulkin, the brother of Willie Shulkin, whose interrogation helped ignite the incident, to serve on a Chamber of Commerce committee. "I have daily business intercourse with Jews and am on friendly terms with them," Hawes said when defending himself during the scandal.

Hawes also claimed his "best friends" growing up were "mostly Jewish boys." Berenson ridicules that claim as "certainly false" since Tarrytown's tiny, strictly Orthodox Jewish population at the time was "unlikely to associate with Gentiles." But this may be unfair, since Hawes spent much of his teens and early adulthood in places with less insular Jewish communities, such as Newton, Boston, Brooklyn, and New Rochelle. Even assuming its mayor was no philosemite, Berenson acknowledges that Massena was a place where the Jewish community "complained little of hostility to Jews" before the blood-libel incident.

So why *did* Mayor Hawes indulge such a pernicious and ludicrous stereotype about his town's Jews? As Berenson says, we'll never know precisely why. In his apology to Dr. Wise, Hawes claimed that his "serious error of judgment" was precipitated in part by "the excitement incident to the disappearance of the Griffith child of my community." Corporal McCann, in his apology, similarly blamed the pressure of the situation, claiming he was "terribly excited and fatigued at the time, having been on duty for many hours without food or rest." Self-serving and inadequate, to be sure, but these excuses find a measure of corroboration in the observations of George Gordon Battle, a New York City lawyer who attended the hearing in Albany on behalf of the AJC. Writing to Wise, Battle described Hawes and McCann as "unfortunate men" who had acted "through ignorance and weakness, rather than through malice."

In one sense, that verdict is comforting; in another, it is profoundly disturbing. Individualism, capitalism, rationalism, religious tolerance—these are the quintessentially American traditions and values thought to have stifled the growth here of the kind of virulent European-style antisemitism that gave rise to the blood libel. Hawes's life experiences and family background suggest he was fully steeped in those traditions and values. And yet, as an elected official in 20th-century America, he flirted, however briefly, with an accusation of Jewish ritual murder. If the crisis had continued—if little Barbara Griffiths had not resurfaced so quickly—would Hawes's New World sensibilities have kicked in and kept a lid on brewing barbarism? Fortunately, the Jewish community of Massena never had to find out.

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American Gods

BY MICHAL LEIBOWITZ

Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World
by Tara Isabella Burton
PublicAffairs, 320 pp., $28

In 2011, Matisyahu shaved his beard, cut his sidelocks, and tweeted the resulting photo with the caption, "No more Chassidic reggae superstar." Though this was perceived by many fans, especially in the Orthodox world, as a turn away from Judaism toward the secular world, Matisyahu himself didn't see it that way. Writing several years later about that time in his life, he described how he'd blended different practices to "reclaim" himself and his spirituality:

> I drank vodka for breakfast on Saturdays in *shul* and talked shit with the cool born-and-raised Crown Heights'ers. I studied philosophy and *chassidut* with a Russian original creative thinker who knew it from the inside (his parents were anti-Communist mystics). I read psychology books by RD Laing and spent time doing sessions with his protégé in England. I let go of all the dogma and began to do me.

In her sharp new book, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World,* journalist Tara Isabella Burton doesn't mention Matisyahu, but his desire "to do me" spiritually is a good example of the widespread rise of the "bespoke" religious identities she discusses. The trend, she writes, is motivated by Americans' hunger for "a spiritual identity and surrounding community that *precisely* reflects their values, their moral and social intuitions, their lived experience, and their sense of self."

Burton takes the reader through seven different movements in contemporary American culture, including wellness, witchcraft, fandom, the social justice movement, and right-wing atavism. She suggests not that each of these movements is a religion proper but, rather, that each provides one or more of the functional elements associated with organized religion—community, purpose, meaning, and ritual—and that Americans, especially millennials, are increasingly turning to them for a spiritual fix.

For much of the 20th century, it was commonly believed that, as modernity, science, and technology continued to advance, religion would retreat. But *Strange Rites* comes to argue that there is increasing evidence the so-called secular age has not rid us of religion; it has simply changed it.

Today, a quarter of American adults and 40 percent of millennials say they're religiously unaffiliated, but only 7 percent of all American adults call themselves "atheist" or "agnostic." Far more simply consider themselves "nothing in particular," which doesn't preclude belief in a non-Judeo-Christian higher power (55 percent), psychics (40 percent), or even the God of Abraham (17 percent). Even among those who do identify with a particular religious tradition, there are rising numbers who say their primary sources of spirituality lie outside their tradition. Finally, there are the growing number of "religious hybrids," people who say they belong to a particular religious tradition and believe or practice part of it but feel free to disregard elements that don't suit them or to supplement with rituals or beliefs from other traditions (this includes, for example, the 29 percent of Christians who say they believe in reincarnation). Burton estimates that these three groups, collectively termed the "Remixed," make up more than half of the American population and together exert an influence that touches almost every part of the cultural landscape. "We may not all be Remixed," she writes, "but we all live in a Remixed nation."

Among those who identify with a particular religious tradition, there are rising numbers who say their primary sources of spirituality lie outside their tradition.



Matisyahu, 2011. (Twitter.)

It is certainly true that religious life in America has changed quite a bit since mid-century, when almost half of Americans reported attending church and 60 percent of American Jews were affiliated with synagogues (a number never surpassed). Burton attributes the dramatic changes to several social and political factors, including declining trust in institutions and the spiritual seeking of the 60s. Still, her main focus is on a single, paradigm-shifting innovation: the Internet.

"Scholars of religion often claim that it's impossible to separate out the invention of the printing press from the Protestant Reformation," writes Burton:

> The technology that gave us the ability to sit with a text in the privacy of our own home and internalize and interpret its message for ourselves gave us at once a profound sense of agency and a retraction of the boundaries of a public sphere. Protestantism is, perhaps, the ultimate religion of the printed book. The Remixed religions we're about to explore are the religions of the Internet.

By "religions of the Internet," she means not that today's American religions necessarily play out in the digital sphere but, rather, that they respond to the demands of people whose lives are shaped by the Internet: people who are hyperindividualistic and location-independent and who demand creative roles in designing their own experiences.

Burton argues that early Internet fandom helped give rise to a transition from a "strictly consumer culture" to what media scholar Henry Jenkins terms a "participatory culture," in which private individuals act not only as consumers of content but as creators. Burton's account of this evolution is sketchy (did early 2000s Harry Potter fandom really give rise to new religious impulses?), but one need not buy into the cultural importance of "Snapewives" to accept that the digital age is one in which individuals demand narratives, practices, and communities they find personally meaningful.

In the realm of religion, this demand for personal, precisely tailored meaning has led to "unbundling," in which some elements of a religious tradition (beliefs, rites, sacred objects) are lifted from the other commitments traditionally thought to be tied to it. Thus, NBA player Joakim Noah regularly sports a Christian crucifix, Muslim prayer beads, and Tibetan Buddhist stones and says, "I'm a little bit of everything." Of course, this is not a purely contemporary phenomenon. Leonard Cohen was ordained as a Buddhist monk in 1996 but continued to consider himself Jewish, telling *The Guardian* in 2004, "I'm not looking for a new religion. I'm quite happy with the old one, with Judaism." And that's to say nothing of the self-described JeWitches (not mentioned in *Strange Rites*) who convened in Richmond, California, on a recent Shemini Atzeret to shake lulavs, cast circles, and pray to, among others, the ancient Canaanite storm god.

But the desire for personalized meaning doesn't only find its outlet in expressions of religious hybridism. Unbundling also means that people are increasingly likely to find at least part of their spiritual life in places that may seem, at first glance, entirely divorced from religion. For example, Burton argues that the implicit theology of Remixed culture finds clear

expression, not in a church or synagogue, but in the 4.2-trillion-dollar "wellness" industry, which encompasses everything from the New Age–tinged mantras of SoulCycle to a $66 jade "yoni egg," with its promises to "harness the power of energy work, crystal healing, and a Kegel-like physical practice." She writes:

> It's a theology, fundamentally, of division: the authentic, intuitional *self*—both body and soul—and the artificial, malevolent forces of *society*, *rules*, and *expectations*. We are born good, but we are tricked, by Big Pharma, by processed food, by civilization itself, into living something that falls short of our best life. Our sins, if they exist at all, lie in insufficient self-attention or self-care: false modesty, undeserved humilities, refusing to shine bright. We have not merely the inalienable right but the moral responsibility to take care of ourselves first before directing any attention to others. We have to listen to ourselves, to behave authentically, in tune with what our intuition dictates.

Faddish though contemporary wellness trends may seem, Burton points out that many elements of this doctrine of individual authenticity have antecedents in New Thought, an American spiritual movement that began in the mid-1800s when New Hampshire clockmaker Phineas Parkhurst Quimby developed what he called the "science of health." Described by Burton as "equal parts proto-psychotherapy and positive thinking, with a little bit of Christianity thrown in," Quimby's science of health claimed that people were the cause of their own illness or misfortune and could only get better by changing their inner psychological states.

This idea proved intensely popular with Americans, and those influenced by it included William James; Mary Baker Eddy, founder of the Church of Christ, Scientist; and Norman Vincent Peale, author of *The Power of Positive Thinking,* who officiated at Donald Trump's 1977 wedding. (There was even a Jewish interpretation of New Thought, "Jewish Science," which was founded in 1922 by Rabbi Morris Lichtenstein and emphasized the use of affirmative prayer in accessing the divine force within.)



A SoulCycle class led by Abby Effron, Washington, D.C. (Photo by Yue Wu/*The Washington Post *via Getty Images.)

Despite their similarities, there's a notable difference between New Thought in its earlier incarnations and contemporary wellness culture. While Quimby's early writings, Peale's *Power of Positive Thinking*, and Baker Eddy's Christian Science all "at least paid nominal lip service to the idea that there was some kind of divine or objectively moral system out there," the wellness movement collapses any distinction between the divine self and its corporeal counterpart. In doing so, writes Burton, wellness culture offers "the best" (or at least the most marketable) of both worlds by combining moral relativism with what she terms a "comforting veneer of metaphysical universalism." Adherents are offered a world full of energy and meaning but one in which they can ethically do, well, whatever their intuition dictates.

In succeeding chapters, Burton argues that the Remixed creed of intuitionalism extends far beyond goop.com and the yoga studio. She locates it also at the heart of modern sexual culture and its valorization of emotional authenticity over "predetermined scripts about what our life should be like." It lies, too, at the root of the recent resurgence of interest in witchcraft, which, with its decentered spiritual system, has been rebranded as a tool of "personal empowerment," and it even plays a role in the social justice movement's emphasis on the authority of lived experience.

Although Burton doesn't much discuss it, this intuitional theology is also trickling back into explicitly religious (or at least relig-ish) spaces. How different, really, is the exhortation from the SoulCycle leader—"It's about you . . . Your perk. Your goals. Your drive . . ."—from an advertisement for Stanford Hillel's "Jewish Incubator Fellowship" that I recently ran across: "It's about YOU. Your interests, your experiences, your passions, your goals. . . . You're the driving force behind what happens here"?

In his influential work, *A Secular Age*, philosopher Charles Taylor coined the term "buffered self" to describe the modern individual. A "buffered self" understands him or herself as clearly distinct from others with firm separations between inner and outer worlds, human and the divine. By contrast, the "porous self" of premodern times was vulnerable to spirits, demons, and God. For Taylor, this shift wasn't simply the result of casting off false beliefs but a trade-off in sensibility. "One is open to different things," he writes. In leaving the premodern era behind, we lost access to certain modes of experience—both transcendent and terrifying—that were possible only in an enchanted world.

This porousness—the sense that we, as individuals, may be touched by the supernatural—is what many of those depicted in *Strange Rites* are trying to reclaim. Whether through "moon juices," divination, or late-night raves at New York's McKittrick Hotel, the subjects of Burton's work are trying to cast off their "buffered selves" to reclaim the sense of wonder and meaning that can perhaps only be found through a brush with the divine.

But reading Burton's book, one can't help wondering whether such attempts to reclaim this enchanted world while rejecting any kind of external authority fall victim to a more insidious kind of force. At the core of the intuitional creed Burton discusses is a hidden premise, gestured at but never quite articulated: the idea that we have access to our deepest, most authentic intuitions and desires—and that we are capable of separating these deepest selves from consumer culture, social pressure, newsrooms, and Internet feeds.

And yet, when we retweet a popular political opinion or attend a SoulCycle class or cleanse our house with sage, are we really expressing our most authentic selves and so pursuing the good? Or are we perhaps not buffered selves so much as buffeted selves—anchorless and tossed about by the brands, ideologies, and communities we think we choose?

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"With a Wolf in One Eye": Sutzkever in Israel

BY RUTH R. WISSE

The most significant thing I accomplished in my two years as a press officer of the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC) was to arrange the first North American speaking tour for the great Yiddish poet Abraham (Avrom) Sutzkever in the spring of 1959. I had met him two years earlier during the summer my husband and I spent in Israel, a meeting I have described in these pages. When Sutzkever wrote to me, saying that he wanted to come to Canada, I could not believe our luck.

Although I didn't know it, Jewish organizations and well-connected officials in New York had been trying for years to arrange a speaking tour for Sutzkever in the United States. What I did know was that in 1959 the majority of Canada's 250,000 Jews were still Yiddish speakers, and, among them, every literate person knew Sutzkever's name. I was confident that these Yiddish readers would help me get the leadership of CJC to sponsor his appearances in Montreal, Toronto, and Winnipeg.

Sutzkever's life had, to that point, merged, as though on a God-ordained path, with the fate of the Jewish people in the 20th century. Born in Smorgon, near Vilna, in 1913, the youngest of three children, he was taken by his refugee parents to Omsk at the outbreak of the First World War and returned to Vilna at its end by his widowed mother, his father having died in Siberia. He began writing poetry as part of a circle of writers and artists in interwar Vilna and published two volumes by the time the ghetto enclosed him with the rest of Vilna Jewry in 1941.

In the ghetto, under impossible conditions, he continued writing poems. With his wife Freydke, he joined underground efforts to smuggle in arms while directing cultural affairs that included performances of the ghetto theater, literary contests, and every kind of activity that could save lives or cultural treasures. The couple escaped before the ghetto's liquidation to join partisans in the forests. From there, they were airlifted to Moscow in a plane sent expressly to bring the poet to the Soviet Union as a living emblem of the murdered Jews of Poland. In Moscow, he befriended Jewish writers and cultural leaders like the poet Peretz Markish, novelist David Bergelson, and famed director of the Moscow Theater, Solomon Mikhoels, before they were murdered on Stalin's orders. After the war, he bore witness at the Nuremberg trials, and, returning to Vilna after its liberation, he helped to retrieve some of the materials they had buried to save from the Nazis. When he left the Soviet Union as a repatriated Pole in 1946, he departed for Paris and went from there to Palestine. Thanks to the intervention of Golda Meyerson—later Meir—he arrived in Tel Aviv in 1947, half a year before the establishment of the Jewish state.

These events and the power of his verse made him the most famous living poet in the Yiddish language. What is more, he exuded heroism—a force that needed no self-promotion or validation from others. Sutzkever knew that he had been born to be a mighty Yiddish poet, and, when history put him to a terrifying test, he met the challenge and became what he was meant to be.

His Canadian visit went beyond my expectations. The first evening in Montreal featured greetings from the poets Aaron Leyeles and I. I. Schwartz, who had come up from New York to embrace him,

In the ghetto, under impossible conditions, Sutzkever continued writing poems.

and from the local doyen of Yiddish literature, Melekh Ravitch. Other writers had come for the occasion, one from as far away as Mexico. The hall was packed, and people had to be turned away. Anticipating that his audiences would include many survivors of the war who would want to hear poems he had written in the ghetto, he read several that were already famous: the poem about the dwindling underground schoolroom of the teacher Mira and the one describing a wagon of shoes bound for Germany among which he recognizes his mother's. But in smaller gatherings, including one at my parents' home, he read more inward-looking poems that harkened back to his childhood in Siberia and his youth in Vilna. The loveliest of them breathed the air of Eretz Yisrael.



Abraham Sutzkever in Amsterdam after the war. (Courtesy of Hadas Kalderon, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.)

At that time, I was friends with Sam Gesser, the Montreal impresario who organized local folk music concerts and recorded them for Folkways Records. We arranged a studio session in which Sutzkever cut the record of his poetry that was later made available through the Smithsonian Institute. The first side featured poems of the ghetto, recited in the resounding Russian rhetorical style of Mayakovsky and Yevtushenko as befits a man addressing an audience of thousands. The Israeli-themed poems on the reverse side would have profited from a softer reading, but I was not about to offer any such suggestion. Maybe it's just as well. That voice projected the potency of poetry and national survival, which were, for Sutzkever and his audiences, one and the same.

Of the works that Sutzkever read and recorded in Montreal, I was haunted by an untitled lyric that he dated 1947, shortly after he had arrived in Palestine. My translation is merely literal:

> Were I not together with you,
> Not breathing joy and pain here—
> Were I not burning with the Land,
> Volcanic Land in its birth-throes;
> Were I now, after my *akedah*,
> Not reborn with the Land,
> Where every pebble is my zeyde—
> Bread would not sate my hunger,
> Water would not soothe my gums.
> Till I would expire, turned Gentile,
> And my longing would come on its own. . .

This poem was first published in the Yiddish paper issued and distributed for the displaced persons camps by the Yishuv in Palestine. It is hard to know what its earliest readers made of it. The weekly aimed at boosting morale and encouraging aliyah, but Sutzkever's poem makes no concessions to clarity or message. It is written from the perspective of someone who has improbably reached his destination, and its ideas are so severely compressed that, after publishing an 11-page article about this poem some years ago, I still felt I had not begun to do it justice.

I now find myself turning to it again, this time as the opening lyric of *In fayervogn* (*In the Chariot of Fire*, 1952), Sutzkever's first collection of poems written in Israel. There, it heads the section called *Shehekhiyonu*, the blessing Jews traditionally pronounce upon new experiences, including first reaching the Land of Israel. Addressed to an unnamed presence, this thanksgiving prayer replaces the tripartite thanks to God—"*shehekhiyonu,* who has granted us life, *vekiymonu*, sustained us, *vehigiyonu lazman hazeh*, and enabled us to reach this occasion"—with clauses beginning, "Were I not," framing the speaker's gratitude in his awareness that he has attained what was denied his murdered fellow Jews. The word "not" recurs six times in 11 lines, the likelihood of his *not* having arrived being so much greater than that of his being there. The original *Shehekhiyonu* prayer already blesses what cannot be taken for granted, but the odds here were so astronomically greater that the poem is written in contingent case, each segment citing what has been gained in terms of what might have been lost.

For this Jew, the joy and woe of national resurrection

are forever fused. The poem invokes a country that is ablaze, fighting for its life. None of its images points to any specific event, yet Israel's War of Independence was already raging when Sutzkever arrived with his wife and daughter, and the volcanic eruptions never ceased even after the birth of the state. *Khevle-leyde*, the Yiddish-Hebrew term he uses for the birth pangs of the country, is the same term used for the process that anticipates the coming of the messiah.

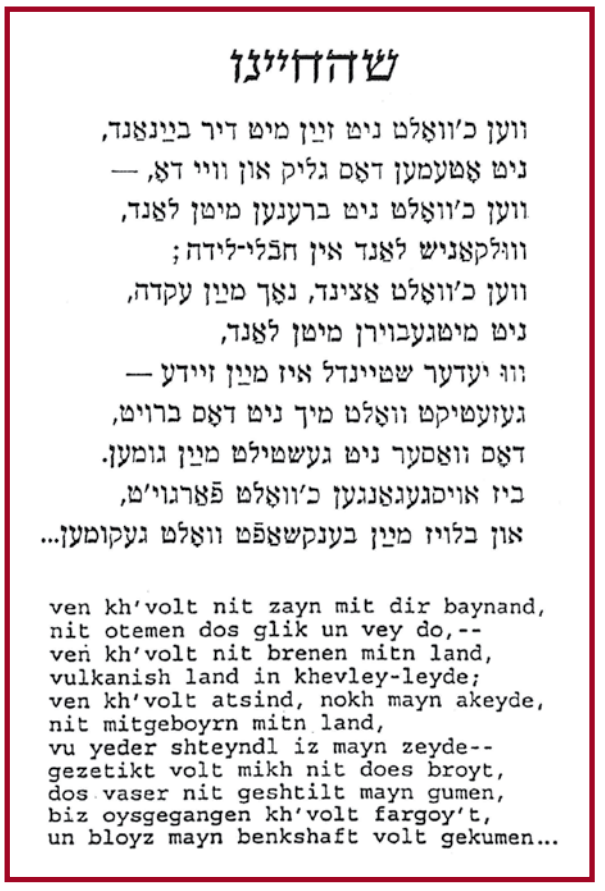
The third part of the blessing, "Who has enabled us to reach this occasion," presents the poet with his greatest challenge. Commanded to sacrifice his son, the biblical Abraham was spared by the substitution of a ram, but the son born to Avrom and Freydke Sutzkever in a ghetto hospital was immediately put to death on Nazi orders. Sutzkever himself narrowly escaped death several times, but his mother was killed, and his Jewish Vilna would never, unlike Zion, rise from its ashes. Thus, to say, as he does here, that he has undergone the *akedah* is true—as both the sacrificing father and the all-but-sacrificed child.

The great stones of the Western Wall go unmentioned in this homecoming prayer; instead, the poet offers his thanks for every familial pebble of the soil underfoot. The Yiddish rhyme of *akeyde* with *zeyde* binds the biblical Hebrew to diaspora Yiddish. The linguist Uriel Weinreich drew attention to the way the rhyme scheme of this poem reinforces its subject by joining Hebrew with the several etymological components of Yiddish—*zeyde* from the Polish *dziadzia* (grandpa); *khevle-leyde* from the Talmud; and *vey do* (woe here), ingeniously, from German. Avoiding the readymade Zionist words like aliyah, Zion, or even Eretz Yisrael, Sutzkever uses the plain fare of Yiddish to bring us to the climactic word composed expressly for this occasion (perhaps cause for an artistic *Shehekhiyonu*).

Had he not reached the Land of Israel, the poet would have died *fargoyt*, a past participle that sounds as natural as the sun setting (we say *di zun fargeyt*) but defines a new kind of death: to turn goy. That word for turning Gentile is itself untranslatable. ("Gentiled" certainly wouldn't do it.) When all is said and done, the danger is not murder at the hands of the Nazis or Soviets but extinction in a diaspora too long endured. There were Zionists who said there could be no future for Jews outside the Land of Israel. Though removed from such political rhetoric, this poem says that, without homecoming, there could have been no *Jewish* survival.

Sutzkever's prayer of homecoming is in the tradition of the Jewish longing for Zion reaching all the way back to the psalmist who ached for Jerusalem by the rivers of Babylon and to Yehuda Halevi, the great 12th-century poet of Spain who followed his heart to the East. Halevi appears in a poem several pages later in the book. "On the sea / Between the death and birth of waves / You can feel his yearning." It was imperative for Sutzkever that the return to the Land of Israel should not overlook the many millions of dispersed Jews who had guaranteed its recovery. Thus, the 11th line of the poem, "And my longing would come on its own . . . " trails its apparent climax and carries a yearning even more powerful than its realization. But why end with the longing rather than with his presence? Does this favor the wish over its fulfillment? Is it, as the American Jewish writer Isaac Rosenfeld once suggested, that the longing for Jerusalem is actually not for the object of its desire but for the unsatisfied craving itself?

Rosenfeld's is the kind of inversion encouraged by psychoanalysis that sees the negative as a photographer does in developing a picture. It is clever, and it may apply in some cases, but not here. The speaker uses yearning in the opposite way, to emphasize that, even had he died among Gentiles in Europe, his yearning would have *arrived* independently. This was not a hunger for hunger but a satisfaction that exceeds satiety. It is pronounced on behalf of the generations of Jews who knew that if they died in exile, they would return to the land, posthumously if necessary—the Jews who prepared a packet of earth from the Land of Israel to be buried with them, anticipating their resurrection and return with the coming of the messiah. More immediately, that final line represents the martyred Jews of Europe whose longing comes to nurture the country.



שהחיינו

וועז כ'וואלט ניט זיין מיט דיר בײַנאַנד,
ניט אָטעמען דאָס גליק אוז וויי דאָ, —
וועז כ'וואלט ניט ברענען מיטן לאַנד,
וווּלקאַניש לאַנד אין חבֿלי־לידה;
וועז כ'וואלט אַצינד, נאָך מײַן עקדה,
ניט מיטגעבוירן מיטן לאַנד,
וווּ יעדער שטיינדל איז מײַן זיידע —
געזעטיקט וואלט מיך ניט דאָס ברויט,
דאָס וואַסער ניט געשטילט מײַן גומען.
ביז אויסגעגאַנגען כ'וואלט פֿאַרגוי'ט,
אוז בלויז מײַן בענקשאַפֿט וואלט געקומען...

ven kh'volt nit zayn mit dir baynand,
nit otemen dos glik un vey do,--
ven kh'volt nit brenen mitn land,
vulkanish land in khevley-leyde;
ven kh'volt atsind, nokh mayn akeyde,
nit mitgeboyrn mitn land,
vu yeder shteyndl iz mayn zeyde--
gezetikt volt mikh nit does broyt,
dos vaser nit geshtilt mayn gumen,
biz oysgegangen kh'volt fargoy't,
un bloyz mayn benkshaft volt gekumen...

Abraham Sutzkever's* Shehekhiyonu *in Yiddish with an English transliteration, 1947. (Courtesy of Ruth R. Wisse.)

The tension in Judaism between living within and outside the Land of Israel begins with the first Abraham's passage to Canaan. Our Avrom, who spent his childhood in Siberia, came to Israel from the opposite direction, from the land of snow, with no intention of erasing his formative past.

He had started out in his teens as a notoriously individualistic lyrical poet who defied the collectivist culture around him by sealing a partnership with the natural world, inviting the first star in the firmament to reflect his presence as a fellow newcomer, just as he was doing for it in his poem, and offering permanence to the Siberian snowman of his childhood who would otherwise melt. He cast himself as a fellow creator, ascribing supreme power to poetry not by lowering the transcendent standard but by aspiring to it. When some friends wondered how such a rarified poet could continue writing in the conditions of the ghetto, he turned the question inside out: only the poet with absolute faith in himself and in poetry could hope to withstand the degradation.

The ghetto recognized no individuals and humiliated them indiscriminately. Even as Sutzkever recorded the details of that humiliation, the flow of his poetry strengthened his confidence, and that confidence sustained others around him. His singularity became inseparable from that of the Jew; the heroic image ascribed to him in the ghetto and its aftermath confirmed the person he had become. He absorbed the national fate as organically as roots absorb moisture, and Yiddish, the substance of his poetry, thrived with him. After the war, he addressed the national fate in three epic works: a farewell to Poland (*Tsu poyln*), the saga of Jews in hiding in the Vilna sewers (*Geheymshtot*), and the shipboard record of survivors who sail for the spiritual soil of the Jewish homeland (*Gaystike erd)*.

But his favored form remained the lyric, and now, having perhaps fulfilled his obligation to history, he was free to speak more personally. With an entirely new landscape before him, he could acquaint himself with every pebble and wadi. He could also assume prophetic responsibility for the great drama in which he had been cast. This would mean striking a balance among his duties to the dead who were left without a voice, to this welcoming haven and those laying down their lives for it, and to the private poetic insight that he had suppressed for a decade.

His newfound freedom also had its drawbacks. Whereas Sutzkever had not been able to extricate himself from the national fate in Vilna, in Moscow, or among the Jewish refugees in Paris, he was now out of the mainstream. His fellow immigrants were intent on adapting to the new conditions and perhaps trying to make up for the part of their lives that had been taken from them. Jews of the Yishuv urgently needed to secure the country, freeing themselves from the British, staving off Arab attacks, starting up an economy, creating the infrastructure for self-government, feeding and clothing the population, and beginning to integrate the refugees. Except for personal losses, they could not pause to mourn. The poets of Israel were also preoccupied with the tasks before them, and even those who dealt with the *khurbn* did so from a distance. Their poems, too, combined pain and joy, but theirs was the loss of soldiers in battle, of civilians securing their state.

"Uri Tzvi Greenberg and [Natan] Alterman are the best," was how Sutzkever sized up the current crop of Israeli poets four months after arriving in Tel Aviv. Writing to his fellow Vilna poet Chaim Grade, who had settled in New York, Sutzkever confided as one craftsman to another that he found the younger Israeli poets "very uninteresting" because they lacked the dense texture of European and traditional Hebrew sources. "I often think that only a *Yiddish* poet will truly celebrate Eretz Yisrael. Because the old-new Yiddish language is more Tanakhic than present-day Hebrew speech that is emptied of all Yerusholayims." In Czernowitz, Jews had created Jerusalem on the Prut; in Toledo, the Jerusalem of Spain; and, incomparably, in Vilna, the Jerusalem of Lithuania. And while Hebrew had not yet absorbed the richness of those centuries of exile, Yiddish had achieved astonishing ripeness as the repository of eight hundred years of European Jewish life, capped by the last two centuries of dynamic Yiddish folk and individual creativity. That two poets as distinctive as he and Grade should have emerged from the same small literary circle of Vilna was proof enough of Sutzkever's contention that only the Yiddish poet could do justice to the historic transition from exile to homeland. A poet is only as good as his or her instrument, and, at

that juncture in Jewish history, he and Grade had the Stradivarii. And Sutzkever was in Israel.

But even he could not create in a vacuum. Ben-Gurion's government had mandated the formal use of Hebrew over Yiddish as the only way of consolidating the Jewish state. Most of Tel Aviv was then still Yiddish speaking, and this included people prominent in politics, culture, and the arts who went along with the policy, either in active agreement or as an unwelcome necessity. Though Sutzkever was accorded a warm personal welcome in the literary cafés, he was not prepared to live as a guest at someone else's table. At this point, he accomplished what some considered his greatest miracle. Unlike those Yiddish writers in Israel and abroad who merely complained of the insult being done to their *mameloshn*, their mother tongue, he set about creating the literary culture he needed under the aegis of the very government that was enforcing the use of Hebrew.

Sutzkever was helped by Zalman Shazar, himself a Hebrew poet and great lover of Yiddish who was also editor of the newspaper *Davar* and influential member of the Histadrut, the all-important General Organization of Workers. The newcomer sought the help of supporters of Yiddish in Paris and New York, but it was the improbable support of the Histadrut that provided the office and basic support necessary for the establishment of his Yiddish quarterly. Sutzkever named it *Di goldene keyt* for the "golden chain" of Jewish tradition, echoing the title of Peretz's poetic drama.

Di goldene keyt became the central address for the best Yiddish writing around the world. Sutzkever hosted the visits of Yiddish writers from abroad and promoted the journal on his visits to the major Jewish centers in Africa and the Americas. He sponsored literary awards and literary events and inspired younger writers to write in Yiddish and others to return to the language. He published his own poetry in every issue. These poems were both an extension of Sutzkever's earlier writing and a departure from it with new rhymes and subjects and a biblical vocabulary that had never before figured in his work.

In fayervogn is the collection of the poems Sutzkever wrote during his first five years in Israel, 1947–1951, arranged thematically to map his encounter with the country. Following his *Shehekhiyonu* comes the most explicit summons in all his writing:

> You arrived naked
> Wholly aflame.
> Your clothes—
> Stitched by motherly fingers,
> As if playing piano on velvet and silk—fell
> scorched into darkness.
> You salvaged the needles.

(For "stitched," Sutzkever created the word *genodlt,* whose English equivalent, "needled," has acquired another meaning.)

Addressed in prophetic mode, the poet is charred by the Holocaust but intact "with a wolf in one eye and in the other—your mother." These opposites cannot be separated: "*Vest zey shoyn beydn / nit konen tsesheydn.*" Rhyme in Sutzkever often performs the task it does here of indissolubly joining apparent opposites. Much of Judaism calls for strict distinctions to be observed between the sacred and the profane, and, while Sutzkever never blurs the boundaries between good and evil, he has acquired a doubled vision that will not allow him to separate wolf from mother or the *khurbn* in Europe from the rebirth of Israel. Unlike so much other modern writing, Sutzkever creates these improbable pairings not for the sake of paradox or irony but as a matter of complex fact. The fire that consumed Europe's Jews and left him naked is the prophesied chariot of fire restoring Jewish life to the homeland.



Left: Natan Alterman, 1950s. (Photo by Moshe Milner, National Photo Collection, Israel.) Right: Uri Tzvi Greenberg, 1956. (Photo by David Eldan, National Photo Collection, Israel.)

The wolf in his eye is the raw animal knowledge he was forced to acquire to offset Vilna's tender legacy. Here, I paraphrase the rest of the summons:

> Even had you been greeted by Isaiah, he would have offered his prophecies with lowered leaden eyelids and shamed lips. Don't look for consolation from even your own brother. Between the two of you there lies a Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, like an ever-flaming River Sambation, that tosses Jewish fate around even on the Sabbath. How can the people here believe that you in Warsaw were protecting the Kastel? That you in the kingdom of death forged this lively-homey young state? You will be believed by the volcanic heartbeat of this land that you heard when YOUR heart stopped beating temporarily. . . . That voice, speaking in the language of the Yiddish Pentateuch, will say—You are mine, may you be blessed in your coming. My sheep—are yours, my garden—yours; now plant your vineyard as tenderly as you once savagely fired your rifle.

Isaiah's prophecy, read on the Sabbath of Consolation after extended annual mourning for the fall of Jerusalem, promises Jews that their "iniquity" has been expiated. It might seem only natural to turn to such passages in what appears to be the fulfillment of the biblical prophecy, but the poet expects no such consolation, for how can that prophet look this survivor in the eye? It would be the ugliest blasphemy to accept Israel's rebirth as national recompense for the *khurbn*, yet even worse to suggest that Jewish survival had not been worth the cost.

This poem, dated 1948, was written after soldiers of the Palmach, in one of the bloodiest battles of the fight for independence, had finally captured the fortifications on the Kastel, the hill that commanded the road from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. No Israeli brother (Sutzkever's real-life brother Moshe, who came to Jerusalem in the 1930s, was an engineer engaged in building the country) can be expected to appreciate that the resistance of European Jews was the same driving force that opened the road to Jerusalem. The legendary ever-roiling River Sambation that once separated Jews from the lost tribes of Israel still divides immigrant from resident.

This was the mood of the country. "From the Tanakh to the Palmach"—leapfrogging the intervening millennia—was David Ben-Gurion's idea of Jewish continuity, and not his alone. The plan for opening the road to Jerusalem was called "Operation Nachshon" after the biblical Nachshon ben Aminadav, who, according to a famous midrash, was the first to jump into the sea when the Jews fled Egypt. Meanwhile, Sutzkever's Vilna landsman, Yiddish and Hebrew poet Abba Kovner, had unwittingly reinforced the contrast between the Jews of exile and the new generation of fighters. In the Vilna Ghetto in 1942, once Kovner realized that the Germans intended to destroy them all, he called on his fellow Jews not to go "like sheep to the slaughter" and helped form a partisan unit. Arriving in Israel in 1947 and settling in a kibbutz, he and other ghetto fighters were seen as the heroes of Jewish armed resistance, and, though he insisted that the rest of the ghetto had *not* been passive, his phrase became a byword for Jewish submissiveness.

For this rebuff of exile, Sutzkever substitutes *Di goldene keyt,* his vision of uninterrupted Jewish creativity. Israel was being repopulated by Jews who had developed, in the centuries between the two Nachshons, a mighty civilization that included the incomparable richness of Yiddish. The Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising were of the same mettle as those who fought at Kastel. Who else but these diaspora Jews had so courageously reclaimed the homeland? To the personal difficulty of balancing redemption and mourning and the theological disproportion between prophecy and fulfillment, Sutzkever adds the historical challenge of treasuring in Israel all that had been created in exile. The concluding lines of this summons reverse the usual contrast between soft diaspora Jew and hard-shelled sabra by pairing the *akhzoryes* of the poet's rifle—savagery conveyed in its sound—with the tenderness of transplanting himself into this new home. The soil itself extends the comfort that is currently unavailable from God or his prophet.

Naturally, Israel's jettisoning of Yiddish was a sore point since the life of a poet—more than that of any other native speaker—is invested in his or her language. Thus, in the book's angriest poem, "Yiddish," the poet asks the doomsayer precisely where he thinks Yiddish has "gone under." "Maybe at the Western Wall? / If so, I shall come there, come / Open my mouth, / And like a lion / Garbed in fiery scarlet, / I shall swallow this tongue as it sets / And awaken all the generations with my roar!" Sutzkever

could be fierce in defense of Yiddish, but the rest of the book demonstrates its power by what he *does* with this language.

A striking feature of the book is its missing part: the life the Sutzkevers were actually living in Tel Aviv, where they settled and raised their two daughters. Tel Aviv figures nowhere in the 92 longer and shorter poems. Freydke Sutzkever found it hard to accept the loss of her family and even harder to substitute the new Jewish society for the one she had lost. As poet and editor, Sutzkever was fully embedded in literary society and kept abreast of everything happening in local publishing, but the petty squabbles that consumed his correspondence were nowhere to be found in his verse. The poets he cites are mostly Middle Eastern. He seemed to find the cultural vocabulary he needed in the parallel experience of Sephardi Jews, whose heritage was even more marginal than his to the new state-in-the-making.

In Safed, he is bewitched by the mystical aura of the great kabbalist Isaac Luria and his disciple, the poet Israel ben Moses Najara, author of hundreds of poems and hymns. He senses in this city, which is "changeless as an apple," the haunting presence of wandering minstrels stopping to hear Najara's hymns, the most familiar of which, *Ya ribon v'almayah* (God, Sovereign of all worlds), still resounds every Sabbath. Another poem extols the three hundred donkeys it took to transport to the Land of Israel the poems of the Yemenite 17th-century poet Shalom Shabazi, whose descendants still sing them at their weddings. Alas, the donkeys bearing Sutzkever's Yiddish verses were not as successful. He grasped what has since become an obvious feature of modern Israel—namely, that the Jews of Arab lands carried on their traditions with much less ambivalence than European Jews, who had been affected by the Enlightenment. There was no counterpart among Sephardi Jews to the ideological embrace of modernity and abandonment of Yiddish.

In Lod, one of the biblical cities whose inhabitants returned from the Babylonian exile and which is now the site of Israel's international airport, the poet welcomes a flight from Iraq, which he calls by its ancient name. Among those arriving and being greeted in 70 dialects is a blind old man who falls on his knees to kiss the ground but then cannot rise again. This returnee from Babylon calls over his granddaughter and, with what may be his last breath, asks her to see that he is buried in the land of Isaiah with the three stones he has brought with him in his *abaya*. In reversing the custom of Jews interred outside Israel who were buried with a token of its soil, Sutzkever underlines the necessity of incorporating the memories of the far-flung exile in the reclaimed land.

In Jerusalem, there is exaltation:

> If, just once, you wish to see eternity face to face and maybe, not die—hide your eyes, turn them down like wicks in your skull. Then, self-igniting, go to the encounter your wandering has not warranted until now—and open them facing Jerusalem's mirrors of stone.

Even in this prose rendition, the poem "Mirrors of Stone" (the Yiddish *feldz* is actually more rock than stone) suggests that the poet's reach for the deathlessness he had once sought in nature is now invested in this historical landscape. The Jerusalem he sees is not the temporal seat of Jewish government, home of the fledgling Hebrew University and Hadassah hospital, not the intersection of three faiths. It is the eternal city, abode of the permanency he had been pursuing since he buried his father in Siberia at age seven. European Romantic poets reached for the sublime. Sutzkever reaches out to the subterranean streams under this city of David and to the mirroring presence of God.

The section of poems on Jerusalem includes yet another Sephardi source, this one invented. "The Testament of Nissim Laniado" professes to be a document the poet discovers in a corner of the religious quarter Meah Shearim and is inspired to translate into Yiddish. Although the entire poem is composed in stanzas of identical rhythm and rhyme, the diction turns plainer when it moves from the poet's discovery of the document to Laniado's will. Taking into account whatever conditions might then prevail upon his demise—war or truce, drought or fecundity—he asks to be buried upright in his holiday best so that, after his extended sleep, he should be ready to rejoin the life from which he is now temporarily suspended. This Jew has heard Isaiah's call, and he plans to be ready and waiting when he hears, "Come: Let us go up to the Mount of the Lord, to the House of the God of Jacob." Sutzkever, a consummate modern, does not issue that call in his own name but, rather, through this "accidentally discovered" document in a different Jewish language.

He imagines the bird flying back to his childhood home and finding the cloud of smoke. "I'm afraid its heart will burst. My friend the stork."

When I first read the Sephardi-themed poems of this book, I thought them part of Sutzkever's attraction to the exotic, the same buoyant curiosity that drew him earlier to the Kyrgyz of Siberia and, a few years later, to the king of the Zulus when he visited the Jewish communities of Africa. But it is truer to see them as the vehicle for an expression of unmediated faith. Though both the poet and the Yiddish language were then at the peak of their powers, they were too burdened—in the poet's own words, too "charred" for simple belief. One of Sutzkever's favorite Yiddish poets was Yehoash (Solomon Blumgarten, 1872–1927), who visited Palestine in 1914 and translated the Hebrew Bible into Yiddish. This was the medium through which Sutzkever absorbed the Bible. Before the war, he had also begun to immerse himself in Old Yiddish texts, perhaps already searching for a liturgical register. Yehoash gave him a biblical Yiddish, but Sephardi poets offered the models of plainer devotion that inspired so much good in the country—and so much of the good that lay outside Tel Aviv.

Thus far, the poet's responses were to Safed, Tiberias, Lod, and the holiness of Jerusalem. Heading south into the open desert was "where stillness wrestles with silence," a place then still more resonant with echoes of the past than the drip of irrigation hoses or laughter of schoolchildren. He had no car and did not drive, so he could not have been traveling there alone, yet lone is how he figures in these poems, taking pure pleasure in his art, as he had done when he was starting out.

A sight-and-sound poem of 1947 says, "Hear the sound of boundless light, as dew falls in the valley: A crystal spring, and soft its sound":

> *Farnem dos kol*
> *Fun likht on tsol:*
> *Dos falt der tal*
> *Der tal*
> *In tol.*
>
> *Der tal*
> *In tol—*
> *A kval*
> *Krishtol.*
> *Un shtil*
> *Zayn kol:*
> *Taltil*
> *Taltol.*

In the desert, every discrete feature and creature of the natural world commands attention. "Tall pillars of light, like riders with shiny trumpets, issue an eleventh commandment. . . . *V'ohavto l'artzkho kamokho.*" God's instruction in Leviticus 19:18 reads, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against someone from your nation. *Love your* fellow *as yourself*." Adapting the Hebrew, Sutzkever substitutes, "Love thy *country* as thyself."

For the first time in a decade, Sutzkever was once again out in the natural world that he adored, in a landscape strikingly different from the lush countryside around Vilna. Among the keepsakes that Sutzkever treasured was the slim publication of a botanist friend who had charted the flora in the Vilna region. He himself had always approached nature less as naturalist than fellow-creature. But though he craved that immediate contact more than ever, his observations were now clouded by what he had experienced during those intervening years. A small stone hangs precariously atop a huge boulder to be knocked off by any wind. Why? A flock of goats, black and white, flies into the valley like a run of piano keys, but, once there, their shadows are uniformly black. Why? The wild rose in the waterfall has a more enticing image underwater, but when he reaches for the refracted rose, it is no less thorny. Why?

In another poem, a stork reminds him of the one that perched on a birch tree across from their house one summer of his childhood and flew off at Sukkot-time, probably to Bethel. When the present one takes off, he imagines it flying back to his childhood home and finding the cloud of smoke. "I'm afraid its heart will burst. My friend the stork."

Sutzkever arranged the poems of the desert in a thematic arc rather than following his actual itinerary: Beersheva, Ma'ale Akrabim, Wadi Jerafi, Ras el Naqb, then down to Eilat, Sinai, and Sodom. At the site of a key battle in the War of Independence, the poet hails "Samson's Foxes," the name given to the outstripped and underequipped unit that captured the outpost from the Egyptian army with tactics reminiscent of Samson's victory over the Philistines. But the vertical connection that archeologists seek and that Israelis cherish is never as important to Sutzkever as the fact that these soldiers had gathered themselves "from the Vistula and Danube, from the Ganges and Dnieper" to be what providence needed

them to be. Wherever he sees it, Sutzkever marks the forged unity of a reconstituted people.

There were Zionists who quipped that you could take the Jew out of exile, but you can't take the exile out of the Jew. They feared that the Jews, like those in the story of the Exodus, would want to return to Egypt. Sutzkever's fear was, instead, that, once they returned home, Jews would discard the precious fruits of the civilization they had continued to forge outside the Land of Israel. As the book advances, the poems register increasing anxiety over whether the Jewry of Babylon-Poland can be successfully reinterred in the Land of Israel. That image of reinterment also comes from Exodus (13:19–21), in which Joseph exacts an oath from the children of Israel to bring his bones from Egypt home for burial. Sutzkever deplores his generation's failure to do what the Israelites did in their time: "The bones of Joseph here under sands, the bones of Joseph there, under Poland— / scarcely recognize one another and slash like knives and glow like coals." These two communities lie not only separate but estranged. The coals with which "The Bones of Joseph" ends evoke the crematoria of Treblinka and the funeral pyres outside Vilna more than coals one might stoke back into a creative fire.

Indeed, the book heads backward, to remembrance of Vilna and its harrowing end. In exploring Israel, Sutzkever himself may have feared losing touch with his past. Or, more likely, his freedom to explore activated a corresponding drive to excavate the worst as well as some of the sweetness of his youth. Of his time in the ghetto, he recalls being tempted by hunger "like Lilith" into eating a swallow, and he remembers picking up a piece of coal in the cellar where he lay hiding to write a poem on the body of the dead man lying beside him. He describes the terrible damage such actions did to his soul, eager to reveal the depths into which he had been pressed as though saying to his readers, "I will bring the Polish past into the Israeli present for you to know who I am."

In Moscow, after his rescue, Sutzkever had transcribed whatever he could recall about the German actions in the ghetto and who had committed them. Reading that account, *Fun vilner geto* (Of the Vilna Ghetto, 1946), an admirer of Sutzkever's was disappointed by its seemingly careless mixture of ghetto history with personal details. But the book was not supposed to be a well-wrought urn. It wasn't art; it was raw evidence for the prosecution against those who tried to destroy the evidence of their crimes. Writing with what little documentation he had at hand, Sutzkever described whatever he could personally confirm. (The book, edited by Justin Cammy, will soon appear in English.)

Once in Israel, Sutzkever faced a different literary task. If the Jewish exiles of Babylon had once asked how they could be expected to sing of Zion on foreign soil, the liberated Jewish poet had to celebrate the recovered homeland without for an instant forgetting the murdered third of the Jewish people that still lay unavenged "where skulls of days stiffen / In a bottomless, uncovered pit." He took up the challenge as no other poet ever had. These poems formed themselves day by day; only when he collected them for publication in this book did he order them in this remarkable sequence—first, thanksgiving for the fulfillment of millennia of yearning; then fresh, eager exploration and rediscovery of the old-new landscape; and, finally, release of memory beyond even the reach of nightmares.

Fun vilner geto described Germans rounding him up with an elderly Jew and a terrified young boy and forcing them to dance around burning Torah scrolls for public amusement. The poem based on this sadistic sequence seems far removed from the book's opening blessings of Zion—but not so far after all. Here—pared to its essence—there are only two captives: the old Jew "with the Torah in his hands, as though just down from Sinai," intoning some of the verses that are going up in the pyre, and the poet,

Fun vilner geto wasn't art; it was raw evidence for the prosecution against those who tried to destroy the evidence of their crimes.

who asks his elder whether this is the reward for his yet-unlived life. The old Jew discounts the question: "Being a Jew means being prepared for every trial, *oyf nisoyen un oyf nes*, for trial and miracle."

The elder's wordplay, worthy of a poet, incorporates the expectation of miracle in the martyrdom so that he is not accepting death for God's sake but with an expectation of life against all odds. Grateful for this instruction, the poet sees his companion swept up in the eponymous chariot of fire and lifts his cloak as Elisha once did Elijah's. In his reflections on "tradition and the individual talent," T. S. Eliot showed how new poets transform our reading of old classics, and, just so, when Sutzkever's readers turn to the second book of Kings, they will now see, as I do, the poet attending this bearded Vilna Jew as he ascends with Elijah.

Other poems in this late part of the book recall further images of the ghetto's destruction, the murder of its children, and the bravery of individual Jews. Whereas the purpose of his account in *Fun vilner geto* was to prosecute the Nazis, these poems obliterate their presence to concentrate on the Jewish response. In the highly inflected way that Yiddish uses language for moral clarity, Jews insert the phrase *yimakh shemam*—may their names be erased—after every mention of the murderers. So, too, Sutzkever's poems.

But this is not yet how *In fayervogn* ends. Readers of Sutzkever's early work cannot be surprised that his first postwar book of lyrics ends with "A Letter to the Grasses"—13 letter-poems on the eternal mysteries of divine and human creation. The Hebrew Bible, sourcebook of the Jewish people, begins with creation because, no matter how very consequential the Jews are in history, they testify to something beyond themselves.

In the first of these poems, the poet is not numb but not yet creatively alive. Severed from memory like the child from its womb, like the rose in a vase, he cuts himself with a piece of glass to persuade himself that the "goldsmith of pain" hasn't lost his touch. And lo!—just as he had hoped—a rare joy invades his limbs. "Good evening to you, grasses, here we are again!" This cut into the flesh—neither a histrionic gesture nor the suicide he had once (reasonably) contemplated in the ghetto—revitalizes the birth of poetry within himself.

When he wrote this "letter to the grasses," Sutzkever was heavily burdened with personal and collective responsibilities, all of them now available to his biographers through a vast correspondence. They will find his romantic liaisons with other women less interesting than the unbreakable union with his wife, the childhood sweetheart who saved his life in the forests in the winter of 1943 and knew him well enough to grant him that freedom. Even more distressing than the constant maneuvering to secure his journal and his family were the petty jealousies that pursued him. The one that prevented him from coming to New York for a decade, allowing us to host him first in Montreal, was a denunciation to the State Department that, while in Moscow, he had been an asset to Stalin. This especially distressed him because of the risks he had taken during his time in the Soviet Union on behalf of Stalin's victims. "It's a million-fold *lie* and frame-up that I ever *belonged* or was even close to the Communist Party in any way, shape or form. *Not* in Vilna, *not* in Russia, *not* in Israel. In fact, it was *just the opposite*. It's a false denunciation by whom I do not know." How awful if his life should someday be presented in such states of agitation. Though the politicking of Yiddish has never abated, Sutzkever was inherently apolitical, not the way some writers try to maintain strategic neutrality, but because his idea of poetry was not compatible with any lesser allegiance.

Sutzkever's real biography is charted in his poems. This 13-part letter to the grasses—13 being the number of the Maimonidean principles of Jewish faith—reflects his own faith. "The hand of the poet fills me with wonder," writes the poet of the power that comes from beyond himself to produce something apart from himself. The poem, likewise, reflects on its separation from the living voice of its creator and regrets having to turn from melodious to papery. Interwoven in these poems are images for the making of poetry that Sutzkever continually returned to from the start to the end of his writing life.

The supernatural compulsion that commands this art makes it hard to be Ibn Gabirol "but also makes it hard—not to be him." Here again, Sutzkever's model of the poet remains as it is throughout this book, the liturgical poet in the Iberian tradition who recognizes no barrier between secular and pious and feels no need to choose between loving a woman or God. He is like the Hebrew prophet who carries his words to term as a messenger of a higher power, but, whereas the prophet reports to the Lord of the Universe, this poet's affinity is with the grasses. In parting, Sutzkever hopes that they will someday sprout at his headstone.

Sutzkever's writing on poetry is delicate and modest. Still, this return to the Land of Israel leads one to think about how the history of the Jews, filled with so much dross and horror from the beginning, was transmuted into the Hebrew Bible. How did the story of Elijah emerge from Moab's war against Israel? And how does Sutzkever's book of thanksgiving and discovery, of remembrance and reinterring, lift off from the crematoria?

Poetry can sometimes release the miracle, the *nes* that is locked in the *nisoyen,* the trial.

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The Wizard of Words and the Baggy Monster: Rereading Amos Oz's *A Tale of Love and Darkness*

BY RUBY NAMDAR

Amos Oz, whose death at the end of 2018 left a gaping hole in the fabric of Hebrew and Israeli literature and culture, was always more than just an author. Oz was a symbol—almost a fetish—of who we Israelis thought we were or fancied ourselves to be. He embodied every captivating quality, be it real or imagined, of the mythological sabra: he was brilliant yet humble, sophisticated and self-aware but not neurotic, highly idealistic but also tolerant and pragmatic. Even his casual good looks reflected the fantasy of the ultimate sabra, the golden boy of the kibbutz, and the Zionist dream.

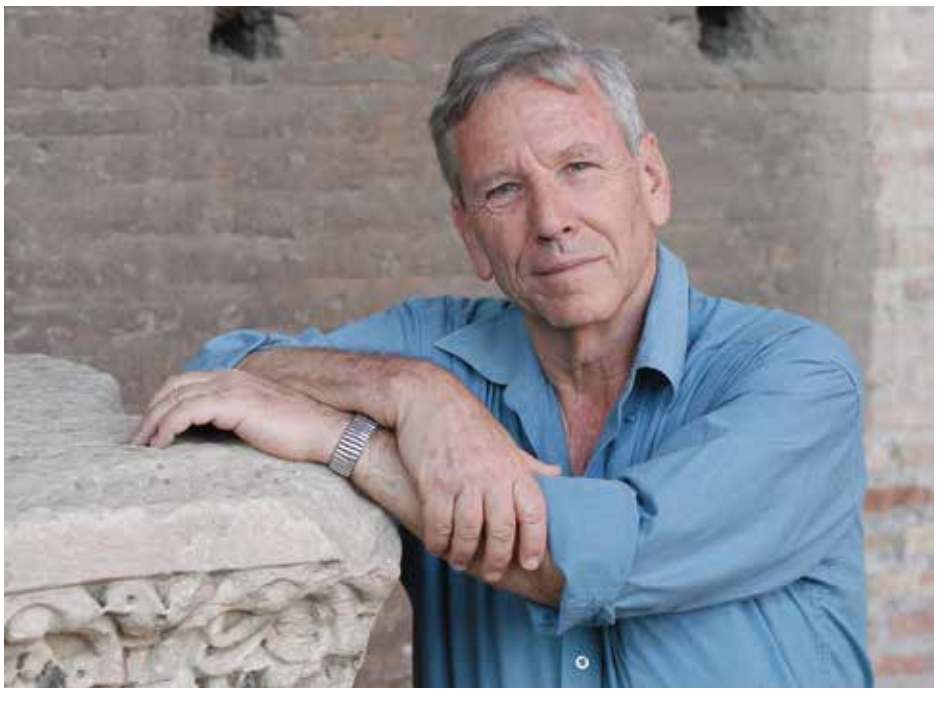
But this near-hysterical embrace also had its dark side. The literary scholar Yigal Schwartz, who also served as Oz's editor, called Israel's unbalanced relationship with Oz a "bipolar reading disorder," with Oz "treated as son of the gods, but also as a scapegoat." In his book on Oz, Schwartz wrote, "His readers are swept by his eloquence and charisma but are, at the same, repelled by them." But it wasn't just Oz's eloquence and charisma that alienated readers (and, even more so, the critics) after a certain point in his career. It was also his tendency to speak in first person plural, even as he masterfully and sensitively depicted the marginal characters; the ease with which he assumed the prophetic mantle and spoke in the name of the collective ethos; and, finally, a certain air of entitlement, perhaps even smugness, that started to tick off many readers who had previously been drawn to his work.

It is hard to say exactly when this backlash began, but one marker of the change was when literary journalists began punningly calling Oz the "Wizard of Words." Whenever this change happened—and, to be fair, it happens at some point to virtually every novelist who becomes identified with his national culture—the moment at which the Israeli literary public decided it loved Oz again is clear: with the publication of *A Tale of Love and Darkness* in 2002. Why was it this baggy monster of a memoir, of all books, that re-endeared Oz to the Hebrew reader and, even more surprisingly, to countless readers around the world?

This turn of events surprised Oz himself. What about this rather clumsy almost-600-page memoir, strangely described by the author as "fictionalized," made so many readers embrace Oz and love to love him once again? The book was translated into some 30 languages, including Arabic, and adorned with many literary honors, including Germany's Goethe Award. It even made it to Hollywood, where it was discovered by Natalie Portman, who directed and starred in a film of the same name, though it did not possess the same beguiling qualities and sank quickly after a few film festival showings. Oz himself stated more than once in interviews that he had expected only a small circle of readers, whose experiences and backgrounds were similar to his own in British Mandate Palestine and the early years of Israeli statehood, to fully appreciate

Oz embodied every captivating quality, be it real or imagined, of the mythological sabra.

and enjoy his memoir. But this historical obscurity—Oz's evocation of a forgotten Jerusalem—is not really what makes *A Tale of Love and Darkness* such an unlikely candidate for worldwide critical and commercial success. Rather, it is the uneven literary texture of the memoir, its structure (or the lack thereof) that one might have thought would have interposed itself between the book and its reader—and yet, bafflingly it was precisely this book that brought Oz back into the readers' and the critics' graces.



Amos Oz during the Literature International Festival, Rome, June 2005. (Photo by Mondadori via Getty Images.)

A Tale of Love and Darkness meanders back and forth in time, from Oz's melancholic and rather marginal childhood in British-governed Jerusalem to his awkward youth as an outsider in the kibbutz, from there back to his family's history in Eastern Europe, through to his childhood recollections and on to some memorable moments in his adult life. At the heart of the story, we find the complex and, at times, tormented relationship between the young Oz, an eloquent and imaginative only child, and his doting yet demanding parents. His father, Yehuda Aryeh Klausner, was a highly educated and intellectually ambitious man whose work as a librarian in the national library on Mount Scopus did not meet his own aspirations. His mother, Fania Klausner (née Mussman), was a sensitive young woman who unsuccessfully battled depression. The memoir is filled with many colorful adult characters (and very few children), some of whom are well-known historical figures such as Oz's great-uncle, Professor Joseph Klausner, a controversial and internationally renowned scholar of Jewish literature. He wrote, among other works, an early biography of Jesus as a Jew and was Chaim Weizmann's right-wing opponent to be the first president of Israel. (Oz's sheepish father lived in his shadow.)

We are also introduced to the captivating figure of the great Hebrew poet Shaul Tchernichovsky, who was a friend of Fania's family and a regular visitor in their home in Odessa, where he used to appear in the company of beautiful young Russian women to banter with his friend, Chaim Nachman Bialik, modern Israel's national poet, who is described as an amiable glutton, always ready for a lavish feast. Another familiar historic figure who makes an appearance in this memoir is Nobel laureate Shmuel Yosef Agnon, an intriguing character who lived across the street from Oz's great-uncle Joseph Klausner and did very little to hide his dislike for him. Especially touching is the relationship of the young Oz with his elementary school teacher, the great Hebrew poet Zelda Schneurson Mishkovsky, a direct descendant of the third Lubavitcher Rebbe, whom Oz charmingly refers to as Morah Zelda and on whom he has his first literary crush. We even meet David Ben-Gurion, the short, big-bellied father of modern Israel whose larger-than-life presence fills his austere, almost monastic office, to which the stunned young Oz is summoned very early one morning in order to listen to "the Old Man's" grandiose musings about

philosophy and especially Spinoza, with whom he was famously obsessed.

We are also introduced to an array of less famous but artfully portrayed characters, and, through them, we witness a world that is long gone: frightened and often frazzled Jewish immigrants, who carry with them the burden of diasporic life with all its fear and uncertainty; Arab aristocrats with their air of worldliness and elegance; quirky British officials; and representatives of the young sabra generation, Oz's peers with whom he never really seems to fit in. This intricate web of stories, acquaintances, and memories is strung together with great detail and unfolds at a pace that seems to be taken from another time and another place.

Oz's claim to fame was his linguistic "wizardry," the almost supernatural perfection of every paragraph, every sentence, and every word.



From left: Gilad Kahana, Natalie Portman, and Amir Tessler in a scene from **A Tale of Love and Darkness,** *2015. (Photo by Ran Mendelson/© Focus World/Courtesy Everett Collection.)*

And yet, the very characteristics that make *A Tale of Love and Darkness* a unique reading experience are also the ones that make it an unlikely candidate for global recognition in a world where accessibility and success have become almost synonymous. Moreover, the intricate web of memory and meaning is very loosely woven. The best way to describe the novel's structure is that it doesn't really have one; the reader is nearly drowned in an abundance of details, which often do not serve the story and, at times, feel nothing short of self-indulgent. The book's amorphousness, for lack of a kinder term, was not widely addressed by the critics, but it did not go completely unnoticed. Ariana Melamed—in a uniquely hostile review sardonically titled "Amos Klausner, an Author?"—called *A Tale of Love and Darkness* a "structureless story, leaping capriciously back and forth." Melamed addressed the overwhelming abundance of details with similar readerly impatience:

> What to do with this beaten, used, wrinkled pile of clichés? . . . A huge pile of totally uncommitted images that overwhelms all that Oz has to say. And he indeed has very little to say.

Melamed's hostile outburst was exaggerated and uncalled for, but it also called attention to literary failings that more "civilized" critics let pass in their reviews.

A *Tale of Love and Darkness*'s textual looseness is particularly shocking given the outstanding tightness of texts typical to Oz, whose claim to fame was precisely his linguistic "wizardry," the almost supernatural perfection of every paragraph, every sentence, and every word. By contrast, Oz's memoir holds at least two books within it: the first is his mother's tragedy; the second is a Proustian evocation of the unmediated flow of deep memory. The relationship between these two different books, squeezed beneath the same title, is not always harmonious. They interrupt each other, disturb each other's flow, and, at times, even seem to fight over the gaze of the reader like two attention-starved children whose tired parent (or author) cannot control them.

The main plot of Oz's *Tale* is heartbreaking and revolves around the psychological deterioration of Oz's mother, Fania, a delicate foreign flower who never set root in the harsh reality of Mandatory Jerusalem, the melancholy of which slowly seeps into her, developing into a full-blown depression that takes her away from her husband and only child and eventually pushes her to suicide. This plot, which was also the basis for Natalie Portman's cinematic misadventure, was first introduced in the young Oz's brilliant 1976 novella *The Hill of Evil Counsel*, which is often—and, in my view, rightly—considered to be the pinnacle of Oz's work. But unlike the tight, mesmerizingly beautiful prose of *The Hill of Evil Counsel*, in which Oz's loss of his mother is transformed into her abandoning her family and leaving the country in the company of a high-ranking British officer, the plot in *A Tale of Love and Darkness* is spread thinly over too many pages. It catches the reader almost by surprise every time it resurfaces between the countless anecdotes, observations, and musings that fill this memoir's pages. The reappearance of those intense snippets of tragedy, it seems, take not only the reader but the author himself by surprise, as if he himself has forgotten its existence:

> I forgot, just as I forgot all about the morning I came home early from school and found my mother sitting quietly in her blue flannel dressing gown, not in her chair by the window but outside in the yard, in a deck chair, under the bare pomegranate tree, sitting there calmly with an expression on her face that looked like a smile but wasn't; her book was lying as usual upside down open on her lap and torrential rain was pouring down on her and must have been going so for an hour or two, because when I stood her up and dragged her indoors, she was soaked and frozen like a drenched bird that would never fly again.

Is this "forgetfulness" deliberate? Does it represent a sophisticated denial mechanism that allowed the young child to survive the tragedy of his mother's depression? The reader does not get an answer to this question. One has to cross such a vast distance to land on this harrowingly beautiful description that seems like an island surrounded by a sea of words. The reader feels conflicted: on the one hand, there is an urge to give the masterful Oz credit and believe that the disproportion between words and story is deliberate, but, on the other hand, there is a nagging suspicion that this is not so much a literary strategy as a simple deficiency of editing. There is a rumor that many editors tried and failed to rein in text and author, and certainly the phenomenon of authors who are "too famous to edit" is well known. But Oz is not generally known as such an author. (Craftsmen like Oz tend to appreciate another expert eye.) In any case, *A Tale of Love and Darkness* stands out among Oz's works in its apparent need for a firm editorial hand.

A typical Oz text is extremely economical in its words, almost hermetically tight, at times to a fault. His previous novel, *The Same Sea* (1999), to take the most extreme example, forsook mere prose altogether and was written in austere verse, pleasing a few Oz connoisseurs and leaving behind many other baffled readers. Here, in his great memoir, the language is far from perfectly chiseled. At times, the reader senses something frighteningly close to logorrhea. This is manifested in the erratic, seemingly careless movement between an almost pompous "high" Hebrew and an almost sloppy everyday language. (Nicholas de Lange's excellent English translation diplomatically softens some of these effects.)

"The enormous gap between the banality of the description and the sublime nature of the language is burdensome, irksome, and even infuriating," wrote the unforgiving Ariana Melamed on this aspect of the memoir. "Not every beating of a blanket is a scene from *Don Quixote*, and not every carp swimming in the bathtub is *Moby Dick*."

An extreme example of such stylistic sloppiness is a totally misplaced mini-chapter in which Oz's storytelling comes to a screeching halt and he assumes the tiresome didactic tone of a lecturer about what is "true" and what is "false" in his work. Indeed, one cannot help but suspect that this is indeed a ready-made lecture that Oz chose to cut and paste into the memoir, taking advantage of the editorial void. This disturbance in the stylistic and thematic flow of Oz's *Tale* (which was wisely omitted from the English edition) is, unfortunately, not the only one in this long journey.

The lack of editing is evident not only at the level of language and structure language; there is also a strong repetitive element that does not feel deliberate and has, as far as I can tell, little poetic or rhetorical value. This is especially jarring in places where the story is actually enchanting, such as the scene in which the young Oz and his parents pay their biweekly visit to the famous great-uncle's house. This scene is a favorite of Hebrew readers, in part because young Bibi Netanyahu makes an appearance in it as a naughty young boy who, together with his famous brother, Yoni Netanyahu, the fallen hero of Operation Entebbe, hides under the dining room table and keeps undoing Oz's shoelaces. Their antics are put to an end by a sharp kick dealt by the young Oz to one of the mischievous Netanyahu siblings. "To this day," he remarks, "I don't know which one of them I kicked, the heroic brother or the clever one." (Strangely, this anecdote was omitted from the English translation.) However, the scene begins with a long, slow-paced description of the family's journey across the landmarks of old Jerusalem, bringing them to the doorstep of Professor Klausner's house in the Talpiot neighborhood, the door of which is adorned with a copper tablet bearing the professor's famous motto, "Judaism and Humanism." The description of their visit is one of the highlights of the reading experience as it captures the melancholic sweetness of the early days of Jerusalem and the as-yet-unfulfilled Zionist dream. But even here, the excruciatingly slow pace and the endless repetitions, the arbitrary breaking into subchapters, all try the reader's patience.

What is it, then, that makes this very imperfect book so captivating? What is the secret of *A Tale of Love and Darkness*'s success?

A more surprising and substantive challenge to the contemporary Israeli reader is Oz's palpable sense of nostalgia for the days in which Jews felt and behaved like a minority in what would become Israel. In spite of the many references to national and, at times, nationalistic sentiments that run in the boy's family (they were prominent Revisionists, opposed to the establishment Labor Party), the text itself seems to long for the days when the essence of the Jewish settlement in Palestine was still diasporic. Oz refers with awe and admiration to the pioneers of the kibbutz, the heroic and distant role models of his childhood, but, as an adult writer, he spends much more ink describing situations and states of mind that are very far from heroic or autonomous. A wonderful example of this is his description of his family's preparations for a disastrous visit to the home of an aristocratic Arab family:

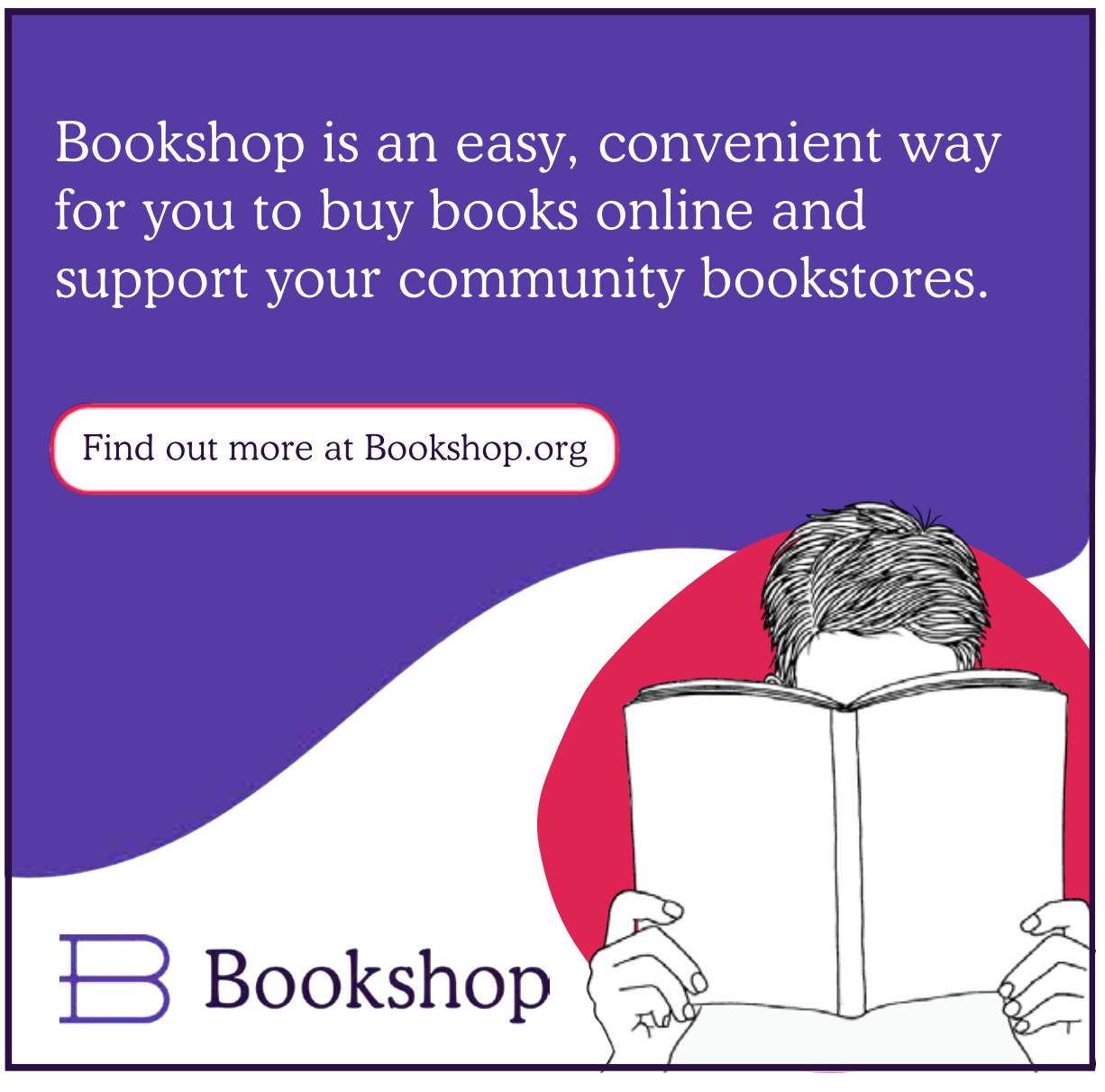
> Our visit to Silwani Villa was not like Lenin visiting the workers or like Tolstoy among the simple folk: it was a special occasion. In the eyes of our more respectable and enlightened Arab neighbors, who adopted a more Western European culture most of the time, Uncle Staszek explained, we modern Jews were mistakenly portrayed as a sort of rowdy rabble of rough paupers, lacking manners and not yet fit to stand on the lowest rung of cultural refinement.

These words and the sentiment that they encapsulate bear no resemblance to the self-confidence, even arrogance, of contemporary Israeli culture. Our historical memory is short, and the days of our being an insecure minority in what we believed was our historical homeland are long forgotten, not only by us but by the world.

What is it, then, that makes this very imperfect book so captivating? What is the secret of its success? Is it the fact that it gave us, to quote Yigal Schwartz again, "what we need most and receive only in truly great works of art: the dense, tangible, rich, almost eternal sense of time, the like of which we've experienced only in our childhood"? Is it, perhaps, a secret fatigue from our heroic national narrative and a paradoxical yearning to return to a more marginal existence?

Or is it, rather, the imperfections of *A Tale of Love and Darkness* that make it strangely accessible? Early on, Oz was admired for his sovereign mastery, the chilly perfection of his work, but this same quality eventually distanced readers and critics from him. Perhaps it was the vulnerability of this warm, rambling memoir that enabled readers to reconnect to Oz. Was our wizard easier to love when he stepped out from behind the curtain of perfection and revealed himself to be a frail old man who, no longer in possession of linguistic magic or prophetic confidence, dared to show himself as he truly was, as we all will be, alone and obsessed with his sweet and terrible memories?

Ruby Namdar was born and raised in Jerusalem to a family of Iranian Jewish heritage. His first book won the Israeli Ministry of Culture's Award for Best First Publication. The Ruined House *won the 2014 Sapir Prize—Israel's most important literary award—and subsequently appeared in English with Harper. He teaches Jewish literature, focusing on biblical and talmudic narrative, at Bard College and elsewhere.*



A Serious Comedy

BY RICH COHEN

Fitzgerald believed *The Great Gatsby* was about American WASPs, but it's really about a Jewish gangster trying to pass. Hemingway believed *A Farewell to Arms* was about a man's disgust with war, but it's really about the sky in Italy, the way the snow creaks beneath your boots in storm-struck alpine towns, the residue that settles at the bottom of a good bottle of wine. An artist does not know the meaning of his own work. If he thinks he knows, he's wrong. If he had a plan and believed that he'd carried it out, he's probably failed. If, on the other hand, he had a plan and knows he failed, there's a chance that he's succeeded. He aims for one thing and hits another.

Take the films of Joel and Ethan, the Coen brothers. Starting with their first movie, *Blood Simple*, their movies might have seemed to be about nothing less or nothing more than the art of filmmaking itself. Each picture has been an occasion to experiment with a classic Hollywood genre. Western. Gangster flick. Newspaper comedy. But their real project, even if they're not aware of it, has been more particular. It's about a sensibility, a way of seeing the world common to a species of pop culture–drunk American Jews, with an emphasis on a unique genus: midwestern Hebrew. In other words, though the Coens have explored characters as *goyish* as Anton Chigurh (*No Country for Old Men*) and Rooster Cogburn (*True Grit*), their work is as Jewish as Saul Bellow (or Bob Zimmerman).

This has mostly been sublimated, hidden. (As the old Hollywood axiom has it, "Write Yiddish, cast British.") When not hidden, their Judaism is played for laughs. As in *The Big Lebowski*, when convert Walter Sobchak, told he's been living in the past, says, "Three thousand years of beautiful tradition from Moses to Sandy Koufax? You're goddamn right I'm living in the fucking past!" Or in *Hail, Caesar!* when a rabbi, asked to comment on the plot of a biblical epic, says, "God has children? What, and a dog? A collie, maybe? God doesn't have children. He's a bachelor. And very angry."

But now and then you see the thing plain. Take *A Serious Man*, which was near the top of my quarantine rewatch list. It's this movie that shows the brothers for what they truly are: the exemplary American Jewish pop artists of the century, seeking to portray neither the experience nor the trials of the Jews but instead a certain Jewish sensibility, the world as it looks through the eyes of the modern midwestern Hebrew.

Such Jews—the Coens grew up in St. Louis Park, Minnesota, a suburb of Minneapolis—came of age in a kind of triple exile: first from Zion, then Europe, and now New York, the center of American Jewish life, capital of Jewish delis, Jewish streets, Jewish basketball and stoopball, synagogues, density, and sophistication. In places like St. Louis Park, young Jews were routinely told that whatever they were doing was being done better by Jews somewhere else. You like that corned beef? Well, they make it better in New York. You like that musical? Well, the real Tevye is on Broadway.

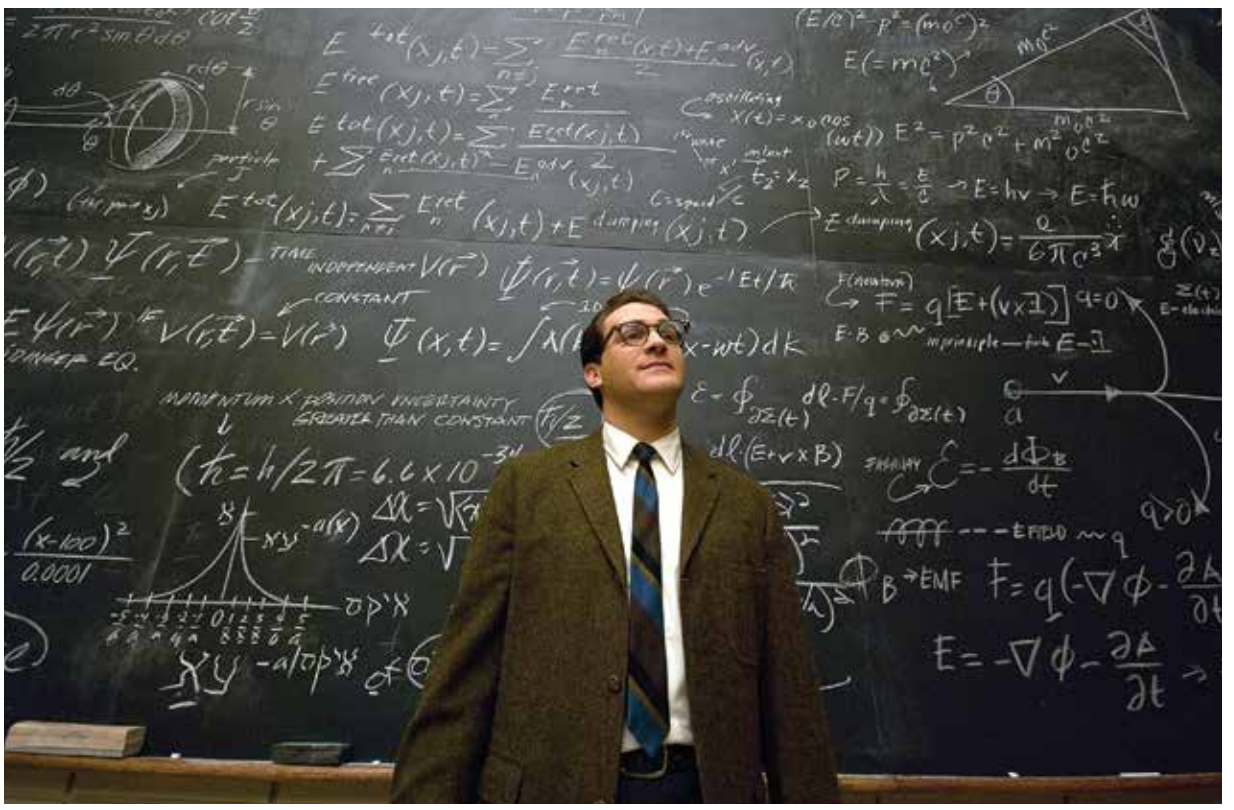
Joel was born in 1954, Ethan three years later. Three years is long enough for separation but short enough to share the same mind, the same books, TV shows, and dreams. Having gotten hold of a Super 8 camera in the early 1970s, the brothers began making their own movies. They started with knockoffs of those they'd seen on TV. In the way of student painters, they learned by tracing the works of the masters: Preston Sturges, Frank Capra.

In places like St. Louis Park, young Jews were routinely told that whatever they were doing was being done better by Jews somewhere else.

They preferred to be behind the camera from the start and left most of the early acting to a neighborhood kid named Mark "Zeimers" Zimering, their first leading man. It was Zeimers who blazed the way for George Clooney, Frances McDormand, John Goodman, and the rest of their regular rotating crew. In the Coens' preteen remake, Cornel Wilde's *The Naked Prey* became *Zeimers in Zambezi*. *Lassie Come Home* became *Ed . . . a Dog*. Other Coen juvenilia includes *Lumberjacks of the North*, *The Banana Film*, and *Henry Kissinger, Man on the Go*.

Joel went to NYU, where he did what you'd expect him to do—studied cinema. Ethan went to Princeton, majored in philosophy, and wrote a thesis on Ludwig Wittgenstein. The brothers got hold of a professional camera after college, used it to film a trailer for the movie they wanted to make, and then used the trailer to raise the money to make it. That film, *Blood Simple*, which starred John Getz and McDormand, is a murder-for-hire crime story. They took the title from Dashiell Hammett's brutal novel *Red Harvest*. "It's an expression he used to describe what happens to somebody psychologically once they've committed murder," Joel told *Time Out*. "They go 'blood simple' in the slang sense of 'simple,' meaning crazy." The movie plays like a tribute to Bogart's Hollywood.

A great run of movies followed—17 features in 25 years, a Philip Roth–like level of productive regularity. Their second film, *Raising Arizona*,



Michael Stuhlbarg in* A Serious Man*, 2009. (Wilson Webb/©Focus Features/Courtesy Everett Collection.)

established their style, which is about wit, words, and antic humor. And speed. Their love of parody seemed to characterize the generation that came after the boomers—every story has been told, every song sung. For the Coens, and the rest of us, there were no new ideas. Style was philosophy, riffing on the masters. These movies speak to those of us who spent our first days drenched in TV and, as a bonus, seem to irritate those who came before, who, in the way of adults, stand at the edge of the playground, calling on them to act their age. Here's Daphne Merkin writing in the *New Yorker* in 1998:

> Still, all the brothers' intelligence and skill can't make up for the sense of vacancy in their movies. Until they find a way to let a little real

life in (grownup reality, that is), Joel and Ethan Coen will somehow seem stunted—no more than the brightest kids in the class.

Amazingly, though, they found a way to address the realest of subjects—their own childhood, their own sense of Judaism—without sacrificing their style; they "grew up" without losing their humor. I'm thinking of *A Serious Man*, which is pitched as a modern-day book of Job—the good man being punished for a crime he did not commit—but is really about the living rooms, yards, and treeless suburban streets where the Coens learned about the world.

The movie takes place in the 1960s in a suburb much like St. Louis Park, where identical ranch houses line the broad streets. If you wandered into the wrong house, you wouldn't even know it till dinnertime. The movie's protagonist, Larry Gopnik (Michael Stuhlbarg), is a college professor, as was the Coens' father. When the action starts, he's going over the Heisenberg uncertainty principle with his physics class—a theory that had already been explained in the Coens' 2001 feature *The Man Who Wasn't There*:

> They got this guy, in Germany. Fritz something-or-other. Or is it? Maybe it's Werner. Anyway, he's got this theory, you want to test something, you know, scientifically—how the planets go 'round the sun, what sunspots are made of, why the water comes out of the tap—well, you gotta look at it. But sometimes you look at it, your looking changes it. You can't know the reality of what happened, or what would've happened if you hadn't-a stuck in your own goddamn schnoz. . . . Sure, it sounds screwy, but even Einstein says the guy's on to something.

A Serious Man takes place in the weeks leading up to the bar mitzvah of Larry's son, Danny. In just a few days, Larry, who is awaiting the decision of his school's tenure committee, is faced with an unfaithful wife, her jackass paramour, a student trying to bribe his way into a passing grade, and an antisemitic buck-hunting neighbor.

In a search that comes to resemble a fable, Larry seeks answers (Why is this happening to me?) from three rabbis—young, middle-aged, old—each of whom represents another generation of failing American Jewry. First the junior rabbi, Rabbi Scott (Simon Helberg). Larry is troubled by his lack of experience, but Rabbi Scott, who comes off as a fool, offers what may be the movie's only useful advice:

> I, too, have had the feeling of losing track of Hashem, which is the problem here. I, too, have forgotten how to see Him in the world. And when that happens, you think, Well, if I can't see Him, He isn't there anymore; He's gone. But that's not the case. You just need to remember how to see Him.



Aaron Wolff, center, surrounded by directors, Joel Coen, left, and Ethan Coen, right, on the set of* A Serious Man*, 2009. (Wilson Webb/©Focus Features/Courtesy Everett Collection.)

Then the second rabbi, Rabbi Nachtner (George Wyner), who's like every rabbi in my Reform synagogue, the spiritual *macher* of all those Rodeph Shaloms and Beth Israels—behind the big desk, sipping from an ornate teacup, speaking in a pseudo-talmudic singsong in which the most mundane phrase is presented as wisdom. Rabbi Nachtner answers Larry's big question (Why is this happening to me?) by telling a story. It's about a "goy's teeth." One day, a fellow congregant, an orthodontist making a plaster mold, discovered Hebrew letters carved into the back of a patient's incisors. They spelled the phrase, *Help Me, Save Me*. Believing these words to be a message meant for him—the patient's mouth being a kind of envelope—the orthodontist set off on a quest similar to Larry's. But in the end, after fruitlessly searching for answers, he simply gave up, returning to a happy, riddle-free life. Which, according to Nachtner, is the point: "These questions that are bothering you, Larry, maybe they're like a toothache. We feel them for a while; then they go away."

Then the third rabbi, an old man, a bearded grandfather who reeks of old books and Europe, the inscrutable Senior Rabbi Marshak (Alan Mandell), whose cavernous office is guarded by a pitiless secretary. She sits before his door like a sentry. At this point in his life, Marshak meets only with bar mitzvah boys, speaks only to children. When Larry pleads for an audience, the secretary says the rabbi is busy.

"He didn't look busy," Larry shouts.

"He's thinking," says the secretary.

The message, for those of us who grew up in the shadow of such rabbis, is clear: the tradition is exhausted; the old men have nothing to teach. Whatever we need can be found on the television or radio. In fact, some of the only words spoken by Marshak come from a song he's heard on Danny's radio. "When the truth is found, to be lies," Rabbi Marshak tells Danny, "and all the hope within you dies." Then he gives Danny one decent piece of advice: "Be a good boy."

The power of the movie is its sense of mystery—it presents a puzzle you want to solve—which comes from a handful of uncanny scenes, fables within the fable. In one, Larry, who has been kicked out of his house and is staying at the Jolly Roger Motel, has a dream in which he is standing before a number-covered blackboard. The camera pulls back, and we see an equation that seemingly goes on forever. As the students get up to leave, Larry calls after them, saying, "But even though you can't figure anything out, you will be responsible for it on the midterm."

In another scene, we see a close-up of the Mentaculus, the book-length algorithm that Larry's insane genius brother Arthur is constantly working on. Described as a "probability map of the universe," the Mentaculus is a dense tapestry of arrows, numbers, Hebrew letters, and hieroglyphics.

But it's the prelude of *A Serious Man*, a 15-minute opener, that sets up everything. It resembles an Isaac Bashevis Singer story; a Jewish merchant invites an old man in for a bowl of soup on a cold night. The merchant's wife—the dialogue is in Yiddish—is convinced the visitor is a dybbuk, a demon wearing a dead man's skin. She puts an ice pick in his chest to prove it, then sends the dying man out into the snow. According to some commentators, these are Larry Gopnik's grandparents, who, in killing a guest, cursed their descendants. To me, it's more like a framing trick the Coens played in *Lebowski*, with their use of a nameless old-time cowboy narrator. The voice from an earlier time tells you that, though set in modern supermarkets and bowling alleys, the movie is really a Western. It's like that with the Yiddish prelude of *A Serious Man*. It's a frame that tells you that what follows is a Jewish folktale, even if it's set in Minnesota instead of Galicia. The message is the same as the message readers find in Singer's "Gimpel the Fool": in this world, the righteous are deceived.

A Serious Man is different from the rest of the Coens' oeuvre—there's something real at stake. Larry has a moral choice to make. Will he take the bribe to fix the student's grade, or won't he? And does it even matter? As it turns out, it does matter, a fact that takes us back to the dream in which Larry stood before the blackboard. Even though he has no idea what's happening, he's still responsible for his actions. The minute he forgets that and takes the cash, the phone rings and, as another midwestern Hebrew once sang, "A foot comes through the line." We're in the Golden Land now, but we still answer to the same old Father. "He's a bachelor. And very angry."

Rich Cohen wrote the forthcoming Pee Wees: Confessions of a Hockey Parent *(Farrar, Straus and Giroux), cocreated HBO's* Vinyl*, and is a contributing editor at* Vanity Fair *and* Rolling Stone.

Our Lady in Tehran

BY SHAI SECUNDA

Tehran
created by Moshe Zonder, Dana Eden, and Maor Kohn
written by Moshe Zonder and Omri Shenhar
directed by David Syrkin
KAN 11/Apple TV+, eight episodes

Leaving an airport bathroom after a turbulent flight, a young Israeli woman sporting a messy hairdo, a pair of headphones, and a red-and-white Adidas jacket collides with a stylish flight attendant and says, "I know you . . . We were together in the army! What in the world are you doing here?!" The flight attendant stares at the woman for a second too long and then dons a pair of sunglasses and swiftly disappears. This seemingly typical encounter between an Israeli traveler and a reluctant acquaintance abroad is not typical at all, since it takes place in Imam Khomeini International Airport in Tehran.

What are these two Israeli women doing in a Tehrani airport bathroom? The frazzled backpacker, Shira (Tuti Ninio), is there because she scored cheap tickets on a Royal Jordanian flight to India, and the plane was forced to make an emergency landing after experiencing unexpected engine trouble. The flight attendant she bumps into is, in fact, an Israeli hacker and spy named Tamar Rabinyan (Niv Sultan, in her first major role), who flew in on the same flight and has just exchanged clothes and identities in a bathroom stall with Jila Ghorbanifar—a Persian woman who is working for a Tehran electric company, collaborating with the Israelis, and will soon be sitting in Tamar's seat on the return flight to India. The Mossad has orchestrated this complex and brazen operation as part of a last-ditch effort to cut the capital's power supply so that the Israeli Air Force can take out Iran's nuclear program. And the Tehrani bathroom run-in is the first of a string of tactical misfortunes that burns Tamar's cover and unleashes a high-octane drama powered by chic wardrobe changes, shifting identities, and an explosive premise: Tamar can make her way in Iran because she is, in some deep sense, herself Iranian.

Much like past successes and failures of Israeli intelligence, *Tehran*'s action alternates between the utterly brilliant and the incredibly boneheaded. Watching the show, one thinks of Israel's recent seizure, from a secret warehouse in Tehran, of an enormous archive of files documenting Iran's nuclear activities. But one also recalls the assassination of Hamas's Mahmoud al-Mabhouh in a Dubai hotel room, a mission in which passports and aliases were lifted from Israeli dual citizens and absurd disguises were donned by agents, with the entire debacle caught by security cameras.

Tehran was filmed in a much smaller country's much smaller capital—Athens—in the hope that that city's dusty streets and public parks might approximate the real thing. Many Israeli viewers were convinced, but Iranians—who, despite the official stance that *Tehran* was a work of Zionist propaganda, devoured leaked episodes with gusto—

The Tehrani bathroom run-in is the first of a string of tactical misfortunes that burns Tamar's cover.

were understandably disappointed with geographic inaccuracies and the camera's apparent apathy for the magic of their capital. Say what you will, Tehran is one of the most picturesque and visually interesting cities in the world. Its historic districts are checkered with concrete skyscrapers and squat neighborhoods, and it boasts busy green quarters and quiet, lush gardens, while the urban chaos is watched over by the spectacular Alborz mountain range. Of course, an Israeli production team could never dream of filming in Iran, but they were able to cast Iranians (expats, of course) to work alongside Israeli actors, and most of the dialogue is in Farsi.

The cinematography is prestige TV chic, on the whole impressive, though perhaps with one too many artsy close-ups. As for the quality of the acting, like real-world espionage, some performances are convincing and subtle, while others risk the whole enterprise by failing to rise to the occasion. The stars shine reliably bright: Shaun Toub and Navid Negahban—two Iranian American actors who worked together on the American thriller *Homeland*—bring grace and grit to their opposing roles as Iranian detective and Israeli spy handler. As Tamar, Niv Sultan's beauty and youthfulness serve her well, although occasionally, her delivery is choppy, as is true of some of the supporting cast. And yet, despite it all, *Tehran* is an achievement of some cultural and political significance.

Certainly, from an industry perspective, *Tehran* is an event. The Canadian Cineflix bought its distribution rights well before it aired on the Israeli public broadcast station KAN this summer, and it will stream exclusively on Apple TV+ beginning September 25. No doubt, this is because the show's co-creator and screenwriter, Moshe Zonder, is also the head writer of *Fauda*, the wildly successful series about an IDF unit of *mista'arvim*, counterterrorists who infiltrate the Palestinian territories disguised as Arabs. *Fauda* garnered critical acclaim in both Israel and America (where it streams on Netflix) for its high production values, action-packed plotlines, and multidimensional characters, including the Palestinian antagonists who, when not plotting the murder of Israeli civilians, are shown to be family men with romantic yearnings and chocolate cravings. Such humanization of "the other" has recently become something of a specialty of Israeli TV; it is one of the factors that led to the improbable success of *Shtisel*'s tale of ultra-Orthodox Jerusalemites.



Niv Sultan in* Tehran.** ***(Courtesy of KAN Public Broadcaster Channel 11.)

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Zonder turns a similar trick here. There is the story of Faraz Kamali (Toub), a high-ranking Iranian detective who is on Tamar's trail from the moment her cover is blown in the airport bathroom. Sure, Kamali is a ruthless operator ready (like his Israeli counterparts) to kill anyone who gets in his way. But he also loves his cancer-stricken wife so deeply that he is willing to let down his (revolutionary) guard to tell her corny jokes, and more hazardously, to make decisions that secure her health and well-being, even if it means imperiling the homeland. Apart from Kamali and his leather-clad sidekick, Ali (Arash Marandi), *Tehran* gives us other well-drawn Iranian characters, including a group of young and restless radicals that Tamar ends up falling in with, joining their antiregime protests and Ecstasy-powered raves. She does this while falling in love with their ringleader, Milad (Shervin Alenabi, whose striking looks don't always match his acting prowess), a fellow hacker who, without knowing that she is an Israeli agent, encourages Tamar to punish the regime by messing with the electric grid.

There's an Isfahani Jewish folk saying: "One of my eyes is raised to Jerusalem and the other to Isfahan."

There is (fortunately) more to Zonder's writing than nuanced profiles of terrorists and terrifying police officers. Indeed, the real heresy at the heart of *Fauda* was not its rounded characters but its split personalities. This is especially true of the show's hero, Doron Kavillio (Lior Raz), an Israeli commando who must navigate his identity crisis as a Mizrahi Jew inside and outside the territories. Unlike most Jewish Israelis, Doron learned Arabic as a child from an Arabic-speaking Jewish father who maintained close friendships with local Palestinians. Through the intriguing back story of its heroine, *Tehran* similarly questions whether the boundaries of Middle Eastern politics always correspond to the psychological borders of its inhabitants.

Beyond the action-packed scenes played out in the situation room in Tel Aviv and the streets of Iran's capital, *Tehran* gestures toward the lesser-known personal drama of those Iranian Jews who either chose to stay in Iran or, after immigrating to Israel, continued to pine away for their home country. The recent history of Iranian Jewry and its complex relationship with the State of Israel has confounded many observers, especially Israeli officials, who have struggled to understand why this community did not immigrate to Israel en masse in the 1950s, or at least after the Islamic Revolution, as other Jews living in Islamic lands did when the going got tough.

Unlike Jews from other Middle Eastern countries, Persian Jews have, to a significant extent, resisted the Israeli melting pot of Mizrahi identities. Recently, historians such as Lior Sternfeld have been retelling and rethinking the meaning of Iranian Jewry's diasporic tale. I would not be surprised if Sternfeld's *Between Iran and Zion: Jewish Histories of Twentieth-Century Iran*, or the works of some of his colleagues, found their way to the nightstands of *Tehran*'s writers. Consider the case of our own Tamar Rabinyan, who was born in Iran, moved to Israel as a child, and grew up in a Bat Yam apartment graced with a photograph of the striking Isfahan skyline, with its rounded domes, piercing minarets, and mountainous landscape. Unlike the majority of Iranian Jews who fled the country in the stormy days leading up to and following the Revolution, the Rabinyans remained for another 15 years. When they emigrated, they left close relatives behind. In a sense, they never really abandoned the country that they still regard as theirs.

An Isfahani Jewish folk saying, "One of my eyes is raised to Jerusalem and the other to Isfahan," is uttered on more than one occasion on the show. Its pleasant symmetry conveys a balance of loyalties common to many Jews of the diaspora, including some Iranian Jews. Yet this was not the experience of Tamar's father, Mordechai (Alex Naki), who tells Iranian intelligence officer Faraz how leaving Iran for the beloved Holy Land brought pain and heartbreak, and ironically, a sense of dislocation: "When I came to Jerusalem for the first time and saw the Holy Wall and the ramparts built by Muslims, I began to cry." When pressed for the meaning of this strange reaction, Mordechai struggles to explain himself: "I am like an exile there. The longing for Iran only grows stronger from year to year." Make no mistake, Mordechai harbors no love for the revolutionaries, telling Faraz that they have "long since lost their moral compass and destroyed our beautiful country." He is also a devout Jew and wears the knitted yarmulke of religious Zionism. Yet even in his bitter accusation of the Islamic Revolution lies the alternate history of those Iranian Jews who despised the shah's monarchic regime and, as Sternfeld's book shows, initially supported the revolutionaries. The Islamists' ensuing cruelties and corruptions were seen by many former opponents of the shah, including Jews, as a betrayal of the Iranian nation.

Tamar's memories of Iran are hazy, but she finds fragments of herself there. When her cover is blown for a second time, and she is forced to make her way alone in Tehran, she seeks shelter with her aunt, who had been forced to cut ties with the Rabinyans when she married her college sweetheart, a Muslim, who is now an official in the Ministry of Justice. Yet Tamar's relationship with the country she finds herself trapped in is not driven by family nostalgia; it is forward looking. This explains her gravitation to the sexy anarchists who want to take down the regime for the future of Iran. Her association with her partner in crime and maybe soul mate, Milad, is more than a honey trap.

Without giving too much away, the season ends on a precipice, with both Iranian and Israeli plans up in smoke. Clad in a chador, Tamar clings to Milad on a motorcycle that rushes past green hedges, city buses, and Jerusalem-like stone into the cool air of the Tehran night.

Shai Secunda is the Jacob Neusner Professor of Judaism at Bard College. His latest book, The Talmud's Red Fence *(Oxford University Press), was recently published.*

Horace Kallen, George Washington, and the Borah Affair

BY ESTHER SCHOR

On February 2, 1934, Professor Horace M. Kallen received a letter from H. H. B. Meyer of the Library of Congress asking for the source of a quotation. Thirteen years earlier, Kallen had published an article arguing for the legitimacy of the League of Nations in which he had quoted George Washington as saying, "When, our institutions being firmly consolidated and working with complete success, we might safely and perhaps beneficially take part in the consultations held by foreign states for the advantage of the nations." Meyer's note was brief and courteous; he even enclosed a stamped envelope to save Kallen postage. What Meyer did not disclose was that, as director of the library's Legislative Reference Service, he was writing at the behest of Senator William E. Borah, Republican of Idaho and the Senate's most prominent isolationist, who was convinced that the quotation was spurious and demanded to know the source.

Borah, who was the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, had seen the quote in a recent *Washington Post* editorial that criticized his use of a more famous quotation from Washington regarding foreign entanglements, words he'd been quoting ever since President Wilson had returned from Europe with the Versailles Treaty. In his Farewell Address, Washington had said, "The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as possible." Borah was aghast when the *Post*, citing the "dynamic character of a changing civilization," had quoted George Washington advocating internationalism to undermine Borah's isolationism. The Library of Congress, asked to find the source of the suspicious quotation, discovered it in a book by historian George Blakeslee, and Blakeslee led them to *his* source: Kallen.

Meyer had to write to Kallen again three weeks later before receiving a response of sorts. It came from Kallen's secretary, Madlyn Miller, who wrote that not only did Dr. Kallen not have the article on hand, he didn't even remember it. Moreover, she reported that Kallen's files from 1921 were unavailable, and his secretary from those days was no longer in his employ. This was technically true; Kallen was no longer employing that secretary, but he *was* living with her. She was his sister, Frances, who had lived and worked with him in his early years at the New School for Social Research. By the time Kallen heard a second time from Meyer, Frances, now a hospital administrator, was probably already ill with the disease that, eight weeks later, would end her life at age 36. With Frances declining and Meyer's query answered (after a fashion), Kallen let the matter rest. It is true that Kallen, who was an ardent Zionist, a prominent internationalist, and the leading advocate of what he called "cultural pluralism," had written dozens of articles over the past 13 years (indeed, he'd published five books) and might have forgotten a piece in the *Journal of International Relations*. Still, the response of his secretary was odd; it read like a deflection.

Kallen intended to sue "Hearst's whores"—"the whole jackal press of the country"—for libel. But what was to be done about Senator Borah?

That might have been the end of it, but a year later, on Washington's Birthday, Borah took to the Senate floor. After the customary reading of



Horace Kallen in an undated photo.

Washington's Farewell Address, Borah had the *Post*'s harsh editorial read into the *Congressional Record* along with Madlyn Miller's letter and then furiously denounced the unsourced quotation of Washington as a "crude, clumsy, impudent forgery":

> It carries the brand of criminal falsehood upon its face. In style, in manner of expression, in substance, and in thought, it is manifestly a weak but vicious pretense. . . . It was forged for a purpose; that purpose was to plant in our historic literature a view contrary to all views expressed and opinions entertained by the Father of his Country.

In the year since the editorial had appeared, Borah announced, a cadre of eminent historians had certified that the quotation was spurious. With a flourish, Borah announced that he had at last traced the offending quote to Horace M. Kallen.

Senator Borah had probably already been aware of Kallen, at least as a prominent academic advocate of the League of Nations (Kallen had written two books supporting it), which the senator had vociferously opposed. Borah, who was one of the "Irreconcilables" determined to block ratification of the Versailles Treaty in 1919, had said, "If the Savior of mankind would revisit the earth and declare for a league . . . I would be opposed to it." Sixteen years later, when the question of America's involvement with Europe was once again coming to the fore, a suspicious quote from "the Father of his Country" about participating in "consultations held by foreign nations" cried out for refutation.

Kallen didn't learn of Borah's yearlong crusade to expose him as a clumsy, criminal, impudent forger bent on planting an alien graft into "our historic literature" until the senator's denunciation from the Senate floor made the news. "I am mad as hell about it," Kallen wrote to his brother-in-law, Fred Blachly, a political scientist at the Brookings Institution, "but I have got to find the source of the quotation."

In mid-March, historian George Blakeslee, who was also the founder of the journal in which Kallen had published his now controversial article, suggested, correctly, that Kallen's source had been Edwin D. Mead, former director of the World Peace Foundation. However, that didn't help much because Mead, in turn, had cited an 1898 *Atlantic Monthly* article by Richard Olney, Grover Cleveland's secretary of state, who had described the source of the Washington quote merely as "an authority of the highest character." So, who was that? The answer, Blakeslee suggested, might lie with one Miss Straw, the secretary who had taken "this Atlantic Monthly article from Mr. Olney's direct dictation."

Meanwhile, editorials with such titles as "An Impudent Forgery" appeared in Hearst-owned papers. This was hardly a surprise; Hearst had been boosting Borah's isolationism since 1919. Kallen, working through the growing pile of denunciatory clippings from newspapers throughout the country, began to realize just how damaging Borah's attack had been. He wrote to his friend, Denys Myers:

> The repercussions among the reactionaries, patrioteers, "isolationists" and others continue to develop. The damage which Borah has done is in some ways irreparable because it is impossible to catch up with a lie.

He intended to sue "Hearst's whores"—"the whole jackal press of the country"—for libel. But what was to be done about Borah? Was it wise, Kallen

wondered, to demand an apology from the senator before learning the source of Olney's quotation?

This was the era of slow scholarship. For almost two years, researchers, most of them women—a sister, a sister-in-law, an aged secretary, women executors, and longtime women friends—were sent to burrow through libraries, archives, and uncollected manuscripts (all without remuneration) in search of the fugitive lines. In late March, Kallen still had no answers. Impatient to act, he drafted an angry letter to Borah and showed it to several friends, who advised him to tone it down.

He also enlisted help from Rabbi Stephen Wise, who knew Borah personally. "He is a very evasive person," wrote Wise, "as shown in his conduct when, despite his promise to me, he opposed Brandeis's confirmation." (In fact, Borah had been one of the 27 senators of both parties who had simply declined to vote on the first Jewish nominee to the Court—a choice, to be fair, that he later regretted.) In his letter to Borah, Wise listed Judge Julian Mack, Associate Justice Louis Brandeis, then Harvard Law professor Felix Frankfurter, and philosopher Morris R. Cohen as prominent friends of Kallen. Knowing that Borah prided himself on his credentials as a progressive Republican, he also mentioned "the older and younger Senators La Follette and Governor La Follette."

It did not escape Borah's notice that, except for the La Follettes, all of these associates were Jews. Denying that he had "even inferentially charged Professor Kallen with forgery," Borah informed Wise that "since receiving your letter I have submitted my statement in the Record to a friend who is also a well-known person of your race, and asked if he placed any such construction upon the statement. He stated emphatically he could see no legitimate inference of that kind." Borah's Jewish referee may well have been peace activist Salmon O. Levinson, an attorney who had worked closely with him on passing the Kellogg-Briand Pact outlawing war. Because the toothless pact did not compromise US sovereignty (since any act of provocation immediately dissolved it), Borah had strongly supported it, and, in January 1929, the Senate ratified it by a vote of 85–1. Whoever the Jewish referee was, Borah's letter implied that Wise would only be convinced by the views of someone "of your race" and signaled that Borah would not be impressed or intimidated by a clutch of eminent Jews—one of whom he had effectively rejected for the Supreme Court. Borah was clearly peeved by the implication that a whiff of antisemitism hovered over Borah's charge that the "impudent" Kallen had planted a foreign element in "our historic literature."

Kallen's response to Borah began on March 29, 1935, with a four-page letter copied to the *Washington Post*. He cited Mead's two speeches and Olney's article, noting, "As is customary among gentlemen and scholars, I took for granted that when a man of Mr. Mead's standing quoted, he quoted honestly, fully believing that those words expressed the very view of George Washington." To Kallen's request for a retraction, Borah responded, as he had to Rabbi Wise, by denying any wrongdoing. Unmoved by Kallen's reference to gentlemen and scholars, Borah declined to do anything "until you are prepared to state either that you regard the quotation from Washington as correct or incorrect."

Kallen responded by saying that he would be forced to "publish this correspondence in the press" and mailed 51 copies of the letters to national daily papers such as the *New York Times* and the *New York Herald Tribune*, weeklies such as *Time* and *Newsweek*, wide-circulation magazines such as the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Esquire*, scholarly journals such as *Foreign Affairs* and the *American Historical Review*, regional papers such as the *Baltimore Sun* and the *Kansas City Star*, leftist magazines such as the *New Masses* and the *Daily Worker*, and the Jewish press, including the *Forvertz* and *Der Tog*, alerting them to expect antisemitic responses. The upshot of this flurry was . . . not very much. Although scores of polite notes drifted in, no one offered to publish the correspondence, and only a few small papers published editorials. Several editors wrote that the compilation was both too long and unamenable to excerpting. And for many, one intractable question loomed over the whole affair—Borah's question: Had George Washington written this or not? Kallen's negative press, however, continued: typical was a *Chicago Tribune* smear called "Falsifying History."



Senator William E. Borah in his office, August 1927, Washington, D.C. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.)

Kallen's ace in the hole was the *Washington Post*—or so he thought. On April 13, after lecturing at Howard University alongside W. E. B. Du Bois, E. Franklin Frazier, and Ralph Bunche, Kallen met with *Post* editor Felix Morley, who revealed to Kallen not only that he himself had written the January 1934 *Post* editorial but also that he had cited Washington's supposed words in his 1932 book, *The Society of Nations*. With Morley's "own scholastic reputation . . . involved in the dispute," he was planning to soon publish the Kallen-Borah letters on the editorial page, on successive days, each with an editorial headnote. But on April 29, Kallen had still not seen the letters in print. He wrote Morley asking if the letters might be brought out as a pamphlet; the archive holds no reply. The decision to kill the story was probably not Morley's. Two years earlier, near bankruptcy, the *Post* had been scooped up by Eugene Meyer, former Fed chairman under Hoover, descendant of Alsatian Jews. Although Meyer had vowed to keep the paper nonpartisan and independent, he was a prominent Republican. Taking on Borah might have been too much, especially with rumors flying that Borah intended to run for the Republican nomination. When Borah announced his candidacy on December 20, 1935, the *Post* welcomed it with an editorial.

Toward the end of April, Kallen received a letter from Antoinette M. Straw, the secretary who had taken dictation for Richard Olney's article in the *Atlantic*. She had been hoping to search Olney's scrapbook from 1898, but, maddeningly, "that particular volume of our collection was sent to Mrs. Minot at Falmouth three or four years ago to look over and she has not yet been able to lay her hands upon it. She will find it presently I am confident." But Straw also suggested that Olney might have seen the quote in official State Department documents. She was right. In Olney's papers, the quotation was traced to a letter from William Seward, Lincoln's secretary of state, to William Dayton, minister to France, dated May 11, 1863. Ironically, whereas Kallen had been ready to trust Secretary of State Olney, Olney had not extended the same favor to his predecessor, Seward, continuing to hunt for the source. Coming up empty, Olney had used the quotation anyway.

Soon, Kallen learned that Senator Elbert D. Thomas (D-Utah), a Japanese-speaking Mormon internationalist, was gathering materials for an anti-isolationist Senate speech on Washington's Birthday. When Thomas failed to deliver the speech, Denys Myers mused to Kallen that perhaps Thomas didn't want to take on his senatorial colleague now that he was a presidential candidate. A year later, however, on February 22, 1937, Thomas did deliver his speech after the ritual reading of Washington's Farewell Address. Recalling Borah's denunciation "on this floor two years ago today" of the "crude clumsy, impudent

forgery" of Washington's views, Thomas wryly observed that "Washington is quoted much as Shakespeare has credited the devil with quoting his Scripture, 'for his own purpose.'" Citing Washington's call for "the adoption of a proper Peace Establishment," Thomas wrestled Washington away from Borah, taking him back for the cause of internationalism:

> For Europe it is collective action or continued fear, dread, and uncertainty. . . . Can the world continue the master contest based upon fear, distrust, and force, or shall it turn to the sobering advice of a Washington, whose spirit speaks to us today from between the lines of his words uttered in 1783?

Borah took to his feet in disgust, insisting that "those who asserted this language to be in Washington's address . . . were impudent forgers and nothing less."

Having lost his 1936 bid for the Republican nomination, Borah spent the late 1930s pressing the case for American neutrality. He habitually blamed the Versailles Treaty for Hitler's aggression. Privately, Borah also lamented Nazi persecution of "those poor people" and criticized Germany for financing insurgents in the United States. But he made no secret of his admiration for Hitler, imagining that a personal conversation with the Führer just might set things to right: "There are so many great sides to [Hitler], I believe I might accomplish something." In 1938, he sought, through the German ambassador, an invitation to Berlin. But when the Foreign Office cabled the invitation to meet with both Hitler and von Ribbentrop, Borah declined; he was ill, relations between the United States and Germany were deteriorating, and he suspected FDR would block his journey. Upon learning that Germany had just invaded Poland, Borah told a journalist, "Lord, if I could only have talked to Hitler—all this might have been averted." Meanwhile, despite Stephen Wise's personal appeals, Borah refused to speak out against the Nazi persecution of Jews. He died of a cerebral hemorrhage in January of 1940 with two great political regrets: not voting for Brandeis and not meeting Hitler.

By the late 1930s, watching the Nazis rise to power, Kallen had shifted his focus from internationalism to intervention. He spent the 1930s organizing the New School's University in Exile for academic refugees from Nazi Germany, boycotting German goods and academic conferences, and protesting to the Japanese government about antisemitism in Manchuria; he also denounced the DAR as a fascist organization. Barnstorming from city to city, Kallen gave a rousing speech called "The Assault on Democracy," urging his audience to protest neutrality and aid refugees. In 1935, he became chair of the World Jewish Congress's committee against antisemitism and, two days after the passage of the Nuremberg Laws, spoke about antisemitism to an audience of over three thousand in Carnegie Hall.

As early as 1936, Kallen had voiced his eagerness for someone to write a long article about his controversy with Senator Borah focused on the senator's "disingenuity and cowardice." Senator Thomas's 1937 speech, despite taking Kallen's side against Borah, had neither vindicated Kallen personally nor advocated for action against Hitler. More than a year after Borah's death in the spring of 1941, a massive article, "George Washington and the Isolationists," appeared in the *New Leader* in four installments by the previously unknown Warrell Gainsborough. Of course, by that time, the possibility of American neutrality was close to a dead letter. When the entire article was published as a pamphlet in early 1942, Pearl Harbor had been bombed, and the US was at war. Nonetheless, Kallen had finally received his vindication—but from whom?

Borah died of a cerebral hemorrhage in January of 1940 with two great political regrets: not voting for Brandeis and not meeting Hitler.

Who was Warrell Gainsborough? Apart from citations to the article and subsequent pamphlet, as far as Google, the Ancestry.com database, WorldCat, the Archive Finder, and the ProQuest Historical Newspapers database are concerned, he never existed at all, not as such. To add to the intrigue, I found the original manuscript of the article in Kallen's papers at the American Jewish Archives. (The typescript is there too.) The manuscript is not written in Kallen's distinctive hand, although the many corrections and emendations *were* clearly written by Kallen. As one might expect, the article is also extremely sympathetic to Kallen. So, the question is not "Who was Warrell Gainsborough?" but, rather, "Warrell Gainsborough was . . . whom?"

In pursuit of an answer, I consulted the archives of the *New Leader*. While they hold no Gainsborough folders, they do hold two folders of letters between Kallen and editor Sol Levitas. The first contains a cover letter dated February 27, 1940, for "the manuscript I mentioned over the telephone," asking for "reprints of the whole thing for wide distribution." Their correspondence has a cloak-and-dagger feel to it: Kallen will only discuss the manuscript in detail on the telephone, and it is the only one of Kallen's many cover letters to Levitas not to give the title or topic of the piece. In a follow-up six weeks later, Kallen asks, "What has happened to my mss?" failing to mention its supposed author (whose initials, if you reverse them, happen to be the same as those of George Washington). "If you are not going to use it," Kallen wrote to Levitas, "don't be afraid to tell me so and return it to me. I can well understand the difficulties of the situation."

A year later, Kallen reminded Levitas about the desired reprints, requesting that his letters to Borah, as well as press clippings, be appended. Apparently, Kallen was footing the bill, since he also asked for prices for printing 1,500 copies with and without appendices. That May, the pamphlet was listed in the *New York Times Book Review* under Gainsborough's name with 66 W 12th Street given as the author's address, but, when the New York Public Library tried



to contact the author at that address, their letter was returned; it was Kallen's work address at the New School, whose mailroom clerks had no knowledge of Warrell Gainsborough. When Levitas forwarded the library's query, Kallen reached for the phone, as he had when he'd first proposed the manuscript to Levitas: "I gave your girl the answers to your questions of November 14 over the phone," he wrote cryptically, noting that he had on hand many copies of the pamphlet and would be "happy to distribute them."

Whoever Gainsborough was, it wasn't Kallen himself; neither the handwriting nor the style matches his. Kallen's writing is quirky and florid, given to elaborate metaphors; his vast range of reference borders on the preening; his argumentation is often obscure. Gainsborough's style, by contrast, is fluent but disciplined. So, who? Kallen's range of acquaintances was vast, and he had access to a healthy supply of fledgling journalists and hungry graduate students; he also had funds at his disposal to compensate the writer. I have compared the Gainsborough manuscript with the handwriting of several possible suspects—including lawyer-philosopher Milton Konvitz; Kallen's brother-in-law, Fred Blachly; his sister, Miriam Kallen (a teacher and future professor of education); and activist Fola La Follette—and failed to find a match. One thing is clear: whoever Gainsborough was, Kallen did his best to make sure we wouldn't find out. (Since biographers "dwell in possibility," I carry a handwriting sample in my wallet against the chance that, someday, late in the afternoon in a dusty archive, I'll find a match.)

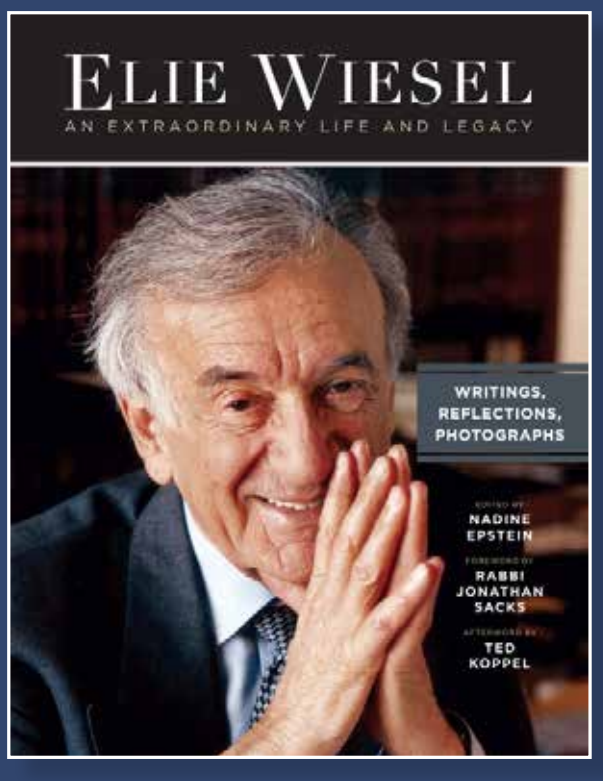
What "Gainsborough," whoever he or she was, accomplished was to take a 20-year-old controversy about Washington's legacy for foreign affairs and refocus it sharply. Back in 1921, while Borah and the "Irreconcilables" paraded under the banner of an isolationist Washington, Kallen had claimed the first president for the cause of internationalism. In 1935, Borah had declared, on the floor of the Senate, that this internationalism was not merely a misreading; it was "a deliberate forgery," the intellectual equivalent of fifth-column subversion.

It was now 1941, and given Kallen's activism on behalf of Europe's Jews, one might expect Gainsborough to cherry-pick passages casting Washington as an interventionist or, at least, as a protector of human rights. Instead, Gainsborough emphasized Washington's apprehension about the viability of the United States, for it was national unity—not federalism—on which the independence of the country would rest. In other words, at the time Washington wrote, "If we remain one people, under an efficient government" in his Farewell Address, national unity was a very big "if." Washington's objection to foreign entanglements, Gainsborough asserted, was to forestall foreign countries—France in particular—from "tamper[ing] with domestic factions"; "foreign influence," Washington wrote, "is one of the most baneful foes of republican government." What had alarmed Washington was not foreign entanglements per se but covert operations at the highest levels of power—in this case, both backchannel negotiations between Secretary Edmund Randolph and the French ambassador, Jean Antoine Joseph Fauchet, and an attempt by Fauchet's successor to tamper with the 1796 election. Gainsborough claimed that the Farewell Address called not for "a permanent policy of Isolationism, but isolation until our country was united and strong," after which it would be free to consider both its interests and its principles in making decisions on foreign policy, which was precisely what was expressed in Kallen's quotation of Washington, authentic or not.

When the Borah affair commenced, Kallen was a distinguished professor in his early fifties with a Rolodex full of journalists, editors, scholars, editors, clergy, civic leaders, attorneys, and politicians. It was a pluralist's Rolodex: people ethnically and regionally various, from all walks of life. Many were individuals of prestige and power. But one lesson of the Borah affair for Kallen was that damage to a reputation, when caused by a man of prestige and power, was almost indelible. Borah's characterization of Kallen as an impudent forger scarred Kallen and made him desperate, perhaps too desperate, to locate the elusive quotation and vindicate himself, at a moment when he needed all of his public credibility to press the case for America's international responsibilities in the run-up to World War II. What he learned is a lesson those in American political life go on learning: "it is impossible to catch up with a lie."

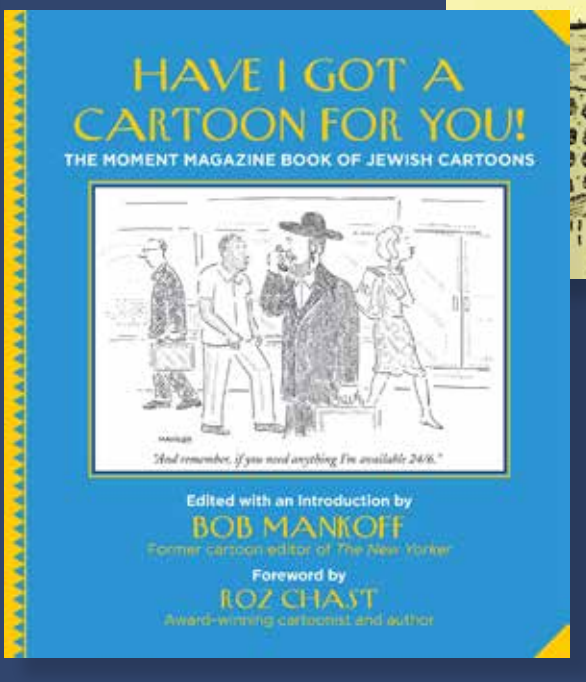
Esther Schor is the Leonard L. Milberg '53 Professor of American Jewish Studies and professor of English at Princeton University. She is the author, most recently, of Bridge of Words: Esperanto and the Dream of a Universal Language *(Metropolitan Books). She is currently at work on a biography of Horace Kallen.*

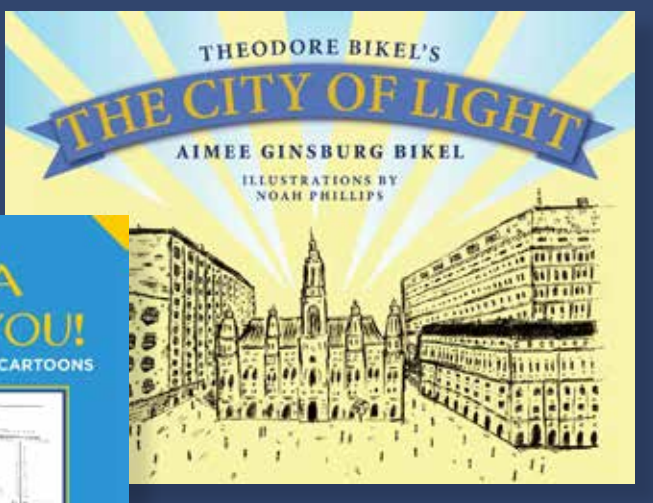
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Haredim and COVID-19: Tenants or Landlords? A Response

BY DANIEL GOLDMAN AND YOSSI SHAIN

In his admirably frank essay, "Holiness and Public Policy: The Haredi Response to COVID-19" (Summer 2020), Rabbi Yehoshua Pfeffer argues that the ongoing health crisis has exposed the failure of haredi leaders to grasp the difference between rabbinic rulings and public policy. Given that haredi politicians (including the minister of health!) found themselves following the uninformed edicts of nonagenarian rabbis rather than legally binding governmental decisions, resulting, as Pfeffer notes, in a disproportionate number of deaths in their own community, this is certainly true. However, we don't think that the haredi failure to understand public policy that Pfeffer points out gets to the bottom of the matter.

The pandemic exposed a deep sociopolitical paradox: haredim in Israel continue to think like tenants, but they have long since become landlords. Whereas the haredi community used to be a small, tolerated community focused on its own needs in its negotiations with the state, it has now become a key part of that state, while still regarding itself as essentially a supplicant.

In stark contrast to ultra-Orthodox communities in the diaspora, who can still regard themselves as essentially strangers in a strange land, haredi Israelis now manage an ideologically fraught relationship with a government of which they form a key part. Understanding how public policy is formulated and implemented is a good idea, but it won't solve this conundrum. As we weather the whirlwind of Israel's second wave of COVID-19, it is worth considering the bind that the Israeli haredi leadership finds itself in and whether it can respond differently this time. Writing earlier this summer, Pfeffer suggested in his article that after its initial failure to take public health measures seriously, the haredi community was one of the most compliant sectors of Israeli society. This has not lasted. As we write in early August, Israel is still in an uproar over the recent Belzer wedding attended by several thousand (!) people.

One of the core issues of the Zionist project has been how to respond to the haredi rejection of, or at best ambivalence towards, the modern nation-state of Israel and the ideals that animate it. Pfeffer provocatively describes the practical effect of this rejection as one in which haredi communities act as "a state within a state." This aptly describes the episode in which Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky effectively overruled the Ministry of Health's official policy on school closings.

At one level, the reality that haredi Israelis are a critical partner of the Israeli political Right and are deeply embedded within Israel's state institutions has created a de facto acceptance of governmental sovereignty and legitimacy within the haredi world. And yet, when the pandemic hit, the depth of that acceptance became less clear. Take the case of Yaakov Litzman, the head of the Agudat Israel who recently stepped down as veteran minister of health after a decade in the position. Litzman was torn between the state rulings and the order given by Rabbi Kanievsky to keep religious institutions open. In fact,

Yaakov Litzman was torn between the state rulings and the order given by Rabbi Kanievsky to keep religious institutions open.

Litzman is one of two senior haredi ministers, the other being Minister of the Interior Aryeh Deri, who fought within the cabinet to keep synagogues open for as long as possible.



A young Orthodox Jewish young man at the Ponevezh Yeshiva, Bnei Brak, during the mandatory COVID-19 lockdown. (Photo by Ilia Yefimovich/picture alliance via Getty Images.)

As full cabinet ministers, Litzman and Deri are charged with carrying cabinet responsibility for all the decisions of the Israeli government. Yet, for the first two critical weeks of the COVID-19 crisis, they and their colleagues failed to effectively mediate between the government's entirely legal and wholly rational response and the haredi leadership's reluctance to accept such restrictions despite the health crisis developing within their communities.

To be clear, the tenant/landlord paradigm has been implicitly endorsed by successive Israeli governments in return for a tacit agreement on the part of haredi leadership to focus their political energies on internal community matters, specifically the funding of *yeshivot* and the exemption of their students from military service. And yet, as the community has grown, so, inevitably, has both its needs and its political power. As Pfeffer notes, haredi Israelis are far from a uniform religious or cultural bloc, but politically they act in virtual unison. Over 90 percent of the more than one million haredi Israelis vote for ultra-Orthodox parties. Indeed, every election campaign run by United Torah Judaism (UTJ) and Shas stresses that voting is a way to serve God. However, every increase in influence and state power pushes the haredi leadership further on a collision course with its own ideology.

The COVID-19 crisis brought the fundamental weakness of this political arrangement into high (and tragic) relief. Despite the presence of haredi politicians in the government, and even within the Ministry of Health, the government did not manage to convey the seriousness of the public health crisis to the haredi community. As for the "state within a state," haredi municipal leaders were eventually forced to hand over effective control of their towns and cities to the army to enforce public health policy.

Of course, no one has suffered more from all of this than the haredi communities themselves, physically, economically, and socially (they are now regarded with even more suspicion and hostility than previously by their fellow citizens). As the haredi leadership emerges from this crisis, it faces a series of hard decisions that will force it to decide whether the dual identity of tenant and landlord in the State of Israel is sustainable.

Daniel Goldman is chairman of LeShem and cochairs the Coalition for Haredi Employment. He is the founding partner of Goldrock Capital.

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

Taking Responsibility: A Rejoinder

BY YEHOSHUA PFEFFER

I certainly agree with Daniel Goldman and Yossi Shain that haredi society in Israel must graduate from a "tenant" to a "landlord" mentality and that the transition is difficult. On the one hand, the self-understanding of haredi society as an isolated, dependent minority encourages shortsighted parochial thinking rather than strategic planning; on the other hand, the very process of graduation requires accepting broader responsibilities and taking public policy seriously. In the interim, both the haredi community and their fellow Israeli citizens suffer the consequences.

Yet, all is not as bleak as it sometimes seems. I would hazard that haredi society—the haredi public if not haredi leadership too—takes responsibility for maintaining Israel's Jewish character. Israel's kippa, so to speak, has slowly transitioned from the knitted *kippa sruga* of the Mafdal Party and its religious Zionist followers to a *mehadrin* black kippa. By way of illustration, the controversy surrounding train maintenance work performed on Shabbat was a direct result of haredi public opinion. Yaakov Litzman, who I quoted in my article as saying that haredi society "will never be a majority," declared that, "Shabbos is dear to us, and my greatest responsibility is to protect it. . . . If I fail in this matter, I have no reason to be in government." This is not the statement of a politician who regards himself and his constituents as mere tenants in perpetual exile.

Haredi citizens and leaders must adopt the strategic and integrative mode of thought required to help responsibly guide the ship of the state.

Though I have discussed his failures as minister of health in the COVID-19 crisis, Litzman has addressed serious issues of larger public interest, including the availability of medical cannabis, waiting times for an MRI scan, and extensive reform of the dental industry. Moreover, his fellow United Torah Judaism MK Moshe Gafni has been deeply involved in environmental legislation, UTJ MK Yisrael Eichler has worked to strengthen Knesset governance, and Shas has maintained an extensive social agenda as part of their platform for many years. The transition from tenant to landlord is already taking place. Nonetheless, as I argued, more is required. Haredi citizens and leaders must adopt the strategic and integrative mode of thought required to help responsibly guide the ship of the state. And I believe the COVID-19 crisis, which exposed haredi vulnerability on many levels, ought to be a significant trigger for this change.

Aside from public health concerns, haredi society now faces other challenges that have followed from the current crisis. Consider the huge increase in haredi Internet use during this period: the latest statistics show that haredi usage of social media platforms has more than doubled over the last few months. How should haredi society react? Consider also the tremendous financial challenges that many haredi institutions face due to significant reductions in philanthropic donations. And perhaps most worrying of all, how can haredi society handle the "yeshiva student crisis" that hit haredi headlines several weeks ago, describing the thousands of young men who have been cut loose from their moral, spiritual, and intellectual homes during this period? My hope is that such difficult challenges will galvanize deeper, strategic thinking within haredi society, which will serve to better both haredi society and, ultimately, the rest of Israel.

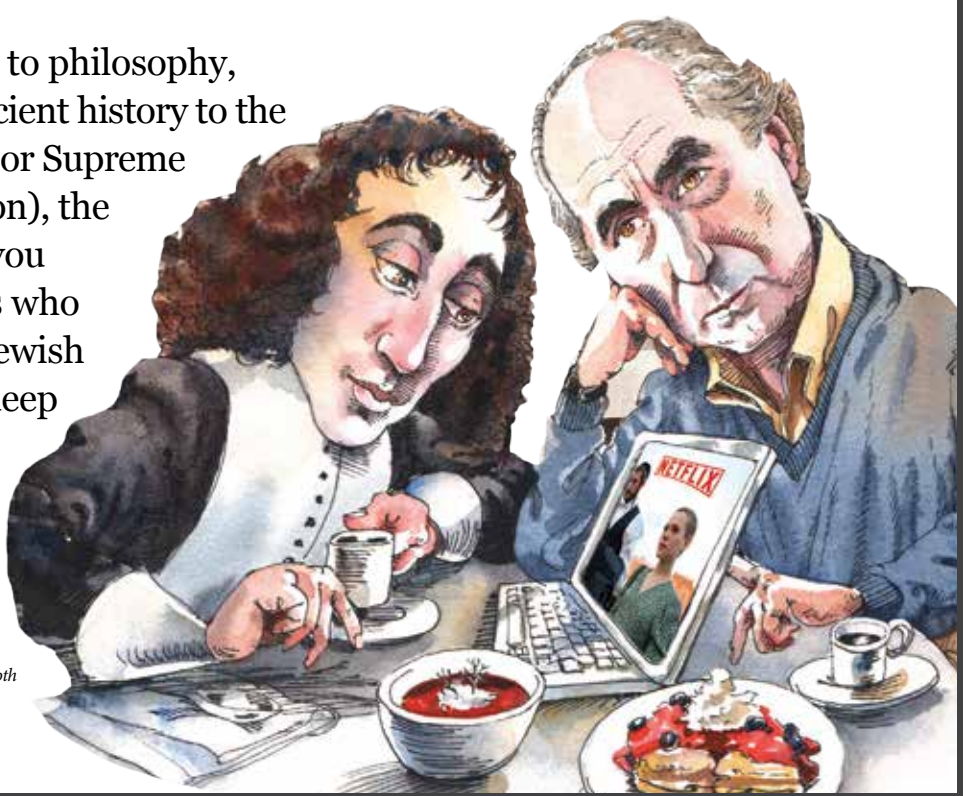
I am reminded of a conversation a close friend once had with a major figure in haredi politics. He asked the following question: "Let's say haredi parties earned a majority of Knesset seats; what would you do?" His answer, obviously tongue-in-cheek, was: "We would turn to the president and ask him to accept us as the fifty-first state of America." Goldman and Shain would diagnose this statement as a symptom of wanting to always be the tenant and never a landlord, but I believe the deeper issue is more cognitive than psychological. The haredi politician's joke was really an admission that he and his colleagues didn't have a clue about how to run a state. That must change, and I believe that there is reason to hope that it will.

Yehoshua Pfeffer is the editor of Tzarich Iyun*, a leading haredi publication of criticism and ideas; a community rabbi; and the director of the haredi division of the Tikvah Fund in Israel.*

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Jonah: The Sequels

BY STUART HALPERN

In 1896, the *New York Times*, citing the October 1891 issue of the British *South Yarmouth Mercury*, told the fantastic tale of a sailor on the whaling ship *Star of the East* who was a modern-day Jonah:

> One morning the lookout sighted a whale about three miles away on the starboard quarter. Two boats were manned. In a short time, one of the boats was near enough to enable the harpooner to send a spear into the whale, which proved to be an exceedingly large one. . . . [It] beat about with its tail in the maddest fashion. The boats attempted to get beyond the reach of the animal, which was apparently in its death agonies, and one of them succeeded, but the other was less fortunate. . . . The men were thrown into the water, and, before the crew of the other boat could pick them up, one man drowned and James Bartley had disappeared.

Though the whale succumbed to its wounds, a search for the missing sailor turned up empty-handed. That is, until, with their "axes and spades," the men cut open their defeated prey and were startled to find Bartley, folded over and unconscious. He was "treated to a bath of sea-water" and revived. His skin, having been subjected to his temporary host's gastric juices, "underwent a striking change." His hands and face "were bleached to a deadly whiteness and his skin was wrinkled, giving the man the appearance of having been parboiled."



Jonas es Vomitado del Vientre del Gran Pez a La Playa (Jonah Vomited by the Great Fish upon the Shore). *Undated colored engraving. (Prismo Archivo/Alamy Stock Photo.)*

In a learned, entertaining 1991 article, Edward Davis traced the fascinating afterlife of the story of Bartley's whale-intestinal adventure, which had been used as proof of the Jonah story's plausibility in the *Princeton Theological Review* and elsewhere. He also showed that the *South Yarmouth Mercury* never existed.

Over the last two millennia, Jonah's tale has been retold for various purposes. In his *Antiquities of the Jews*, the first-century turncoat Josephus promised his Roman readers that he would tell the story as he had found it "written down in the Hebrew books." He then proceeded to offer, like poor Bartley's skin, something barely recognizable.

While the first chapter of Jonah does not yet give the exact message Jonah was meant to deliver to the sinful Ninevites, Josephus spells it out for us: Jonah was "to publish it in that city, how it should lose the dominion it had over the nations." Josephus explains Jonah's flight from this mission, which has bewildered exegetes for ages, as the result of Jonah's fear of harm at the hands of the Ninevites angered by the prediction of their downfall. Josephus's account of the storm that affected only the boat on which Jonah fled, and the subsequent lottery by the panicking passengers to divine the storm's cause, is relatively faithful. Jonah's speech about the Lord who "created the sea and land" is toned down, and the sailors' vows to give offerings to Jonah's God after they toss him overboard are dropped. Louis Feldman, the late scholar of all things Josephus, suggested that these tweaks were a result of political caution. Josephus was wary of giving his pagan readership even a whiff of Jewish proselytizing. (As Feldman used to quip to decades of students at Yeshiva University, "Josephus was a smart man, but I would never have wanted to buy a used car from him.")

Chapter Two is retold somewhat faithfully, although Josephus omits Jonah's prayer from the fish's belly and credits him with obtaining a forgiveness he never asked for. It's when Josephus sails on to the second half of the book that he jumps the shark. The book's last two chapters are reduced to three sentences: Jonah delivers his message of impending downfall, "and when he had published this, he returned." "Now," says Josephus as he rests his stylus, "I have given this account about him as I found it written." The repentance of the people (and animals) of Nineveh, arguably the book's climax, is missing. Nor is there any hint of Jonah's sulking response to their *teshuvah*. In Josephus's account, the *kikayon*, the short-lived, shade-providing plant for the sweltering Jonah, never grew, let alone shriveled. And God's great rhetorical question, "And shall I not care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well?" was never posed.

Feldman offered a series of explanations for these elisions. The notion of a world power repenting after a warning from Israel's God was to be avoided (me, proselytize? Never). And Jonah's disappointment over the survival of a pagan city probably wouldn't have gone over well with readers in a pagan city. What of God's resonant last speech about mercy? How could Josephus justify cutting it? As Yitzhak Berger observed in *Jonah in the Shadows of Eden*, although the last sentence of the book has been read by the Jewish tradition as a rhetorical question, it can also be read declaratively: "And I shall *not* have mercy on Nineveh." Maybe Josephus read it that way. Thus, Jonah had overcome his fears (with a little help from a fish) and delivered the message, which God's speech merely confirmed, and Nineveh *had* eventually fallen. After all, Josephus was working on his rewrite from a Roman estate, not an Assyrian estate.

Such a calculated rewriting of the Bible may offend modern readers, but the ancient Rabbis also rewrote Jonah's last scene, as Robert Gregg has noted. When the book of Jonah is read aloud on Yom Kippur, it doesn't end with God's caustic moral rebuke to the prophet, either. It ends this way:

> Who is a God like You, forgiving iniquity and remitting transgression; Who has not maintained His wrath forever against the remnant of His own people, because He loves graciousness! He will take us back in love; He will cover up our iniquities, You will hurl all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will keep faith with Jacob, loyalty to Abraham, as You promised on oath to our fathers in days gone by.

These verses about God's loving-kindness are actually from the fourth chapter of another "minor prophet," Micah. Placed there by the Rabbis, they become Jonah's response to God. "Shall I not have mercy on Nineveh?" God had asked. And the Yom Kippur response is delivered, "Who is a God like You, forgiving iniquity and remitting transgression . . ."

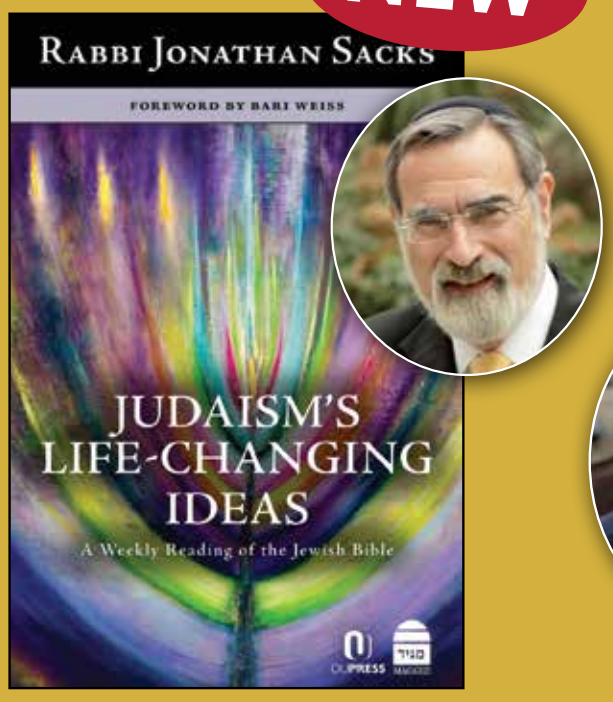
The Rabbis, as James Kugel has shown, read the Torah as a unified, self-glossing canon. Thus, Micah's words could very well have been, on some level, Jonah's, or at least about him, especially since they speak of hurling "all our sins into the depths of the sea." Yom Kippur, the Rabbis saw, was not a day for rhetorical questions, so they copied and pasted the answer from Micah. On this day, even the pouting prophet must speak of God's gracious response to His people's repentance.

Stuart Halpern is senior adviser to the provost and senior program officer of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University.

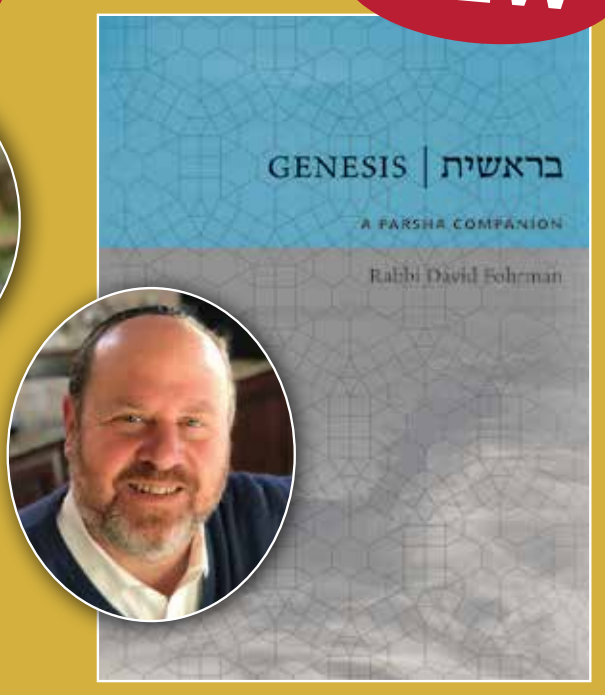
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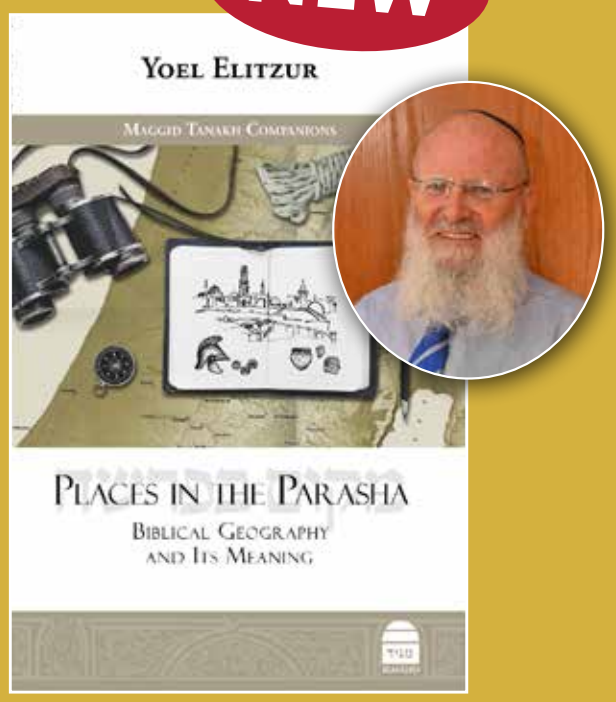
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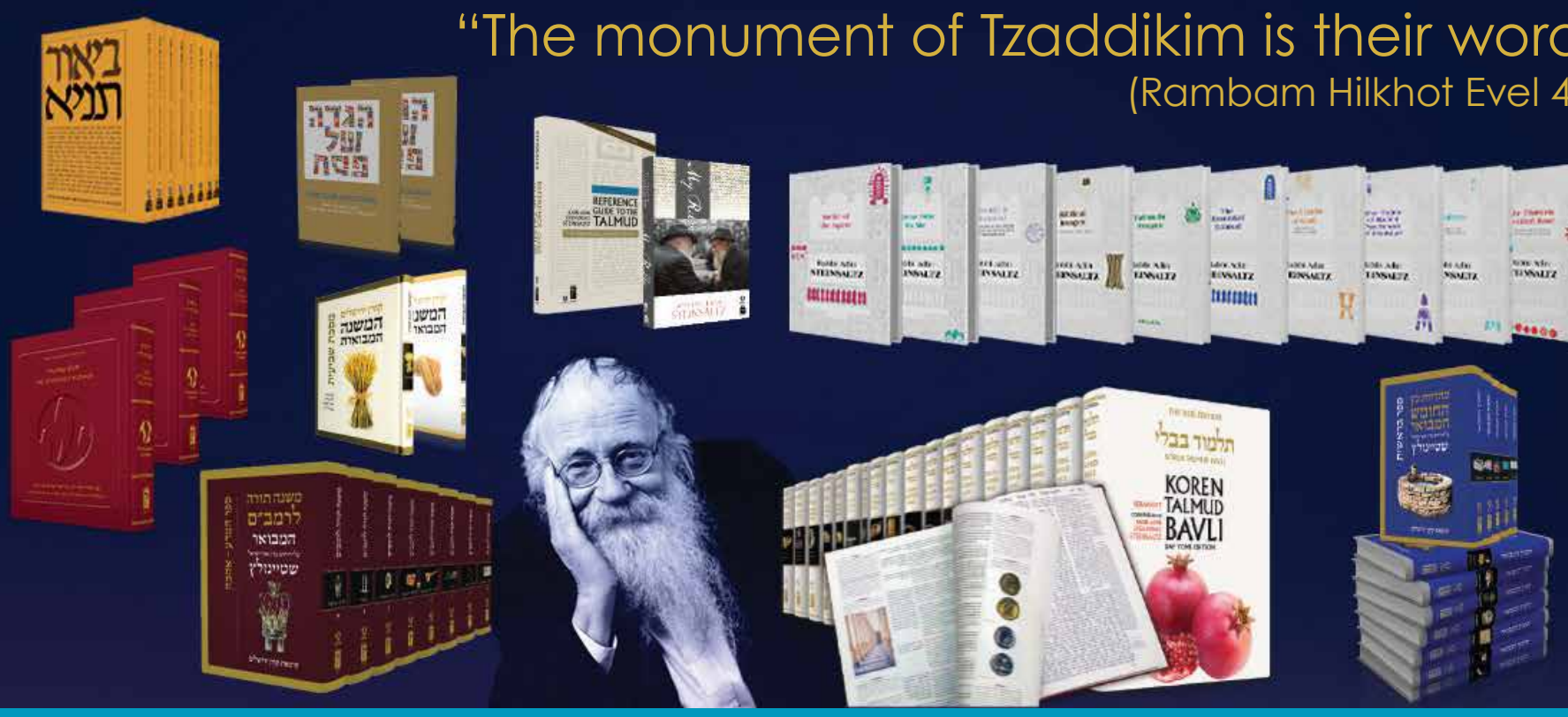
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(Rambam Hilkhot Evel 4:4)



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