

Jewish Ideas Weekly

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October 29-November 5, 2010

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 29

The Azeri Exception

By Aryeh Tepper

Someone forgot to tell the republic of Azerbaijan that Jews and Muslims cannot live together in peace. Somewhere between twenty and forty thousand Jews reside in that Shiite country, which sits on Iran's northern border and enjoys diplomatic, economic, and military ties with Israel. Can this last, and for how long?

Jewish history in Azerbaijan goes way back. The majority of Jews in the country are so-called Mountain Jews, a community that believes it was exiled from the land of Israel after the destruction of the first Temple in 586 B.C.E. Whatever truth there may be to the claim, there's no denying that Jews have been in the region for a long time: in 1990, archeologists found the remains of a 7th-century Jewish settlement close to the capital city of Baku.

In the early 19th century, a small number of Ashkenazi Jews also began settling in the country, and Baku's oil boom in the latter part of the century drew in more—as did the anti-Semitic pogroms in Kiev, Russia, in 1904. The first branch of the proto-Zionist group Hovevei Zion, "Lovers of Zion," was set up in Baku in 1891.



Synagogue, Quba.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, economic fears pushed the majority of Azerbaijan's then-80,000 Jews to emigrate to Israel and the West. Nevertheless, a substantial community, loyal to the regime, remained. In early October, Azerbaijani President Ilhem Aliyev and Israeli Chief Sephardi Rabbi Shlomo Amar attended the festive opening of a new campus at a Jewish school in the capital.

Whence Azerbaijan's openness and tolerance? In the years immediately following World War I, the country established the first Islamic modern parliamentary regime in history, earlier even than Turkey's. For a brief period, until this breath of freedom was snuffed out by Soviet occupation, Muslim women enjoyed the right to vote, Jews served as gov-

ernment ministers, and a Zionist activist was elected to parliament. This legacy, evidently never forgotten, was revived and refurbished after Azerbaijan declared its independence from the USSR in 1991.

Diplomatic ties between Israel and Azerbaijan were established in 1992, and the two countries' strategic relationship was further upgraded with the end of the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia in 1994. During that conflict, which displaced over a million people and left 15 percent of Azerbaijan

occupied by Armenian forces supported by Iran, Baku asked for and received help from Jerusalem in rebuilding its military and supporting its cause in Washington; in return, it offered oil, open markets, and crucial intelligence cooperation.

And today? Despite Azerbaijan's secular and tolerant character, a constellation of factors, including a bad economy and domestic corruption, has left the country vulnerable to the global appeal and reach of Islamic extremism. Sunni and Shiite radicals have begun to penetrate Azeri society, threatening the country's fabric and undermining the government's moderate policies. One doomsday scenario played out in 2009 when Hizballah operatives were arrested for plotting to blow up the Israeli embassy in Baku. Azerbaijan has yet to open an embassy in Tel Aviv.

Thus, despite the countries' shared interest in preventing the spread of Islamic radicalism in general, and their shared apprehensions regarding Iran in particular, Baku's willingness to reinforce its ties with Jerusalem remains in question. And so, inevitably, does the future status of Azeri Jews.

This is an issue that should engage the concern of others, especially in the West. Open cooperation between Azerbaijan and Israel and the successful integration of Jews into Azeri society are living reminders of the possibilities of peaceful, fruitful relations between Jews and Muslims. If Azerbaijan were to fall under the influence of radical Islam, the spiritual and political darkness that is descending upon much of the Islamic world would become that much more complete.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 1

The Mad Mystic of Bratslav

By Allan Nadler

The most bizarre pilgrimage in Jewish history now occurs each year on Rosh Hashanah in the southern Ukrainian city of Uman.

There, a motley carnival of some 20,000 penitents and spiritual seekers, mostly from Israel and America, converges on the grave of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav (1772-1811). Himself the strangest and most paradoxical leader in the history of Hasidism and one of its most original, albeit mad, geniuses,

Nahman has been an object of both literary fascination and considerable scholarly research. He also shares center stage with Franz Kafka (1888-1924) in the latest volume in the Jewish Encounters series, *Burnt Books* by Rodger Kamenetz.

Who was he? A great-grandson of Hasidism's

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founder, Israel Baal Shem Tov (the “Besht”), Nahman believed that he possessed the reincarnated and refined souls of multiple forerunners: the biblical Moses, the first-century sage Shimon bar Yohai, the great 16th-century kabbalist Isaac Luria, and, finally, the Besht himself. Referring to himself as a cosmic *hiddush*, something entirely new under the sun, Nahman taught that his very existence was an unprecedented and miraculous phenomenon, and boasted that the “flame of my teachings will burn until the messiah arrives.”

Simultaneously with this grandiosity, Nahman was a deeply tortured man, one whose teachings, largely based on personal experience, highlighted man’s essential sinfulness, existential distance from God, and need for constant, mournful penitence. This theology stood in dramatic contrast to classical Hasidism’s joyful emphasis on the immanence of God and man’s closeness to Him. Complicating matters further is that Nahman himself often emphasized the great importance of ceaseless joy in serving God: a paradox perhaps reflecting his own severe mood swings and emulated to this day by Bratslav Hasidim, whose bizarre “bi-polar” behavior alternates between somberly mournful private confessions of sin and raucously exuberant public singing and strange, trance-like dancing.

Many of Nahman’s more audacious mystical teachings earned him the contempt of other Hasidic leaders of his generation—of whom he was outspokenly critical. The Rebbe of Savran issued a harsh writ of excommunication against Nahman’s followers, banning them from all synagogues, prohibiting marriage with their children, disallowing them to teach Torah, and in general insisting that “We must do all we can to break them.” Other Ukrainian Hasidim considered the Bratslavers to be mad, possibly even evil. Many suspected them of antinomian leanings, a suspicion triggered by Nahman’s obsession with “correcting” the sexual sins associated with adherents of the notorious messianic pretenders Shabbetai Tsvi (1626-1676) and Jacob Frank (1726-1791).

The quarrels surrounding Bratslav Hasidism became even nastier after Nahman’s death, and were marked by an unusual degree of internal Jewish violence. In sub-

sequent generations, Bratslavers who undertook the Rosh Hashanah pilgrimage to Uman did so at great personal risk, being commonly met with beatings and even hails of rocks by other Hasidim as they made their way to Nahman’s mausoleum.

That trek demands its own explanation. Given Nahman’s megalomaniacal persona and messianic fantasies, it is little wonder that his small handful of followers considered him literally irreplaceable. Just before his death, he offered them a path forward: by visiting his grave on Rosh Hashanah, they would remain in eternal communion with his soul. This earned the Bratslavers their most famous epithet as *di toyte Hasidim*, the dead Hasidim. And thus was inaugurated



Bratslaver Hasidim, Uman.

what has become, since the fall of the Soviet Union (which had banned Jews from worshipping in Uman), the most extravagant of all ultra-Orthodox assemblies.

Finally, there is Nahman’s literary legacy, and in particular his enchanting tales. These fables, unlike anything in earlier Hasidic literature, earned the admiration of some of the greatest Yiddish and Hebrew writers of the 19th and 20th centuries, from I.L. Peretz and Der Nister to S.Y. Agnon and Aharon Megged. Many Hebrew writers, Megged among them, would also note the uncanny commonalities between the stories of Nahman and those of Franz Kafka. In his masterful bibliography of Bratslav literature, the Israeli historian David Assaf lists more than twenty published works debating the extent of Nahman’s influence on Kafka.

Into these complex and treacherous waters now wades Rodger Kamenetz in *Burnt Books*, the subtitle of which is “Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav and Franz Kafka.” The author of *The Jew in the Lotus* (1994), an effort to meld Judaism and Buddhism, Kamenetz

is here attempting a mind meld of a different sort. As in the earlier book, he also has a personal story to tell, documenting in detail his voyage to Uman on Rosh Hashanah to effect a spiritual “*shiddukh*” between his two title figures. Many of the book’s chapters are in fact better characterized as memoir-cum-travelogue than as literary or theological analysis, and the book as a whole is at least as much about Rodger Kamenetz as it is about either the mad mystic or the modernist master.

Kamenetz’s escapade begins in Prague, where he is teaching a summer course about Kafka. While communing in his apartment with the ghost of the great writer, who has appeared to him like a genie from a coffee mug picked up at a souvenir shop, he is given his mission. That mission will end with the wide-eyed Kamenetz in Uman amid the throngs of pilgrims, yearning for mystical communion with Nahman. In a final moment, we see him fondling the Kafka coffee mug at Nahman’s grave while meditating ecstatically on “Jews who believe and Jews who can’t believe, and Jews who want to believe, who come in hope and despair, and I came to Uman for them.”

The almost 300 pages that separate the events in Prague and Uman comprise a rambling, subjective exposition in which Kamenetz meanders between charming if unoriginal renderings of some of the most famous passages in Kafka’s oeuvre and what strike him as related themes and passages from Nahman’s tales, which he approaches as a complete novice.

Indeed, when it comes to the Bratslav phenomenon as a whole, Kamenetz disdains the fruits of modern critical analysis, preferring to take the internal Hasidic hagiographical accounts at face value. So deliberately naïve an approach is especially problematic when addressing the most cult-like and self-censoring Hasidic sect in history. Concerning attempts to understand Nahman through the use of psychoanalytic tools, Kamenetz declares grandly that the rabbi’s “own vocabulary of the soul is more profound and nuanced than modern psychology or contemporary cognitive science.” This may or may not be so, but the fact remains that Bratslav today—precisely because its mystical theology is so intricately entwined with Nahman’s biography and with his worshipful devotees’ attempts to imitate him—is a magnet for many people who are obviously in need of psychiatric treatment.

What of the fact that both Nahman and

Kafka asked their closest friends to burn their writings, which for Kamenetz not only provides a title but establishes some deep affinity between the two figures? In fact, their respective motivations were diametrically opposed.

Toward the end of his life, Nahman had come to the heartbreaking realization that the world was not ready for him and had proved unworthy of the “holy fire” contained in his esoteric teachings, with its power to inaugurate the final redemption. His instruction to burn these writings was a symptom both of his megalomania and, paradoxically, of his intuition that, were they not destroyed, his subversive messianic agenda would be exposed as heresy in the eyes of the pious and as scurrilous foolishness among the enlightened.

Kafka’s motives could hardly have been more different. Filled with a deep personal self-loathing combined with a fatal literary perfectionism and an array of neuroses, he wanted his works destroyed because they were unworthy of existing in the world, as unworthy as he believed he himself was.

To all this, the credulous Kamenetz is blind. And on top of his credulity he has piled ignorance. Among his many speculations, he introduces readers to Nahman’s tale of the prince who became convinced he was a turkey, for which the obvious parallel in his mind is Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*. Not only is this a pure guess, but of far greater interest is that Nahman plagiarized the tale almost entirely from Jacob Frank. That lifting, one of many such, dramatically highlights Nahman’s conflicted admiration of and contempt for the apostate failed messiah, extensively documented by the Israeli

scholar Yehudah Liebes but unrecognized by Kamenetz.

Another howler derives from Kamenetz’s personal “roots” voyage to the Ukrainian town of Kamenetz-Podolsk, where he fancies his family originated. Excitedly noting that Nahman had also traveled to Kamenetz, he devotes a whole chapter to this episode. Along the way, he once again misses the main point, which is that Nahman’s messianic purpose was to perfect the souls of Frankists who were openly debating the local rabbis and thereby causing the bishop to conduct a public burning of the Talmud.

Without a shred of evidence connecting his family to Kamenetz-Podolsk, Kamenetz is reduced to pleading that “the name had to come from somewhere.” He then compounds his cluelessness by expressing bewilderment that his grandfather was said to have been raised in Lithuania, not the Ukraine. Why, then, did he fail to “discover” the *Lithuanian* town of Kamenetz—Kamenetz-Litovsk, today in Belorussia—which boasted a major Jewish community and one of Europe’s most prestigious yeshivas (and also forms the setting for a celebrated Yiddish memoir recently published and easily available in English)? As it happens, the memorial (Yizkor) book for Kamenetz-Litovsk records the names of numerous members of the Kamenetzki family (in the Polish rendering of the name) who perished in the Holocaust. One of the survivors is listed on the memorial book’s editorial committee.

And so Kamenetz has managed not only to get Nahman’s visit to Kamenetz-Podolsk all wrong but to get himself all wrong into the bargain. Perhaps one should expect no

better of an author who starts out by proposing that “Franz Kafka actually influenced Rabbi Nahman,” a chronological absurdity justified by a non-sequitur—namely, that “the kabbalah presents an expansive theory of the universe far beyond time and space”—followed by an irrelevancy—namely, that Gershom Scholem, the great scholar of Jewish mysticism, was greatly enamored of his somewhat older contemporary Franz Kafka.

With Scholem and Kafka we may end. Learning from his sister that a group of young Berlin Jews had been roundly rebuked by Scholem for studying Martin Buber’s German-language renderings of Hasidic tales, with Scholem “demanding that people learn Hebrew instead of occupying themselves with such literary twaddle,” Kafka responded, in words quoted by Kamenetz: “Theoretically I am always inclined to favor proposals such as those made by Herr Scholem, which demand the utmost, and in so doing achieve nothing.”

But Kafka added a final sentence: “Actually, Scholem’s proposals in themselves are not impracticable.” This, Kamenetz has mischievously omitted. And no wonder: had he himself heeded Scholem’s and Kafka’s shared endorsement of serious preparation before delving into difficult and arcane matters, Kamenetz—who cannot read, let alone decipher, either Hebrew or Yiddish—might have spared the world a great deal of self-indulgent twaddle. Instead, he has insulted his readers and the memory of both Nahman of Bratslav and Franz Kafka, two great men who shared so finicky an obsession with their written words that they burned many of them.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 2

The Persian Talmud

By Yehudah Mirsky

Iran makes for an awful lot of news these days, and—the green shoots of democratic dissidence excepted—virtually none of it is good. But then there is the past: a recent conference in Jerusalem brought together scholars from Europe, Israel, and the United States, as well as some Iranian expatriates, who have been intensively researching the buried treasures of the field known as “Irano-Judaica.” The gathering, together with the publication of a volume titled *The Talmud in its Iranian Context*, underscores one of the most exciting developments in Jewish schol-

arship: the effort to put the “Babylonia” back into the Babylonian Talmud.

Babylonian Jews had lived for six centuries under the Persian Parthian empire when, in 224 C.E., the land fell to another Persian dynasty, the Sassanians, who ruled until the Muslim conquest in the mid-7th century. In addition to the official religion of Zoroastrianism, Sassanian Babylonia was home to Christians, Jews, and a range of syncretistic sects, all standing at the geographic and cultural crossroads of Greco-Roman culture from the west, Hindu and Buddhist influences from the east.

Despite its dualism, which put it at odds with monotheism, Zoroastrianism’s moralism and eschewal of sorcery were in some

ways more congenial to Jews than Greco-Roman paganism; also, both Jews and Zoroastrians vigorously engaged in the study and interpretation of ancient texts (respectively, the Torah and the Avesta). At least until the mid-5th century, moreover, when the atmosphere turned chilly, establishment Zoroastrianism was relatively tolerant of Jews and Judaism. It was in this period that the discussions recorded in the Babylonian Talmud took place, although the editing proceeded for several centuries thereafter.

Modern historical studies of the Babylonian Talmud—the Bavli, to use its Hebrew name—have understandably focused on the Hellenistic and, later, Christian milieus that were so influential in the formation of

Western Jewry. For decades now, academic Talmudists have also devoted much energy to understanding the composition and editing of the talmudic text itself. By contrast, and with exceptions, the Iranian element has been relatively slighted. In the 1960s, Jacob Neusner began to frame some of his research in terms that encompassed the study of Sassanian Babylonia; in 1982, the late E.S. Rosenthal urged the mastery of Middle Persian, the Sassanian lingua franca, as a gateway to Talmud study; Isaiah Gafni made deft use of Persian sources in his researches into talmudic history. But today's efflorescence, capped by the conference in Jerusalem, is above all the fruit of unflagging efforts by Yaakov Elman of New York's Yeshiva University.

Knowledge of Middle Persian language, history, and culture is obviously helpful for understanding such things in the Bavli as place names, folk proverbs, and the practicalities of agricultural and commercial life. More signifi-

cantly, such study sheds light on the social and political structures of talmudic times, the cultural processes at work among Jews and non-Jews alike, and even the Talmud's distinctive theological views and literary methods. Situating the Bavli in its Sassanian context hardly effaces the differences between Judaic and Persian culture; rather, it helps clarify points of similarity and difference and how each group understood and, within a multicultural environment, observed its own boundaries.

Thus, as the scholar Maria Macuch points out in *The Talmud in its Iranian Context*, although the Bavli does not use explicitly religious terminology taken from Zoroastrian scriptures, it does avail itself of technical legal terms and of the daily vernacular of the

law courts—with which, it seems, the rabbis were familiar. (After all, it was the 3rd-century Babylonian sage Samuel who decisively declared in the Talmud that *dina d'malkhuta dina*, the kingdom's law is the

law.) Another clarifying point is registered by Richard Kalmin. Why were the rabbis of the Bavli so much harsher on the issue of professional dream interpretation than their counterparts in the Yerushalmi or “Jerusalem” Talmud? Answer: they wanted to keep their own and their people's distance from the Persian Magi.

If Persian history can be a significant resource for study of the Talmud, the Talmud can be a significant resource in turn for Persian history. Gafni's student Geoffrey Herman comments: “As a product of integrated Sassanian subjects, . . . the Babylonian Talmud has few parallels among Sassanian sources. Indeed, it has the potential to convey to us some of the flavor of life in the Sassanian Empire that few other sources offer.”

Shai Secunda, a rising star in the field of “Irano-Judaica,” has noted the relative paucity of contemporary work on Iranian Jewry during the many centuries after the coming of Islam. This brings us back with a jolt to the realities, and the dangers, of today. Excavating the distant past will hardly solve those dangers. But by immeasurably enriching our knowledge of how Jews and Persians once lived and thought, it can help us understand how they built identities that still have the power to shape our world—if not today then, we may hope, tomorrow.



Talmud, Amsterdam 1740.

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 3

The Jewish Saul Bellow

By Sam Munson

Does Saul Bellow (1915-2005) need an introduction? Nobel laureate, three-time National Book Award winner, famed for his capacious mind and his profoundly idiosyncratic, sky-reaching prose, a lifelong generator of personal and public controversy, Bellow was also the unrivaled paragon, during his life and after his death, of American Jewish letters. This, notwithstanding his own caustic quip on the subject in 1969: “This tendency to turn [Bernard] Malamud, [Philip] Roth, and me into the Hart, Schaffner & Marx of American literature is ridiculous.”

The clever reference to a men's haberdasher aside, there can be no doubt that, whatever other roles he played, from the beginning of his literary life Bellow was deeply concerned with the fate of the Jews and affairs of the Jewish mind. Or was he? Readers of the massive new collection of the novelist's

letters might be forgiven for wondering in what sense Bellow was a Jewish writer at all. Yes, throughout the early correspondence, Yiddish words and phrases (and even Hebrew ones) are copiously sprinkled amid the lavish brilliancies of his private prose. And yes, many if not most of the letters pass back and forth between Bellow and other Jews, and they are often devoted to discussing (and dissecting) still other Jews. But until almost his fortieth year, at least in this collection, Bellow scarcely mentions his religious and cultural origins in any overt manner, let alone any issue of Jewish public affairs.

There is, of course, no obligation on an artist to vaunt his ethnic background or affiliations or thoughts. But it does seem puzzling that the author of so much foundational work in the genre of Jewish-American fiction should be so reticent—or so cagey—on the subject. Consider this passage from a 1950 letter to his editor Monroe Engel, outlining his thinking about his major work-in-progress, *The Adventures of Augie March* (the Jewishness of whose eponymous

hero would likewise go all but unmentioned in the resultant novel):

My own figure for the shape of the book is that of a widening spiral that begins in the parish, ghetto, slum, and spreads into the greater world, and there Augie comes to the fore because of the multiplication of people around him and the greater difficulty of experience.

Behind these words lurks the answerless question of assimilation, one of the most fruitful subjects in all of Jewish literature—not just American, and not just contemporary. And yet no hint of that issue is so much as breathed. One can posit a number of more or less innocent reasons for this: that Bellow, himself fully immersed in *Yiddishkeit*, felt the subject needed no extended treatment, or that for him the specific situation of American Jews was a matter of purely private interest. But such considerations hardly deterred other Jewish writers of the time, starting with his colleagues in the “triumvirate.” Whence Bellow's reticence?

And, no less intriguing, whence his later

volubility? For there is no question that, once the subject of the Jews does enter his letters, he worries it with all the considerable power of his intellect and personal magnetism—not to mention his vanity and thin-skinned narcissism. In the late 1970s, during the administration of Jimmy Carter, Bellow signed a public statement protesting the policies of then-Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin. When the statement and its signatories came under criticism, he aired his petulance in a letter to Leon Wieseltier:



You put your name to a document and get a free bathysphere ride through the oceans of Jewish opinion and emotion. . . . Begin was awful on his last trip here. . . . It isn't so much that he's wrong on the issues, he's not; but he doesn't know how to lead the discussion. And imagine the Jews being outdone by a Carter. What can explain that but hysteria and disorder in the Jewish ranks.

The younger Bellow would not, one suspects, have mixed himself up in the contorted internal politics of his fellow Jews. But here, in a letter written nine years after he had rejected the mantle of "Jewish writer," his attention appears to have been captured in a new way by the Jews, an irritating human species with whom he shares a half-exasperated, half-solicitous, wholly undeniable bond. It is almost as if he were beginning to feel responsible for them. This new attitude would become all the more

salient in a grudging but real confession of personal dereliction nine years later:

It's perfectly true that "Jewish Writers in America" (a repulsive category!) missed what should have been for them the central event of their time, the destruction of the European Jewry. . . . We (I speak of Jews now and not merely of writers) should have reckoned more fully, more deeply with it. . . . I was too busy becom-

ing a novelist to take note of what was happening in the Forties.

Thus Bellow wrote to Cynthia Ozick in 1987, responding to her novel *The Messiah of Stockholm*. In still later years, as both his correspondence and his books testify, he would do more to reckon "more fully, more deeply" with the Jewish fate.

Explicitly or implicitly, Saul Bellow wrote some of the most profound treatments in fiction of the Jewish experience in the modern world: consider only *The Victim* (1947), *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970), and the stories "Cousins," "The Bellarosa Connection," and "Something to Remember Me By." At the same time, he never ceased struggling against being pigeonholed artistically. A student almost unsurpassed of "human beings, some of whom happen to be Jews," he resisted, at first fiercely, later resignedly, the narrowing impulse of literary gatekeepers to put him safely away in a box, whether socioethnic or, when he dared to question the pieties of multiculturalism, political. Was he wrong? Even in pluralist America, it seems, you can't have things both ways—not even if you possess the skill, stamina, and boundless determination of a Saul (*né* Solomon) Bellow.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 4

The Next UN Security Council

By Elliot Jager

Israelis are not alone in rolling their eyes at the mere mention of the United Nations. Thanks to blocs of like-minded nations with interlocking leaderships and overlapping interests—the 53-member African Union, the 57-member Organization of the Islamic Conference, the 118-member "non-aligned" movement—an anti-Western and anti-Zionist tyranny of the majority has long been assured.

But that's in the General Assembly. What about the 15-member Security Council, which enjoys both more power and more legitimacy than other UN bodies? In the Council's early years, when the democracies led by the United States presented a formidable front, most of the vetoes were cast by Soviet Russia. Since the 1980s, the U.S. has had to be the major exerciser of the veto, blocking, among other things, dozens of one-sided anti-Israel resolutions. And things can only get worse.

The Council now has five veto-wielding

permanent members: China, France, Russia, Britain, and the U.S. The other ten, enjoying two-year terms, are Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Gabon, Lebanon, and Nigeria plus the newly elected Colombia, Germany, India, Portugal, and South Africa, whose term begins in January 2011.

India, Brazil, and South Africa already exercise global influence, and the three of them can be expected to join China and Russia in shilling for Iran in its pursuit of nuclear weapons. The three will likely also form a potent anti-American bloc on the new Council. Last year, for example, only 11 percent of India's votes in the General Assembly lined up with Washington. Sixty-seven percent of South Africa's were on the opposite side. On thirteen issues identified by the State Department as "important," Brazil stood with the U.S. a total of

three times. Gabon, a serial abuser of human rights, has made it a point almost never to vote with Washington.

And the Europeans? The U.S. can usually count on France, Britain, and Germany for support—except when it comes to Israel.



At that point London and Paris invariably break away to take the Arab side or to abstain. The Germans, for their part, will invariably go along with the EU "consensus," at Israel's expense. Portugal's support of the Arab line on the notorious Goldstone Report probably helped it secure its new Council seat. Canada, by contrast, seems to

have lost its bid precisely on account of its principled pro-Israel position.

This, then, is the environment in which the Council will monitor the ongoing Hizballah putsch in Lebanon and Hamas aggression from Gaza and, should it come to pass,

consider the issue of a Palestinian unilateral declaration of statehood. South Africa has already declared that “the Security Council has to shoulder its responsibility for ending the Israeli occupation and [for] ensuring [that] the Palestinian people’s right to self-determination is met.” In a worst-case scenario, the Council could recognize the West Bank and Gaza, demarcated along the 1949 armistice lines, as “Palestine.”

Prospects might appear less bleak if Israel held a Security Council seat of its own, which would enable it to participate in decisive closed-door deliberations. But, of the

192-member UN, only the Jewish state is ineligible to serve on the Council—because the Arabs will not allow it to join the regional group that is a steppingstone to Council membership. This state of affairs could become exponentially worse if decades-long efforts to enlarge the Council gain headway and result in a further dilution of Washington’s ability to counter the UN’s tyrannical majority. Promoting just such “structural reform” is one of India’s announced priorities.

What about Jerusalem’s ability to rely on Washington to defend its vital interests? Unfairly or not, worries on this score, too, are

now being voiced, especially by those concerned lest the U.S. decide not to veto a declaration of unilateral Palestinian statehood. Such concerns serve further to underline the dramatic degree to which the world has changed since victorious World War II leaders created the architecture of the Security Council. Never has the need been greater for a self-confident United States to dispel the fog of uncertainty and to spearhead the cause of nations sincerely opposed to the scourge of war and genuinely committed to human rights, social progress, and freedom.

THE WEEKLY PORTION

Toldot: Why Can’t Esau be More like Jacob?

Genesis 25:19–28:9

By Moshe Sokolow

Rebecca had a difficult pregnancy. “The children agitated within her, causing her to exclaim: If this is so, wherefore am I? So she went to inquire of God” (Genesis 25:22). Talmudic legend supplies the cause of the agitation: whenever she passed by an idolatrous temple, Esau would stir in her womb; whenever she passed by a study hall for Torah, Jacob would rouse himself. As the biblical text informs us, she learned from God that the twins she was carrying would become antagonists until, ultimately, the elder would come to serve the younger.

Sibling rivalry is a prevalent theme throughout Genesis. The children of Adam, Noah, Terah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are all in competition, if not outright conflict. Curiously, however, it is the younger sibling who, in every case, triumphs. God prefers Abel to Cain, Shem to Yefet, Abraham to Nahor, Isaac to Ishmael, Jacob to Esau, Joseph and Judah to Reuben, Peretz to Zerah, and, finally, Ephraim to Manasseh. Later, far beyond Genesis, David will be preferred over his older brothers, and so will Solomon.

The Torah describes the upbringing of Jacob and Esau briefly: “The lads grew up; Esau became a skilled hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a simple man, dwelling in tents.” Post-biblical Jewish tradition has it that Esau’s hunting, like that of Nimrod before him, bespeaks an essential rebelliousness before God, while the tents in which Jacob dwelled are synonymous with rabbinic

study halls. Talmudic and medieval homiletics transformed the brothers’ rivalry into the ongoing antagonism between, first, Judea and Rome and, later, Judaism and Christianity. The second-century sage Shimon bar Yohai went so far as to postulate, as a matter of essential religious consequence, that “Esau hates Jacob.”

But was that necessarily a foregone conclusion? Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) did not think so. The leader of “neo-Orthodox” German Jewry, Hirsch originated the concept of “Torah im derekh erez,” Torah together with worldliness, a concept he applied in his own educational endeavors and that foreshadowed the characteristic combination of Jewish and secular studies in contemporary American day schools. In his commentary on the Torah, Hirsch offers a seemingly sacrilegious observation on the way Jacob and Esau were raised:

[T]he sharp contrast between the two grandsons of Abraham may not have originated merely in their natural tendencies but may also have been caused by mistakes in their upbringing.

In other words, according to Hirsch, Isaac and Rebecca failed, as parents, to deal correctly with the differences between their twin sons. In particular, they mistakenly thought that the two boys could be educated in identical fashion; in so doing, they fell afoul of the biblical caution, “Educate a lad in his own way, and even in old age he will not stray therefrom” (Proverbs 22:6). This, to Hirsch, was equivalent to an injunction to follow what is today called differentiated instruction: that is, taking students’ varied backgrounds and predilections into consideration rather than teaching everybody the same things in the same way. Hirsch:

Under such conditions a Jacob type will

learn to draw with ever-growing zeal from the well of wisdom and truth, but an Esau type will hardly be able to wait for the day when he can throw away his ancient school books. At that time he will turn his back not only on his schoolbooks but also on his life’s purpose, which he has been taught only in a one-sided way that has no appeal to his temperament.

Drawing the moral for his own time, Hirsch adds that all who bear responsibility for the next generation must exercise greater care to nurture children’s individuality. The ensuing benefits, he concludes, may be nothing short of earth-shaking. After all, he writes:

Had Isaac and Rebecca studied Esau’s nature and asked themselves at an early stage how even an Esau, with the strength, skills, and courage latent within him, could be won for endeavors in the service of God . . . the sword of Esau could have become wedded early on to the spirit of Jacob, and who knows what a different turn all of history would have taken.

Raising children is challenging; twins, all the more so. The Torah’s penchant for promoting the second-born over the first may be designed to teach that status should be conferred in accordance with moral character rather than with accidents of birth or social standing. Hirsch’s idealistic addendum is a reminder of the role played in the development of that moral character by a nurturing and well-tailored education.

So, why can’t Esau be more like Jacob? In the end, like everything else in the upbringing of children, the imponderables outnumber the certainties. Parents can only do their best, hoping that tradition and schooling will lend a helping hand—and that, when they become parents themselves, their children will do even better.