

# Jewish Ideas Weekly

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FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 9

## Can Reform Judaism Get Its Mojo Back?

By Evan Moffic

Reform Judaism is the largest movement in American Jewry. The Union for Reform Judaism represents 900 congregations with 1.5 million members. It recently chose a dynamic new president, Richard Jacobs. True, Rabbi Jacobs' election caused an uproar: he drew criticism from the right for his support of J Street and the New Israel Fund and charges from the left that the people he brought to URJ did not include enough women. Still, the fact that a URJ leadership change could stir such controversy is a sign that people care about the movement's future.

But the Reform movement faces problems far deeper than the distractions of political correctness and ideological minefields. The recent UJA-Federation study of the New York area's Jewish population provides a sense of where those problems lie. The number of Reform Jews in New York has declined both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the Jewish community. A startling 74 percent of Jewish children in New York can be identified as Orthodox. True, New York's Jewish community has certain unique characteristics; but New York's trends are apparent in other population centers as well, especially the decline in synagogue affiliation and the growing numbers of interfaith families.

The American Jewish community as a whole cannot survive if there is no non-Orthodox movement to which American Jews can belong; in other words, survival depends on a strong Reform movement. But in light of current trends, is that possible? Some have already answered in the negative. In 2009, Rabbi Norman Lamm, Chancellor of Yeshiva University, declared,

"We will soon say kaddish on the Reform and Conservative movements." Even within the Reform movement, Rabbi Dana Evan Kaplan recently wrote that without a serious revision in basic structure and heightened expectations of Jewish living, Reform Judaism is doomed.

I am not so pessimistic. But, if the survival of a strong Reform movement is indeed possible, what will it require? Is current



leadership up to the task?

The first indicator of the movement's problem—the decline in synagogue affiliation—is not hard to understand. Increasingly, American Jews simply choose not to join synagogues. People see synagogues as too expensive, boring, or irrelevant. This trend is most pronounced in precisely those parts of our country, like the West and Southwest, where the Jewish population is growing most rapidly. The recent economic downturn has merely accelerated an already-existing trend.

Thus, if Reform Judaism is to survive, the primary task of its leaders is to focus steadily on promoting synagogue affiliation. Synagogue membership is the citizenship card of Jewish life. It provides the resources needed to create places in which the growing intermarried population can raise Jewish children and Jewish learning can be transmit-

ted to the vast majority of Jewish children, those who do not attend Jewish day schools. Synagogue membership provides funding for the URJ and social capital for other Jewish organizations.

This task does not require us to "reimagine" synagogues or transform the ways in which they are funded; the challenge must be not redefined but met. Reform synagogues simply need to do what synagogues have done for the last 2500 years: serve as centers of Jewish living and community. And Reform synagogues, in particular, must maintain an open door for anyone who wishes to walk through it.

But if that is the central task, is Reform leadership up to it? The movement needs high-quality clergy, of course; it also needs committed lay leadership.

The Reform movement was built on the basis of lay-rabbinic partnerships. We need to attract strong dynamic lay leaders who see and feel that the future of the Jewish people depends on them. Too often we reward people simply for showing up. We need to find ways to draw serious people to address the serious challenges of Jewish life.

The kind of organizational dysfunction we too often see does not have to be accepted; it does not exist everywhere in Jewish life. The community Federation in my hometown of Chicago (Jewish United Fund of Chicago is the technical title), for example, while it employs skilled and forceful professionals, also engages lay leaders. More than financial resources, board membership demands a serious commitment of time. In spite of these demands, or because of them, individuals actually compete to be on the board.

When lay leaders see that their communities' future rests in their hands and not just those of professionals, they become energized and active. Some rabbis seem to fear that engaged lay leadership will weaken the authority of the professionals who run com-

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munal organizations, but it is more likely that skilled lay leaders will recognize and respect the professionals' skills. True, respect will not always mean acquiescence; but the disagreements that arise are more likely to be serious and constructive.

Moreover, if lay leadership is stronger, rabbis will be freed to do what they are most qualified to do: articulating a compelling case for Jewish meaning in 21st-century America. Despite American Jews' extensive achievements in secular learning, they have produced no significant Jewish theology

since Mordecai Kaplan's 1935 *Judaism as a Civilization* (JPS). Judaism needs a view of God incorporating advances in neuroscience, an understanding of Jewish identity that includes the many interfaith families who raise Jewish children while incorporating references to other faiths, and an understanding of Zionism that goes beyond boiler-plate affirmation. This enterprise will strike some as syncretism, capitulation, or assimilation. Yet, if the Reform movement does not address these matters, who will? The job is fully large enough to occupy the

time and energies of the Reform rabbinate; strong lay leadership will give Reform rabbis a better chance to succeed at it.

In 1969 Rabbi Richard Levy, later to become president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, wrote that the American Reform synagogue has "defaulted" on all three of its traditional functions: building community, nurturing study, and engaging in meaningful worship. Since he wrote, the default has only deepened. If it is not addressed now, there may be no future opportunity for repair.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 12

## The Most Influential Jewish Philosopher You Never Heard Of

By Diane Cole

Adapt or die: this principle now permeates discussions among not just biologists but anthropologists, sociologists, and even theologians seeking the origins of religion in an evolutionary need for group survival. The adage is especially applicable to a 1934 classic of Jewish evolution, Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan's *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American Jewish Life* (JPS). While Kaplan's contemporaries, theologians Martin Buber and Abraham Joshua Heschel, remain widely read today, Kaplan (1881-1983) is relatively unknown. Yet, what would contemporary American Judaism be without him?

Kaplan introduced the synagogue bat mitzvah (his daughter, Judith, was the first bat mitzvah, in 1922). He promoted Jewish community centers, created the concept of Judaism as an evolving civilization, and allowed Jews to "reconstruct" Judaism with new, relevant meanings. As a professor at the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary for more than 50 years, he influenced several generations of rabbis. After he retired from JTS in 1963, he helped found the Reconstructionist movement.

Kaplan was—still is—often criticized as radical or even heretical. In 1945 the Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States and Canada not only excommunicated Kaplan but burned his *Sabbath Prayer Book*. Kaplan's introduction to the *Prayer Book* described it as merely an adaptation of the Orthodox prayer service for the "modern spirit." But that spirit was a rationalist cast of mind that questioned the supernatural aspects of Juda-

ism. "Since Scripture came into being over a long period of time and through human instrumentalities," he wrote, "this prayer book avoids implying the historical accuracy of those Biblical episodes which relate miracles and supernatural events."

Kaplan also changed the liturgy by removing references to Jews as the chosen people; he kept references to the immortality of the soul but removed any mention of corporeal resurrection. To him, these changes were evolutionary survival mechanisms, like the change to rabbinic Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple. To the UOR, the changes constituted heresy. To the outside world, the attack on Kaplan was shocking enough—in light of fresh memories of Nazi bonfires of Jewish books—so that it was reported in the *New York Times* and *Time* magazine.

So, who was this "heretic"?

Kaplan was born in Lithuania in 1881, the son of a distinguished rabbi who brought the family to New York in 1889. The younger Kaplan graduated from City College and was ordained at JTS in 1902. Working toward his doctorate in philosophy at Columbia, he was drawn to the Pragmatist philosophers and to sociologists and anthropologists studying the evolutionary benefits of religion. He also studied with Felix Adler, founder of the non-theistic Ethical Culture Society. Adler had angered many Jews, including Kaplan, who felt that Ethical Culture had "de-Judaized" Judaism. Yet Kaplan was intrigued by Adler's emphasis on ethics, social justice, and community action.

Throughout his life, Kaplan retained his belief in God and his observance of

Jewish laws. But his studies convinced him that there were too many internal contradictions, and too much archeological evidence, to allow one to view the Scriptures as the work of God rather than human beings; and his goal became the development of a Jewish theology that could reconcile reason and faith and enhance a sense of communal belonging. In 1922 he left a traditional New York congregation to establish his own synagogue, the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, which became the laboratory for Kaplan's ideas about reinterpreting traditional ritual and liturgy.

In Kaplan's "reconstructed" formulation, the Jewish religion was the "soul" of the Jewish people—but just one element defining Jewish civilization. Other elements were the Jews' ethical principles, sacred scripture, language, land (Kaplan was an early, ardent Zionist), beliefs, traditions, literature, and history. Individuals could belong to and identify with the Jewish people as

a culture and civilization regardless of their beliefs and practices.

In his 1937 work *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* (Wayne State University Press), Kaplan also questioned the relevance of laws whose interpretation had not changed in centuries:

The very notion that any text written hundreds of years ago, at a time when the social situation was radically different from what it is today, can give us clear and valuable guidance in deciding, ethically, issues that did not arise until recent times is utterly antagonistic to the modern evolutionary outlook.



As Kaplan said elsewhere, the challenge was to take Torah seriously without taking it literally.

For Kaplan, God was not an omnipotent, supernatural being but the “power that makes for salvation,” an internal force that allowed individuals to seek goodness and moral perfection for themselves and the world. Such “salvation” would be found not in the next world but in this one, through discovery of personal meaning and achievement of positive social goals. Kaplan was, in this sense, self-help guru long before the phrase was invented. He was criticized for his references to “salvation,” a word closely associated with Christianity. But Kaplan answered that while Christian salvation occurs in the hereafter, the Bible also uses the term to denote “redemption from evil and self-fulfillment in this world.” He explained, “Salvation means deliverance from those evils, eternal and internal, which prevent man from realizing his maximum potentialities”—in positive terms, “the maximum fulfillment of those human capacities which entitle man to be described as ‘made in the image of God.’”

How radical were Kaplan’s ideas? His beliefs echo not only the Pragmatists and Transcendentalists but Spinoza, excommunicated by his 17th century Jewish community for, among other things, denying God’s supernatural powers and the notion of an afterlife. To traditional rabbis, neither Spinoza’s God nor Kaplan’s was recognizable.

Still, by the time Kaplan died at the age of 102, those ideas seemed less radical. The dense, often awkward quality of his writing is one fact that has kept potential readers away; another is that, as the decades passed, many of his once-controversial ideas became conventional.

Even Kaplan’s idea that the Torah was composed by different authors is now widely accepted. *Etz Hayim* (“Tree of Life”), the Torah and commentary volume used in most Conservative synagogues today, includes this formulation: “Detailed study . . . has led modern critical scholarship to theorize that the Torah is a compilation from several sources.” And “[b]ecause the Torah, in this perspective, is an amalgam,” it contains “factual inconsistencies; contra-

dictory regulations; and differences in style, vocabulary, and even theology.” While this wording does not endorse a theory of multiple authorship, it leaves the door open for readers who wish to do so.

It is a door that more 21st-century Jews might enter, if they knew it existed. These days, when discussion of religion often veers between polar extremes of fundamentalist acceptance and atheistic rejection, Kaplan’s approach—adapting, or reconstructing, rather than abandoning completely—seems less radical than just plain practical. Kaplan’s emphasis on Jewish “civilization,” of which religion is just one part, allows secular Jews to remain connected by *belonging*, even without *believing*. And if you’re not sure? Kaplan’s naturalistic view of religion embraces a broad spectrum of belief, from deep spirituality to agnosticism. With mainstream religious affiliation dwindling throughout America, maybe it’s time to remember Mordecai Kaplan’s message: adapt or die.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 13

## Keep Calm and Carry on

By Dov Lerner

Shabbat is designed to be a day of rest, relaxation, and communal prayer. Due to halakhic restrictions on their carrying items from one place to another, however, observant Jews can become prisoners in their own homes. The rabbis, therefore, wherever they could, came up with a way to circumvent this issue: the eruv. The word literally means “mixture”; and views on the eruv are themselves mixed and hotly debated. The Yeshiva University Museum now has an exhibition devoted to the eruv called, “It’s a Thin Line: The Eruv and Jewish Community in New York and Beyond.” The museum launched the exhibition with a day-long symposium reflecting the debates that the eruv has occasioned.

Among the Sabbath laws is an injunction against transferring an object from a private to a public space or moving it within the public space itself. The prohibited activity is often simply called “carrying.” The activity is heavily regulated, and the rules are complex. Halakhic literatures are occupied by questions of how to define a public or pri-

vate space and what constitutes a transfer.

For purposes of this idea of “carrying,” the rabbinic discussions generally identify four types of space: *reshut harabim*, or public space; *reshut hayahid*, or private space; *makom patur*, an exempt area; and *karmelit*, related to the word for “garden,” which is legislatively treated as a kind of limbo, a public space that nevertheless has some characteristics of private space. The *karmelit* is the only space around which the construction of an eruv is permitted. The eruv’s artificial architecture—often consisting merely of poles and wires—defines the confines of the space as private and, thus, allows carrying within its bounds.

Nowadays, it is not unusual for an area with a large Jewish population have an eruv. Manhattan’s eruv covers over half of the island, stretching from Harlem in the north to Greenwich Village in the south. In recent years eruvim have sprung up in cities across the globe, from San Diego to Vienna. But the halakhic legality of the contemporary eruv is not universally ac-

cepted. Though many observant Jews embrace the eruv, a large swathe of Orthodox Jewry will not use it.

Yeshiva University Museum’s inaugural symposium, titled “The Mystery and His-

tory of the Eruv,” covered the history of the eruv fairly quickly. In a presentation on the theoretical basis of the eruv, Lawrence Schiffman described the fierce debate over the device between ancient Jewish sects—the Sadducees, who rejected the entire eruv project, and the Pharisees who promoted the eruv’s use. Charlotte Fonrobert addressed the practical application of the eruv



in a more recent context, describing its use, championed by Rabbi Selig Bamberger, in 19th century Würzburg, Germany.

Jeffrey Gurock brought the discussion rapidly into the present time, analyzing controversies over the eruv in 20th century Manhattan. The demographic that now depends on the eruv, he said, consists of what may be called “eruv moms”—because mothers with young children are often the primary victims of an area with no eruv.

While their husbands attend synagogue on the Sabbath, they are stuck indoors. Forbidden from transferring their children outside their private homes or shouldering their weight in the streets, they suffer from the inevitable result: Sabbath cabin-fever. The eruv allows mothers and their young children to join the congregation.

In the afternoon, the symposium turned to the future. There were pragmatic projections of eruv building, in which Elliot Malkin proposed replacing wires with lasers and weekly checkers with cameras. Isaac Cohen made sociological observations about the ways of making Jewish space. The final speaker, author and law professor Thane Rosenbaum, examined the philosophical implications of the different notions of Jewish private and public spaces, touching on the question of what it means, as a Jew, to be an insider or an outsider.

The new exhibition itself builds on Rosenbaum's theme, exploring the role the eruv plays within American Jewish culture and the ways in which that role differs from

the eruv's historical function. At the entry to the exhibit, one is greeted by a wall of images and biblical quotes that express and emphasize the restriction on Sabbath "carrying." Then, before visitors are presented with any details of the ways in which the rabbis circumvented this restriction, they are offered the primary Jewish proof of the necessity of such circumvention—not mothers with babies but hot cholent. In pre-modern Europe, Jews did not have private ovens. Individual families warmed their Sabbath lunches in a common place: the premises of the local baker. The eruv provided the mechanism that allowed them to carry their cholent home.

Breaking from the historical background, the exhibit, escorting visitors with a vertical wire tied taut above their heads, introduces the subject of the Manhattan eruv. The exhibit begins with some of the oldest disagreements and earliest designs, then proceeds through the evolution of the eruv to date. Where the exhibition excels is in giving a sense of the social impact of an eruv,

running televised interviews with rabbis and builders and including Wyatt Cenac's wry segment on the *Daily Show* describing the effort to prevent the construction of an eruv in the Hamptons—an effort led by secular Jews seeking to keep the Orthodox out.

At the exhibit's end, visitors are met by a wall of different quotes that attempt to make them confront the profound implications of the boundaries of private space. The quotes are not talmudic or rabbinic, neither biblical nor historic. Instead, they represent the voices of current residents of Teaneck and Great Neck, Passaic, and Queens, all remarking on the ways in which an eruv has changed their lives—by freeing the otherwise fastened, allowing the infirm and elderly, as well as mothers and children, to experience the Sabbath world outside their homes. When an eruv is built, they say, synagogues become accessible and friends closer. Perhaps not so ironically, an eruv, by enclosing a space, unchains the immobile and breaks down walls.

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 14

## Jacob's Sons in the Bishop's Palace

By Diana Muir Appelbaum

The current Baron Rothschild is one of the British philanthropists backing a new museum of Christianity in Britain, built around *Jacob and His Twelve Sons*, a dazzling series of thirteen Baroque paintings, each over eight feet tall. His interest in the project was undoubtedly sparked by the remarkable connection between these paintings and the history of Jews in Britain.

Francisco de Zurbarán's paintings were already a century old in September 1745, when a Jacobite army supporting the Catholic pretender to the British throne soundly trounced British regulars at Prestonpans, near Edinburgh. Londoners panicked and there was a run on the Bank of England. Among the most prominent financiers in the kingdom was a Jew named Sampson Gideon, who regularly floated enormous loans on behalf of His Majesty's government. Gideon reportedly stabilized the government's credit by quickly raising the staggering sum of £1,700,000. That translates to

an estimated £24 billion (\$38 billion) today.

Gideon was the son of a Jewish immigrant who had become a successful merchant in the West Indies trade despite the legal disadvantages he faced. As an immigrant, he could not buy real estate, trade with the colonies, or own a share in a British trading ship, and he had to pay the higher customs fees charged to foreigners. He could have been naturalized only if he had been willing to become a Christian.

Because he was born in Britain, Sampson Gideon possessed most—though not all—of the rights of an Englishman. Jews, Catholics, and non-Anglican Protestants could not attend university, work as an attorney, be appointed to any public office, hold an officer's commission, or sit in Parliament. Gideon wanted these rights, along with the social acceptance that would have come naturally to an Anglican of his standing.

His father had already changed the family name from the Sephardi Abudiente to the more British-sounding Gideon. Sampson Gideon married a Christian woman; their

children were baptized. He resigned his membership in the Jewish community, and purchased a landed estate with a country house for his son to inherit. He arranged to have the son, a fifteen-year-old Anglican schoolboy, made Sir Sampson, sent the boy to Eton, and negotiated his marriage to the daughter of Sir John Eardley Wilmot, Chief Justice of the Common Pleas. He secured his daughter's marriage to Viscount Gage with a dowry that is the equivalent of £77 million (\$122 million) today.

When Parliament passed the Jewish Naturalization Act of 1753, they undoubtedly had Sampson Gideon's remarkable success in mind: England wanted more men of his worth. The "Jew Bill" permitted Jews to petition Parliament for a private Act of Naturalization, waiving the requirement that they receive "the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper." Some supported the Bill as a reasonable extension of the Toleration Act of 1689, and some argued that naturalization would encourage Jews to convert to Christianity, but most quite frankly argued that encouraging rich Jewish



merchants to settle in Britain would be good for the economy. The Bill passed without a great deal of debate.

Getting a private Act through Parliament was such an expensive undertaking that a mere handful of the 8,000 Jews then living in England could possibly have taken advantage of the Jew Bill. The Jew Bill was the 18th-century equivalent of modern laws in the United States, Canada, and other countries that offer citizenship to substantial investors. But in the end the Jew Bill was of no use even to the wealthy. It sparked an enormous outpouring of anti-Semitic sentiment and was quickly repealed.

Richard Trevor, Bishop of Durham and, therefore, a member of the House of Lords, was among the Jew Bill's strong supporters. The fight for Jewish civil rights would continue for another century, ending in 1858, when Lionel de Rothschild took his seat in Parliament with a modified oath that that ended "so help me, Jehovah." But in 1756 the Bishop of Durham found a way to make a very public statement of his support for Jewish naturalization.

A series of paintings by the Spanish Baroque artist Francisco de Zurbarán came

onto the market from the estate of James Mendez. Mendez, a successful financier, was the son of Fernando Mendez, a Sephardi Jew who came to England as the personal physician of Catherine of Braganza, the future Queen of England following her marriage to Charles II. Mendez's wealthy grandchildren were rapidly assimilating into the Anglican gentry and may have decided to sell *Jacob and His Twelve Sons* precisely because the paintings were too Jewish.

Art historians speculate that the Zurbarán paintings were commissioned for a Catholic foundation in Spanish America, and captured in the Atlantic by British privateers who sold them in England.

The Bishop was able to purchase only eleven sons. Benjamin was sold separately, but the Bishop had a copy made. To showcase the paintings, Bishop Trevor had the Long Dining Room at his official residence, Auckland Castle, enlarged and remodeled, in a princely gesture of public support for English Jews.

Auckland Castle itself has just been purchased by financier Jonathan Ruffer, an art collector, philanthropist, and committed Christian who plans to turn the historic

Bishop's Palace into a museum that will tell the story Christianity in Britain. Since the Christian story cannot be told without the story of Christianity's Jewish origins, Zurbarán's magnificent paintings of Jacob and his twelve sons will be at the heart of the collection.

But the story of Britain's Christians is as ambiguous as the story of Britain's Jews. After centuries of identifying as a Christian and Protestant nation, Britain has become a land filled with cherished, historic church buildings that attract almost no worshippers. Men like James Mendez and Sampson Gideon, with their Anglican grandchildren, may have been as typical of the Jewish community of their era as the proudly Jewish Rothschilds. (Sampson Gideon's Christian son changed his name to Eardley, served as an elected member of Parliament for over three decades, and was created Baron Eardley.)

As for Gideon himself, he left £1,000 to London's Bevis Marks Synagogue in his will. He had paid his dues to the community every year under the name "Almoni Peloni" (a variant of "ploni almoni," the biblical equivalent of "John Doe"). And he was buried as a Jew.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 15

## Self-Hatred Or Self-Help?

By Ben Cohen

One of the most insightful scenes from Larry David's comedy series, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, begins with David and his on-air wife, Cheryl, standing at the entrance to a movie theater. As they chatter aimlessly, David starts whistling a tune composed by Richard Wagner. Cheryl's delight at the bewitching melody is offset by the reaction of a bystander, a fellow Jew who rounds on David for whistling a composition written by "one of the great anti-Semites of the world." The two embark upon a furious argument, which culminates in David's adversary slamming him as "a self-loathing Jew." "I do hate myself," David barks in response, "but it has nothing to do with being Jewish."

This splendidly barbed exchange demonstrates the extent to which the accusation of "Jewish self-hatred" has penetrated mainstream culture, particularly in recent years, when disputes over Zionism and Israel among Jews have given the term a fresh lease of life. Yet anyone seeking to under-

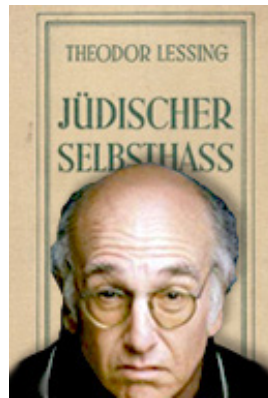
stand exactly what a "self-hating Jew" is would be none the wiser having witnessed Larry David's fury. Similarly, the invective around the Middle East conflict serves, as Paul Reitter argues in his slim, intriguing volume, *On the Origins of Jewish Self-Hatred* (Princeton University Press), to obscure rather than shed light upon this most curious of intellectual labels.

As with its conceptual godparent, the word "anti-Semitism," the idea of "Jewish self-hatred" is rooted in the frantic, often hostile, debates about the nature of Judaism that sprang forth in Germany in the final decades of the nineteenth century. Reitter, a professor in the German department at Ohio State University, notes that some Orthodox Jewish commentators began damning the Reform movement as "Jewish anti-Semites" in 1882, just three years after the rabble-rouser Wilhelm Marr, popularly credited with having invented the term "*Antisemitismus*," published *The Vic-tory of Jewry over the Germans*. Awareness

of Jewish self-contempt also became, Reitter argues, "a kind of metaphor for the more general malaise" that swooped down on a rapidly modernizing, conflict-ridden Europe. One writer, Herman Bahr, described a

Vienna, filled with disaffected individuals shedding old identities and adopting new ones, as "Jewified." Meanwhile, the 1903 suicide of the youthful philosopher Otto Weininger, perhaps the best-known figure to have been afflicted with Jewish self-hatred, and supposedly the only Jew to have drawn Hitler's admiration, is often held up as evidence of how deadly this complex of attitudes and neuroses could be.

Indeed, the writer Theodor Lessing, whose 1930 work *Der Jüdische Selbsthass* (*Jewish Self-Hatred*) occupies a good deal of Reitter's study, warned that certain manifestations of Jewish self-hatred would "leave you dead." Yet Reitter asserts that Lessing's book was decidedly not a morbid account of the inevitability and inescapability of self-hatred, but rather an early foray into the self-



help genre. Many of the aphorisms found in Lessing's book—"be whatever you are, and always try to live up to your best potential"—would not look out of place pinned to an office corkboard in large, bolded letters.

Reitter's thesis is that the notion of *Selbsthass* was intended affirmatively, as a prop to the mental and social liberation of the Jews. Before Lessing, Reitter notes, there was Anton Kuh, a German Jewish journalist with a voracious appetite for wordplay, who coined the term in 1921. For Kuh, Jewish self-hatred was both "an affliction and an existential option"—in other words, not a form of Jewish anti-Semitism imprisoned by self-disgust, but a pathway to achieving harmony and understanding inside and beyond the various Jewish communities.

When it came to the key options that faced Jews during the interwar period—assimilationism and Zionism—Kuh rejected both. (Reitter cites a gruesomely prescient remark of Kuh's about the pitfalls of assimilation: "In the end, an ax blow will lop off their bowed heads.") Inspired by Nietzsche's revulsion in the face of German nationalism, Kuh contended that the embrace of self-hatred contained a healing power that would result in a new spirit of love throughout the human family. With hindsight, one can read this in several—ways, few of them generous: Kuh can seem soppy and shallow, as well as painfully short on actual detail—which makes the relatively benign response he received from several of his fellow Jewish intellectuals that much more fascinating.

It fell to Theodor Lessing to draw the parameters of Jewish self-hatred. Although born into a prosperous and assimilated Jewish family in Hanover, Lessing grew up petrified of his brutal father, neglectful mother, and a school at which the humiliation of

under-performing students was routine. As a result, writes Reitter, Lessing was ideally positioned to become the primary theorist of Jewish self-hatred. Before he composed *Der Jüdische Selbsthass*, Lessing had tracked the polemical exchanges on Judaism between Karl Kraus and Heinrich Heine, engaged in his own with the writer Thomas Mann, and written up his thoughts on the *Ostjuden* (Eastern European Jews) during a visit to Galicia. Throughout, Lessing's views are as unsettling as his childhood. At one point, he opined that, although there was no normative basis to the claims of racial anti-Semites, such as Houston Stewart Chamberlain, they may nonetheless have been functionally correct in their diagnosis of the Jewish Question.

If the shadow of Gentile anti-Semitism hung over Lessing's work, then the challenge was to overcome it without succumbing to its prescriptions, as Otto Weininger arguably did. In that regard, Lessing placed enormous stress on the specific historical role of the Jews, as well as on the condition of the Jews as emblematic of a wider psychosocial malaise. "The Jews," he wrote, "had to think through and resolve problems that came about for younger and happier peoples only later."

Quite what all this means for the debate about Jewish self-hatred in our own time Reitter doesn't say. In delving into the archeology of the term, the book locates itself in a comparatively short phase of modern Jewish history, and likewise focuses on individuals who are, for the general reader, a tad obscure. Sometimes it seems as if Reitter is unsure of himself outside of his own detailed framework, such as when he describes "*Poale Zionism*"—more accurately, *Poale Zion* (Workers of Zion), the Marxist-

Zionist party—that became a critical political influence in the early years of the State of Israel—as a "maverick" faction.

More significantly, the book ends too abruptly, almost as if it is unfinished. True, the book concentrates on the origins of the term "Jewish self-hatred," but that, surely, makes the later mutations of Jewish self-hatred even more relevant. One wonders, for example, what Kuh and Lessing would have made of the non-Jew Jean-Paul Sartre's characterization of "inauthentic Jews"—offered in his highly influential post-war work, *Anti-Semite and Jew*—as "men whom other men take for Jews and who have decided to run away from this insupportable situation." Nor is there any examination of whether and how the meme of "self-hatred" manifested in studies of other minorities, as it did in various post-war sociological and psychological surveys of African-Americans. Introducing this comparative element might have put the shared insistence of Kuh and Lessing that, since Jews are uniquely possessed of self-hatred, they are uniquely equipped to deal with it, into a more clinical perspective.

As for those readers seeking enlightenment about how self-hatred figures into contemporary disputes among Jews over Zionism and Israel, they will be sorely disappointed by Reitter's book. That in itself is no bad thing; not every inquiry into Jewish identity needs to be framed by references to provocateurs or propagandists. But their centrality to current explorations of this phenomenon underlines that, whatever the original positive intent behind the term "Jewish self-hatred," the interpretation of it as a form of Jewish anti-Semitism will remain dominant.