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FRIDAY, JANUARY 4

Dr. Orlinsky and Mr. Green

By Michael Carasik

Jews and Christians share the 24 books of what Jews call the “written Torah” and Christians—arranging them in a different order—call the “Old Testament.” But it’s reasonable to wonder how much actual sharing has gone on over the centuries. The intersection of the two religions over Scripture has more often been a realm of conflict than of cooperation. For Christians, the Jewish failure to accept the New Testament must be considered a deal-breaker; for Jews, the Christian insistence on seeing Jesus in every part of the Bible is an equally annoying form of blindness. Even the Christian division of the Hebrew Bible into chapters—now long naturalized in Judaism—was most likely originally adopted as a result of Christian pressure to have a common reference for arguing about the Bible’s meaning, and perhaps even through the influence of the Christian printers and editors of Hebrew editions of the Bible.

That very fact, though, demonstrates that technical, commercial, and other practical aspects have often led to cooperation and interchange between Jews and Christians over the Bible. The “Crossing Borders” exhibit at the Jewish Museum in New York, with works from Oxford’s Bodleian Library including the Kennicott Bible, provides one display of such interaction, in a presentation that is both informative and beautiful. On a recent Thursday evening, a visitor could cross borders of another sort, traveling five miles south and 500 years along the historical timeline, for a celebration of another example of biblical border-crossing, this one in the person of one of the most influential Jews of the 20th century: Harry Orlinsky.

The occasion was “The JPS Torah at Fifty: A Celebration of a Translation and a Translator.” The catch-all event (also marking the 90th anniversary of the Jewish Institute of Religion, which merged with the Reform Hebrew Union College in 1950, and a rather loosely-defined *yahrzeit* for Orlinsky, who died in March of 1992) was sparsely attended: Orlinsky is little remembered today, being best known as “Mr. Green,” the scholar who authenticated the four Dead Sea Scrolls offered for sale in a *Wall Street Journal* want ad. But his legacy as a Bible scholar is enormous. He was the first editor-in-chief of the “New” Jewish Publication Society translation of the Bible, whose Torah translation has found its way into the pews in both Reform and Conservative congregations. Even more significantly, he was also on the committee that created the Christian “Revised Standard Version” (RSV) translation of the Bible, earning him both praise and hostility, and later the New RSV as well. He was the first Jewish scholar ever asked to participate directly in the making of a Christian Bible translation.

Orlinsky’s position at the Reform Jewish seminary left him open to attack from fundamentalist Christians as a Jew and from fundamentalist Jews as a Reformer. But according to Leonard Greenspoon, a scholar of biblical translation who spoke at the New York event, Orlinsky’s only concern was that a translation should accurately reflect the meaning of the original Hebrew. A story told by Orlinsky on himself provides an illustration. “Mr. Green” was rather quickly satisfied that the scrolls of the *Wall Street Journal* ad were authentic. But Orlinsky, the

scholar and translator, insisted that the Great Isaiah Scroll be unrolled all the way—so that he could check the reading at Isa 43:19 to see whether it had *netivot* (“paths”) rather than *neharot* (“rivers”). It does, though both the NJPS and NRSV translations continue to say “rivers in the desert,” as does the Hebrew of the standard Masoretic text in use today.

Orlinsky certainly understood his task for JPS to be the creation of a *Jewish* translation, but not one that distorted the original meaning of the Bible. The first words of that translation are the best and most obvious example. Instead of the traditional “In the beginning,” a misreading of the Hebrew to match the beginning of the Christian Gospel of John, the JPS Torah has “When God began to create,” following the commentary of Rashi, the great 11th-century Jewish commentator—a translation confirmed since Rashi’s day by other examples of creation stories from the ancient Near East. (For more examples of Orlinsky’s translation decisions, see Greenspoon’s article on “English Translations” in the Jewish Study Bible (Oxford University Press) and Orlinsky’s own *Notes on the New Translation of the Torah*.)

Orlinsky himself, though trained at the Jewish Dropsie College in Philadelphia, is identified with the “Albright school” of Protestant biblical scholarship, centered in the middle of the last century at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. Orlinsky’s once well-known book *Ancient Israel* (Cornell University Press) is very much in the Albright tradition. Despite his major place in Jewish biblical studies during that era, he left no “Orlinsky school” of scholars to continue his work. American Jewish



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biblical scholars of today are more likely to trace their academic ancestry to H. L. Ginsberg of the Jewish Theological Seminary or Nahum Sarna of Brandeis. (It is curious that

all three, though not refugee scholars, were born outside the United States, Orlinsky and Ginsberg in Canada and Sarna in England.) Orlinsky's fate seems likely to be that of

many translators: his own memory will continue to fade, while the enormous influence he exerted through his work of translation will continue to grow.

MONDAY, JANUARY 7

It's All Happening at the Zoo

By D. G. Myers

Now that Philip Roth has given up the ghost of fiction writing, the title of the world's most Jewish Jewish novelist falls to Howard Jacobson, his nine-years-younger contemporary, who has been called the "English Philip Roth."

"I'm a Jewish Jane Austen," Jacobson prefers to say, although it might be even more accurate to call him the Samuel Johnson of the Jewish novel. Instead of Austen's "five inches of ivory," Jacobson's books are clamorous with the sounds of discursive battle, like Dr. Johnson's famous conversation, in which badly equipped ideas are overrun and foolish opponents routed. Jewish writing is not defined by its subject—it doesn't have to be set in a shtetl or a concentration camp—but by its voice, Jacobson says, a "strong, disputatious voice. You feel you're listening to ethical argumentativeness that reminds you of the Talmud." And that's really the only way in which Jacobson resembles Philip Roth. Along with the late Mordecai Richler, the three of them are the great masters of the Jewish talking novel. "Talking feverishly about being Jewish was being Jewish," Jacobson says in his Man Booker Prize-winning novel *The Finkler Question* (Bloomsbury).

Zoo Time (Bloomsbury), Jacobson's 12th novel, is not immediately recognizable as Jewish fiction. Its subject, instead, is the highly publicized death of books, which the Internet and the Kindle between them are supposed to have caused. The story begins when Guy Ableman, a novelist who feels no pressure to write under a *nom de juif* (in a phrase he uses later), steals his own book from an Oxfam store. When the arresting officers accuse him of stealing, Guy protests:

"What word would you use, sir?" the younger of the two policeman asked me. "Release," I said. "I would say that I have released my book." "Released from what exactly, sir?" This time it was the older of the two policemen who addressed me. . . .

Roughly, what I said to him was this: Look: I bear Oxfam no grudge. I would have done the same in the highly unlikely event of my finding a book of mine for sale second-hand in Morrisons [a British supermarket]. It's a principle thing. It makes no appreciable difference to my income where I turn up torn and dog-eared. But there has to be a solidarity of the fallen. The book as prestigious object and source of wisdom—"Everyman, I will go with thee and be thy guide" and all that—is dying. Resuscitation is probably futile, but the last rites can at least be given with dignity. It matters where and with whom we end our days. Officer.

Did I mention that Jacobson is (to borrow the title of his 1997 book on humor) *Seriously Funny* (Viking)? What induces high anxiety in insatiable readers, book-lovers, and people who otherwise have less invested in books—creative writers, for instance—Jacobson plays for laughs. He gathers all the evidence of a declining respect for literature: the solemn public readings, the book signings, the book clubs, the writers' conferences, the rise of literary ignoramus to positions of editorial control. Thirty pages into *Zoo Time*, and it is difficult to take the death-of-books hysteria seriously any more. Even when Guy's longtime publisher Merton Flak commits suicide (he'd entered publishing to find "works of enduring genius," and he would rather die than publish a "follow-up to *The Girl Who Ate Her Own Placenta*"), you can't help laughing.

Jacobson's real concern is more urgent. What becomes of a world in which *King Lear* has lost its power to inspire pity and fear, Henry Miller his capacity to shock? Much of *Zoo Time* is taken up with Guy's romantic pursuit of his own mother-in-law, "sixty-six and out of bounds," but no one seems especially put out by it. Undaunted, Guy sends a book proposal to his agent:

My aim . . . is to write a transgressive novel that explores the limits of the morally permissible in our times. Who are the great blasphemers of our age? Not poets and writers any more. Stand-up comedians. My hero is a stand-up comedian. First line of novel, he walks on to the stage, says *Take my mother-in-law—I just have*. Audience gets up and leaves in disgust. What do you think?

This is what Guy calls "zoo time." It is "when the sacred rules governing decent society reassert themselves only to be broken." (It is also the source of comedy—when "we resemble beasts more closely than we resemble gods," as Jacobson says elsewhere.) The trouble is that there are no more sacred rules, no more limits to the morally permissible. No more transgressiveness, and no more comedy either. "You're behind the times," his agent says. "The audience wouldn't leave in disgust. Might not laugh, but wouldn't walk out." Perhaps there is no better reason for anyone to remain a novelist, Guy protests—"on behalf of everyone else he drinks humanity's humiliation to the dregs." Go ahead and seduce your mother-in-law if you must, Guy's agent replies, but for God's sake, don't write about it.

What happens instead is that Guy's wife Vanessa publishes a bestseller about her mother, which is turned into a movie by a Dutch director for whom she leaves him. Left without options in "the age of the dying of the word"—he refuses to write five-minute story apps for the iPhone, as his new publisher urges—Guy switches gears and strikes it rich with *The Good Woman*, a paean to, well, the goodness of women. He is under no illusion about his success. Suddenly he has thousands of readers, but "[t]hey read the pap I put out not because they loved me, but because they hated Proust at his most dilatory and Henry James at his most sublimely impenetrable and Lawrence at his most finical-erotic-prophetical and Céline at his most odious."



He follows up *The Good Woman with The Good Daughter* and he has *The Good Mother* ready to go. It is no problem seeing people as good, so long as they are kept away “from art and judgement, where they are as lost souls.”

The novel ends there, but—and this is the great tribute to Howard Jacobson’s fiction—the ending is not the last word. Fifty pages before the end, personal responsibility has complicated Guy’s literary career: his father, suffering from Alzheimer’s, is dying. Guy returns home to find that his brother Jeffrey has become religious and has changed his name to Yafet. He wears “fringes” and has grown “baby ringlets.” He calls himself (at least this is what Guy hears him say) a *bal-chu-va*. “And that means?” Guy asks. “Returning to the way of righteousness,” Jeffrey/Yafet replies. Although he is a self-described “writer of impious disturbances,” Guy is thrown into self-questioning by the changes in his brother:

I’d assumed that Jeffrey had squeezed himself into Yafet in order to damp himself down, quieten the tumult in his head. But what if Jeffrey the impious disturbance was not only still in there but more impious than ever? Not a fraud or an impostor, I wouldn’t have accused him of that, but still going both ways. The religious could do that: they could jeer at belief, rail at God Himself, from the very centre of their faith. . . . Belief contained its own parody; disbelief did not. As a matter of principle, disbelief closed down uncertainty and ambivalence. Whereas belief, particularly Jewish belief, from what I knew of it in the novels of the wild American Jews I admired, played more games with itself than any other sort. Even the most solemn Jewish holy man was a trickster at heart.

Jacobson is too generous to American Jewish novelists: he alone could have written a

passage of such brazen, respectful insight into the “very centre” of the Jewish religious life. Although he himself is not a religious Jew (“I don’t go to *shul*,” he says), Jacobson includes scenes like this—exhibiting a far easier familiarity with and affection for the Jewish religion than anything in Roth—in *The Mighty Walzer* (Bloomsbury), *Kalooki Nights* (Simon & Schuster), and *The Finkler Question*, his three best novels. “[T]he Jewish faith frightened even Jews,” his hero, a would-be convert, says in the last of those three. “Only a few were at home in all the ceremonials.” Jacobson is at home too—not in the ceremonials perhaps, but in the fear and uncertainty and ambivalence that characterize the modern Jew. This at-homeness with the circus of Jewish feeling is what distinguishes Howard Jacobson from the other Jewish novelists of his generation, and what makes every novel he writes, very much including *Zoo Time*, a must-read for Jewish readers.

TUESDAY, JANUARY 8

A Pillar with a Past

By Lawrence Grossman

The contemporary “yeshiva world,” in which young men spend almost all their waking hours for many years in the study of Talmud, traces its origins to Volozhin, a town a few miles west of Minsk in present-day Belarus, which in the 19th century was within the borders of Russia. Since the area’s Jews were culturally part of Jewish Lithuania, Volozhin and the other yeshivot that it spawned and inspired down to the present are deemed “Litvish,” a term that has come to connote not only geography but also such traits as erudition and keen rationality.

The Volozhin yeshiva was launched in 1803. While it did produce rabbis, it was not, strictly speaking, a rabbinical school. Rather than offering professional training, it was dedicated to the service of God through intense study of talmudic texts. The Russian government’s decision to close it in 1892 is commonly attributed to the school’s refusal to countenance secular studies in the curriculum, but the opening of tsarist Russia’s official archives after the fall of Soviet Communism has shown that the closure was due to internal disputes within the yeshiva and the regime’s fear of student radicalism.

The paramount personality in Volozhin’s

history was Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (1816-93), often referred to as Netziv—which means “pillar” in Hebrew and is also the acronym of the first letters of his name. Rabbi Berlin’s life was virtually synonymous with the yeshiva. In 1830, at age 14, he went to Volozhin to marry a daughter of the head of the institution and to engage in full-time study. In 1853, after the deaths of his father-in-law and an older brother-in-law, he was placed in charge. He would run the yeshiva—not without several challenges to his authority—for nearly four decades, until it closed. In that role he was the mentor of many rabbinic leaders of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Hacohen Kook, first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Palestine. He also made an indelible impression on such yeshiva dropouts as the well-known Hebrew writer Micah Yosef Berdichevsky, who wrote essays about the yeshiva and its head, and the great poet Hayim Nahman Bialik, whose classic poem about yeshiva life, *Hamatmid* (“The Perpetual Student”), features Rabbi Berlin in a cameo role.

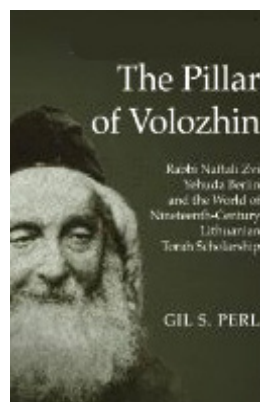
No serious biography of Netziv exists; but Gil S. Perl’s *The Pillar of Volozhin* (Academic

Studies Press), a revision of the author’s Harvard doctoral dissertation, not only sheds light on the rabbi’s intellectual development but also identifies a key historical watershed for the Litvish intellectual elite. Perl’s book compares two of Netziv’s important literary works. One is his well-known commentary on the Torah, *Ha’amek Davar*, written in the 1860s and 1870s, which has become a classic. The other work, far less famous, is *Emek*

Hanetziv, a commentary on *Sifre*, the rabbinic midrash on the Books of Numbers and Deuteronomy that is believed to have been compiled in the third century C.E. *Emek* was not published in Netziv’s lifetime. Preserved in manuscript form by his descendants, it finally saw the light of day in 1958.

Midrash, as Perl explains, means “the way in which the rabbinic exposition is grounded in the words of the

verse.” He finds convincing internal evidence that Netziv wrote *Emek* while still a young man, no later than the 1840s. Since Netziv’s coverage of *Sifre*’s midrash deals with the same biblical texts as his later commentary on Numbers and Deuteronomy in *Ha’amek Davar*, any difference in approach between the two works would be significant.



It is significant indeed. The earlier *Emek* demonstrates a “broad range of intellectual interests,” including grammar, semantics, ancient history, and popular science. It quotes not only traditional commentators but also Renaissance scholars whose religious Orthodoxy had been questioned, like Elijah Levita (recently discovered to be an ancestor of British Prime Minister David Cameron) and Azariah de Rossi. Even more striking, *Emek* cites Moses Mendelssohn, the very personification of 18th-century Jewish enlightenment, and his student Naf-tali Herz Wessely, whose proposal to reform Jewish education through the introduction of secular studies brought the wrath of the rabbinical establishment down on him.

Perl’s familiarity with early 19th-century Litvish culture enables him to place *Emek* within a broader context. It seems that Netziv was just one of many rabbinic scholars pro-

ducing works on midrash; and these contemporaries, too, had no compunction about referring to secular disciplines and citing authorities outside the circle of tradition.

But in Netziv’s later *Ha’amek Davar*, published in 1879, the use of information from non-Torah sources is considerably curtailed; references to controversial non-rabbinic authorities are almost entirely gone, and a strong polemic stressing the centrality of Torah study and opposition to doctrinal deviation suffuses the work.

Perl suggests two reasons for the shift. One was personal: as head of the Volozhin yeshiva, Netziv now represented the rabbinic establishment and could not risk the intellectual chances he had taken as a little-known young man in a manuscript that he did not even publish. More significant, the times had changed. By the mid-1840s, the Russian Haskalah (Jewish enlightenment)

had turned militant in its attacks on traditional Jewish life, even enlisting the government to set up alternative Jewish schools. The traditional society of Netziv’s youth, which had allowed for a certain intellectual openness, had been replaced by an either/or choice between what had become Jewish Orthodoxy, on the one hand, and secularization on the other. Netziv, of course, chose the former. By the end of the century, what Perl calls the yeshiva world’s “staunchly conservative and parochial stance” was well entrenched.

Much of the contemporary yeshiva leadership believes it is following Jewish tradition by focusing narrowly on talmudic learning to the exclusion of other fields of knowledge and diverse points of view. In this perceptive book, Gil Perl reveals just how recently this assumption emerged.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 9

Gun Control and the Limits of Halakhah

By Sholmo M. Brody

Since the shooting in Connecticut, Jews have played a prominent role in the push for more gun control, citing Jewish authority to support their stance. There are also Jews on the other side of the debate, and some in between; they, too, cite Jewish sources. Can Jewish law truly provide guidance in preventing further massacres in America?

Let us first establish the principles that guide Jewish law on violence and self-defense. The Torah states, “Take utmost care and watch yourself scrupulously,” (Deuteronomy 4:9) and commands a homeowner to build a railing around his roof “lest you bring bloodguilt on your house if anyone should fall from it.” (22:8) From these verses, the Sages derived the rules that a person should not keep wild dogs, shoddy ladders, or other dangerous objects in his home lest they cause bloodshed (*Bava Kamma* 15b) and should not sell weapons to anyone who he fears will use them inappropriately (*Avodah Zarah* 15b). Thus, if a careless gun salesman unintentionally contributes to illicit violence, he is guilty of “placing a stumbling block before the blind.” (*Choshen Mishpat* 427:7) While it may be true that “guns don’t kill; people do,” the responsible

“people” under Jewish law are not only individuals who handle weapons badly but also individuals who provide them with those weapons.

Thus, after John Hinkley shot President Reagan with a handgun in 1982, Rabbi J. David Bleich wrote a powerful open letter to the Jewish pawnshop owner who unknowingly sold Hinkley that handgun:

Jews ought to be in the vanguard of those seeking to impress upon our legislators that handguns are indeed “stumbling blocks” which must not fall into the hands of the “blind.” . . . [I]t is precisely because the “morally blind” criminals are disposed to crime that Judaism teaches that it is forbidden to provide them with the tools of their trade.

Yet only indiscriminate sales of weapons are prohibited; sales to responsible people seeking self-protection remain permissible. Indeed, the Torah not only allows people to kill intruders in their homes but actually mandates that potential victims or even bystanders kill a person seeking to commit murder (*rodef*): “Do not stand by the bloodshed of your fellow.” (Leviticus 19:16) The question facing society is how to regulate weapons so as to balance these

rules most effectively and to maximize the single value that underlies them: keeping people safe.

Jewish sources have addressed similar issues of balance in two different contexts: “cities of refuge” and fierce dogs. As for the first, the Torah mandates the establishment of cities of refuge—communities to which individuals who have killed, but are not fully culpable of murder, may flee for legal protection from a “blood avenger,” an en-

raged member of the victim’s family. What rules should govern such cities, the Talmud asks, given the backgrounds of some of the inhabitants and the standing threats to their lives? One might argue that the values described above dictate strict gun control laws to prevent any sale of weapons or hunting devices that might fall into the hands of a blood avenger or an unsavory refu-

gee. This was precisely the position of the Sage Rabbi Nehemiah.

Yet the majority of Sages disagreed. Instead, they argued that weapons sales should be allowed—but no traps should be laid or nooses knotted, “so that the blood avenger should not have a path there.” This statement is cryptic; but in the 19th century, Rabbi Yitzhak Chajes offered the most likely explanation: with snares readily available,



one can make a death seem accidental (*Siah Yitzhak, Makot*). Without them, a blood avenger must try to kill through more open means—and is more likely to get caught.

Still, why not ban weapons sales anyway? Though the Talmud and Chajes don't explain, it appears the Sages believed that a ban would not prevent a blood avenger from acquiring weapons—but would prevent law-abiding residents from buying weapons for their own protection in an area prone to violence.

In this debate, we see two reasonable positions producing very different policies, even though the Sages shared the same goal: preventing violence. Thus, reasonable people may disagree about the appropriate policy for a specific context.

Cities of refuge ceased to exist after Biblical times. Thus, this particular debate did not much engage later decisors and do not provide much evidence of how particular weapons control policies actually worked. Fierce dogs, however, still exist. The talmudic Sages did not like dogs, especially dogs that attacked strangers. The aversion might have stemmed partly from the association of dogs with Egyptian paganism but mainly reflected the Sages' belief that dogs were dangerous (*Bava Kamma* 15b): even their barking and growling could terrorize people to the point of causing miscarriages. They also feared that dogs might deter neighborly intermingling or keep poor people from seeking assistance (Maharsha, *Shabbat* 63a). Thus, they mandated that a person who owns a fierce dog must keep it leashed (*Bava Kamma* 79b).

However, they provided that in dangerous areas like border cities, one can unleash a dog at night, when most people have gone to sleep (*Bava Kamma* 83a). Scholars have debated the scope of this exception. In 13th-century Germany, some asserted that since Jews lived among hostile neighbors, any Jew could own a dog for protection—and keep it unchained day and night (*Shiltei Giborim*). In 16th-century Poland, Rabbi Moshe Isserles agreed, noting that this was

the contemporary practice among Jews—though Isserles added that if the dog might attack innocents, it had to be kept chained.

But Isserles' cousin and countryman, Rabbi Shlomo Luria, condemned the exception altogether, arguing that the outside threat was not so great and the potential for accidents from keeping a dog around children and others was much greater. In the next century, Rabbi Meir Eisenstadt argued that dogs should not be allowed generally but only when needed to protect large groups of people in specific areas (*Shu"t Panim Meiros* 2:133). In the 18th century, Rabbi Yaakov Emden proposed a different compromise: one dog per home—or, since some properties might require greater protection, "One may not possess any more than absolutely necessary." Applying these principles to outlying towns in contemporary Israel, Rabbi Pinchas Zivchi ruled as follows: If one fears burglary, the dog should be visibly chained during the day, with a warning sign posted; the dog can be released at night, but only within a closed courtyard. If one fears terrorist attacks, the dog can be kept loose at all times—but only if safeguards can be taken to prevent it from harming innocent bystanders.

Substitute handguns for fierce dogs, and you get something like the following debate:

"Guns are dangerous; no private citizen should own one." (*Bava Kamma* 15b) "No, they are necessary for protection at night—but only in violent areas." (*Bava Kamma* 83a) "Today, every area is violent; so, we need constant protection." (*Shiltei Giborim*) "This makes sense and agrees with current practice, but people should properly secure the guns in their homes." (Isserles) "That's a terrible idea: guns in the house are more likely to harm innocents than to protect against attackers." (Luria) "Let's compromise: let citizens carry weapons, but only in significant locations of concern, like schools." (Eisenstadt) "Or limit people to one gun, or the absolute

minimum necessary." (Emden) "No, the problem is more complex; we need differing rules for different types of people, guns, places, and circumstances." (Zivchi)

Sound familiar?

Admittedly, guns are not dogs, because guns are controlled by rational beings who can use them cautiously or recklessly. Nonetheless, the diversity of rabbinic opinions on the proper regulation of dangerous but protective canines shows that reasonable people, even those sharing Jewish values regarding violence and self-defense, can disagree about gun control. Another factor complicates the situation still more: the positions of the Sages and scholars were not formed in a vacuum but related to their particular circumstances. How should our principles apply in the United States—or Australia, Israel, or any other country? America, for instance, is no longer building a new society. Instead, its society is marked by deep fear of violent attacks by gangs or deranged individuals; 300 million firearms in the hands of private citizens, legally or otherwise; a strong culture and history allowing the use of hunting and other recreational weapons; and a constitutional right to bear arms—which, though its meaning is contested, cannot be ignored. And that's just for starters. Each of these factors could reasonably change, in a liberal or conservative direction, the way people might think about gun policy in America, even if they might have taken an alternative approach under different circumstances.

Can halakhah provide authoritative solutions to the American dilemma? No. Still, we might heed the wise statement once made by the late Rabbi Haim David Halevi, Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, about foreign policy: even when halakhah cannot provide the answers, it still may serve as a guiding light, promoting the critical values that direct policy makers toward a better resolution. The same is true for gun control.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 10

Buczacz by Way of Newark: On Literary Lives at the End

By Jeffrey Saks

By now we've absorbed the news that celebrated author Philip Roth, nearing 80, has laid down his pen. A *New York*

Times piece on his exit said that Roth, once accustomed to write standing at a lectern, now has a Post-it Note on his computer announcing that "the struggle with writing is over." But Roth's retirement is also an occasion to reflect more generally on the "sense of an ending" in literary careers. Not every great author has gone out like Roth. The great Hebrew writer S.Y. Agnon, for one,

provides an instructive counterpoint.

Roth was the great Jewish writer whose books informed my youth in a certain way. He was nearly two generations older than I; and his descriptions of adolescence, sexuality, and the Jewish-American experience didn't have much autobiographical resonance with me. But *Goodbye, Columbus* (Vintage) was pushed on me by my

mother, who grew up some years behind Roth in the Weequahic section of Newark, New Jersey, a once vibrant shtetl of Americanized Jewish life, which serves as the setting for most of his novels. By the time I was a child (having been born just two years after the 1967 riots that shook the city), “white flight” had emptied Weequahic of its Jews. On a nostalgic car drive through the *alte heim* in the 1980s, for which my more genteel suburban-raised father insisted that we lock the doors and windows, all that remained were churches occupying old synagogue buildings, still bearing Stars of David in their masonry. The flavor of the Newark of my mother’s childhood—and her parents, grandparents, even some of the generation before that, her whole large family of cousins and aunts and uncles with names like Muggie and Sonny and Nechu and Niggy—was transmitted to me through Roth. (Family legend had it that a particular ruffian in one novel was modeled after my grandfather, the son of a bootlegger and suspected horse thief.)

My transformation from a suburban, assimilated fourth-generation American Jew to an Orthodox rabbi and educator living in Israel may partly explain the progression of my literary tastes. Nowadays I’m mindful of Gershom Scholem’s assertion that *Portnoy’s Complaint* (Vintage) is bad for the Jews; not for nothing did he compare it to *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Still, it was Roth’s retirement announcement that led me to recall a remarkable description of an author much closer to my heart these past few years, the only Nobel laureate in Hebrew letters, S.Y. Agnon. Like my Newark forebears—and like Roth—Agnon (1887-1970) was a witty Galician; but instead of heading west for the American pastoral, he arrived in Palestine in 1908, where he remained,

except for a 12-year sojourn in Germany, throughout his life.

Agnon’s writing captures an older Jewish world and the shock and “nightmare” that occurred as that world was confronted by modernity. He does so by reaching back through the bedrock sources of rabbinic Judaism to a civilization older still, distilling the language and lore of the Mishnah, Talmud, and midrash, together with medievalists and Hasidic masters, and recasting them as modern literature.

Just before his death, Agnon, by then the most famous literary man in Israel’s history, was visited by Aharon Appelfeld, then a young author. Appelfeld—out of sync with his 1960s literary contemporaries, who were busy chronicling the Sabra experience—had spent the war years as a child hiding in the Ukrainian forest and, like Agnon, was still writing of the Old World. In a late-night meeting, which proved to be their final conversation before Agnon’s death, the older man greeted Appelfeld disarmed of his usual “arsenal of irony.” As Appelfeld recalls in his memoir, *The Story of a Life (Schocken)*, “He tried to explain to me what my parents had not been able to tell me and what I wasn’t able to learn during the war years.” What Agnon said was, “Every writer needs to have a city of his own, a river of his own, and streets of his own.”

Agnon told Appelfeld that he had been “thinking a great deal about his father and his mother” and that if he had time, “he would have gone back and told their story in a completely different way.” But this effort “would have required considerable energy, which he no longer had. In previous years

he had been able”—like Roth—“to stand at his lectern and write for hours, but this was now hard for him.”

Yet for Agnon, unlike Roth, retirement was never an option. An inveterate reviser of his works, he lay in his hospital bed instructing his daughter on the ordering of chapters of unfinished novels even after a stroke robbed him of his speech in the months before his death. Indeed, during his final years, when most of Israel thought he’d given up writing, Agnon was reconstructing the “city of his own” that he had urged on Appelfeld, composing the stories that would

become *Ir U’m’loah* (“The City and the Fullness Thereof”), the monumental (in both senses) posthumous collection of tales of his native Buczacz. “I am building a city!” he confided to Baruch Kurzweil.

Many authors colonize literary neighborhoods, towns, and shtetls, of course, both those with real-world antecedents and those built solely with the bricks of imagination.

Comparing Agnon and Roth probably reveals more about my journeys as a Jew and a reader than about them as writers. But isn’t immersion in literature meant precisely as a catalyst for self-reflection?

“That evening,” Appelfeld concludes, Agnon “felt that it was important for me to learn where I had come from and where I had to go.” Reading of the city Roth built with his books, my mother’s city, helped me understand my origins. Reading Agnon, though, showed me that Newark was not really a starting point but merely a way-station, a place to visit as a guest for the night.

