

Jewish Ideas Weekly

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January 18-25, 2013

FRIDAY, JANUARY 18

Where Does the Modern Period of Jewish History Begin?

By Michael A. Meyer

What marks the beginning of modern Jewish history?

The advent of Moses Mendelssohn? The French Revolution? The migration of Judah the Pious to Palestine in 1700? The Sabbatian explosion in the 17th century? These were some of the answers offered by the great Jewish historians of the 19th and 20th centuries. In his classic 1975 Judaism article, When Does the Modern Period of Jewish History Begin?, Michael Meyer argued that there is no value in "setting a definite terminus for the beginning of modern Jewish history." This did not settle the question, but it made it impossible for anyone to address it without taking Meyer's views into account.

—The Editors

The endeavor to divide history into distinct and meaningful periods has met with so little success that contemporary historians have treated the subject with utmost caution. Grand theoretical speculations, such as the bold efforts of Hegel to assert clearly defined stages in the development of the human spirit, or of Marx to locate similar stages in the various forms of production, have all come to grief at the hands of empirical inquiry. Few historians today still believe that world history allows of any simple, precise division, let alone that any suggested plan is rooted in the very nature of reality. All-embracing schemes of periodization, nearly everyone now acknowledges, rests more on stipulation than on inference. Though a division of some kind is still considered necessary as an instrument for understanding turning points and transitions in history, each proposal is generally

recognized as merely provisional, subject to correction not only by new evidence, but, also, by the lengthened perspective gained in the passage of time.¹ For Jewish history, periodization is fraught with all of the methodological difficulties that attend the division of world history. Scattered among the nations, the Jews have participated to varying degrees in simultaneous and successive foreign civilizations while at the same time carrying on their own heritage. The very diversity and uniqueness of their Diaspora experience have militated against any agreement on its division. Though the major Jewish historians have all had to utilize some system of periodization to organize their material, they have differed vastly in the schemes which they have employed. In part, methodological considerations have determined this divergence of systems, but, to no small degree, religious and ideological motivations have played a role as well. Nowhere is the operation of both factors more apparent and instructive than with regard to the problem of setting the threshold of the modern period in Jewish history. In fact, tracing the various theories regarding the onset of Jewish modernity reflects with amazing clarity both the course of Jewish historical thinking and the shifting conceptions of Jewish existence that have characterized the last hundred and fifty years.

The first Jewish scholar since Josephus to undertake a comprehensive history of the Jews was Isaac Marcus Jost, a German Jew who wrote a nine-volume *History of the Israelites* that was published from 1820 to 1828. Jost grew up in the period when German Jewry was given its first measure of civil equality. Responding to this new situation, a considerable segment of the community

had come to see in the changed political attitude a sharp break with the past or even to perceive the messianic prospect of full Jewish participation in the political and cultural life of Europe. Although by the time when Jost began to write his history, the post-Napoleonic reaction had cast serious doubts on the realization of that hope, he remained of the opinion that an unalterable process had been set in motion, and, as a loyal Prussian, he chose to see its origins in Prussia. Jost, therefore, designated 1740 as the beginning of modern Jewish history, since, in that year, Frederick the Great ascended the Prussian throne. He realized, of course, that Frederick's policy had, if anything, been more restrictive toward the Jews than were the regulations of the monarchs who had preceded him. But, even as late as 1846, Jost still claimed that the enlightened despot had awakened a spirit



which strides over the ghetto walls and glances into the dismal apartments of the Jewish streets . . . , it declares liberty to the oppressed, and this one word, even before its content is grasped and appreciated, arouses the soul to glad hope and the yearning for a better life.²

Since Jost was writing for German gentiles as well as for Jews, he doubtless wanted to link the turning point of the modern age in Jewish history with the monarch who had brought Prussia to a position of power in Europe. At the same time, he tried to make his Jewish readers appreciative of what they owed to the Prussian state. It was, he thought, in response to this new enlightened spirit emanating from Frederick that the fundamental transformations in the Jewish community which generated

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modernity came about: the decline of unquestioned rabbinic authority, the shift from a corporate entity to a religious denomination, and the increasing participation by Jews in German cultural and political life. With the origin of these changes in Prussia, Jost saw the beginning of a new epoch for all Jewry, one which he termed “the age of spiritual liberation.”

Jewish writers contemporary with Jost shared his sense of living in a new and hopeful time both for Europe and for the Jews. That was certainly true of the young Leopold Zunz and his circle when they laid the foundations of the scientific study of Judaism, declaring that the time had come to render account of a past that was now closed and determining to use their scholarly tools to further the process of political and cultural integration. When Nahman Krochmal, the profound Galician Jewish philosopher and historian, divided Jewish history into successive cycles of growth, blossoming, and decay, he chose to conclude the most recent period of decline with the Cossack persecutions of the mid-17th century. His own age, by implication, represented a new period of germination, the first stage of a fresh cycle.³

The best-known of the 19th-century Jewish historians, Heinrich Graetz, did not, however, fully share the earlier messianic enthusiasm. A severe moral critic of modern European culture,⁴ he set the Redemption far into the future. But, like Jost, he, too, thought that the most significant break in recent Jewish history had occurred in the preceding century. Because of his predilection for the internal intellectual history of the Jews, and his ascription of the dominant role in historical change to prominent individuals, Graetz assigned the beginning of the modern period of Jewish history to the appearance of Moses Mendelssohn. In the biography of this first significant figure to link Judaism with modern European culture, Graetz found what he called “a model for the history of the Jews in modern times, for their upward striving from lowliness and contempt to greatness and self-consciousness.”⁵

Graetz’s selection of Moses Mendelssohn as the turning point met severe challenge a generation later at the hands of Eastern Europe’s most significant Jewish historian, Simon Dubnow. For him, Graetz’s selection was questionable on three grounds. First, it was—no less than Jost’s view—distinctly Germano-centric. Beginning with Mendelssohn, Graetz had gone on to devote two-thirds of his last volume to tracing de-

velopments in Germany—supposedly set in motion by Mendelssohn—while paying scant attention to the vastly larger Jewish settlement in Eastern Europe. Second, Graetz’s emphasis on the role of individuals and of intellectual processes in history was out of keeping with the positivist approach that had meanwhile come to dominate European historiography and had influenced Dubnow. Finally, Dubnow simply could not see in Mendelssohn a model for the modern period. The Jewish philosopher’s cherished goal of acculturation ran directly counter to Dubnow’s autonomist ideology, which advocated separate, highly independent, communal entities within the frameworks of non-Jewish states. Dubnow favored political integration within the larger society but, at the same time, argued for cultural separatism. It is, therefore, not surprising that in his own writing he should have linked Jewish modernity to political, rather than cultural, transformation. In his *World History of the Jewish People*, which appeared in the 1920s, it is the French Revolution, the period when the Jews first gained citizenship, and not the beginning of the Haskalah, the Jewish enlightenment, which serves as the watershed.⁶

More recently, the majority of Jewish historians have preferred to fix the boundary line about a century or more before the French Revolution. They have chosen the earlier threshold for a variety of reasons. The most blatantly ideological justification for such an earlier *terminus a quo* is that which was given by Ben Zion Dinur, who died just recently after a productive and influential career as professor of Jewish history at The Hebrew University in Jerusalem. As an ardent Zionist, Dinur could not resist selecting the first evidence for a movement of return to the Land as the beginning of the modern period of Jewish history. What acculturation had been for Graetz and emancipation for Dubnow, Zionism became for Dinur. One might have expected him, therefore, to select a very late date, perhaps the appearance of the first Zionist classic, Moses Hess’s *Rome and Jerusalem*, in 1862, or the formation of the Hibat Zion movement and the agricultural settlement which it fostered in the 1880s, or even the publication of Herzl’s *The Jewish State* in 1896. Instead, however, Dinur chose the year 1700, for in that year, Rabbi Judah the Pious led some one thousand Jews to Palestine. For Dinur, this symbolic event (the immigration was actually a failure) was portentous

for the future. It represented the beginnings of a rebellion against the *galut* and the endeavor to seek Israel’s national salvation in its own land.⁷

Dinur’s theory effectively eliminates Diaspora Jewish modernity from the basic structure of Jewish history. Its commonly accepted characteristics are not determinative of an age. Although Dinur does recognize the relative significance of Jewish emancipation and acculturation, these are essentially conceived as forces making for Jewish national dissolution and as foils—albeit necessary—for the primary process, which is the rebuilding of the Jewish nation in Palestine. Unlike Diaspora Jewish historians, Dinur placed a definite and final terminus on this modern period. It concluded in November, 1947 with the United Nations resolution to establish a Jewish state and with the declaration of its coming into existence the following spring. The modern era, thus, lasted almost exactly 250 years, and the birth of the State of Israel brought it to an end. With 1948 this final stage of Diaspora Jewish history has definitely reached its climax. For the last generation, Jewish history has been essentially post-modern, the history of the people in its land, with that portion which remains on the Diaspora periphery playing, at best, a secondary role.

Gershom Scholem’s revisionism has been much less obviously ideological, but he, too, has had a specific purpose in view. He has devoted much of his life to establishing the central significance of the kabbalah, not merely as a byroad of Jewish history, as Graetz insisted, but as a main highway. Scholem has shown that the kabbalistically influenced, Sabbatian, pseudo-messianic movement of the 17th century had an enormous influence in its time, and he has tried to raise its significance even further by arguing that it made possible Jewish modernity. The unorthodox theses of the radical Sabbatians, their ideological doctrines, as well as their attitude toward practice, Scholem has argued, shattered the world of traditional Judaism beyond repair. Once these messianists ceased to be “believers,” they could no longer return to contemporary rabbinic Judaism. Instead, “when the flame of their faith finally flickered out, they soon reappeared as leaders of Reform Judaism, secular intellectuals, or simply complete and indifferent skeptics.”⁸ Scholem would thus not only regard the Jewish history of the late 16th and early 17th centuries as dominated by kabbalism and pseudo-messianism, but

would make even the anti-mystical Judaism of 19th-century Western Europe ironically, embarrassingly—and unconvincingly—an outgrowth of it.

Other Jewish historians have shared Scholem's preference for the 17th century but have argued for the determinative significance of factors other than mysticism and messianism. Shmuel Ettinger, currently professor of modern Jewish history at The Hebrew University, has developed the theory that the emergence of the centralized absolutistic state was the most crucial factor in initiating the changes that differentiated modern Jewish existence from previous forms. The new state was no longer willing to tolerate separate corporate entities with their own structures of law and authority. The resulting deprivation of Jewish communal autonomy spurred the integration of the Jews into European society and resulted in the intellectual response of the *Has-kalah*.⁹ But, for Ettinger, the process of cultural and political integration, set in motion by the development of the centralized state, was characteristic of modern Jewish history only during the first of two stages. Beginning with the resurgence of anti-Semitism in the 1880s, a reversal took place which resulted in the success of Jewish nationalism and the creation of the Jewish state. For Ettinger, as for Dinur, the establishment of the state constitutes the climax of modern Jewish history.¹⁰

Finally, we may consider the view of Salo Baron, the dean of Jewish historians in America. It, too, focuses on the 17th century, except that for Baron no single factor is determinative:

The Jewish Emancipation era has often been dated from the formal pronouncements of Jewish equality of rights by the French Revolution, or somewhat more obliquely, by the American Constitution. However, departing from this purely legalistic approach, I have long felt that the underlying more decisive socioeconomic and cultural transformations accompanying the rise of modern capitalism, the rapid growth of Western populations, the international migrations, the after-effects of Humanism, the Reformation, and the progress of modern science, long antedated these formal constitutional fiat. While such developments can never be so precisely dated as legal enactments, treaties, wars, or biographies of leading personalities, the mid-seventeenth century may indeed be considered the major turning point in both world and Jewish history.¹¹

Baron's enumeration of such a variety of causes leaves little room for criticizing the selection of a particular feature to the exclusion or relative diminution of others. But his direct linkage of Jewish modernity with phenomena of world history which had only limited, indirect, or delayed effect upon the Jews raises serious doubts; the general transformations which he lists here—important as they were for general history—had little modernizing influence on any considerable segment of the Jews in Europe in the 17th century. No less subject to dispute is his willingness to set a single watershed at a distinct point in time—and even to declare in the title of the later volumes of his *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* that the “Late Middle Ages” of the Jews stretches specifically from 1200 to 1650.

Of course, neither Baron nor any Jewish historian, from Jost down to the present, has regarded the exact line of demarcation which he chose as more than symbolic. All were far too aware of the gradual passing of one age into another to assume that such precise boundaries could be anything other than instrumental or suggestive. Yet, the fact that they have selected a particular year or, at least, a limited period of time during which, they argue, the chief characteristics of modern Jewish history made their appearance, itself raises a number of serious questions which have yet to be resolved.

Perhaps the most basic question concerns the principal causes and characteristics of modernity. It seems most unlikely that agreement here will be achieved, not only because of the continued effect of ideology, but, also, because economic, social and intellectual influences will continue to be weighted as variously by Jewish historians as they are by their colleagues in general history. At present, Jewish scholars span the entire gamut—from Marxist economic determinism to an idealism which largely ignores the relevance of societal change. In particular, it is by no means resolved whether the Jewish Enlightenment and Emancipation were primarily a response to the rise of capitalist modes of production, to the need for more efficient government, or to a more favorable social attitude emanating from a growing class of liberal intellectuals. Nor is there agreement whether what is basic for Jewish history is demography (and, hence, the change in the migration pattern from west-to-east to east-to-west in the 17th century would loom as a decisive event), or community structure and cohesion, or the intellectual and emotional

world of the individual Jew.

But even if there could be agreement on the characteristics determinative of the modern period, difference of opinion would remain as to when they emerged. Even if economic, political, and cultural integration be taken together as representative of Jewish modernity, the question as to when they became constitutive must still be settled. The proponents of a boundary line in the 17th or early 18th century have pointed to widespread evidence of the decline of rabbinic authority, the pursuit of secular education, and the disregard of traditional Jewish norms in Central Europe decades or more before the appearance of Moses Mendelssohn.¹² Their critics have held that such manifestations of dissolution, taken in historical context, really do not indicate a break at all. They are simply aberrant phenomena in a society which is still basically intact. Even where Jewish laws were violated, the violation was not yet justified by an appeal to values drawn from outside the Jewish community.¹³ But in admitting a seedtime for Jewish modernity which precedes its initial boundary, the critics, in turn, are forced to assume the difficult task of determining at which point the heretofore exceptional or deviant instances become normative.

The issue is further complicated by the differentiation that must be made, even by non-Marxists, between the various classes within the Jewish communities. Jacob Toury, of Tel Aviv University, has argued that the integration of the Jews into German society proceeded much more rapidly among the wealthiest and the poorest classes of Jews, while the lower middle class remained impervious to outside influences for a relatively much longer period.¹⁴ While, increasingly, during the 18th century, both economically successful Jewish merchants and destitute Jewish vagrants mingled freely with their gentile counterparts and adopted some of their values, the bulk of the German Jews still retained their traditional norms.

Even more significant than the qualification by social class is the one necessitated by geographical differentiation. During the 18th century, Eastern and Western (including Central) European Jewries came to differ enormously. Although the sociologist and historian, Jacob Katz, has attempted to argue the simultaneous emergence of modernity among Ashkenazic Jews through Hasidism in the East and through *Haskalah* in the West, he was forced to admit that Hasidism did no more than “distort” the framework of

the traditional Jewish society while the Haskalah actually shattered it.¹⁵ However much Hasidism challenged some of the norms of rabbinic Judaism, it surely did not create the characteristics of Jewish modernity. On the contrary, it soon became the most vociferous opponent of Jewish enlightenment.

If integration, on various levels, into non-Jewish society be taken as the basic criterion of the modern period, then the determination of a watershed for Eastern Europe in either the 17th or 18th century is very hard to justify. A much better argument could be made for a turning point in the mid-19th century during the relatively liberal reign of Alexander II or even as late as the Bolshevik Revolution. As for the Jewish communities of the Orient and North Africa, with the exception of a small upper class, there seems to have been relatively little interruption of their mode of Jewish existence until they were exposed to their Ashkenazi brethren in the State of Israel. These Eastern communities have been the stepchildren of Jewish historiography, virtually ignored in textbooks and lecture courses until their aliyah in the 1950s. As their descendants now gradually make their way into Jewish scholarship, especially in Israel, they will doubtless try to diminish the weight given to European developments, just as Dubnow had sought to reduce the excessive emphasis which Graetz had given to the Jews of Germany, in favor of Poland and Russia. Periodizations of the modern age which are exclusively Europe-centered may become subject, therefore, to considerable challenge in the next generation.

With all of these difficulties, is there any value in setting a definite terminus for the beginning of modern Jewish history? I would argue that there is not, unless stimulating discussion with some new theory be itself a value. Any endeavor to mark a borderline which will be meaningful for all Jewries and embrace the origin or rise to normative status of all—or even most—of the characteristics of Jewish life as it presently exists seems to me bound to fail. Yet, one must begin somewhere in relating the Jewish history of most recent times. In practice it is, therefore, probably best to begin with the 17th century where, according to nearly all views today, many of the elements that become constitutive of later Jewish life first made their appearance to any degree. But the conventionality of so doing must be fully realized. For, looking further backward, it is possible to attest certain apparently modern developments in some form even in earlier

centuries, just as some scholars have tried to dismantle the Renaissance by carrying its various elements back to the Middle Ages.¹⁶ Surely, the Golden Age of Jewish life in Islamic Spain and certain of the communities of 16th-century Italy possess significant characteristics of modernity when held up against 18th-century Poland. On the other hand, there remains a vast difference between the degree of modernity in evidence before the mid-18th century and that apparent thereafter. One can neither ignore the seeds of later development by suggesting a 17th-century “traditional society” little touched by change until a century later, nor, contrariwise, suggest that modernity has arrived along with its first harbingers.

What the Jewish historian can legitimately do—and must do—is to set the forces of continuity (which are never absent) against those of change and to analyze their relative progress and interaction. For most recent times, this means tracing a transformation of Jewish life that proceeded gradually, and sometimes fitfully, from West to East, from class to class, and in which various constituent elements—economic, social, and intellectual—underwent differing degrees of change. The scholar may find crucial points of development which he can legitimately regard as watersheds for a *particular* Jewry, but their limited importance must always be borne in mind. Rather than being concerned with the impossible task of determining the precise bounds of a single “modern period” for all Jewries, it would be best to focus on the process of *modernization*¹⁷ in its various aspects, tracing it from one area of Jewish settlement to another and trying to determine its dynamics. (To what extent, for example, does it operate by diffusion and to what extent is it explainable by an internal dialectic within each Jewry?)

Finally, there remains the question of the differing perspective between Jewish historians in Israel and in the Diaspora. If the modern period, or the process of modernization, is defined in whole or in part by Jewish life led as a minority group participating in a non-Jewish society and subjected to the ambiguities and ambivalences of that situation, then the establishment of the State of Israel—as Dinur has asserted—has put an end to such Jewish modernity, at least for the Jews in Israel. In fact, the entire Zionist movement can then be seen as essentially post-modern, a reaction spurred by anti-Semitism to the integration favored by the Haskalah. But if Diaspora Jews are es-

entially living the heritage of the Jewish enlightenment while Israelis draw sustenance from the roots of Zionism, then we have the anomalous situation where Diaspora Jewry today lives in one period of Jewish history while Israeli Jewry lives in another. From the Israeli viewpoint, this suggestion that the Diaspora remains mired in an earlier period while Jewish history has marched on to its next stage is strangely reminiscent of Lessing's, Hegel's, and, later, Toynbee's viewpoint on the failure of the Jews to advance along with the history of the world. According to its Zionist variation, Diaspora Jews have stubbornly refused to make the called-for dialectical transition from Haskalah to Jewish nationalism.

For the future of Diaspora Jewish existence, such a conception must be as unacceptable on ideological grounds, as it is for historiography on account of its serious distortion of demographic realities. Yet there is no avoiding the obvious fact that many—though by no means all—of the commonly accepted characteristics of Jewish modernity do not apply to the State of Israel. Those which result from minority status are notably absent. Thus, there is a basic bifurcation that necessarily exists between that portion of the Jewish people which lives exposed to the complexly interacting forces of assimilation and anti-Semitism and the other portion which enjoys a high degree of political independence and the ability to shape education and culture. In order to employ a single concept of modernization which will embrace developments leading simultaneously toward today's Diaspora Jewry and toward Jewish existence in the State of Israel it is, therefore, necessary to include within it both the forces that have operated in the direction of integration into non-Jewish society and those equally modernizing influences—such as a modern separatist nationalism drawn largely from European models—that have driven in the direction of disengagement. Jewish nationalism must be seen not as post-modern, but as part of the modernization process itself.

A single concept is possible, moreover, because the division created by the opposing forces has not become complete. Although the integrative pattern still dominates Diaspora existence today, elements of Jewish national identity are noticeably present as well. By the same token, Israeli society is so influenced by the cultural and intellectual currents of the West that it hardly makes sense to declare that its center of gravity

lies within a specifically Jewish sphere like that of pre-modern Jewish communities. If, therefore, modernization (which results in modernity) were conceived in terms of novel elements of both integrative and disjunctive character, it could meaningfully be used to characterize a basic process which has led to both of the forms of Jewish existence today, that of the Diaspora and that of the State. The conceptual unity of Jewish history would thus be preserved, even down to the present.

1. See George H. Nadel, "Periodization," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (New York, 1968), XI, pp. 581-81.
2. *Neuere Geschichte der Israeliten* (Berlin, 1846), I, p. 7.

3. *Kitvei Rabbi Nahman Krochmal*, ed. Simon Rawidowicz (Berlin, 1924), p. 112.
4. See his anonymously published *Briefwechsel einer englischen Dame über Judentum und Semitismus* (Stuttgart, 1883).
5. *Geschichte der Juden* (Leipzig, 1870), XI, p. 3.
6. In this view, as he himself acknowledged, Dubnow was anticipated by Martin Philippon, *Neueste Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes*, 3 vols. (Leipzig, 1907-11). From a Marxist perspective it was later adopted by Raphael Mahler, *Divrei Yemei Yisrael* (Merhavia, 1969), p. 22.
7. *Israel and the Diaspora* (Philadelphia, 1969), pp. 79-161.
8. *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York, 1971), pp. 125-26, 140-41.
9. *Toldot Am Yisrael Mi-Yemei Ha-absolutism ad Lehakamat Medinat Yisrael* (Jerusalem, 1968), p. 2.
10. *Toldot Am Yisrael Ba et Hahadashah* (Tel Aviv, 1969).

11. *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (New York, 1965), IX, p. v.
12. E.g., Azriel Shohet, *Im Hilufei Tekufot* (Jerusalem, 1960).
13. See Baruk hMevorah's review of Shohet's book in *Kiryat Sefer*, XXXVII (1961-62) 150-55.
14. "Neuehebraische Veröffentlichungen zur Geschichte der Juden im deutschen Lebenskreise," *Bulletin des Leo Baeck Instituts* IV (1961) 67-73.
15. *Tradition and Crisis* (New York, 1961), pp. 227, 245. See the criticism of Shmuel Ettinger on the original Hebrew edition in *Kiryat Sefer* XXXV (1959-60) 12-18.
16. Wallace K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought* (Cambridge, Mass., 1948).
17. Cf., Richard Bendix, "Tradition and Modernity Reconsidered," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* IX (1967) 292-346.

MONDAY, JANUARY 21

Shabbat Shirah: Song Takes Wing

By Jerry Friedman

On *Shabbat Shirah* (the "Sabbath of Song"), we read the Torah account of the crossing of the Red Sea by the Israelites. The climax of the reading is the "song at the sea," with its lofty, rolling musical melody. The Rabbis believed that the *shirah* was sung responsively, first by Moses and the men, then by Miriam and the women. Today, in keeping with this tradition, the congregation sings a number of the verses before the Torah reader chants them, as an expression of the spontaneous enthusiasm of the people.

Nahum Sarna tells us that the *shirah* in this Torah reading—unlike Greek epic poetry, which focuses on a historical event—is a spontaneous lyrical outpouring of emotion in response to a miracle, employing poetic imagery rather than heroic narrative. Thus, the narrative description in Exodus recounts, in simple, concrete language, the way in which God drives back the sea with a "strong east wind all that night . . . turning the sea into dry ground." In the *shirah*, by contrast, the same event is described in striking visual imagery:

At the blast of Your nostrils, the waters
piled up,
The floods stood straight like a wall,
The depths froze in the heart of the sea.

In witnessing the miracle at the sea, Israel

found a new voice and a new language: the language of poetic imagery. Here we see the people draw close to the divine through poetry, metaphorically experiencing the blast of God's very "human" nostrils.

To celebrate *Shabbat Shirah*, the Rabbis suggested, in addition to the customs connected with the synagogue Torah reading, a home-based ritual: on *Shabbat Shirah* we feed the birds. Some have suggested that we do so to acknowledge the birds' singing in praise of God and his great miracle at the sea. Others have linked feeding birds with their role in the biblical story of the double portion of manna that miraculously appeared on Friday so that the Israelites would not have to gather manna on Shabbat. A midrash tells us that two trouble-makers, Dathan and Aviram, put out manna Friday evening so that the people would discover it on the morning of Shabbat and Moses and God would be discredited. But the birds gobbled up all the manna before the people awoke, preserving the miracle of the double portion of manna on Friday and its absence on Shabbat and, thus, confirming the leadership of Moses.

The teaching that we should feed birds on Shabbat presented a halakhic challenge for the Rabbis. On Shabbat, we are generally permitted to feed only domesticated animals, not wild ones. An individual might technically circumvent the halakhic prohi-

bition by shaking bread crumbs from a napkin or tablecloth onto the grass, but I doubt this is what the Rabbis had in mind. How curious that they should have creatively invoked the midrash concerning Dathan and Aviram to give legitimacy to a custom that was otherwise halakhically forbidden!

I strongly suspect that Israelites were feeding birds at this time of the year long before the customs, halakhah, and *midrashim* of rabbinic Judaism emerged. I believe the practice originated during the Israelites' journey through the desert, where they would have witnessed a striking annual natural phenomenon. Each spring, 500 million birds migrate up the rift valley in Af-

rica, along the Red Sea, across the Sinai Peninsula, north through the Arava and Jordan Valley, dispersing at last in the birds' summer homes throughout Asia Minor and Europe. The Israelites would have witnessed flocks of raptors seeking the warm morning updrafts to traverse the mountains, great flocks of storks and cranes darkening the sky and creating a din with their beating wings.

They would have seen the tiny vulnerable songbirds, the warblers and finches with their beautiful colors and melodic songs. And of course there were the flocks of quail on which they feasted.

This annual migration of hundreds of millions of birds, heading in exactly the same direction as the Israelites, must have



made a tremendous impression on these wandering nomads and fostered an intimate connection. Throughout the 40-year journey in the desert, the appearance of these flocks of birds each spring must have captured the imagination and lifted the spirits of their human companions. Many of the birds would have alighted at the Israelite campsites to feed and eventually to be fed.

Once the nation was settled in *Eretz Yisrael*, this annual migration would have continued to be a powerful reminder to the Israelites of their ancestors' 40-year journey through the desert. Feeding the birds would become a way of celebrating their connection to the great spring migration that was witnessed during that first spring of liberation at the sea and annually for 40 years.

The Rabbis, writing in the first century, were likely dealing with a well established popular custom. They seemed to go to great lengths to put it into a religiously sanctioned framework, using various imaginative *midrashim*. Undoubtedly they feared an implied worship of birds, such as existed throughout the ancient world. Contemporary Egyptians expressed their death-and-rebirth symbolism through the image of a godlike phoenix rising from the ashes. In the Greco-Roman world, bird flight, bird-song, and the entrails of sacrificed birds were used to augur the future. In later centuries, birds were to figure prominently in Christian iconography, as momentous events were commonly accompanied by white doves.

The Rabbis need not have worried. Although the people continued to remember the miracle at the sea and their desert relationship to the birds, they never worshiped them. Our people knew the difference between poetic imagination and worship, and God Himself had no hesitation about using bird imagery to express His relationship to His people. As the Israelites stood at the foot of Mount Sinai before receiving the covenant, God responded to their fear and trembling at the momentous event and their apprehension about their journey into the unknown by comforting them with these tender words: "I will carry you on wings of eagles, And bring you near to me."

TUESDAY, JANUARY 22

Gun Control, Halakhah, and History: Further Thoughts

By Shlomo M. Brody

Jewish Ideas Daily recently published an article in which I argued that even people who share a framework of Jewish values may reasonably disagree about how to deal with America's gun crisis. This argument has provoked comment from opposing directions. One set of critics protests, "How can you overlook Judaism's absolute abhorrence of weapons?" Another group says, "After the Holocaust, how can you ignore the moral imperative for Jews to bear arms?" Neither of these questions changes the conclusion that Judaism's teachings are ambiguous in their implications for public policy toward gun control.

As with warfare in general, the Bible is ambivalent toward weaponry: weapons are necessary but not idealized. The Torah frequently refers to weapons. While some references merely describe contemporary instruments of war, many are symbolic. After Adam and Eve's exile, the Garden of Eden is protected by revolving swords, signifying the beginning of an era in which weapons will be needed to protect our most treasured property (Genesis 3:24). Cain's descendant Tubal-Cain invents "instruments of copper and iron," understood by the Sages to symbolize weapons of destruction (4:22). The transformation of swords into plowshares represents the end of war and the beginning

of the messianic era (Isaiah 2:4). The word *keshet* not only describes the violent arrow employed by Ishmael and others but represents God's rainbow, His promise to protect the world from further destruction (Genesis 9:13). The imagery strongly suggests a biblical belief that weaponry, like war, is a reality of life—but should not be glorified, since



our greatest hope is for an end to its use.

This moral sentiment is expressed in law as well. The Bible forbids the use of certain metal instruments to construct an altar (Exodus 20:21); the reason, in one interpretation, is that those same instruments may be used to shorten life, while worship on the altar is meant to extend life. Similarly, the Sages forbade entering the Sanctuary with a sword (*Sanhedrin* 82a), a restriction later interpreted by medieval Jewish law to forbid bringing sharp knives, apparently used

by traveling merchants for protection, into a synagogue (*Orach Chaim* 151:6). In contemporary Israel, where armed soldiers and citizens regularly enter synagogues to pray, contemporary decisors contend that one should, where possible, cover the weapons or remove the ammunition (*Shu"t Yechave Da'at* 5:18).

The same sentiment informs the modern treatment of handling weapons on Shabbat, a day when one generally may not move any object regularly used for activities forbidden on Shabbat (*muktzeh*). One should not handle a hammer, for instance, because building is a category of forbidden labor. What about a gun? It produces a flame and draws blood, both of which are forbidden Shabbat activities; therefore, many rabbis believe that handling guns is prohibited on Shabbat (*muktzeh*) unless for saving lives. Yet Rabbi Shlomo Goren, former chief rabbi of the Israel Defense Forces and the State of Israel, argued that even on a weekday, a Jew may use weapons only for morally imperative purposes—to deter enemies, prevent danger, or save lives. But if the purposes are morally imperative, a Jew may handle weapons even on Shabbat.

The same logic makes the notion of using guns for recreation, like hunting, totally alien to Jewish law. Some scholars say the use of a gun to earn a living by hunting—or even by operating a recreational hunting facility—may be permitted, especially if other jobs are unavailable. But to use weapons to kill animals for fun, as Rabbi Yechezkel Landau declared in a celebrated responsum, is to imitate biblical villains like Nimrod and

Esau, not our forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. (Since 1955 Israeli law has, unfortunately, allowed recreational hunting. A recent rise in illegal poaching has renewed debate about the practice and may lead to its curtailment.)

In the same way, while it is understood that the use of weaponry is sometimes morally necessary, the glorification of weaponry is foreign to Jewish thought. In a well-known Mishnah, the Sages, in line with Isaiah's messianic vision, banned bearing weapons in public on Shabbat, even as an ornament, since "they are merely shameful." Very few historical sources refer to Jews wearing arms as ornaments, except for certain early modern court Jews who thereby signified their social rank. One 13th-century scholar, Rabbi Isaac of Vienna, criticized Bohemian Jews for wearing armory on the Sabbath eve—but defended the practice if it was intended to deter bandits (*Or Zarua* 2:84).

What do these sentiments imply for public policy in America? First, society should abhor and boycott cultural media, like movies and video games, which glorify guns and violence. Social scientists debate the impact of these media on behavior. Irrespective of that debate, however, violent imagery without educational purpose violates the values of a religion that goes so far as to prohibit even raising one's hand against someone else without cause, let alone actually striking the individual. The second necessary implication is that guns should be used only for protection, not for recreation.

Yet in America, both media violence and recreational use of weapons are difficult to regulate. The First Amendment protects the media; the Second Amendment, to some extent, protects weapons use. Moreover, large numbers of Americans view recreational hunting as morally acceptable. In these areas, alas, specifically Jewish perspectives are outside the contemporary American consensus and very likely to remain so. This fact, too, has implications: Greater em-

phasis should be placed on promoting Jewish perspectives within the private spheres of home, school, and synagogue.

But none of the legal sources contemplates banning weapons—certainly not weapons used for self-defense. As Rabbi Isaac of Vienna's ruling testifies and historians have confirmed, Jews have owned weapons during many historical periods, even when discriminatory laws purported to ban Jewish ownership. Yitzchak Kahane has documented discussions of Jewish-owned weaponry in everyday legal texts on topics from property disputes to broken contracts for weapons training. More significant, there are numerous halakhic discussions of the issues involved in weapons sales by Jews to their gentile neighbors (*Avodah Zarah* 15b). Medieval Christian texts stress the obligation of Jewish citizens to assume their share of the defense of city walls, and this obligation led to a rich halakhic discussion of bearing arms on Shabbat. In Spain, one 12th-century French scholar noted, "it is still common for Jews to go to war with the king," reflecting the early Hispano-Jewish tradition of warrior leaders like Shmuel Ha-Nagid. There is even documentation of Jews' occasional use of weapons to defend against anti-Semitism, like this passage from the so-called Crusade Chronicles:

When the people of the Holy Covenant . . . saw the great multitude . . . they clung to their Creator. They donned their armor and their weapons of war, adults and children alike, with Rabbi Kalonymos . . . at their head . . . and they all advanced toward the gate to fight against the errant ones and the burghers.

None of this discussion marks Jews as warmongers or even habitual hunters, but it does show that Jews owned weapons and used them to defend themselves.

On the other hand, when some U.S. gun rights advocates claim that Jewish history

makes it morally imperative for Jews to own guns, they are entirely unpersuasive. Yes, fewer Jews might have been killed in the Holocaust if the Nazis had not barred them from owning guns. But the lesson of that experience is that when a totalitarian anti-Semitic government tells Jews to give up their guns, Jews should keep those weapons or, better yet, flee. How is that relevant to contemporary America and its police and armed forces? Those who actually fear rampant anti-Semitic attacks on a future generation of unarmed U.S. Jews should move to Israel, with its Jewish army and nuclear bombs. Otherwise, they should just get a grip.

If we accept the fact that 21st-century Washington, D.C. is not Nazi-era Berlin, here is a better question: Including Representative Gabby Giffords in Arizona, Noah Pozner in Newtown, and the Canadian couple recently murdered in Florida, how many Jews have been injured or killed by the latest round of U.S. gun violence? In the same period, how many were killed by anti-Semites? In all likelihood, more American Jews have fallen victim to hunting accidents and careless gun-handling than to punks with swastika tattoos. In America, maximizing Jewish welfare means maximizing safety for all citizens. Does this mean encouraging responsible citizens to own handguns, getting weapons off the streets, or any of the other strategies that have been proposed? That is the question to ask.

The legacy of Jewish perspectives on gun control—as related in law, theology, and history—is that weapons should be regulated in a manner that deters evildoers and protects the innocent. What specific policies will achieve this goal in today's America? Reasonable people can disagree. But Jews who take part in this dialogue can draw on critical Jewish values that should frame the debate, even if these values cannot provide all the solutions.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 23

Why America Has No Chief Rabbi

By Jonathan D. Sarna

The public face of world Jewry will change this summer. Come September, both England

and Israel will install new chief rabbis. Jonathan Sacks, the brilliant and widely published chief rabbi of the United Kingdom, is retiring, to be succeeded by the affable Ephraim Mirvis, currently rabbi of the Finchley Synagogue in North London. Yona Metzger, the Chief Rabbi of the Ashkenazi community of Israel, is completing his ten-year fixed

term, to be succeeded by whomever a special 150-member electoral assembly selects—for the moment, a subject of intense speculation and backroom maneuvering.

The position of chief rabbi dates far back in Jewish history. In the Middle Ages, when Jews were treated as a corporate body, the chief rabbi served not only as the judge,

scholar, and supreme religious authority for his community, but frequently bore responsibility for collecting its taxes as well. Many a chief rabbi, as a result, was appointed or confirmed directly by the king.

Chief rabbis today confine their authority to the religious realm, but their role is never purely ceremonial. Inevitably, they must also devote themselves to promoting their own brand of Judaism (usually some variety of Orthodoxy) over all the others. Israel's chief rabbinate, in recent years, has sought to undermine more liberal approaches to conversion and has taken a hardline stance on women's issues and on the thorny problem of who is a Jew. Rabbi Sacks alienated liberal Jews early in his tenure and promoted a centrist form of Orthodoxy that those to his religious right openly disdained.

America is unusual in never having had an official chief rabbi. In 1888, a short-lived

Association of American Orthodox Hebrew Congregations imported Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Vilna to serve as chief rabbi of New York, but that effort ended disastrously. Consumers soon balked at the extra charges imposed in return for the rabbi's supervision of kosher food. Competing rabbis, some of whom also styled themselves "chief rabbi," offered their supervisory services at lower rates. Without its projected income stream, the association of Orthodox congregations

that had brought Rabbi Joseph to America defaulted on its obligations to him and went out business. The unfortunate rabbi spent his last years as an impoverished invalid. No successor was ever appointed.

A few Orthodox rabbis in other American cities did, for a time, carry the title "chief rabbi," based on their learning and status. One or two even pretended to the title "chief rabbi of the United States." But none ever achieved recognition outside his own Orthodox circle.



Chief Rabbi Aaron Hart.

As a matter of law, the First Amendment precludes the government from recognizing one religious authority as "chief" over another. Just as America introduced free-market capitalism into the economy, so it created a free market in religion. Contrary to expectations, this has had the paradoxical effect of strengthening religion in the United States. As Thomas Jefferson observed as early as

in 1820, religion thrived under the maxim "divided we stand, united we fall."

In this environment, the creation in America of a government-protected form of Judaism under the authority of a chief rabbi was clearly impossible. Instead, American Jews accommodated themselves to the nation's competitive religious marketplace, which by and large has served them well. Rabbis, like their Christian religious counterparts, win or lose status through their

individual activities and accomplishments, exemplified by *Newsweek's* annual listing of the 50 most influential rabbis of the year.

American Jews have nevertheless been reluctant to recommend their free-market approach to religion to Jewish communities abroad. A recent conference hosted by the prestigious American Jewish Committee, for example, heard a litany of complaints concerning the Israeli chief rabbinate and its maltreatment of non-Orthodox Jews, Russian Jews, women and converts. But in the end, AJC called for "significant modifications" to the chief rabbinate, rather than the embrace of the religious free market. A paper by former Undersecretary of Defense Dov Zakheim, delivered at the conference, argued that "what is needed . . . is not the abolition of the Chief Rabbinate, but rather its transformation into a much more circumscribed, yet relevant and all-inclusive authority."

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, America's foremost 20-century Modern Orthodox thinker, who exercised vast influence on American Jewish life without ever having been selected chief rabbi, was wiser. He turned down the invitation to serve as Israel's chief rabbi, because, he explained in 1964, he "was afraid to be an officer of the State."

As England and Israel prepare to install new chief rabbis, Rabbi Soloveitchik's decision deserves to be remembered. "A rabbinate linked up with the state," he warned, "cannot be completely free."

THURSDAY, JANUARY 24

Antisemitism: Obsession or Logic?

By Alex Joffe

The title of Robert Wistrich's new book, *From Ambivalence to Betrayal: The Left, the Jews, and Israel* (University of Nebraska Press), may be read as a description or a conclusion. The book delivers only the former. Wistrich, perhaps the world's foremost expert on anti-Semitism, lays out an erudite and stunning bill of particulars but never quite states a conclusion about the route taken by the Left from ambivalence to betrayal. His diffidence tells us something important about Jews and the Left.

There are clues in the preface. There,

Wistrich notes the Left's "disturbing complacency," its "crippling paralysis of imagination," and its "consensual point" with anti-Semitism. But his tone is rueful, and he takes pains to distinguish the disgraceful aspects of the Left's present from its more respectable past. Speaking of the alliance between the Muslim Brotherhood, personified by Sheikh al-Qaradawi, and British leftists like George Galloway and Ken Livingstone—the "red-green axis," to which anti-Semitism is fundamental—he states that "what went wrong" was "already prefigured in the 19th-century seedbed of anti-Semitic socialism." He goes on to claim, though, that such alliances represent a "complete betrayal of the Enlightenment legacy and a caricature of socialist internationalism," which would have been inconceivable to

Marx, Engels, and Rosa Luxemburg.

Perhaps—but the subsequent 600 pages do much to demonstrate that anti-Semitism was and is a fixture of the Left. Wistrich shows, for example, how young Marx—whose notorious 1843 essay "The Jewish Question" depicted German Jewry as a spiritless fossil, identified with capitalism, whose own actions generated anti-Semitism—"supported Jewish emancipation only as a tactical political demand consistent with the principles of bourgeois society while simultaneously advocating its *liquidation* in the name of a higher social order." But Wistrich then wavers, saying only that this "dialectical paradigm" was "undoubtedly open to anti-Semitic interpretations."

To the contrary, Marx's stance, unambiguous and life-long, represents the basic logic

and *ur*-text of the Left's relationship with the Jews. Jewish emancipation (including opposition to anti-Semitism) was but a means; society's full liberation required liquidation of "Jew" as a separate identity and Judaism as a belief system. The goal was and remains a utopia where, as Marx said, "the Jews will have become impossible."

Wistrich discusses in detail well-known figures like Luxemburg and Moses Hess as well as many who are more obscure. Patterns with contemporary resonance recur. German socialist leader August Bebel attributed the growth of anti-Semitism in the late 19th century to the lower classes' "understandable" identification of Jews with capitalist oppression: after all, money was the "secular God of the Jews." Thus, social democrats opposed anti-Semitism but "understood" anti-Semites. German Communist Party founder Franz Mehring not only blamed anti-Semitism on Jews but charged liberals with attempting to "suppress," as anti-Semitic, speech that said so. Such "understanding" and cries of censorship are common today.

Russian Communists were more severe, and Wistrich's expositions of Bolshevik and Soviet denunciations of the very idea of Jewish nationality are especially valuable. The exigencies of World War II required temporary indulgence of worldwide Jewish solidarity and even Zionism, and after the war the Soviets supported the creation of Israel as a wedge issue against the West. But at home, anti-Jewish campaigns began swiftly in 1946; by 1949, they extended to assimilated Jewish intelligentsia, who were accused of lack of "Soviet patriotism." The campaigns culminated in Stalin's 1952 "Doctors' Plot," which, Wistrich puts it, fused accusations of "Jewish nationalism" and "cosmopolitanism" in an explicit Zionist conspiracy theory also linked to Israel and Western imperialism.

Khrushchev admitted that there was never really a doctors' plot, but the political benefits of maintaining and exporting anti-Semitism, especially to Arabs and Muslims, were too great to forego. Thus, Soviet operatives and their supporters resurrected classic Tsarist texts like the *Protocols of the Elders*

of Zion, accused the Talmud of preaching racism and violence, and condemned the "Nazification" of Israel. This, not racism or accusations of deicide, is the source of most contemporary anti-Semitism, imported wholesale from the Soviets by the Left and the Muslim world.

Left unasked by Wistrich—and by Colin Shindler in his recent book *Israel and the European Left: Between Solidarity and Delegitimization* (Continuum)—is whether the Left's anti-Semitism is inherent or inevitable. Anti-Semitism is fundamental to the nationalistic and religious right; Jews are necessarily the Other for fascists like the Hungarian Jobbik party. But amid the universalistic pretensions of the Left, its own logic of anti-Semitism—the logic that turns ambivalence to betrayal—is disguised, overlooked, or forgiven. Even Wistrich, who lays it all out, refrains from comment except in his regretful preface.

This logic dictates that real or imagined Jewish claims to "chosenness" will collide with the Left's demand that identities be homogenized. When this proves impossible—when ethnic or national minorities rebel, when class solidarity fails to materialize, when proletarians perceive their interests differently from the revolutionary vanguard, when someone wishes to retain an identity as a thinking individual—someone must be blamed. It is usually the Jews.

Examples, historical and contemporary, abound. Purges of the Austrian and Polish Communist parties were justified by the need to expunge Jews and Zionists. The failures of Arab nationalist movements, the authoritarian or fascist states they produced, and the Arab Spring rebellions against them were all blamed on machinations by Zionism and Israel—or their very existence. These phenomena represent not simply "scapegoating" but a consistent totalitarian logic that pervades the Left, flowing from what Isaiah Berlin called a

strain of Calvinist predestination in Marxist thought, the "clear division of men into the children of light and the children of darkness," with the latter "a multitude condemned by history itself to perish."

It is this division of humanity into the saved and the unsaved that helps lead the

Left, on Wistrich's own evidence, to the alliances he abhors. Thus, some Western progressives hail Muslims as inherently anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist allies, swallowing or not even sensing the cognitive dissonance in alliances with patriarchal, theocratic authoritarians who hold progressives in contempt. In contrast, Jews are the ultimate chimera, ancient yet modern, at once a people, a religion, a nation

and a nation-state. They can never be saved.

Why does Wistrich come right up to the brink but refrain from these conclusions? He did the same in his last book, *A Lethal Obsession: Anti-Semitism from Antiquity to the Global Jihad* (Random House). There, two-thirds of the discussion deals with anti-Semitism from the Left and Islam; but their common logic—the need to deem Jews the Other—is called merely "obsession," hateful but irrational, capable perhaps of being overcome by reason.

Like many disappointed veterans of the Left, Wistrich holds with hope over experience. Many have found themselves in this situation, led to unpalatable conclusions that threaten to undermine their worldviews and lives. For some, it means abandoning the hope of assimilation or integration or admitting the permanence of anti-Semitism or of Jews as outcasts. For others it means finding themselves in agreement with "conservatives," something to be avoided at all costs. Wistrich's own motives remain as unclear as his prescriptions; but his book is valuable as a work of massive and learned scholarship and a document of a journey not yet completed.

