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Leaving the Ghetto

By Jacob Katz

In 1973, Jacob Katz, the Hebrew University professor who was one of the greatest Jewish historians of the 20th century, published a book entitled Out of the Ghetto: The Social Background of Jewish Emancipation, 1770-1870. It is still in print and found in part or in its entirety on the syllabi of countless courses in modern Jewish history. Less well known is the article he wrote in 1996 in which he brilliantly condensed the main argument of Out of the Ghetto into five pages. The article quickly outlines the circumstances under which European Jews at the end of the 18th century first began "to be integrated into the life of the surrounding society." Katz then sketches the ways in which Western and Central European Jews transformed themselves in response to the expectations of the people whose fellow citizens they became, without abandoning their religious identity. He concludes by addressing the following question: "Was there, then, any possibility that the Jews collectively might have been accepted in Europe on their own terms—that is, as a community, with a religion opposed to Christianity?" He doesn't seem to think so.

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—The Editors

We know a great deal by now about how the history of European Jewry in the modern era came to its tragic end. But what about the beginning of the period, when great hopes were abroad for a decisive change in the historical fortunes of the Jews? Suddenly, a community which since the Middle Ages had lived in the lands of Christian Europe as a tolerated fringe group seemed destined to be integrated into the life of the surrounding society.

The idea of their integration was nowhere

initiated by the Jews themselves. Rather it was a byproduct of the major transformations occurring throughout Europe in the wake of the French Revolution. The different strata of society, hitherto gathered in various organizational frameworks according to rank and occupation, were expected to dissolve, and to find their place within the new national entity; there were to be no more "states within a state." So too with the Jewish community, which had long been



administered by its own unique laws and was therefore seen to be trespassing upon the domain of the sovereign state. It too was expected to cede its autonomy, and its members, like all other citizens, were henceforth to regard themselves as living directly under the rule of the national authority.

The Jews would indeed leave the confines of the physical ghetto; but their old habits of internal cohesion would die hard. So, at any rate, it seemed to outside observers. Writing in 1793, the philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte accused the Jews of Europe of acting as a united body even in the absence of any formal Jewish authority. To Fichte, the mutual and spontaneous bonds among the various segments of European Jewry were tantamount to a kind of government, with the result that a *de facto* Jewish state could be said to extend throughout the whole of Europe, a

state hostile to the interests of the several European powers.

Fichte's anti-Jewish animus aside, was there any basis to his claim of a sort of pan-Jewish community? There was. In this transitional period, European Jewry was divisible into two parts: the Ashkenazi, which extended from the Ukraine in the east to Alsace in the west; and the Sephardi, whose centers were in London, Amsterdam, and Venice. Each of these two parts lay scattered over different lands of residence, across which stretched economic, familial, and religious-cultural ties. Within each part there was a certain degree of international movement, and the two parts also enjoyed a measure of mutual economic contact and assistance.

This is what was supposed to change. The all-encompassing sovereign state would fulfill its obligation to absorb the Jews living within its national boundaries; in return, they would not only forge bonds with their fellow inhabitants but, concomitantly, weaken their ties with Jews living elsewhere. As each segment of European Jewry became naturalized in its place of residence, the mobility so characteristic of the Jews in the traditional period would come to an end.

Though these assumptions were never spelled out explicitly, they were clearly on the minds of European politicians. Thus, at the Congress of Vienna after the fall of Napoleon in 1814-15, representatives of the Germanic states debated whether the rights won by the Jews during the French occupation should remain in force. Prussia was one country which, on its own initiative, had granted certain rights to the Jews in 1812, and it now urged the adoption of a uniform civil status for them throughout the Germanic lands. When their proposal was defeated, however, the Prussians turned around and abolished many of the laws they had themselves enacted for the benefit of their own Jews. There is no doubt that they

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feared a wave of immigration that would upset the new principle of local absorption and local naturalization.

Hungary offers an example of a different kind. During the first half of the 19th century, that country underwent an accelerated process of economic modernization accompanied by a national awakening. This attracted a flood of Jewish arrivals from neighboring Moravia, Bohemia, and Galicia. It also led to the unsuccessful 1848 revolution against Austrian hegemony. Not until 1867 did Hungary gain a measure of independence under Franz Deák, by which time Hungary's Jews numbered a half-million. Deák instituted a number of internal reforms, including equal rights for the Jews, but at the same time he also weighed carefully the desirability of restricting immigration. Although ultimately he refrained, it is clear that in Hungary, too, the idea of emancipation was tied up with the expectation that Jews elsewhere should solve their own problems in their own lands.

Jewish mobility was not the only nettlesome matter which European statesmen hoped to resolve with emancipation; they were also concerned with the pattern of Jewish economic activity. As long as the Jews lived in ghettos or in ghetto-like conditions, their occupations were defined for them by local authorities. Usually, this restricted them to brokerage and various other credit operations involving the investment of capital, from peddling to large-scale commerce and finance. Here and there they were also permitted a craft of some sort. Not surprisingly, with the removal of legal barriers that were supposedly to blame for the one-sided nature of Jewish occupations, it was generally believed that they would branch out into other fields. To speed up the process, some governments offered incentives to those willing to take up agriculture or certain trades. Most, however, simply assumed that with free citizenship, human nature would take its beneficent course.

Still another issue tied up with emancipation concerned the substance and future of Judaism. To outsiders, the religion of the ghetto dwellers seemed strange and foreign, the result of excessive adherence to an outdated, petrified tradition. It was widely assumed that such a religion, with its exotic rituals and burdensome restrictions, could not stand up to the conditions of freedom. There were, moreover, particular Jewish practices—the custom of burying the dead on the day they died, the use of rabbis

as judges in financial disputes—which the state was prepared to abolish outright, holding them to be infringements upon its own jurisdiction. In some places, the authorities even arrogated to themselves the right to make changes in religious rituals, for example by substituting German for Hebrew as the language of public prayer.

In general, the belief was widespread that with emancipation, Jews would come to embrace the ways of the surrounding Christian society. As to the intensity of this embrace, there were differences of opinion. Devout Christians held fast to the idea that Jews were fated to acknowledge the truth of Christianity and to convert. Many such people had earlier opposed emancipation altogether, on the grounds that the Jews deserved to be humiliated for persisting stubbornly in their error; once emancipation was an accomplished fact, they hoped it would spur the Jews to their final destiny. Less orthodox Christians entertained such hopes as well, based in their case not on Church dogma but on the conviction that Christianity embodied an exalted philosophical or ethical message. Still others thought it would be sufficient if the Jews reformed their own religion, so that it would no longer be an obstacle to the performance of their civic duties, or a barrier between them and their neighbors. Finally, there were those who had themselves renounced Christianity and hoped to find in emancipated Jews kindred souls and partners in the struggle for secular ideals.

And what did the Jews make of the various visions of the future projected by their emancipators?

For an answer to this question we may turn in the first instance to the contemporaneous Jewish press. From the time of their founding in the late 1830's and early 1840's, the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums* in Leipzig, the *Archives Israelites* in Paris, and the *Jewish Chronicle* in London tracked the struggles of both West and East European Jews for their rights. In particular, these papers reported the readiness of Western Jews to assist their brethren in the East—a readiness which stemmed in part from feelings of solidarity but which had a self-interested side as well. In Germany, France, and England, Jews saw their own chances in society put into jeopardy by the prospect of a new influx of Eastern Jews bearing the stamp of the ghetto.

For a long time this threat lacked a basis in reality. Jewish migration hardly ceased

in the 19th century, but until relatively late in the century most of it originated in Germany and Austria, was destined for the United States, and did not attract much notice. Only in the 1870's did migration from the East gain momentum, first in Romania and then in Russia. In Bucharest, the American consul, Benjamin Franklin Peixotto, conceived a plan to resettle half of Romania's Jews—some 100,000—in the United States, and to this end he tried to secure the assistance of West European Jewry. Peixotto even called for an assembly of Jewish representatives in Brussels to resolve the issue, but most did not respond; the reason, according to the contemporary writer Berthold Auerbach, was fear that such a migration would make all of European Jewry look like a band of gypsies.

For the Jews of Western Europe, then, just as for the emancipators, the solution to the Jewish problem lay in absorption into the surrounding society. And if Jews were thus at one with their emancipators on the desirability of local integration—which implied, willy-nilly, a loosening of their ties to Jews elsewhere—they agreed as well that integration meant the abandonment of traditional patterns of Jewish livelihood. Though the course to be followed was not absolutely clear, one step taken by every major Jewish community from Paris to Budapest was to place Jewish boys in apprenticeships with non-Jewish artisans. This was not an inexpensive proposition. The necessary funds came from wealthy Jews who viewed the scheme as a way of erasing the image of Jews as hucksters out to make easy profits at the expense of those laboring by the sweat of their brow.

On one issue, however—religion—Jewish and Gentile opinion differed significantly. Jewish citizens aspired to be accepted into society as Jews. Even those who saw a need for religious reform—reform that often seemed, in practice, a slavish imitation of Christian models—viewed it as a legitimate development within the Jewish faith and took pains not to include any overt symbols of Christianity. Moreover, Reform and Orthodox Jews alike strove to establish their religion on an equal footing with Christianity. Not only were they confident that Judaism would continue to exist, they believed it would flourish and gain a new lease on life.

Generally speaking, the process of integration began on both sides in an atmosphere of raised expectations and widespread hopefulness. The question we need

to ask ourselves now is whether this was warranted—not in the light of hindsight, of later circumstances which could never have been predicted at the outset, but in light of the realities of the time.

It would indeed have been feasible for each European state to have absorbed its Jews if all had decided upon this course simultaneously. But that was never a serious possibility. The emancipation of the Jews required, in each state, the attainment of a certain level of political, economic, and cultural development, and in 19th-century Europe there was no uniformity on this front.

Consider the single, broadly cultural issue of relations between church and state. Although the downfall of the *ancien régime* ended the subservience of the latter to the former, and hence the doctrinally driven insistence that Jews be kept in an inferior position, this was a slow process, and it did not immediately affect all states with Jewish populations. Austria, for example, continued to see itself as a Catholic nation, and Russia as a Slavic and Russian orthodox one. Without basic changes in these two governments, the Jews there could hardly hope to become citizens. Meanwhile, even the most liberal nations did not go so far as to deny their links to Christianity.

The promise of economic diversification also failed to materialize following emancipation. Even with the abolition of restrictive laws, the Jews remained a distinct minority, and peculiar as well in their choice of vocations. This is a phenomenon that is common to all religious or ethnic minorities everywhere, and it has been treated extensively in the work of modern economists (in the case of the Jews especially by Simon Kuznets). At the time, it was commented upon by Johann Gottfried Hoffman, who made an exhaustive study of Jewish demographics. Hoffman refuted the accusation that Jews were congenitally incapable of rough physical labor by pointing to the many Jewish peddlers who set out on the road with packs of merchandise on their backs and meager rations of dried food. Such men were hardly less “physical” than farmers or factory workers. Why, then, did Jews prefer peddling to other forms of work? The reason, according to Hoffman, was social: it kept them in contact with other members of their community with whom they could observe the requirements of their religion.

Since their nonconformist faith prevented the Jews from being absorbed into their local communities, and also from integrating into the wider economy, the success of the

emancipators’ project came to depend upon the hope for conversion. From our vantage point it may seem absurd that such a hope could be seriously entertained, but in fact many Christians at the time believed in it. And with some cause: there were more than a few cases of conversion among the Jews who first emerged from the ghetto—enough, indeed, for the German Jewish historian Heinrich Graetz to speak of *Massen-taufe*, or mass conversion.

This, however, was a serious overstatement. Instances of true mass conversion in history have always depended on a charismatic leader who draws after him an entire community. There was, quite simply, no chance of this happening in the rationalistic atmosphere of 19th-century Europe. Most Jewish converts tended to act out of pragmatic considerations of career and social advancement, or out of dissatisfaction with their own religion, or both. In any event, each conversion was a personal affair, or at most involved an entire family. Mass conversion was out of the question.

Was there, then, any possibility that the Jews collectively might have been accepted in Europe on their *own* terms—that is, as a community, with a religion opposed to Christianity? When it granted the Jews civil rights, the state did commit itself to tolerating Judaism; but this tolerance took the form of a grudging resignation, which never extended beyond the absolute minimum. A common lament by spokesmen of the German-Jewish community throughout the 19th century was that while Jews had been emancipated, Judaism had not. By this they meant that Jewish religious institutions—the rabbinate, the seminaries, the formal community—did not enjoy the benefits granted to comparable Christian institutions.

Moreover, Judaism itself continued to be denigrated in public, especially under the aegis of the churches whose influence continued to be felt throughout the post-revolutionary states. The churches provided secular leaders with moral legitimacy, in exchange for protection and various benefits. As Jews kept a distance between themselves and the churches, they were in turn kept at arm’s length from the institutions of the state and excluded from the ranks of its servants.

In this indirect way, Judaism remained an obstacle to full citizenship. In Germany, for example, universities could not appoint professors without first obtaining the consent of the local government; consequently, regulations that barred Jews from government ser-

vice also kept them out of academia. As for the enlightened professoriate, its members made no efforts to fight such discrimination: indeed, they could not see why conversion from Judaism—in their view, a move from the spiritually and ethically inferior to the spiritually and ethically superior—should present difficulties to any Jew intent on pursuing an academic career. Theodor Mommsen, the famous classical scholar and the only Gentile to take a stand against the anti-Semitism of his colleague Heinrich von Treitschke, wrote that while he would never ask a believing Jew to convert, he could not understand why secular Jews should be at all reluctant to do so. Apparently it never occurred to him that there was a significant difference between distancing oneself from one’s religion and embracing another.

These patronizing attitudes offended the Jews collectively and individually, although as a general rule they tended to view them as vestigial and expected that in time they would disappear. Yet the bewilderment of a Mommsen reflected a deep problem, as well as a failure to develop intellectual concepts adequate to a changed reality. In the pre-modern era, the Jewish community had been recognized as having its own culture, at the heart of which lay its religion. The modern state, for its part, defined the Jews solely in terms of that religion; indeed, no other category lay at its disposal. To a certain extent this characterization was accurate, since in their transition to modernity the Jews had indeed shed all but the faintest remnants of their pre-modern culture. Yet in a larger sense it was totally unsuitable, for whole sectors of the community had also ceased to uphold the fundamentals of the Jewish religion and its unified patterns of ritual. What secular Jews remained attached to was not easy to define, but neither, for the Jews involved, was it easy to let go of: there were family ties, economic interests, and perhaps above all sentiments and habits of mind which could not be measured, and could not be eradicated.

Not surprisingly, the Jewish community became an enigma to observers both within and without. Jewish intellectuals did come up with a host of theories to account for and to justify this paradoxical situation, but no one managed to coin a key phrase to define it (in the way that “pluralism,” for instance, captures the ethnic situation in today’s United States). In fact, the reality was too complicated to be encapsulated in a simple formula.

But if Jewish observers could not find the

magic words, their enemies and ill-wishers did—specifically, through the concept of race. Originally a purely anthropological category without any necessarily negative connotation, this term no sooner gained currency than it became pressed into service to explain all the defects, real or fancied, of the Jews, from their cosmopolitanism, to their avoidance of manual labor, to their exploitation of others, to their “tribal” religion which allegedly lacked any spiritual depth or ethical foundation. Once the concept of race became infused with anti-Semitism, it

became a most efficient instrument of political propaganda. If it did not actually create, it certainly deepened the alienation of the Gentile public from the Jews, and thus, in the fullness of time, it helped to set the conditions for Nazism.

A negligible minority in a Christian world, the Jews of Europe were never the masters of their own destiny. This was so in the Middle Ages, and it remained so in modern times. Just as their seclusion from society at large had been imposed upon them during the time of the ghetto, so their attempt at inte-

gration in the modern age was likewise directed by external circumstances.

To us, looking back, this may seem to lend the saga of the European Jews a certain air of doom foretold. Yet who among us, even knowing what finally lay in store for them, can blame them for having seized the modern opportunity, or for having imagined that it spelled the end of their historic tribulations? Who among us, desirous of honoring their memory, would dare to judge their long and ardent struggle against the vise of circumstance?

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 11

Leibowitz at 110

By Jeffrey Saks

Yeshayahu Leibowitz died in 1994, but he has by no means been forgotten. His 110th birthday is being commemorated by conferences throughout Israel, several publications, and even a new documentary film. A scientist, a philosopher, and a sharp-tongued public intellectual, Leibowitz was an oracle for some, and to others a crank. But even those who are relieved not to hear his voice any more have to acknowledge his originality and his importance as a Jewish thinker and a force in Israeli life during the better part of the 20th century.

Born in Riga (where for a time he was a schoolmate of the young Isaiah Berlin), Leibowitz was educated in Germany before he settled in Jerusalem in 1934. For decades, he taught chemistry, physiology, and the philosophy of science at the Hebrew University. In addition to being the editor of the *Encyclopedia HaIvrit*, he taught, lectured, and wrote on a wide variety of issues.

A religious Zionist and a supporter of Jewish statehood, Leibowitz nevertheless expressed strong suspicion of all forms of government and warned that viewing the state as a value in and of itself (rather than a vehicle for social or national good) paves the way to fascism. He denounced as a form of idolatry the attribution of inherent sanctity to land, and is best known, perhaps, for insisting that Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza after the Six-Day War would ultimately corrupt the nation. Leibowitz demonstrated nothing but contempt for Gush Emunim and the followers of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook (whom he characterized

as being “not interested in Jews or Judaism, only in the State”). He believed that the entanglement of state and religion would only harm the latter. His position on these and many other matters reflected his deep fear of seeing Judaism become the “concubine” of the state.

As a philosopher of Judaism, Leibowitz focused on the exclusive importance of the performance of the mitzvot. He held that observing the commandments (i.e., fulfilling the Divine will) is an end in itself, and not a means to achieve personal, spiritual, communal, or national benefit. To seek any meaning beyond the mitzvot themselves, he thought, is a form of idolatry.

Leibowitz rejected conventional articulations of the Jews' chosenness or uniqueness: “The notion that Jewish man is endowed with characteristics that non-Jews lack (the prophetic faculty described by Judah Halevi, the ‘soul of the nation’ proposed by Rabbi [A.I.] Kook, and the like) derogates the significance of Judaism.” That significance, and the very constitution of Jews as a people or nation, consisted for Leibowitz exclusively of “the realization of a program of living set forth in the Torah and delineated by its mitzvot.” Jewish uniqueness “is not a fact; it is an endeavor. The holiness of Israel is not a reality but a task.” The Jewish people's “uniqueness rather consists in the demand laid on it. The people may or may not heed this demand, therefore its fate is not guaranteed.”

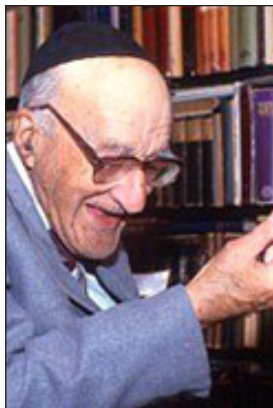
The racial or genetic theories that found expression in Halevi's *Kuzari* and other religious sources were, in Leibowitz's eyes, an-

ti-rational and pseudo-mystic. But he was equally hostile to those who propounded secular definitions of Jewishness. “He who empties the concept of the Jewish people of its religious content (like David Ben-Gurion),” he wrote, “and still describes it as an *Am Segulah* [chosen people] turns this concept into an expression of racist chauvinism.”

Critics took Leibowitz's position to be atheistic—and indeed, he effectively removes God from the human experience of religion. The transcendent Deity was not Leibowitz's concern; only the service of God held any meaning for him. The only possible relationship between man and God was the one embodied in the normative practice of halakhah.

Leibowitz's views aroused a great deal of criticism, which was only intensified by his singularly cantankerous mode of expressing them. Most famously and most egregiously he described Israeli soldiers' conduct during the 1982 Lebanon war as the behavior of “Judeo-Nazis.” Anger against him on account of that remark had not subsided a decade later, when a public outcry forced him to decline the Israel Prize for his life's work.

Distaste for his politics has not prevented his posthumous publications (mostly transcripts of the conversations he conducted over many years with a circle of students and disciples) from selling well in Israel and resonating within public discourse. And yet, it is quite likely that contemporary devotees of Leibowitz latch on to his views about the territories or separation of religion and state without paying any attention to the other



strains in his philosophy, especially his emphasis on mitzvah observance as the central act in the private life of a Jew.

Leibowitz remains largely unknown to American Jewry (to whom the name Leibowitz generally connotes his sister Nehama, the Bible scholar). There is a collection of essays by Leibowitz translated into English, *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State* (Harvard University Press); and perhaps the best English-language introduction to his work is the preface to the book, written by its editor, Eliezer Goldman. Un-

fortunately, however, very little of Leibowitz's work is available in English. This may have something to do with what many find to be the unpalatable nature of his religious philosophy. The idea that Judaism is merely the performance of mitzvot is unappealing even to many for whom it is also that. As a friend once said, "I tried to read Leibowitz once, but after 10 pages I was tired of being yelled at, so I put the book down."

But whatever one thinks of his philosophy or his politics, Leibowitz's ideas are as relevant today as they were during his life-

time and deserve all of the attention they are receiving on the 110th anniversary of his birth, in Israel if not elsewhere.

It is a testament to the book that it embodies the conflict it describes. A work that argues for political engagement, it languished for years in an obscurity to which political circumstances consigned it. The book should be read not only because the conflict it describes is universal but also because it has traveled a long distance to tell us so.

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 12

Department of Excuses: BDS at Brooklyn College

By Jonathan Marks

BDS—the "boycott, divestment, sanctions" movement—styles itself a "global movement against Israeli apartheid." The group promotes economic sanctions against Israeli businesses, cultural institutions, and universities in the name of what it calls Palestinian equality. According to BDS founding member Omar Bhargouti, such equality requires at least three things: "ending Israel's 1967 occupation and colonization, ending Israel's system of racial discrimination, and respecting the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their lands from which they were ethnically cleansed." As others have noted, the third goal is a veiled demand for an end to Israel.

Last Thursday, Brooklyn College hosted a discussion of the BDS movement by a panel consisting of Bhargouti and Judith Butler, a Berkeley philosophy professor and BDS supporter. It was co-sponsored by Students for Justice in Palestine—and the Brooklyn College political science department. New York elected officials called for the event's cancelation or withdrawal of school or department sponsorship. But the professors stood firm, backed by not only Brooklyn College President Karen Gould but New York City Mayor Bloomberg, who defended "an academic department's right to sponsor a forum on any topic."

In fact, few of the critics questioned the "right" of Brooklyn College or its political science department to sponsor the event. The question is not the rights but the responsibilities and judgment of the college

and the department, neither of which has offered a good defense of the decision to sponsor the BDS panel.

No one will dispute President Gould's assertion that "providing an open forum to discuss important topics, even those many find highly objectionable, is a centuries-old practice on university campuses around the country" or that fostering a "spirit of inquiry and critical debate" is part of the mission of an educational institution. In sponsoring the BDS panel, goes the argument, the political science department was endorsing not BDS but discussion and debate. The department itself has insisted that it is open to co-sponsoring similar events "representing any point of view."

Presumably, however, the department will not lend its name to just any panel at which a view is aired. If the department's policy is to sponsor events that foster discussion, what kinds of events foster these goals and, thus, merit its sponsorship? President Gould's comments suggest one criterion: an event's organizers should share and be willing to work toward the goal of fostering open discussion. This criterion does not demand that more than one view be represented on the stage. It is enough if the speaker, however committed to a single view, present the argument in a spirit that invites further inquiry. A presentation sponsored by scholars might also be reasonably expected to adhere to the scholarly view that getting at the truth is more important than defending a political position.

By the same standard, an academic de-

partment should not sponsor organizers and speakers who intend merely to proselytize. If the faculty decides an event is worth sponsoring even though its organizers and speakers do not seek open discussion, the department should act to ensure that such discussion takes place anyway—by offering students a balanced selection of readings beforehand, arranging a moderated discussion afterward, or sponsoring another speaker with a different perspective.

In applying these standards of sponsorship, there are hard cases—but the BDS event was not one of them. The way the event's supporters described it demonstrates that it was never intended as an "open forum to discuss important topics," "Brooklyn College Students for Justice in Palestine," the group's website announced, "presents BDS (Boycotts, Divestment, Sanctions) Movement for Palestinian Rights," a "strategy that allows people

of conscience to play an effective role in the Palestinian struggle for justice" by gathering for a lecture "on the importance of BDS in helping END Israeli apartheid and the illegal occupation of Palestine." When Judith Butler finally spoke at the event, she claimed she was not asking "anyone to join a movement." But the student sponsors plainly organized the event solely to boost their cause. There is nothing wrong with that, any more than it is wrong to invite people to a camp meeting for the purpose of converting them; but it is wrong for an academic department to co-sponsor such a meeting.

Glenn Greenwald of the UK *Guardian* defended the event this way: "Why shouldn't



advocates of a movement be able to gather at an event to debate tactics and strategies without having someone there who objects to the movement itself?” Similarly, when Butler spoke—before she remembered that the event was supposed to be an exercise in “critical judgment” and “democratic debate”—she observed that she had expected it to be a “conversation with a few dozen student activists in the basement of a student center.” There is nothing wrong with activists getting together to plot strategies for delegitimizing Israel, but it is wrong for an academic department to sponsor such a gathering.

The way the BDS panel’s organizers, defenders, and participants explained the event makes a laughingstock of those who stood up with a straight face and claimed

that the decision to sponsor the panel was about fostering a “spirit of inquiry.” At best, the decision was thoughtless—and that has been the department’s last line of defense. “We just [expletive] co-sponsored it,” tweeted Brooklyn College political science professor Corey Robin amid the controversy, as if the act were meaningless—as if it made sense, when presented with a request to sponsor an anti-Zionist recruitment and strategy session, to reach for the department’s rubber stamp.

Others at Brooklyn College know better. Before the event, as the controversy gathered steam, the school’s faculty overwhelmingly supported resisting the politicians’ attempts to tell it what to do. But when political science chair Paisley Currah asked other departments to become additional co-

sponsors of the event, BC English professor Eric Alterman reports that in an emphatic rebuke to the political science department, no other department agreed to do so. They understood, as the political science department pretends not to, that sponsorship is a meaningful act. Alterman goes farther, arguing that progressives have a particular “responsibility to condemn the intellectual masquerade in which BDS engages and the destructive consequences it supports.” One need not agree with him to conclude that the political science department’s decision, far from being a service to the mission of critical inquiry, was a dereliction of its duty to students and an embarrassment to Brooklyn College.

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 13

Is Judah Halevi’s *Kuzari* Racist?

By Ari Ackerman

Often enough, you can judge where people stand in the cultural geography of contemporary Israeli society by their attitude toward Judah Halevi’s *Kuzari*. This popular medieval philosophic treatise, which espouses a theory of Jewish superiority, is a favorite text of many in the religious Zionist sector. Secular liberals, by contrast, who oppose its ethnocentric conception of Judaism, frequently accuse it of being a racist work. Yet the most articulate and vociferous Israeli critic of Halevi’s *Kuzari* was not a secularist all but a religious Jew, albeit a rather idiosyncratic one. Yeshayahu Leibowitz, whose 110th birthday is currently being marked in Israel, often denounced the *Kuzari* as the most influential and pernicious version of the theory that the Jewish people possess inherent holiness.

In explicit response to Leibowitz’s indictment, Micah Goodman’s book, *The Dream of the Kuzari*, newly published in Hebrew (Or Yehudah: Dvir, 2012) offers a fresh new understanding of Judah Halevi’s approach to the nature of Jewish peoplehood and chosenness. Goodman, a popular scholar and charismatic educator who recently authored a bestseller on Maimonides’ *Guide for the Perplexed*, challenges the previously undisputed reading of the *Kuzari* as an argument for a qualitative distinction between Jews and other human beings.

Halevi places this argument in the mouth of the book’s principal figure, the Jewish sage whose dialogue with the King of Khazar forms the backbone of the work. According to this unnamed sage, the difference between Jew and non-Jew parallels the distinction between human being and animal, and Jews consequentially have a kind of access to God that is beyond the capacity of other men. Goodman, however, like Leo Strauss, warns against the straightforward identification of Halevi’s own views with those of the sage, and provides solid textual justification for avoiding it. He maintains that the *Kuzari* should be read as a Platonic dialogue in which the truth emerges not from one speaker alone but from the parry and thrust between the dialogue’s participants. Goodman describes how the King of Khazars and the Jewish sage articulate conflicting attitudes toward the non-Jew. While the Jewish sage claims that the non-Jew can never receive revelation, the King of Khazar is living counter-testimony to the sage’s view. From the very beginning of the book, after all, he acts in obedience to a divine communication that has been vouchsafed to him. This constitutes dramatic evidence that Judah Halevi is not simply adopting the particularistic view of the Jewish sage. Instead, as an accomplished poet, he believes that the truth belies philosophic argumenta-

tion and can best be represented by a literary work in which opposing worldviews collide and interact.

Nevertheless, despite Goodman’s creative reading, one is still left with the impression that the *Kuzari* is not truly dialogical. It

lacks the give and take of Plato’s dialogues, as the king dutifully absorbs the teaching of the Jewish sage, rarely asking a searching question or contradicting his teacher. Indeed, the sage’s discourse often goes on at length without any interruption from the king. I would also note that as Goodman himself reminds us, the *Kuzari* has always been understood to advocate the view that Jews possess inherent

superiority to non-Jews. If we accept Goodman’s explanation of Halevi’s actual intentions, we must conclude that the work was a resounding failure. That is, although Halevi crafted the work meticulously over an extended period of time, his readers throughout the generations failed to understand it properly.

Goodman suggests that this was an outcome Judah Halevi himself had foreseen when he concealed his true view from the reader regarding Jewish chosenness. But Goodman does not develop this idea sufficiently. As far as appears, he does not provide a convincing explanation for Halevi’s efforts to conceal the truth from most



readers. Nor does he make clear enough the distinction between the readers from whom Halevi wants to hide his true view and those to whom he actually wishes to transmit, however covertly, his authentic opinion.

I do not wish to leave the impression, however, that Goodman's book focuses exclusively on this issue. Rather, it provides a wide-ranging analysis of the *Kuzari*. Goodman divides his work into four primary sections. The first and longest section provides an overview of the main topics that Halevi explores: his famous proof for the veracity of the revealed Torah, the contrast between the God of Abraham and the God of the philosophers, a phenomenological analysis of religious experience, a conception of God and prayer, and the nature of human perfection, religious asceticism and *ta'amei hamitzvot* (the reasons for the command-

ments). The final section of Goodman's book is equally ambitious in its scope. It attempts to highlight the main differences between the two most important alternatives developed by medieval Jewish philosophy: the rationalistic and universalistic orientation of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* and the fideistic and particularistic approach of Judah Halevi's *Kuzari*. This section also examines the history of the reception of Judah Halevi's immensely popular work, with particular emphasis on its unique position within the cultural configuration of the Jewish people in contemporary Israel and the United States.

Goodman is an eloquent and lucid writer. His entire book is replete with fresh readings of particular passages of the *Kuzari* that exhibit his uncanny ability to relate medieval Jewish philosophical texts to

vexing problems of contemporary Jewish existence. Goodman is clearly concerned with the fact that Halevi's *Kuzari* has become a divisive work engendering dissension among different segments of the Jewish people. Attempting to repair the cultural rupture, he provides a universalistic interpretation of the *Kuzari* that will better equip it to become part of the shared discourse of Jewish education. In truth, however, there is no need to reinterpret Jewish texts so that they accord with the modern or post-modern sensibilities of the contemporary Jewish student. It would be better for today's Jewish students to be exposed to the multiple voices of the Jewish tradition, including dissonant ones. In doing so, they will come to understand the complexity and plurality of their own multifarious tradition.

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Speaking What Must Be Spoken

By Diane Cole

We read about the Holocaust in order to remember, but the sheer number of books on the subject can intimidate. What has long been needed was a guide that would be as accessible as it was comprehensive and scholarly. Now we have one, in *Holocaust Literature: A History and Guide* (Brandeis University Press) by David G. Roskies, professor of Yiddish literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York and at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and Naomi Diamant, deputy dean of New York University's Stern School of Business.

Appearing together at a recent panel devoted to their book at the Yeshiva University Museum, the co-authors emphasized the lessons to be learned from reading the Holocaust literature in the chronological order in which it was written and published. First, it corrects the conventional wisdom that the Holocaust meant little to American Jews—or, for that matter, to the world—until the 1960s. (New York University professor Hasia Diner also challenged that notion in her powerful 2009 book *We Remember with Reverence and Love* [NYU Press].) As Roskies and Diamant remind us in their book, Anne Frank's diary first appeared in Dutch in 1947, the same year in which Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* (Touchstone) was published in Italian. Even before

that, in Poland in 1946, first-person reports and diaries of ghetto deprivation, deportation and approaching death, by men and women who themselves perished in the Holocaust, began to be published. Non-European non-Jews also brought the horror to wide public attention. Among them was the American writer John Hersey, whose 1950 documentary-like novel about the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, *The Wall*, became a bestseller.

Roskies' and Diamant's history does not begin in 1946, but reaches back to the very beginnings of Holocaust literature, in the midst of the war itself. In the Europe of 1939 to 1945, they point out, "geography was destiny," because whether Jews lived or died was overwhelmingly determined by where they found themselves: in what the authors call the "Free Zone," those areas where Jews were free from Nazi persecution, or what they bluntly label the "Jew-Zone," the countries of round-ups and ghettos and camps where the slaughter took place. Related to the geography of *where* wartime writing was taking place is the even more chilling demarcation in *time*: before 1942, when at least some glimmer of hope remained that relief or rescue or escape was possible, and after, when those caught and trapped realized they were doomed. "A Jew still alive in the Jew-Zone was a statistical error by the fall of

1943," the authors write. And yet many of these final few still found a way to scrounge for scarce supplies of paper and writing utensils to record what they witnessed, and hide their manuscripts in hopes that they would be found later.

Reading in time also provides insight as to why, after the war, certain accounts appeared in print right away, while others remained archived or, if published, may have languished out of print for decades. One reason: the unedited cries heard in the diaries and chronicles of the doomed could be raw, filled with rage against the scandal of silence (perhaps especially

what they perceived as Jewish silence), as well as rage and blame turned against themselves for inaction, and a sense of moral repugnance at betrayals committed by Jew against Jew in order to eke out another day's survival. In some cases, these stark stories were so searing and disturbing that surviving Jews hotly disputed whether such accounts should be presented to a larger public that would not—could not—understand the barbarous reality of the concentration camps. To some extent, as the authors put it in their book, "Holocaust memory had to obey the habits of the Jewish heart."

How to shape the memory and meaning of the Holocaust became a dominant theme in what Roskies and Diamant call



the “Communal Memory” period of 1945-1960—a time when controversies emerged as different groups attempted, through survivor accounts and anthologies, to present a particular face—whether of heroism or martyrdom—or connect a specific agenda, religious or political, to the Holocaust. Additional questions were raised in what the authors call the “Provisional Memory” era of 1960-1985: Does the survivor’s internal sense of trauma ever end, even after having created, outwardly at least, a new and successful postwar life? How can we judge the behavior of ghetto and concentration camp survivors, as passive or heroic, when either path would likely lead to their death, or someone else’s, or both?

Today, the authors believe, we are in a self-conscious era of “Authorized Memory.” But even so, they write, “every generation must be scandalized anew by the

Holocaust.” Which means that the story must continue to be taught and the books that recount that story read. To that end, Roskies and Diamant provide, in the second half of their book, an annotated guide to 100 (admittedly an arbitrary number) books about the Holocaust available in English. Readers will find there books they may have already read (Elie Wiesel’s *Night* [Hill & Wang], André Schwarz-Bart’s *The Last of the Just* [Overlook], Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* [Pantheon]) and lesser-known others that cry out to be read (*Blood from the Sky* [Yale University Press] by Piotr Rawicz, a novel they describe as crossing “James Joyce with Dostoevsky”; *Our Holocaust* [Amazon-Crossing] by the Israeli novelist Amir Gutfreund, which they call “the first communal *Bildungsroman* in Holocaust literature”; and *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* [University of Nebraska Press], French philosopher Sarah

Kofman’s autobiographical account of conflicted loyalties as a hidden child). They have also produced a free online companion curriculum.

Appearing together with Roskies and Diamant on the panel were noted Holocaust historian Samuel Kassow of Trinity College, who called the authors’ approach “path-breaking,” and literary critic Ruth Franklin, author of *A Thousand Darknenses: Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction* (Oxford University Press), who hailed their work as “magisterial.” This is entirely warranted praise for a book that offers us so much insight into how to read the literature of the Holocaust in time, and over time. Roskies and Diamant remind us of that it is not enough to preserve its memory; we must also make it available to be rediscovered by generations to come.