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Menachem Begin: A New Life

By Asaf Romirowsky

In *Menachem Begin: A Life* (Yale University Press), a new biography of one of Israel's more multifaceted leaders, Avi Shilon succeeds in portraying a fervent and uncompromising Zionist whose political brilliance usually compensated for his lack of military experience. Shilon shows that for Begin, anti-Semitism was at the root of everything. It was Begin's realization of the threat that posed by anti-Semitism that motivated his actions and led to his political career. When the Holocaust destroyed the Polish-Jewish world from which he had emerged, the need for Jewish independence became clearer to him than ever before. Ensuring that another Holocaust would never take place was his paramount concern, even when he was Prime Minister of Israel, pursuing Yasir Arafat in the PLO leader's Beirut bunker. While many of Begin's critics have deplored the ways in which this frame of mind led him to take what they consider politically inappropriate actions, Shilon's biography focuses not on criticizing the man in this respect but in showing the reader where Begin "came from."

Shilon also shows just how important symbolism was to Begin. In the 1940s, when he was the leader of the underground Etzel, an acronym for Irgun Zvai Leumi, or National Military Organization, his operations against the British rulers of Palestine always included symbolic elements that stressed the importance of Jewish sovereignty and self-determination. For example, Etzel's "Operation Wall" was a response to a British prohibition against blowing a shofar at the Western Wall on Yom Kippur. This action, Shilon observes, "was not the most important in the history of Etzel, but it em-

phasized Begin's main approach in the organization's initial operations: symbolic declarative acts, not necessarily with any real military content."

Begin had a gift not only for symbols but for words. According to Shilon, his oratorical skills were in part responsible for his emergence as Jabotinsky's successor. The Revisionists, the members of Jabotinsky's movement, were captivated by Begin's ability to express their ideology and deeply impressed by his honesty and integrity. Yet "more than anything else," Shilon rightly observes, Begin "will be remembered for putting his stamp on the Jewish character of the Israeli state." He "saw himself as part of the Jewish nation across the ages, a kind of new modern prophet, a link in a chain stretching across the generations whose hard-line view were inspired by the Jewish Holocaust and who restored to the public debate images and views from the Diaspora."

Begin's Diaspora experience imbued him with a profound sense of Jewish solidarity. Even when the Haganah was hunting down his rebel forces and turning them over to the British, he would not lash out against his fellow Jews. We did not teach our fighters, he wrote in *The Revolt*, "to hate our political opponents," for "mutual hatred brings almost certain civil war." Subsequently, during Israel's War of Independence, when the Israeli Army attacked the *Altalena*, an Etzel ship carrying weapons to the new state in apparent defiance of Ben-Gurion's orders, Begin defused the threat of civil strife. "I call on my brothers not to open fire," he declared. "There will be no fraternal war. . . . The enemy is at the gate." At the time, some of Be-

gin's Etzel comrades regarded the response as cowardly. Only much later, Shilon notes, did Begin receive due credit for it.

After becoming Prime Minister of Israel in 1977, Begin similarly defied accusations of cowardice from some of his associates. He had his own misgivings about paying a high territorial price for a peace treaty with Egypt, but he overcame them for the sake of what he considered to be the greater good. And no one accused him of cowardice when he

dared to order the attack on Iraq's nuclear reactor in 1981.

If Begin wasn't a coward, neither was he a warmonger. The war in Lebanon in 1982 was something that had been thrust upon him, and it broke him. As Shilon makes clear, Begin "knew that he had not led his government properly and that he had become embroiled in a war he did not desire, and he knew it was his responsibility. Furthermore, he knew that those around him

had witnessed his deterioration, yet none of them had dared say a word and actually had helped him to retire with dignity."

Shilon's comprehensive biography of one of the most important Zionists and leaders of the State of Israel elucidates the whole course of Begin's life, from his youth in Poland, when he was afflicted by a sense of powerlessness, to his performance in positions of power in the Jewish state. It helps us understand the greatness of the man, his very real and sometimes surprising achievements, and the factors that led to his demise. Shilon provides a clear picture of a leader whose steadfastness can serve as an example to all of us, even those who do not share every one of Menachem Begin's commitments.



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The Black-Hat Underground

By Yoel Finkelman

Aderaba—the title means “On the Contrary”—is in danger of closing. After four years of publication, the magazine by, for, and about frustrated Israeli *ba’alei teshuvah*, newcomers to Jewish Orthodoxy, can barely afford to continue. It has garnered neither a big enough subscription base nor the amount of advertising it would need to make ends meet, and editors were only able to put out the last issue after a long fundraising campaign.

That’s a shame, because *Aderaba* isn’t the typical *ba’al teshuvah* publication—the one that offers real or imagined proofs of the truths of Orthodox dogma or explains how much happier one will be as an observant Jew. Nor is it the typical rebellious Hasid story—the one that seem to appear regularly, occasionally even on the *New York Times* bestseller list, telling the story of a young haredi person who feels stifled by the conformity and groupthink and, after a few trips to bars or strip joints, painfully finds a new and more authentic life on the outside.

Instead, *Aderaba* is the work of people who look like, act like, and in many ways are ultra-Orthodox Jews, straight out of Bnei Brak. But they have had enough of the hypocrisy, discrimination, and poverty of haredi life. They want something more, something greater, something worth changing one’s life for, something that lives up to the promises they were given when they were in the process of becoming religiously observant. It is a magazine for haredi non-conformists struggling, fighting, groping, kvetching, thinking, and crying toward something else, something just as pious as the life of the strictest haredim, but rid of the social pressure to look and act just like everyone else. *Aderaba*’s audience is made up of people who want to escape the stigma attached to those who were not born into the haredi community and who don’t believe that working for a living necessarily makes a man into a second-class citizen.

The magazine focuses in part on criticism of the negative features of haredi culture: discrimination against *ba’alei teshuvah* in general, and Sephardic ones in particular; “extra stringencies” in Jewish law for which people pay a price in personal happiness or economic well-being; power politics that re-

places piety in haredi institutions; haredim-by-birth who don’t appreciate the positive baggage—the talents, knowledge and perspectives—that the newly Orthodox bring with them from the outside. It also presents critiques of the secular way of life.

Most of all, however, the magazine offers



something new, positive, and constructive, something unavailable in other venues. Several of its contributors have reflected on how Israel’s largely secular social protest movement of the summer of 2011 has challenged the haredi community to do more on behalf of the country as a whole and to rethink its approach to economic equality and social justice. One issue contains an interview with a prize-winning secular architect who suggests ways in which synagogue space could be shaped to make prayer more inspiring and school buildings could be constructed to encourage young people to feel a sense of belonging within the educational community. Combining Zionism’s long-standing stress on the importance of manual labor with an Orthodox enthusiasm for mitzvah observance, one writer describes a newly Orthodox carpenter who teaches his haredi-from-birth neighbors to cut wood and construct their own sukkah, transforming the commandment into something more personal for people who never saw value in such “goyish” skills. A typical haredi publication wouldn’t dream of making room for a regular column of satire or humor; *Aderaba* includes one regularly. Short stories reflect on longing, love, passion, and wanderlust, just the kinds of themes that haredi fiction typically avoids.

In part, the magazine serves as a kind of literary support group for people struggling because they can’t find *shidduchim*—marriage partners—for their children, because they are not satisfied with the schools, or because their children are rebelling against the observant way of life. But in part the

magazine and its constituency are trying to rethink the question of what a pious, ultra-Orthodox community might look in the Jewish state. For these writers and readers, being a *ba’al teshuvah* is more than being a secular Jew who is now haredi, someone who may have job skills unattainable within the haredi educational system but whose past may, for that very reason, reveal an embarrassing and unremovable tattoo.

Being a *ba’al teshuvah* is an identity of its own, a combination of general culture and haredi Judaism that is more than the sum of its parts. Haredim-from-birth are too busy putting up walls and protecting themselves to appreciate the good and valuable aspects of modernity. Religious Zionists and modern Orthodox Jews in general are too comfortable, too confident that they know the right synthesis of tradition, modernity, and Zionism. *Ba’alei teshuvah*, at least the ones who write for *Aderaba*, see themselves as caught up in a more fluid and complex situation. They are uncomfortable and searching. Their quest is not a transitional stage between one clear identity and a later clear identity, but involves searching as a way of life. In their case, liminality is something positive and desirable in itself.

These people see their searching as something central to repairing the social and religious ills that plague modern Israel, not only within the narrow walls of the ultra-Orthodox community but within the country as a whole. “You have to understand,” says one contributor, “that *ba’alei teshuvah* are the future leaders of the state of Israel. They came from within the country and now they have the power of Torah and *mitzvot*. Today they are fragmented, but as soon as they get organized they will lead on every plane. . . . *Ba’alei teshuvah* are the elite of the State of Israel.” The same magazine in which these overconfident words appeared also published a piece of self-deprecating satire, in which the editor roams the haredi street looking, without success, for someone—anyone—who has read and wants to respond to the latest issue of *Aderaba*. Unfortunately, however, the magazine’s economic struggle is no joke. It demonstrates all too clearly that the community of creative *ba’alei teshuvah* is not yet big enough and has not built up enough momentum. The pushback from the mainstream haredi community and the suspicion of non-haredi Israelis are too great to overcome, at least at this stage. The black-hat underground is not yet ready to surface.

A Time Capsure

By Glenn Dynner

“Here you are, your tiny, little scraps of paper,” teased the YIVO archivist on duty as he set down yet another box of petitions (*kvittlekh*) addressed to the 19th-century miracle worker Rabbi Elijah Guttmacher. His skepticism about the crumpled petitions he had put before me was understandable. They certainly do not inspire as much awe as hoary Hebrew tomes or official Polish documents. But they provide something almost never found in such sources: windows into the struggles and secret anxieties of everyday Jews in Eastern Europe. Beginning in the 1860s, Jews from nearly every walk of life streamed towards Rabbi Guttmacher’s court in Gratz (Grodzisk Wielkopolski) to obtain his blessings, advice, and remedies. In the process, they told their stories.

Rabbi Guttmacher was an unlikely miracle worker. For one thing, he was not Hasidic. A prized disciple of the distinguished legal authority Rabbi Akiva Eiger of Poznan, Guttmacher held the official rabbinical post in Gratz. He was one of the first traditional rabbis to insist that Jews should not simply hope and pray that “suddenly the gates of mercy will open . . . and all will be called from their dwelling places,” but should actively engage in the settlement of Palestine. Rabbi Guttmacher even begged his thousands of supplicants to stop coming to him, going so far as to post a lengthy appeal to that effect in the Hebrew periodical *Hammaggid*. Yet Jews from Eastern Europe and beyond continued to treat him as if he were a renowned Hasidic *rebbe*.

The history of the Guttmacher collection itself is gripping. Around 1932, amateur ethnographers (*zamlers*) discovered over 6,000 of these Hebrew and Yiddish petitions in an attic in Gratz. Part of the collection made its way to Jerusalem, but the bulk of it was delivered to the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, at that time located in Vilna. In 1942, the collection did not escape the rapacious eyes of the Nazi Einsatzstab Rosenberg, and was spirited off to the Institute for Exploring the Jewish Question in Frankfurt, a perversely conceived museum for those in the future who might be curious to learn about the now-vanished Jewish people. In 1945, the U.S. Army stumbled upon the looted collection and returned it to YIVO, by then located in New York. From

that point on, the Guttmacher collection—a veritable East European Jewish time capsule—sat in New York City, where it has gone almost unnoticed.

These thousands of “tiny, little scraps of paper” illuminate nearly every facet of Jewish life in Eastern Europe. Candidly and poignantly, petitioners requested Rabbi Guttmacher’s heavenly intervention for ridding them of their diseases, demonic possessions, infertility, and sexual dysfunction; or they sought his counsel in conflicts with neighbors, domestic disputes, matchmaking and, above all, matters affecting their economic livelihood. Not surprisingly, most petitions convey distress. Yet they often defy our image of the shtetl as a site of dwindling opportunity and mass pauperization. Many petitioners found ways of making ends meet, whether through traditional pursuits like crafts, trade, and tavern-keeping or newly emergent industries. Others had lost vast sums of money through risky investments or loans—but they had been well-off, at least for a while.

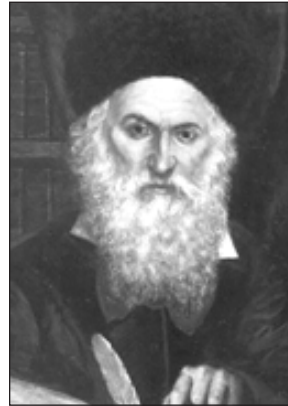
Traces of past prosperity pervade an anguished petition by an industrialist named Shmuel ben Gitl of Kalisz. Shmuel had once attained an “honorable livelihood that allowed him a free hour to devote to Torah and divine service.” He had not mispent his profits, but had “spread around much money and gold on behalf of his beloved son, who is currently living with him, to get him a private tutor (*melamed*). He gave him chests of money, respectable clothes, and wealth only in order to lead him on the path of Torah and knowledge and good deeds.” But despite everything he had lavished on his promising son, “the wheel of fortune reversed on me, God forbid, and I declined greatly, God forbid.” Shmuel had invested most of his fortune in a timber factory, even selling off many of his books, “and all the wine of my spirit was poured on this altar.” Alas, he was finally compelled to form a partnership that entitled him to merely one-sixth of the factory’s profit, and he had to borrow 400 rubles from his new partner “to sustain my household.”

Shmuel, it seems, was suffering from the ill effects of a modernization process that was having an impact on more and more Jews, particularly in larger towns like Ka-

lisz. Gradual industrialization created more opportunities but also more competition, some of it quite fierce. Shmuel complained that “a gentile, may his name be blotted out, has arisen and established a factory next to our town.” To make matters worse, the gentile had hired a Jewish agent who “pursues me” with the new factory’s profits (Shmuel didn’t specify how). In this newly cut-throat environment, ethnic solidarity seemed to be falling by the wayside.

It was not just a matter of supporting his household. Shmuel had a reputation to sustain: “I also need rubles every week to spread among the people who previously knew me,

who surround me and do not know my present condition . . . and also the Festivals are approaching, and I am accustomed to giving a lot of money.” Most distressingly of all, Shmuel’s children had reached marriageable ages: “The marriage rites are hanging around my neck, and I need to give a suitable dowry to make respectable matches according to my familial status with Torah



scholars (*talmide hakhamim*), especially Torah scholars with distinguished lineage (*yihus*.” Shmuel’s social status was in real peril.

We do not know how Shmuel or most of Guttmacher’s other petitioners fared. Some likely recovered, some were no doubt reduced to poverty, and some probably joined the growing exodus to America. But what we do know, beyond a doubt, is that these crumpled slips of paper can provide a wealth of information about the gritty realities of the evolving Jewish experience in Eastern Europe. cal Assembly, officially severing his ties with Orthodoxy. The following year he published his second book, *Banner of Jerusalem*, which is perhaps the first book-length study of the life and thought of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook to appear in English.

Agus spent most of his career (1950-1980) as the leader of a single synagogue, Congregation Beth-El in Baltimore (located since 1957 in the suburb of Pikesville). His constant involvement in the day-to-day operations of a large suburban synagogue-center did not prevent him from enjoying his most productive years as a scholar. In 1959, he published his *Evolution of Jewish Thought*, which covered the development of Judaism up to the onset of modernity. In 1963, he

published *The Meaning of Jewish History*, a two-volume interpretative study of the entirety of Jewish history featuring a laudatory preface by Salo Baron, the greatest Jewish historian of the time.

If *The Daily Beast* were to publish a list of the top 50 Judaica scholars in America today, it would include many whose publications would surpass those of Agus in sophistication. But unlike Agus, these men and wom-

en do not have the demanding responsibility of running a congregation. This might, on balance, result in scholarship's gain, but it is certainly the Jewish community's loss. At a time when the average American Jew was increasingly well-educated in secular matters but had little access to Jewish knowledge on a high plane, Agus and many congregational rabbis of his day not only contributed to scholarship but strove to bring some

of its riches to the educated layperson as well. The congregation-based scholars of yesteryear labored to make Judaism intellectually stimulating as well as emotionally stirring and politically applicable. Our need for rabbis like them is as great today as ever, but if the *Daily Beast's* list is any indication of how things now stand, they seem to be in short supply.

WEDNESDAY, MAY 8

Going Home

By Judah Bellin

In his new book *The Little Way of Ruthie Leming* (Grand Central Publishing), Rod Dreher, senior contributor to *The American Conservative*, tells a stirring story of family rupture and reconciliation. Dreher grew up in St. Francisville, a small town in Louisiana that was home to many generations of his ancestors. When he was a teenager, he saw the town as nothing but a provincial backwater and took the first opportunity to escape. His career in journalism led him to such cities as New York, Dallas, and Philadelphia. His sister Ruthie, on the other hand, was fiercely devoted to her hometown: she raised her children within walking distance of her parents' house, married her high-school boyfriend, and taught in a local elementary school.

But Ruthie also contracted lung cancer. When the people of St. Francisville learned of her diagnosis, they responded with an astounding outpouring of material and emotional support. They hosted a community-wide concert that sold hundreds of tickets and netted \$43,000. Neighbors accompanied Ruthie to chemotherapy and religious counseling sessions and, after she died, succored her grieving family with seemingly boundless food, alcohol, and recollections. As Ruthie's husband Mike told Dreher, "We're leaning, but we're leaning on each other."

Dreher attributes the large-scale displays of affection to his family's long-standing roots in the area. This recognition forces him to confront his own isolation. Indeed, he realizes that living in large cities has stripped him of a "sense of home and permanence" and finds himself drawn toward the insularity he spurned only a few decades earlier. Ruthie's illness teaches him

that "when suffering and death come for you—and it will—you want to be in a place where you know, and are known." He concludes he cannot find such a place in a major metropolitan area; and, after further deliberation, Dreher and his wife decide to relocate to St. Francisville.

Jewish readers who grew up in tight-knit communities will understand intuitively what Dreher was looking for. His adept descriptions of a community's small joys and frustrations will resonate deeply with them. However, many might be puzzled by Dreher's insistence that such communities are difficult to forge in America's largest cities. As American Jewish history indicates and recent survey data confirm, America's strongest Jewish communities are often located in large urban centers. Ironically, if most American Jews were to listen to Dreher and return to their roots, they would return to the very areas Dreher describes as inhospitable to true community.

This circumstance is attributable to the unique character of the American Jewish community, which, in the traditional model, requires abundant resources: synagogues, schools, kosher food, and federations. It is precisely the defining elements of large cities—their proximity to good employment opportunities, wealthy patrons and, most important, young people—that sustain them. However, the continued importance of large cities for Jewish life leads to an outcome that contradicts *The Little Way of Ruthie Leming's* core message. While reflecting on his decision to return home, Dreher laments that our individualistic culture encourages us to abandon our roots for the sake of our careers. For many traditional Jews whose roots lie in an expen-

sive suburb or city, though, the situation is exactly reversed. They feel that their return home is *conditional* on their attending the best schools and pursuing the most lucra-

tive careers (if only to obtain the means to pay for the day school education of a slew of children). From their perspective, career advancement is not a goal one sacrifices for the sake of the community but rather the community's price of admission. This is not to say, of course, that Judaism does not pose obstacles to engaging in certain professions. Insofar as traditional Jews are concerned, howev-

er, the demands of modern capitalism and community are not as incommensurate as Dreher assumes.

One wonders what Dreher would make of the vibrant, tight-knit life of some of the Jewish sub-communities in our major cities. Indeed, this question points to a tension within *The Little Way of Ruthie Leming*. On the one hand, Dreher seems to make the modest argument that tight-knit community is a blessing, no matter its particular form. On the other hand, he clearly idealizes small towns, viewing them as an antidote to the "deracinating effects of late capitalism" and "the erosion of localist consciousness" that our cities symbolize. One is never quite sure which message takes precedence.

It is clear, however, that the second message should ring false for American Jews. Their experience shows that the size of one's town does not necessarily bear any relationship to the intimacy of one's community. The philosopher Edmund Burke put it best when he described the many communities that constitute civil society as "little platoons." Indeed, platoons are not bound to place and must adapt to their



new surroundings; moreover, they maintain their integrity only by adhering to core principles. Burke's term does not necessarily fit with Dreher's notion of community, which assigns great importance to specific geographic space. However, it aptly describes many Jewish communities here and abroad whose tightly drawn boundaries allow for robust communal ties despite large, anonymous, and often protean surroundings.

It would thus make no sense for American Jews to participate in the great American tradition of romanticizing small towns, a ritual that rests on the faulty premise that real communities can only exist outside our bustling cities. The American Jewish experience does not accord with this trope; and to the extent that Dreher draws upon it, *The Little Way of Ruthie Leming* is not particularly instructive. To be sure, though, Dreher

does not presume that everyone would benefit from living in small towns like St. Francisville; by his own account, his is a deeply personal story. Moreover, one is still well-advised to delve into his book for its smart and sensitive meditations on familial reconciliation. One simply wishes that Dreher had given a similarly thorough treatment to the nature of community.

THURSDAY, MAY 2

High Concept in Dialogue With Tradition

By Diane Cole

Even the richest Judaica exhibitions can run the risk of seeming either repetitive (one display case after another stuffed with, say, menorahs) or, alas, just plain baffling to viewers, Jewish or not, who are unfamiliar with Jewish tradition.

But the traditional objects and artifacts of Jewish cultural history have never looked so freshly inviting or unexpectedly contemporary as in the provocative new exhibition at The Jewish Museum in New York titled, "As it were . . . So to speak: A Museum Collection in Dialogue with Barbara Bloom."

The exhibition, which runs through August 4, employs a high-concept perspective that combines visual wit with a sense of wonder at the beauty of the ritual objects whose meaning and use today may be obscure to non-Jews as well as many secular Jews—like artist Barbara Bloom herself. It's a blend that instructs as well as entertains and respects history while making the old seem brand-new again.

Admittedly lacking in any Jewish education or knowledge of tradition, conceptual artist Barbara Bloom, born in 1951, may at first seem an unlikely—or at least counter-intuitive—person for the Jewish Museum to have invited to create an installation using selections from the 25,000 ceremonial, decorative, and fine art works in its collection. But if the Jewish Museum wanted a fresh set of eyes to look at the collection, they found one. Of the 276 objects displayed, 80 to 90 percent are objects that Jewish Museum curator Susan L. Braunstein, who coordinated the exhibition with Bloom, cannot recall ever having been on exhibit before.

Bloom's artistic sensibility and free-ranging curiosity are as much on display as the collection itself as she engages "in dialogue" with it, just as the show's title promises. Indeed, dialogue is Bloom's central metaphor, and she both employs and plays with the idea of conversation at several levels. You're greeted at the entrance to the exhibition with a whispered hum of voices, recorded snippets of overlapping conversations fading in and out of decipherability—just the kind of ambient noise you'd expect at a party. But the party Bloom asks you to imagine is populated by guests—and historical objects—that have been artfully gathered here as if for a lively, discussion-filled soiree that has been

taking place over decades, centuries, and millennia, and is continuing right here in front of you. It's a flight of fancy, to be sure, but it's also grounded in the fact that these distinctively Gothic, high-beamed, ornately paneled rooms are part of the historic Warburg family mansion, dating to the early 20th century, that houses the Jewish Museum and once upon a time actually served as the site of frequent gatherings hosted by the Warburgs.

Enter the rooms, and you're struck by displays of objects notable not only for their intrinsic beauty or historic interest but also because they are presented in an arresting new way. An array of spice boxes is seen in silhouette, behind a translucent scrim that seems to emphasize their ceremonial use in separating the end of the Sabbath from the rest of the week. Teeny-tiny thumbnail-sized miniature Bibles from the 19th century, with print so small they must be read with a magnifying glass, are placed inside hollowed-out books that make up part of the shelves of a re-

imagined Warburg library. Twelve different cups used for a variety of Jewish ceremonial purposes, from eras and locales ranging from the Eastern Mediterranean of the 1st century C.E. and 19th-century Bohemia to everyday commercial glassware used today at the Jewish Museum café, sit at table places around a circular dining room table in what was once the Warburg's dining room; all that's wanting is people to take their seats and toast one another.

Still, beneath (and alongside) the party-like façade runs a serious commentary on the succeeding epochs of Jewish history. Bloom may not be a student of the Talmud, but she pays tribute to that essential Jewish text and



at the same time riffs on it in two ways. First, she sees a model for her own juxtapositions of objects from different eras in the layout of a typical page of Talmud, in which the main text, dating from the first centuries of the Common Era, sits in the center and is surrounded in the margins on all sides by commentaries composed in later centuries. In Bloom's design equivalent, each

room features highly stylized furniture hollowed out or rejiggered to double as display cases.

Second, Bloom devises a Talmud-like commentary of her own by providing abundant texts throughout the exhibition. These include excerpts from works by a multitude of scholars, authors, artists, poets, scientists, philosophers, and rabbis from across the globe and centuries, as well as by Bloom herself—all placed adjacent to one another and forming another way in which she furthers her idea of a continuous and ongoing dialogue among past, present, and future. In addition, in a modern touch (and reference

to Jonathan Rosen's book *The Talmud and the Internet: A Journey Between Worlds*, there is even a special computer display of a website produced to explore that metaphor.

Most of all, contrasts of old objects in new and unexpected settings are the order of the day throughout the installation. My favorite is the baby grand piano whose interior strings, wires, and hammers have been replaced by a dazzling array of dozens of glistening silver Torah pointers, used to keep one's place in reading the scrolls. These elegantly slim rods (the Hebrew term is "yad," which means hand) of differing lengths almost always feature a thumb and pointing forefinger; so, what better way to demonstrate a new use than to aim several of these pointers at different keys on the keyboard? Follow the pointing

finger to the specific keys that are depressed and you'll discover the intertwined chords of pieces by two renowned Jewish composers of completely different genres: George Gershwin and Arnold Schoenberg, both of whose music is open on the piano.

Other examples include a vaguely Art Nouveau construction of a conjoined sofa and couch designed to suggest patient and analyst and hollowed out to illuminate Freudian artifacts (including Freud's actual cigar box); a display of amulets and a conjuring bowl in front of a mirror and make-up table; a marital bed whose headboard is crowned with an illuminated ritual wedding contract, a ketubah, but flanked with two examples of an official rabbinic divorce decree, or "get"; and a card table replete with ancient

playing stones, as well as "The Game for the Dreyfus Affair and Truth," reproduced from an actual 1898 game.

Some of Bloom's conceits do not work so successfully. For instance, at the doorway to each room Bloom has positioned portrait paintings from the collection that are entirely covered except for the subject's eyes, as if to suggest the presence of others following you through the exhibition. They merely made me curious about the rest of the painting that was concealed—her intention, perhaps, but to me a distraction.

But the main point is that the museum took a risk here, and it has paid off. "As it were . . . so to speak" invites you to talk about it even as you take it in.