

Jewish Ideas Weekly

Special Edition

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Over the last two weeks, Jewish Ideas Daily has republished some of its highlights from the last three-and-a-half years. Here, we consolidate them into one retrospective. For more Jewish thought, please join us in our new venture, Mosaic, which launches Monday, June 3 at www.mosaicmagazine.com.

—The Editors

MONDAY, MAY 20

(Originally published May 14, 2012)

The Moral Costs of a Jewish Day School

By Aryeh Klapper

There is a lot of hand-wringing these days about whether the rising costs of Jewish day schools are sustainable. The discussion has been about money: How can we get more? How can we spend less? These questions miss the point: The largest costs of high day school tuition are not financial but moral, and the key to solving the financial dilemma is to address the moral problem.

What are the moral costs? Imagine that someone proposes a new Jewish practice that would have these consequences:

- Parents take second jobs, or work longer hours, that deprive them of almost all weekday contact with their children and leave them too exhausted to make Shabbat meaningful.
- Almost half of households are transformed, for years, from community contributors to charity recipients.
- Children aspiring to intellectual, creative, or service work, such as teaching (especially Torah) or other helping professions, are told that these are not options because they will not produce enough money to sustain a committed Jewish lifestyle.
- For economic reasons, families choose to have fewer children.

We would consider such a practice stunningly irresponsible. Yet these are real-life consequences of current day school tuition, even as the community seems committed to making day school education a requirement of serious Jewish child-rearing. How can we live with these consequences?

Furthermore, parents receiving day school financial aid have no guarantee, and often no idea, of how they will be affected by tuition hikes or whether the school will take account of a job loss, a new baby, a car's breakdown—or, on the other hand, a gift from a parent or extra income from a second job. They cannot make future plans; they are chronically dependent on other people's decisions. They are deprived of economic dignity. Indeed, financial aid applications require families to state their expenses in often-humiliating detail. They know a committee will sit in judgment of their priorities. A family that eats pasta all month so it can go to a movie risks an aid cut because it spends on entertainment. A family that uses an inheritance to visit yet-unseen relatives in Israel risks a cut because it can afford travel.

The price of poverty is often loss of privacy. This is an evil, which we should minimize. But the current system maximizes intrusions on privacy by forcing people who make five times the median income to apply for charity. Because the maximum tuition is unaffordable even for many families earning over \$200,000 per year, they are forced into a financial aid system that requires complete financial disclosure.

The system also undermines the schools' Jewish effectiveness. If our children lack Jewish passion, doesn't that bespeak parental exhaustion? If they are materialistic, isn't this related to their being told that their career paths are limited because they are poor? When they show signs of being "at risk," doesn't this reflect lessened parental involvement? How can chil-

dren internalize the core Jewish value of human dignity and the spiritual value of financial independence when their schools make them dependent?

Should we therefore undo our commitment—admittedly unprecedented in Jewish history, and inconceivable in a less wealthy community—to broad-based day school education? This is not necessary. We can address the moral issues and, in doing so, the financial issues as well.

The Solomon Schechter School of Greater Boston has proposed a version of a model with great potential. In very simplified form, here is how it might work: Tuition is set as either a fixed percentage of income—say, 15 percent, with small adjustments for the number of children in the school—or a relatively high set amount per student, which high-income families can use if they wish to pay a lower percentage of their income. Families unable to pay even the 15 percent could,



as now, apply for financial aid.

This model corrects many of the current system's moral deficiencies:

- It makes the tuition-setting process transparent and predictable.
- It moves many middle-class families off the rolls of those receiving financial aid.
- It defines day school education as a public good to be communally supported instead of an individual good, privately purchased.
- It makes clear that the rich, even when they pay the maximum tuition, are assessed a lower percentage of their income than the middle class.

There are, of course, gaps and imperfections. The new system does not (yet) address families with children in multiple schools or

questions of what costs should and should not be included in tuition. It also excludes, consciously, family assets. Yes, this exclusion could allow families to “cheat” by hiding their true financial capacity; but counting all assets would provide a disincentive to saving—and, equally important, would have critical implications for privacy and dignity.

No system is without drawbacks, but the proposed system’s moral advantages are significant.

Still, let’s be practical: The model will and should be required to pass the budget test. It should provide our schools with revenues at least equal to those of the present system. In fact, the new model would meet or exceed the test, if only because the percentage of income required as tuition can be set so as to produce approximately the revenues that schools receive now.

But the new system would have further budget advantages. Under the current sys-

tem, schools operate under deeply flawed ideas about their revenues and their communities’ financial capacities. They have arbitrary “financial aid budgets” for what they consider tuition “subsidies”; they turn down students when these budgets are “spent” and they can no longer “afford” to take students paying less than full tuition. In fact, however, any student who pays a significant portion of gross family income will be contributing significantly more than the marginal cost of his or her education. In rejecting such students, schools forego revenues and profits. Moreover, notes Dan Perla of the AviChai Foundation, if a school sets tuition as a percentage of income during a recession, when costs rise faster than wages, it will realize rising revenues from the same percentage of income when times improve.

In addition, it is wholly reasonable to expect that the new system would change behavior. Families who do not consider day

school under the current system, because of uncertainties or privacy concerns, may well consider it when they know how tuition payments will relate to their income and are required to submit only the first page of their income tax returns. Families with many children will be more likely to send them to day schools; indeed, such families may grow larger over time. Wealthier and even middle-class families, who will no longer see their tuition payments as subsidizing their neighbors, may be more likely to donate. Families without children in the schools may also be more willing to donate if day school costs are presented as a communal obligation, not a commodity for purchase.

This new model requires elaboration and customization, but it can redirect the community’s conversation and efforts toward a model of day school financing that is both financially and morally sustainable.

TUESDAY, MAY 21

(Originally published June 13, 2011)

Anti-Semitism and Man at Yale

By Alex Joffe

The modern university is no longer made up simply of departments and regular professors teaching students. Ancillary centers, programs, and initiatives proliferate, undertaking research on every conceivable topic and, in exchange for use of the university’s name, bringing in prestige, money, and the occasional celebrity. The fates of such entities rarely make the *New York Post*. But anti-Semitism is not a normal subject.

Just how abnormal a subject it is, and how volatile its study can be, has come to public attention with Yale University’s termination of the Yale Initiative for the Interdisciplinary Study of Antisemitism (YIISA) after five years of successful operation. Led by the sociologist Charles Small, YIISA was the largest research unit in North America devoted to examining an issue of great antiquity and urgent contemporary significance. Its mission was defined clearly: “to explore this subject matter in a comprehensive, interdisciplinary framework from an array of approaches and perspectives as well as regional contexts.”

Pursuant to that mission, YIISA annually

assembled groups of scholars for seminars and conferences and published a series of studies. The scholars attached to the initiative included such figures as David Hirsh of Goldsmiths College in London, Irwin Cotler, the former Canadian attorney general, and Bassam Tibi, professor emeritus of international relations at the University of Goettingen. Dozens of other well-credentialed academics participated in YIISA seminars, with interns, graduate fellows, and Yale faculty members helping to realize the enterprise’s promise of becoming a “vibrant space” for scholarship, discussion, and debate.

But “initiatives” are fragile things, and this one, evidently, initiated more than its host had bargained for. At a 2010 conference titled “Global Antisemitism: A Crisis of Modernity,” experts from around the world gathered to deliberate the most dangerous global form of contemporary anti-Semitism, namely, the Muslim variety. Dangerous in more ways than one: the event’s discussions provoked the ire of some Yale faculty and students, as well as representatives of the official Muslim world; the ire evidently caused institutional discomfi-

ture; and YIISA’s fate was sealed.

No doubt other considerations went into Yale’s decision to shut down this enterprise; it is difficult to know for sure. But the finality of the move, and the evasive rationales advanced for it, suggest a desire to dodge



the issue. After all, universities rarely admit mistakes and even more rarely correct them. More typical are bureaucratic fixes: downgrading “programs” to “projects,” moving units to smaller office spaces (the academic equivalent of Siberia), or, in truly bad situations, replacing leaders and putting units in receivership. Why pull the plug so completely?

In the event, Yale’s stated reasons for terminating YIISA omit any mention of the 2010 conference or its subject matter. The university’s director of strategic communications, according to Abby Wisse Schachter who broke the story in the *New York Post*, asserted that the decision was made on the basis of YIISA’s failure to “serve the research and teaching interests of some significant Yale faculty and . . . [to] be sustained by the creative energy of a critical mass of Yale faculty.” Unspecified were the interests that were not being served or

sustained, let alone the nature of the alleged failure.

To counter criticism of its action, Yale dribbled out a few additional statements. To Donald Green, the director of the institute where YIISA was housed, the problem lay both in YIISA's professional standards and in its non-popularity: "Little scholarly work appeared in top-tier journals in behavioral science, comparative politics, or history. Courses created in this area did not attract large numbers of students."

It may indeed be that course enrollments were low, but so are enrollments in any number of areas that universities deem worthy of study. In any case, such numbers are of little relevance to an entity like YIISA, which was by definition a research and not a teaching unit, and which held numerous events attracting public attention and open to the entire Yale community.

As far as publications are concerned, YIISA, just like similar centers and programs at Yale, published its own highly regarded monograph series that made its scholars' work freely available for download. Since when is the wide dissemination of scholarly products no longer an important academic goal? Nor is Yale known for applying the "top-tier" criterion across the board. The Yale Center for the Study of Globalization, for example, is a center-Left policy group currently directed by the former Mexican president Ernesto Zedillo. It attracts wealthy and powerful speakers, some of whom are or may become Yale donors, and releases its reports and findings not in so-called "top-tier journals" but in various house-branded forms. It is hardly unique in this.

But the pious invocation of "top-tier" academic journals with their hoary review processes is itself specious. Offering a comparison with YIISA's record in this respect, Green touted the "extraordinary number" of articles in such journals produced by yet another Yale research "initiative." This is the Field Experiments Initiative, dedicated to "randomized studies of voter mobilization, peer counseling of homeless people, campaign activities in Africa, and the persuasiveness of televised campaign advertisements." The fact that the jargon-laden

study of campaign advertisements yields more placements in academic journals than do analyses of anti-Semitism speaks dreary volumes about the gatekeepers of so much of contemporary scholarship, about the subjects they consider respectable, and about the standards of judgment they apply.

And here we return to the unspoken nub of the matter. At its 2010 conference, YIISA dared to tackle, openly, the single deadliest form of contemporary anti-Semitism, bringing together for this purpose a bevy of "top-tier" scholars from around the world. It was, clearly, the very holding of such an event that raised hackles from within and without. One response came from Maen Rashid Areikat, the Washington representative of the Palestine Liberation Organization: "It's shocking that a respected institution like Yale would give a platform to these right-wing extremists and their odious views. . . . I urge you to publicly dissociate yourself and Yale University from the anti-Arab extremism and hate-mongering that were on display during this conference."

This, from an operative of a group whose very name is soaked with the blood of murdered Jews and whose doctrines have poisoned the minds and disfigured the passions of whole generations, including in centers of elite Western opinion. Asked about the possible influence of responses like Areikat's in its decision to terminate YIISA, a Yale spokesman huffed that the university "doesn't make decisions about individual programs . . . based on outside criticism." Maybe so. But it would be naïve to suppose that Yale is anything less than supersensitive to its institutional self-interest in a part of the world whose favor it may wish to court—and the all too palpable consequences of whose wrath it seeks to avoid.

It is well known, for instance, that Yale has long been seeking support from wealthy Arab donors. In particular, it has wooed Saudi Prince Alwaleed ibn Talal, who in 2005 gave \$20 million apiece to Harvard and Georgetown for Islamic-studies programs. (Yale, which competed vigorously for the prize, made it to the final round.) True to their donors' intent, such academic programs are faithful disseminators of the "narrative" of Muslim victimization. In

the same connection, it should likewise be borne in mind that in 2009, alerted to the imminent publication by its own press of a scholarly book on the Danish-cartoons controversy, the Yale administration summarily intervened to yank images of the cartoons from the final product—on the grounds that their appearance might elicit "violence."

That craven decision was made, allegedly, on the advice of experts gathered for the task, a number of them on the Yale faculty. The same or similar experts, one imagines, now constitute the unnamed "critical mass" whose "research and teaching interests" YIISA is condemned for having failed to serve. Among them, no doubt, are Flynt and Hillary Mann Leverett, formerly of the State Department and National Security Council and now senior fellows of Yale's Jackson Institute for Global Affairs. The Leveretts, strong defenders of the Iranian (and Syrian) regimes, famously charged the George W. Bush administration with ignoring crucial opportunities to negotiate with the mullahs of Tehran, and have criticized the Obama administration on the same grounds. In 2009, Hillary Mann Leverett took her graduate students to New York to meet with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at the United Nations; reportedly, he enlightened them on the absence of proof for the Holocaust.

There is no need to impute a conspiracy here; it suffices to recognize a confluence of factors—and a mindset. Exactly 60 years ago, the young William F. Buckley, Jr., in *God and Man at Yale*, published a withering critique of, in the words of a recent appraisal, "the intolerance of the academy toward unfashionable concepts, . . . the stultifying effects of elitist groupthink on thought, and . . . the failure of the university to engage a wide range of ideas fairly and in simple good faith." At the time, the particular issue salient in Buckley's mind was the academy's refusal to engage the subject of God and man. Today, it is the refusal to engage the global campaign to defame, de-legitimate, and demonize the Jewish people. As the fact of anti-Semitism grows, including on some North American campuses, one large, serious academic effort to study anti-Semitism has been shut down.

(Originally published October 18, 2010)

Good Girl Gone Bad

By Margot Lurie

Fifty-five years ago, a star was born: plucky, lucky Marjorie Morningstar, the “American Everygirl who happens to be Jewish.” At least, that’s how *Time* described her. Today, depending on whom you ask, Herman Wouk’s 1955 novel, *Marjorie Morningstar*, is either the story of the romantic awakening of a blue-eyed Jewish beauty or a cautionary tale about what happens when you stray too far from your origins.

Born Marjorie Morgenstern in 1916 (a year after the birth of her creator), our heroine appears to us first as an undergraduate at Hunter College in New York, dreaming of becoming an actress and striving to rid herself of every mitzvah and mannerism that comprised her identity. She Anglicizes her Semitic surname, dabbles in sex, and engages in the years-long pursuit of a dilettantish stage director—all without success. In the end, never having seen her stage name on a marquee, she settles for settling down with a steady husband, children, and a return to religious observance.

The failure of Marjorie’s artistic ambitions was Wouk’s wild success. The novelist had already had a bestseller in *The Caine Mutiny* (1952), but *Marjorie* was a phenomenon, selling more copies than any American novel since *Gone with the Wind* and continuing to sell to this day. This is not attributable to Wouk’s artistry. A prime example of the literary category that the critic Pearl K. Bell dubbed the “good bad book,” the novel is witty and memorable to a fault—and also solidly middlebrow, clumsily written, and twice as long as it should be. In prose simultaneously flat and overwritten, the characters announce their emotions like restaurant orders, and symbols are dropped into the text like cartoon anvils. In the first twenty pages, Marjorie is thrown by a horse named Prince Charming. Pursuing her free spirit—first cigarettes, alcohol, and bad company, then

shellfish, pork, and sex—she falls in love with a *luftmentsch* named Airman. After the two consummate their love, she gropes on the night table for cigarettes and accidentally breaks a glass—the traditional conclusion to a Jewish wedding. “Shock, shock, and it was over” is Wouk’s description of the quite literal anticlimax: Marjorie’s Recline and Fall.

The columnist Florence King once observed that in college in the 1950s, her “Wasp sorority sisters” identified so strongly with this Jewish heroine that they “even made the connection between loosening sexual standards and loosening kosher standards.” The sisters were on to something. Wouk became Orthodox in his mid-twenties; four years after *Marjorie*, he published *This Is My God*, an “account of the Jewish faith” that has enjoyed a similarly long shelf life. And critics at the time did spot Wouk the religious apologist peeking out from the wings. Reviewing *Marjorie*, Norman Podhoretz accused the author of dishonesty: “the kind of Judaism which involves dietary laws and certain other observances is in a crisis—and not simply because the Noel Airmans of this world jeer at them.”

More generally, and also from the start, Marjorie’s story has been read in a political light. The book is conservative, it is said, not just because the Bronx striver ends up as Mrs. Milton Schwartz of the Suburbs but because Wouk is intent on showing that having been Noel Airman’s girl in Greenwich Village wasn’t really so great to begin with. As lobster is a let-down, so is sex, so is liberation. Responding in the *Nation* to a glowing cover story on Wouk in *Time*, Maxwell Geismar condemned an age, “the Age of Wouk,” characterized by “the impulse of revolt, but not the act; just as Marjorie . . . must first rebel against her environment in order properly to conform to it.”

True, but not the whole truth. Wouk asserts that Marjorie’s best joys reside in tame,

kosher amusements: watching a sunset, dancing, reading scripts. But it’s as if he can’t bear to prove the point. If forbidden food and forbidden sex and trashy theater are rigged and unfair and no damn fun, why does his heroine keep coming back for more and more of them? By choosing Morality over Marjorie while indulging Marjorie over Morality, Wouk creates a character, call her a puritanical sybarite, much more intriguing than he may have intended.

And there’s something else. Marjorie is not the only striver in the book—her ambitions are set against a backdrop of aspiring immigrant life. (Among its other faults, the 1958 movie adaptation of the novel dispenses with all of this.) Marjorie’s orphaned father became, at fifteen, “a fleck of foam on the great wave of immigration from Eastern Europe,” working himself up in the

millinery business. At Marjorie’s age, her mother was a Yiddish-speaking immigrant in a Brooklyn sweatshop. Her Falstaffian uncle worked as a night watchman and a dish washer. “But a nickel, Modgerie, a nickel I always had, to buy you a Hershey bar ven I came to this house.”

In *This Is My God*, Wouk writes that “even the enemies of the Jews have long recognized the stability of the Jewish family.” Marjorie’s parents fought hard for that stability, and were able to give their children better educations and material provisions than they had enjoyed: good, safe, assimilated, working-class lives that became middle-class lives. Marjorie’s children in turn will have led upper-middle-class lives. Much can be said about what was gained and what was lost along the way, for the boys and the girls alike; but by whose perspective is this a tragedy?

So spare a thought for plucky, unlucky Marjorie on her fifty-fifth. Anna Karenina and Jane Eyre and Lady Macbeth and Catherine Earnshaw are for humanity, and for the ages. Marjorie is just for us girls.



(Originally published February 17, 2011)

The Riddle of the Satmar

By Allan Nadler

A prospect terrifying to secular Israelis and Zionists worldwide has been the rapid

growth of the Jewish state’s ultra-Orthodox (*haredi*) community. Given the stranglehold of *haredi* political parties on recent coalition governments, and the encroachments by non-Zionist *haredi* clerics upon Israel’s chief rabbinate, once religiously moderate and firmly Zionist, the fear is not entirely irrational. Birthrates among *haredim* are

more than quadruple the national Jewish average; the large majority do not serve in the army; the male unemployment rate is at an astounding 70 percent; and the ultra-Orthodox community subsists largely on a variety of government welfare programs and Jewish aid from abroad.

A great historical irony lurks in this sce-

nario of an emerging theocracy in the land of Israel. It could all have been avoided had the leading *haredi* figures, during the country's nascent years, heeded the strong admonitions of the most virulently outspoken anti-Zionist rabbi who ever lived. This was Joel Moshe Teitelbaum (1887–1979), the “Satmar” rebbe. Born into a hasidic dynasty, Teitelbaum served in and around the Hungarian (later Romanian) town of Satmar until World War II, when he was rescued from death in the Holocaust. After a brief postwar sojourn in Jerusalem, he settled for good in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, later establishing Kiryas Joel, a Satmar town named for him, in New York's Orange County. From the start, he would have absolutely no relations, political or financial, with the Jewish state, prayed daily for its demise, and instructed his adoring followers to do likewise.

A massive new biography of the rebbe—privately published in Montreal, and the first of its kind in English—has now appeared. Composed by Rabbi Dovid Meisels, the son of one of Teitelbaum's closest Hasidim, it devotes close attention to the rebbe's railings against a state that he regarded as the illegitimate product of a heretical, indeed a satanic, ideology—an ideology responsible for the greatest catastrophes in modern Jewish history, including the Holocaust itself. As a consequence of his extreme position, and in sharp contrast to just about every other *haredi* leader, he not only issued strict sanctions against accepting a single shekel of Israeli state support but strongly discouraged all but his most intellectually gifted followers from lingering in yeshivas, insisting instead that every male Satmar householder enter the workplace. To this day, unlike most other *haredim* in both the United States and Israel, Satmar Hasidim show low rates of unemployment.

Meisels's book is anything but an objective historical biography; nor does it provide any critical or systematic treatment of the complex and deeply counterintuitive religious philosophy found in Teitelbaum's many published works. Rather, it is a worshipful hagiography that mainly comprises hundreds of revealing stories about the rebbe, hitherto available only in a handful of Satmar-published Hebrew and Yiddish texts.



While readers may easily take issue with the panegyric tone and particular take on some of the rebbe's most controversial opinions and deeds, the book does not, so far as I can tell, fabricate historical facts from whole cloth. The interpretation of those facts is, of course, a different matter.

Teitelbaum was, indeed, the world's most outspoken, steadfast, and uncompromising rabbinical opponent of Zionism and the state of Israel. Zionism's many successes, and most dramatically Israel's seemingly miraculous military victories and its integration of millions of Jewish refugees from around the world not only failed to shake his convictions; quite the contrary, he interpreted them as the most diabolical tests of the faith of truly pious and believing Jews. Among his most controversial (and, even in the *haredi* world, most widely ignored) rulings was a 1967 prohibition against visiting, let alone praying at, Jerusalem's newly liberated Western Wall. Curses, not blessings, were all that could be incurred by treading on ground contaminated by the evil Zionist army.

What explains the rebbe's astonishing stubbornness and the theological creativity, grounded in a vast erudition in rabbinic literature, on which it rested? Until now, scholars of Hasidism have based our assessments of Teitelbaum's extremism mainly on his own impressive, if more than a little mad, writings. To experts as well as to curious outsiders, the great value of Meisels's volume will surely be its surprising disclosure of many aspects of the rebbe's personality and psyche that shed a different kind of light on his evident inability to adapt to discomfiting realities and accept the magnitude and multitude of blessings bequeathed to world Jewry by the state of Israel.

Some of the details are quite intimate. Early on in *The Rebbe*, Meisels relates tales of Teitelbaum's early childhood—standard procedure in the literature about hasidic *tsadikim*, or saintly persons destined to become rebbes. Here, however, one finds bizarre accounts of three-year-old Joel Teitelbaum repeatedly engaged for long periods of time in rinsing his mouth, washing his hands, and sitting on the toilet, often interrupting his own prayers to return to the outhouse. The explanation offered for this behavior,

which was a source of great concern to his mother, is that the saintly child could not appear before his Creator in prayer without having completely purified his holy body of all forms of uncleanness.

Needless to say, a very different, clinical explanation jumps out from these narratives of childhood fixation: namely, that they testify to an extreme, textbook case of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). The refusal even to touch Israeli currency can be adduced as another example of the same psychological disorder, as, still more weirdly, can Teitelbaum's unusual interest in the density of the fabric (the technical term is denier count) of the stockings worn by women in the Satmar community.

In Meisels's words, “The rebbe taught that even 70-denier stockings should not be worn. The numerical value of *sod* (secret) is 70, so the secret is out that this [stocking] is also transparent.” There then follows a lengthy account of Teitelbaum's creation, with the help of a Brooklyn businessman named Lipa Brach, of an exclusive line of fully opaque women's hosiery:

Money in hand, Reb Lipa Brach began to work on the project. He went to several hosiery manufacturers, collected samples, and brought all of them to the rebbe to inspect. The rebbe was very pleased with the progress, and he tested each sample by pulling it over his own arm. If his hair showed, it was no good.... The new stockings were given the brand name, “Palm,” the English translation of the Rebbe's surname.... To this day every Satmar woman and girl wears Palm stockings.

In many years of reading hasidic literature, from theoretical mystical tracts to tales and hagiographies, I have never encountered anything remotely like this image of a rebbe testing the thickness of stockings on his own arm, let alone naming a line of women's undergarments after himself. Was he aware of what he was doing? Most people who suffer from OCD are highly conscious of their disorder; a revered religious leader, zealously guarded by a closed circle of worshipful acolytes, would be more likely to mistake psychiatric symptoms as messages from God.

But that is not the whole story. If the rebbe was obsessive, he could also be startlingly inconsistent. Punctilious in forbidding his followers to benefit from any form of Zionist assistance, he seemed to have made an ex-

ception when it came to saving his own holy skin, accepting a seat on a controversial rescue train organized by the Hungarian Zionist leader Rudolf Kasztner that saved some 1,650 Jews from sure death in the Holocaust. Immediately after the war, he also accepted a certificate for immigration to Palestine, having earlier forbidden his followers to avail themselves of just such certificates in the harrowing years leading up to the Nazi conquest of Hungary.

The chapter dealing with this episode is by far the most convoluted in Meisels's book. It concludes with an apologetic explanation according to which Kasztner's father-in-law, the head of the despised Neolog (Reform) community of Koloszvar, had a dream: his pious mother decreed that the train to Switzerland then being organized by her grandson not be allowed to depart without the Satmar rebbe. A particularly chilling passage follows: "When someone remarked about how the rebbe had been saved from the claws of the Nazis, from darkness to great light, the rebbe replied, 'No! I have come from the Nazi darkness into the even deeper darkness of the Zionist era.'"

Other episodes are not so much inconsistent as deeply paradoxical. More than any other rabbi of the postwar period, Teitelbaum clung to the Hungarian Orthodox principle of total separation from the non-Orthodox in communal affairs. Taking this separatist ideology to unheard-of extremes, he managed almost single-handedly to build

a formidable and completely self-sufficient community in Williamsburg, starting with a few dozen survivors in 1947 and today numbering almost 150,000 souls worldwide. With its growth fueled not only by the rebbe's dynamic and domineering personality but by an astonishingly high birthrate, a strict work ethic for men, and an array of communal institutions, it is today the largest Hasidic sect in the world.

And yet, despite their isolation from mainstream Jewish communities, and their unchanged contempt for the Jewish state, the Satmars' spiritual relationship with other Jews remains strong. As I can attest from personal experience, a stranger wandering into a Satmar synagogue on a Friday evening will have to tear himself away from the many Hasidim insisting that he dine or spend the night and the following day with their families. Moreover, during all of Israel's wars, while praying for the downfall and defeat of the Jewish state, the rebbe simultaneously ordered his Hasidim to recite Psalms imploring God that no Jews be killed in battle. As chilling as is the Satmars' hatred of Zionists as a group, so warm is their embrace of Jews as individuals.

The sinuosity of Teitelbaum's distinction between the "Zionist state" and the Jewish people is perhaps best illustrated by a fascinating account in *The Rebbe* of a meeting in 1968 with Senator Hubert Humphrey, then running for the presidency. The rebbe's aides had warned Humphrey against raising any

political issues pertaining to Israel. When he was informed of this after the meeting, the rebbe laughed:

Had Humphrey spoken to me in support of the Zionist state, it wouldn't have bothered me in the least. We Jews have a Torah which forbids us to have a state during the exile, and therefore we may not ask the Americans to support the state. But a non-Jew has no Torah, and by supporting the state he feels he is helping Jews. So, on the contrary, if an American non-Jew is against the Zionist state, it shows he is an anti-Semite.

Today, the Satmar movement's implacable stance toward the state of Israel is almost universally reviled by Jews, and the movement is shunned by many as an abomination. Seen in the light of vignettes like these, it emerges as something more tragic than abominable. For no other post-Holocaust community has more faithfully and effectively preserved its old religious and cultural traditions and folkways, to say nothing of the Yiddish language. Were it not for their total alienation from the rest of world Jewry, a result of Teitelbaum's obsessive compulsion to wage endless war against Zionism and Israel, his Hasidim might have contributed immeasurably to strengthening the fiber of Judaism and Jewish life in our time.

FRIDAY, MAY 24

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Christianity: Good for the Jews?

By Elliot Jager

On a sun-drenched day during the week before Christmas, Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre was crowded with pilgrims from Nigeria. They were taking turns kneeling and praying at a marker on the spot where, sacred history has it, Jesus was crucified, entombed, and resurrected. (Other Christians consider the holy place to be the nearby Garden Tomb.) Back in Nigeria on Christmas Day, a wave of murderous bombings by Muslim extremists hit several churches. Plainly, the Christian faith is at once thriving and struggling. Global Christianity, a new report from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, describes and measures both phenomena.

Jews have more than a passing interest in the state of Christianity, not only because of Christianity's origins in Judaism and fraught relationship with Jews but also because nowadays, many believing Christians consider themselves friends of the Jewish people and Israel. Consider, for instance, the fact that growing numbers of Hispanic-Americans are embracing an Israel-friendly evangelical Christianity. Note the fact that Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, hopes to visit several African countries with substantial Christian populations in the coming months.

Given the trends in Muslim civilization, it matters to Jews that there are more Christians than Muslims in the world and that Christians make up about the same portion of the global popu-

lation today—32 percent—as they did a century ago. With almost 80 percent of the U.S. population of Christian heritage, the Americas are today the world's largest bastion of Christianity. Post-modern Europe comes in



only second. It no longer has the most Catholics or Protestants, though it remains home to most of the world's Orthodox Christians, thanks to believers in Russia, Ukraine, Greece, and Romania. The report does not explore the continent's declining commitment to its religious heritage, which is marked enough so that Prime Minister David Cameron recently exhorted Britons not to be afraid to assert their country's Christianity.

Around the world, half of all Christians are Catholic; Protestants make up 37 per-

cent, Orthodox Christians 12 percent. Catholics are most strongly represented in Brazil, Mexico, the Philippines, the United States (where about one in four is Catholic), and Italy. The United States is home to the largest number of the world's Protestants, followed by Nigeria and—somewhat surprisingly—China. Germany is evenly divided between Protestants and Catholics—who, together, total only around 70 percent of the population (five percent are Muslim). The percentage of Protestants is greater in the Congo—over 95 percent—than in the place where Luther launched the Reformation in the 16th century. Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa is generally robust. In Nigeria, Africa's largest country, Pew figures the Christian population at 50 percent.

The picture is quite different in the Middle East, where Christianity was born but which is now home to less than one percent of Christian believers. Just four percent of today's Middle Easterners are Christian, mostly Catholic or Orthodox. The country with the largest proportion of Christians—38 percent—is Hizballah-dominated Lebanon. In raw numbers, however, the largest body of Christians in the Mideast, about a third of them, consists of Coptic Christians living in Egypt. Though the CIA World Factbook places their percentage of Egypt's population at nine percent, Pew says the figure is only about half of that—and shrinking. The reason may not be hard to deduce: Egypt's Sunni Muslim majority has not been partic-

ularly tolerant of Christianity. With Hosni Mubarak's fall and the rise of Islamist parties, the prospects for Christianity in Egypt hardly leave room for optimism.

Intriguingly, the Pew study counts substantial numbers of Christians in Saudi Arabia: 1,200,000, or 4.4 percent of the population. Left unsaid, however, is that these are mostly not Arabs but Filipino and Indian expatriates who, because of state-sanctioned intolerance, may not be practicing their faith openly. The United Nations does not seem overly concerned about this type of bigotry.

Pew reports that 100,000 Christians, almost all Arabs, live in the West Bank under Mahmoud Abbas's Palestinian Authority. Those who speak for them, such as the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Fouad Twal, tend to be PLO marionettes. At this time of year, for instance, the Sunni-dominated PLO cynically promulgates the fairy tale that Jesus was a "Palestinian" and Christmas is a Palestinian holiday, while over in Hamas-run Gaza several thousand Christians live under siege. Meanwhile, Israeli authorities granted West Bank and Gaza Christians passage into Israel to visit family for the holidays and issued 400 separate permits allowing them travel abroad from Ben-Gurion Airport.

As for Christians in Israel proper, Pew places their numbers at 150,000, up from 34,000 when the state was founded but down by 10,000 from Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics figure in 2008. Eighty percent are Arabs, the remainder immigrants from

the former Soviet Union. Israeli Christians, naturally, enjoy full freedom of worship. (By tradition, the Jerusalem municipality distributes free Christmas trees to all comers.) Pew's figures do not count Israel's thousands of foreign workers, such as Filipino and African caregivers or Romanian laborers, or foreign clerics assigned to the country.

Life is not always easy for Israel's Christian evangelicals, many of whom have been treated shabbily by officious bureaucrats at the Shas Party-controlled Ministry of Interior. The ostensible justification is a (mostly) unfounded dread of missionary activity; actually, most Christian fundamentalists are in Israel on personal spiritual journeys or expressly to build support for the Jewish state in the larger Christian world.

Making strange bedfellows, many liberal and ultra-Orthodox Jews—insecure in their different ways—have demonstrated an unseemly intolerance toward fervently believing Christians. Though Jews have been treated with contempt by the Christian world from time immemorial, it seems myopic and counterproductive to view 21st-century Christianity, with its 2.18 billion adherents, as if it were continuing, robot-like, in that benighted legacy. In fact, as fate would have it, Christian and Jewish civilizations at the present time have every reason to seek possibilities for collaboration. Strangely enough, what's "good for the Jews"—and the Jewish state—is to see Christianity thriving.

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Christopher Hitchens's Jewish Problem

By Benjamin Kerstein

The fact that Christopher Hitchens has a problem with the Jews has been an open secret for years. No one much likes to talk about it, and for various reasons his journalistic peers have remained silent on the subject. But it is nonetheless the case, and there is little sense in denying it.

The sixty-one-year-old Hitchens, a native of Great Britain and a recently naturalized U.S. citizen, is one of the most widely read and admired columnists in America, as well as a celebrated author who, in the words of the *New York Times*, "embraces the serious things, the things that matter: social justice,

learning, direct language, the free play of mind, loyalty, holding public figures to high standards."

Hitchens's career began on the radical Left, with a strong affinity for the legacy of the Communist ideologue Leon Trotsky and his followers. His real gift, however, was not for ideology but for polemic, and his blistering prose quickly made him a literary celebrity, first in the pages of Britain's *New Statesman* and then, after he emigrated to America, as a regular columnist at the *Nation*. Before long, Hitchens's colorful opinions and even more colorful public image became fixtures of mainstream publications like *Vanity Fair* and the *Atlantic*.

For much of his career, Hitchens was

known as a ferocious critic of American power and American policy. But in the 1990s, with the war in the Balkans and the long campaign to secure American intervention against the Serbs, he began a slow turnabout that would come to a head on



September 11, 2001. Following the 9/11 atrocities, and the conspicuous failure of many of his left-wing comrades to acknowledge the guilt, and the threat, of radical Islam, Hitchens split from the Left for good, becoming one of the most vocal and, in conservative quarters, most prized supporters of the war on terror and American intervention in Iraq.

As a result of this about-face, Hitchens is now loathed both by his former comrades on the Left and by apolo-

gists for radical Islam. At the same time, many conservatives have proved willing to overlook his less palatable opinions: his implacable hatred of religion, for example, or his claims that Mother Teresa was morally depraved and that Henry Kissinger should be tried for war crimes. Nonetheless, it has been hoped that, along with his turn against the Left, Hitchens might have mellowed somewhat on the Jewish question, and in particular on his longstanding antipathy toward Israel. But this was not to be, as he took care to remind the world in a November 15 essay in the online magazine *Slate*, enchantingly titled “Israel’s Shabbos Goy.”

In this article, Hitchens’s trademark indignation was aroused by the Obama administration’s offer to Israel of various benefits in exchange for a moratorium on settlement building. Any such deal would have had to be approved by Israel’s coalition government, one of whose members is Shas, a Sephardi religious party whose founder and spiritual leader is Rabbi Ovadia Yosef. The once-formidable scholar, referred to by Hitchens with typical subtlety as “this elderly Sephardic ayatollah” and a “scrofulous medieval figure,” is now in his nineties and, as evidenced by some recent nasty remarks about non-Jews, much in need of retirement. For Hitchens, however, Ovadia Yosef and his attitude toward Gentiles are not the real problem. The real problem is Judaism itself:

The only mystery is this: why does the United States acquiesce so wretchedly in its own disgrace at the hands of a virtual client state? A soft version of Rabbi Yosef’s contemptuous view of the Gentiles is the old concept of the *shabbos goy*—the non-Jew who is paid a trifling fee to turn out the lights or turn on the stove, or whatever else is needful to get around the more annoying regulations of the Sabbath. How the old buzzard must cackle when he sees the Gentiles [i.e., America] actually volunteering a bribe to do the lowly work!

The tone of unrestrained invective in these passages is part of Hitchens’s cachet as a writer. The substance, however, is very ugly stuff indeed, composed out of some of the most barbarous and reactionary stereotypes of the Jewish people. In one paragraph alone, Hitchens evokes an image of the Jews as preternaturally crafty, hypocritical, manipulative, supremacist, animalistic, and morally diseased creatures who, with the help of their corrupt talents, set themselves

to exploiting Gentiles for financial gain and “cackle” with glee at the resultant spectacle. Nor is this sort of defamation particularly unusual for Hitchens, who has been writing similar things for years and, for the most part, getting away with it.

Hitchens’s bestselling atheist jeremiad, *God is Not Great* (2007), provides an excellent overview of its author’s sentiments on the topic of Jews and Judaism. While the book is ostensibly opposed to all religions equally, Hitchens goes out of his way not merely to criticize Judaism but to portray it in the ugliest possible terms, invoking many of the classic themes of anti-Semitism in order to do so.

He informs us, for example, of the “pitiless teachings of the God of Moses, who never mentions human solidarity and compassion at all,” and whose Ten Commandments have nothing to say about “the protection of children from cruelty, nothing about rape, nothing about slavery, and nothing about genocide.” Indeed, according to Hitchens, “some of these very offenses are . . . positively recommended” by the God of the Hebrews, with far-reaching historical consequences. According to Hitchens, the Jews’ genocidal God and His order to drive the Canaanite tribes out of the land of Israel form the basis not only of a “19th-century irredentist claim to Palestine” but of the current debate among Israeli rabbis over “whether the demand to exterminate the Amalekites is a coded commandment to do away with the Palestinians.” Who these rabbis might be, the extent of their influence, and whether anyone listens to them are questions that go mostly unaddressed.

For Hitchens, the evils he lists are not just religious tenets; they are ingrained in the Jews themselves. The rituals and practices of Judaism, he charges, are debased by the Jews’ obsession with money, as exemplified by the “hypocrites and frauds who abound in talmudic Jewish rationalization” and who operate according to the principle: “Don’t do any work on the Sabbath yourself, but pay someone else to do it for you. You obeyed the letter of the law: who’s counting?” (Hitchens’s world abounds, apparently, in dutiful *shabbos goyim*.) Circumcision, he claims, is the “sexual mutilation of small boys” and “most probably a symbolic survival from the animal and human sacrifices which were such a feature of the gore-soaked landscape of the Old Testament.” As for anti-Semitism, the Jews brought it on themselves. “By claiming to be ‘chosen’ in a special exclusive covenant with

the Almighty,” Hitchens writes, “they invited hatred and suspicion and evinced their own form of racism.”

Hitchens’s loathing for Judaism, or rather the grotesque caricature he refers to as Judaism, is particularly evident in his treatment of Hanukkah, a holiday marking the 2nd-century B.C.E. victory of a Jewish revolt led by the Maccabees. For Hitchens, the Maccabees’ defeat of the Hellenistic regime of Antiochus Epiphanes was a disaster, because Antiochus, far from being a villainous tyrant, had “weaned many people away from the sacrifices, the circumcisions, the belief in a special relationship with God, and the other reactionary manifestations of an ancient and cruel faith.”

To put it kindly, this is false; for the rather less benign details, one may consult I Maccabees and Josephus’s *Antiquities of the Jews*. In brief, the “weaning away” lauded by Hitchens involved the forcible suppression of Jewish culture, religion, and ritual, along with torture, imperial occupation, and mass murder, including the slaughter of children: in other words, the very things that this self-proclaimed global humanist violently denounces whenever the Jews are not involved.

For Hitchens, the Jewish rejection of Hellenistic Greek culture in favor of what he calls “tribal Jewish backwardness” constitutes something like a crime against humanity. This belief is an important one, and he appears to have come by it very early on. In his recently published autobiography, *Hitch-22*, he laments that, in the world-historical struggle between Athens and Jerusalem, the former tragically lost out to the latter’s “stone-faced demand for continence, sacrifice, and conformity, and the devising of ever-crueler punishments for deviance.” The fact that, historically speaking, the “ever-crueler punishments for deviance” were inflicted by Athens upon Jerusalem, and not vice-versa, is something that, for Hitchens, is apparently not worth mentioning.

In short, Judaism is to blame for everything Hitchens hates about monotheism as a whole. “As a convinced atheist, I ought to agree with Voltaire,” he writes of the father of Enlightenment anti-Semitism,

that Judaism is not just one more religion, but in its way the root of religious evil. Without the stern, joyless rabbis and their 613 dour prohibitions, we might have avoided the whole nightmare of the Old Testament, and the brutal, crude wrenching of that into prophecy-derived Christi-

anity, and the later plagiarism and mutation of Judaism and Christianity into the various rival forms of Islam.

“Most of the time,” he concludes, “I do concur with Voltaire, but not without acknowledging that Judaism is dialectical.”

That tacked-on caveat about Judaism’s “dialectical” quality may seem curious, but Hitchens gives a good indication of what he means by it in describing the type of Jew he does find acceptable. These are the “non-Jewish” Jews like Spinoza, Trotsky, and, one imagines, the partially Jewish Christopher Hitchens himself. Needless to say, separating the Jews into “good” Jews and “bad” Jews has a rather nasty provenance, but Hitchens has indulged in the exercise on more than one occasion. Concerning, for example, the 2003 terrorist bombing of the Neve Shalom synagogue in Istanbul, he wrote with ostensible sympathy that “The worshippers were not killed for building a settlement in the West Bank: they were members of a very old and honorable community who were murdered for being Jews.” The implication that, had the Jews of Neve Shalom been building a settlement in the West Bank, murdering them would have been perfectly acceptable, points to where Hitchens’s dialectics can lead.

It is also true that, on occasion, Hitchens has been outspoken in condemning anti-Semitism. Unfortunately, even a cursory examination reveals that these condemnations tend to be highly selective—so selective, in fact, that they often appear to be little more than an exercise in bad faith. For the most part, Hitchens condemns anti-Semitism when doing so can serve as a weapon against those he dislikes: e.g., certain right-wingers, certain left-wingers, radical Muslims, people who support radical Muslims, the Catholic church, or Christian evangelicals. When anti-Semitism serves his purposes, however, he is perfectly willing to make use of it and to engage in apologetics on its behalf.

Indeed, Hitchens’s concept of anti-Semitism is itself a largely self-serving fantasy. “Because anti-Semitism is the godfather of racism and the gateway to tyranny and fascism and war,” he has said, “it is to be regarded not as the enemy of the Jewish people but as the common enemy of humanity and of civilization and has to be fought against very tenaciously for that reason.” In other words, Hitchens appears to be opposed to anti-Semitism only to the extent that it has nothing to do with the Jews but serves as a proxy for other evils. Given that anti-Semitism,

whatever else it may be, is most certainly the enemy of the Jewish people, to decline to condemn it on that basis is, in effect, to decline to condemn it at all.

Hitchens has also proved quite willing to rationalize or explain away anti-Semitism when it is practiced by his friends or by those on his side of an argument. A notable beneficiary of his indulgence, as far back as the 1980s, was the leftist intellectual Noam Chomsky, who found himself in trouble after signing a petition defending the French Holocaust denier Robert Faurisson. Criticized by a group of French intellectuals, Chomsky shot back that he was merely standing up for Faurisson’s right of free speech, not his opinions, and attacked his critics as enemies of that right. In this he was duly parroted by Hitchens, who asserted that “the ‘fact’ here is that Chomsky defended not Faurisson’s work but his right to research and publish it.”

This too was false. The petition Chomsky signed, and from which Hitchens himself quoted extensively, was clearly written by a Holocaust denier and presented Holocaust denial as a perfectly acceptable form of historical inquiry. This was what Chomsky’s opponents criticized—not his defense, such as it was, of Faurisson’s right to free speech.

Something similar occurred in the case of the British pseudo-historian David Irving, a self-declared fascist who has also described himself as “a hardcore disbeliever” in the Holocaust. In 1996, when St. Martin’s Press declined to publish Irving’s biography of Joseph Goebbels, Hitchens rushed to announce that the press had “disgraced the business of publishing and degraded the practice of debate.” He also asserted that Irving “has never and not once described the Holocaust as a ‘hoax.’” This was obviously untrue, since Irving had been publicly denying the Holocaust for nearly a decade. Nor was “the Irving suppression,” as Hitchens dubbed it with his usual bombast, anything more than a simple case of a publisher deciding, on fairly firm grounds of intellectual and moral integrity, not to publish an extremely bad book.

Even the symbols of Nazism seem to exercise Hitchens in strikingly counterintuitive ways, depending on who is deploying them. Remarking on the use of swastika flags by pro-Palestinian protestors, Hitchens publicly claimed to be “sickened” but then admonished his audience to remember that “this is an auction of imagery that was started by [Menachem] Begin and other Israeli extremists who once openly and regularly compared the PLO to the Nazi party.”

By way of contrast, on a 2009 visit to Beirut, Hitchens went out of his way to deface a swastika displayed by a pro-Syrian fascist party, endangering his traveling companions in the process. The contrast serves as something of an object lesson in Hitchens’s selective outrage: When a swastika is the symbol of an obscure Lebanese political bloc, nothing, including the safety of others, must be spared in order to destroy it. When a swastika is brandished by pro-Palestinian activists, it is an understandable reaction to the rhetoric of “Israeli extremists.”

The truth is that, beneath the surface platitudes, Hitchens’s attitude toward the Holocaust and Nazism, like his attitude toward anti-Semitism, is disturbingly bizarre; but it is of a piece with his general attitude toward the Jews, Judaism, and their enemies.

There is, of course, no issue on which Hitchens’s anti-Semitism has been more aggressive and outspoken than that of Zionism and Israel. That Hitchens hates Israel has long been known, and he has made no secret of it. Indeed, it practically leaps off the pages of his *Slate* article as well as countless other essays and interviews. Somewhat less well known is the extent to which this antipathy appears to be based on Hitchens’s embrace of the racist proposition that the Jews have no homeland in Israel (and thus, by definition, no homeland anywhere).

According to Hitchens, the widely held delusion that the Jews are a people with the same rights as any other is a direct result of the deleterious influence of Judaism itself. As he puts it: “The only actual justification offered” for Zionism “is that God awarded the land to one tribe a good many years ago, and of course this appalling racist and messianic delusion . . . only makes a terrible situation even worse.” In reality, one is constrained to point out, there is a bit more than God involved, such as the existence of a Jewish nation in the land of Israel for centuries, its sovereignty ended only by genocide at the hands of Roman legions; the centrality of Israel and especially Jerusalem to Jewish thought and culture; the fact that only the land of Israel has ever been regarded as the Jewish homeland by both Jews and non-Jews (including Muslims); and various other significant and notably secular historical facts.

Many of Hitchens’s claims against Zionism go far beyond simple distortion. About Theodor Herzl, for example, he tells us: “If I could rewind the tape, I would stop Herzl from telling the initial demagogic lie (actu-

ally two lies) that a land without a people needs a people without a land.” In fact, Herzl never wrote this. Hitchens’s claim otherwise is no less false than his subsequent assertion that “If you give the most cursory attention to the writings of Herzl and [Max] Nordau and other founders of the Zionist movement, or if you read the memoirs of Yitzhak Rabin closer to our own day, you will notice at once that . . . they wanted [the Arabs’] land, and wanted it without its inhabitants.” Herzl, in fact, hoped that the Arabs would be integrated as equal citizens in a future Jewish state, as did most of the “other founders of the Zionist movement,” and Yitzhak Rabin never advocated an Israel emptied of its Arab citizens but publicly denounced such sentiments. One is not permitted to “lie about history,” Hitchens once lectured a supporter of Israel, a rule that appears to be forgotten when it comes to Hitchens himself.

One likely reason behind Hitchens’s hatred of Zionism is the (to him) irritating fact that the movement succeeded despite the opposition to it of many of the “non-Jewish” Jews he so admires. “One of the advantages of a Marxist and internationalist training,” he has stated in an interview, “is that it exposes one to the early writings of those Jewish cosmopolitans who warned from the first day that Zionism would be a false messiah for the Jews and an injustice to the Arabs. Nothing suggests to me that they were wrong on these crucial points.” This assertion is either tragic or absurd, considering that the Jewish cosmopolitanism glorified by Hitchens ended in the Auschwitz gas chambers, while the despised Zionists went on to found a relatively strong, prosperous, and culturally vibrant nation-state.

To a great extent, such violent hostility appears to be driven not by the delusions of Zionism but by the delusions of Christopher Hitchens. In a remarkable piece of bluster, he once wrote that “if anti-Jewish fascism comes again to the Christian world—or more probably comes at us via the Muslim world,” he would not repair to Israel because “I already consider it an obligation to resist it wherever I live. I would detest myself if I fled from it in any direction.” The obvious truth behind this swaggering fantasy is that if “anti-Jewish fascism” were to rise again, Hitchens would most likely share the fate of almost everyone who followed his recommended course the last time such a dilemma presented itself. His complacent formula for permanent Jewish victimization calls to mind something his hero George

Orwell once wrote about pacifism: that it “is only possible to people who have money and guns between them and reality.” Much the same, and worse, appears to be true of Hitchens and his anti-Zionism.

Without taking anything away from Hitchens’s native gifts as a polemicist, it is not difficult to pinpoint the source of many of his poisonous attitudes toward the Jews and Judaism. He has done so himself many times by naming the late Israel Shahak as his “beloved guide, in the superior sense of that term,” occupying a place in his pantheon of intellectual heroes next to Thomas Paine, Edmund Burke, and, of all people, Gore Vidal. “He was never interviewed by the *New York Times*,” Hitchens lamented after Shahak’s death, “and its obituary pages have let pass the death of a great and serious man.”

Unfortunately, the “great and serious man” was barking mad. This is made apparent by the merest glimpse into Shahak’s magnum opus, *Jewish History, Jewish Religion: The Weight of Three Thousand Years*, which Hitchens has recommended as a reliable guide on matters Jewish. It is, quite simply, a masterpiece of anti-Semitic literature, whose thesis is quickly summarized: Judaism is racist and evil; as a result, Zionism is racist and evil; as a result, Israel is racist and evil. For Jews to cease to be racist and evil, they must divest themselves of Judaism.

To support this thesis, Shahak spins a lengthy conspiracy theory according to which the ancient rabbis cooked up the Talmud in order to create “one of the most totalitarian societies in the whole history of mankind.” Here are a few characteristic passages:

* “[B]oth before and after a meal, a pious Jew ritually washes his hands, uttering a special blessing. On one of these two occasions he is worshipping God, by promoting the divine union of Son and Daughter; but on the other he is worshipping Satan, who likes Jewish prayers and ritual acts so much that when he is offered a few of them it keeps him busy for a while and he forgets to pester the divine Daughter.”

* The “dominant feature” of talmudic Judaism “is deception—deception primarily of God, if this word can be used for an imaginary being so easily deceived by the rabbis. . . . Together with the deception of God goes the deception of other Jews, mainly in the interest of the Jewish ruling class.” Indeed, “Marx was quite right when, in

his two articles about Judaism, he characterized it as dominated by profit-seeking.”

* Zionism, along with Orthodoxy, is the true successor of “historical Judaism.” Both are “sworn enemies of the concept of an open society.” Indeed, a Jewish state “cannot ever contain an open society. It can [only] become a fully closed and warlike ghetto, a Jewish Sparta, supported by the labor of Arab helots, kept in existence by its influence on the U.S. political establishment and by threats to use its nuclear power.”

And so on in the same vein, including the revelations that Martin Buber was a mass murderer and that American Jews—who are all racists—became involved in the civil-rights movement only in order to further Jewish interests.

To anyone who has read Hitchens, much of this will sound familiar enough: at various times he has repeated whole passages from Shahak, occasionally word for word. The line about “Arab helots,” for example, is a particular favorite. He is also, as we have seen, especially fond of Shahak’s idea that there are some exceptional Jews “who have internalized the complex of ideas which Karl Popper has called ‘the open society.’”

We have returned to the good Jews and the bad Jews. The good Jews are those who rid themselves of any semblance of a particular Jewish identity. The bad Jews are those, secular or religious, who choose to remain who they are, and are therefore corrupted by the racism, chauvinism, power worship, and hatred of Gentiles inherent in Judaism itself. It is worth pointing out that, according to these criteria, almost all Jews are bad Jews.

Indeed, this final point is the essential one, because it goes to the heart of Hitchens’s attitudes toward Judaism. Like Shahak, Hitchens’s vision is of a world in which there will be no more Judaism. One should be honest about what this means: it means the religious, cultural, political, and social extinction of the Jews as Jews. In the world as Hitchens would have it, the Jew would cease to exist.

Hitchens often makes much of the necessity of facing truth as it is, and of not making convenient excuses for looking away. As he often quotes Orwell, “to see what is under one’s nose needs a constant struggle.” Indeed it does. In the present case, the anti-Semite is under all our noses, and it is well worth the struggle to see him.

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Orthosexuality

By Elli Fischer

The Talmud tells a story about one Rabbi Kahana who hid under the bed of his master, Rabbi Abba (better known as Rav), as the latter was having sex with his wife. Kahana, shocked at the type of frivolous language used by his mentor, commented that Rav was behaving ravenously. Rav exclaimed, “Kahana, you’re here? Get out! It’s not proper!” Kahana replied, “It is Torah—and study it I must.”

It is not easy to discern who gets the last word in this jarring little *aggadah* (indeed, it appears in several places in the Babylonian Talmud—sometimes with and sometimes without Kahana’s ultimate proclamation). There is a clear tension between propriety and modesty on one hand, and the *religious* requirement to understand sexuality on the other.

The balance between these two values has varied from community to community and era to era, and there have certainly been Jewish communities far more prudish than the Talmud’s. Yet in contemporary society, characterized by unprecedented sexual casualness, shifts within the Jewish community toward greater openness go unnoticed. Public perception has tended to relate to several controversies that recently erupted within the American Modern Orthodox community—one relating to an Orthodox college student’s article about a one-night stand and another pertaining to an Orthodox-style homosexual commitment ceremony in Washington, D.C.—as evidence of cloistering and repression within this community. In truth, however, there has been a subtle but dramatic shift toward greater openness about sexuality in the Modern Orthodox world over the past decade or so.

That the community has shifted toward greater openness while upholding communal modesty norms is strongly attested to by the recent publication of *The Newlywed’s Guide to Physical Intimacy* (Gefen) by Jennie Rosenfeld and David S. Ribner. This booklet speaks directly to the experience of young Orthodox couples and the attitudes about sex that they have absorbed during their formative years. The authors’ thorough knowledge of the Orthodox community and their work experience equips them to walk couples entering a sexual relationship with

little or no experience and constrained by a complex set of rules and mores through their first, often awkward sexual encounters. It answers many questions that these young couples have about sex (but are, naturally, afraid to ask). Pasted into the book’s back cover is an envelope that contains several detailed sketches of male and female anatomy as well as some basic positions for intercourse. The unprecedented inclusion of sexually graphic material in an Orthodox publication, coupled with its somewhat symbolic placement in a sealed envelope, represents a recalibration of the stated tensions between reticence about sex and the need to properly educate about it—to study the Torah of sex.

This guide did not appear out of nowhere. In 2005, two Orthodox educators developed a comprehensive sex education curriculum

for Orthodox elementary and high schools. With the Assistance of Tzelem, a Yeshiva University-sponsored project co-founded by Rosenfeld, the curriculum has been implemented in a number of schools. Additionally, Tzelem and JOFA (the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance) have offered training for “hatan and kallah teachers” (men and women, often rabbis and wives of rabbis, who instruct

Orthodox couples who are engaged to be married about the Jewish laws governing marital relations) in counseling geared not only toward helping Orthodox couples develop a healthy sex life but also toward recognizing and seeking professional treatment for sexual dysfunction. Though there is still plenty of room to grow, such initiatives have already contributed greatly to the education of a young generation that is frank and well-informed about sex, but has learned about it in an unabashedly religious context.

Not long ago, sexual abuse and predation were not generally viewed as a significant threat and thus barely discussed within the Orthodox community. The *Jewish Week*’s June 2000 publication of “Stolen Innocence,” an exposé of the sexual predations of charismatic rabbi and educator Baruch Lanner, brought these issues into the spotlight. The article implicated some of Modern Orthodoxy’s flagship institutions, most notably the Orthodox Union, in (to say the least) failing to properly address and report Lanner’s crimes. As a result of the article

and subsequent investigations, institutional taboos against addressing these issues are much weaker than they were, if they have not evaporated altogether.

In the summer of 2005, a prominent Orthodox rabbi and educator made news when he resigned his position, came out as gay, and provisionally abandoned Orthodoxy. At the time, my ex-Orthodox gay *havruta* (study partner) noted that he didn’t know of anybody who grew up Orthodox, came out as gay, and remained within the Orthodox community. Although it had been five years since the release of *Trembling before God*—a documentary film about Orthodox homosexuals that, for many, offered the first inkling that such individuals existed within the community—being openly gay was still perceived to be completely irreconcilable with being part of an Orthodox community.

Yet already then there were signs of a shift. This educator’s students reportedly were most troubled not by the fact that their teacher was gay, but that coming out as gay necessarily meant leaving Orthodoxy; they did not see the two as being completely irreconcilable. And indeed, the last few years have witnessed the Orthodox community engaging with homosexuals and homosexuality to an unprecedented degree.



In late 2009, Yeshiva University hosted a very well-attended panel discussion with rabbinic faculty and four gay alumni of Yeshiva, entitled “Being Gay in the Orthodox World.” A few months later, a group of Orthodox rabbis drafted a “Statement of Principles on the Place of Jews with a Homosexual Orientation in Our Community” that, after reaffirming halakhic strictures on same-sex relations, outlines how homosexuals can and should be accepted as full participants in synagogues and schools. It has thus far been signed by hundreds of rabbis, teachers, and community leaders—all Orthodox. To be sure, each of these events generated opposition that feared that such statements would send the wrong message—namely, that open discussion in public fora crosses the line from sensitivity to tacit approval. Nevertheless, the trend is toward greater awareness and acceptance of gays within the Orthodox community, and an ever-larger number of “open” homosexuals consider themselves part of that community.

This final point was virtually absent from all public discussion of a recent same-sex

wedding ceremony held in Washington, D.C. Though not an Orthodox ceremony, it looked enough like an Orthodox wedding that the Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America was moved to clarify that “same-sex unions are against both the letter and the spirit of Jewish law,” even while recognizing “the acute and painful challenges faced by homosexual Jews in their quest to remain connected and faithful to God and tradition.” Lost in this controversy was the fact that this couple wished to solemnize their marriage with an Orthodox-style ceremony in the first place. Not long ago, it would have been virtually unthinkable for a homosexual who had grown up in an Orthodox community to model a same-sex marriage ceremony on an Orthodox wedding.

What happened in the past decade or so that precipitated this shift toward greater openness about sexuality among the Orthodox? After all, change does not come easily to inherently conservative societies. It is

possible that the effects of the sexual revolution of the 1960s have finally, a generation later, begun to filter into the Orthodox community. This may also explain a different but related phenomenon that has developed within ultra-Orthodox communities in America and Israel: as the West has become ever more sexually permissive, these communities have responded by demanding ever greater separation between the sexes.

But it was the emergence of the Internet in the 1990s that eventually brought issues of sexuality into the open. The anonymity afforded by the first generation of internet chat rooms, bulletin boards, and listservs gave individuals who had felt completely alone—victims of sexual abuse, couples experiencing sexual dysfunction, homosexuals—a platform to express their feelings, ask questions, and find kindred spirits. It was only a matter of time before their voices joined together, and the broader community realized that the Torah of sex was being neglected.

It is understandable that the broader society would find the Orthodox community overly prudish and behind the times (one wonders if the myth about Orthodox Jews having sex through a hole in the bed sheet persists). After all, the article about the one-night stand that caused Yeshiva’s *Beacon* to lose university funding pales in comparison with, for example, the Duke PowerPoint scandal. *The Newlywed’s Guide to Physical Intimacy* is not exactly the *Bava Kama Sutra*—it is certainly a far cry from the graphically explicit *Joy of Sex*. And yet, articles that admonish “Shh! Don’t Talk about Sex at Yeshiva University” miss a crucial point. Sex was never a taboo subject in the Orthodox community and it is currently being discussed frankly and openly. And just as in Rabbi Kahan’s justification for his presence in his master’s bedroom, the immodesty of talking about sex publicly is justified by the educational merits of the discussion: “It is Torah—so learn it we must.”

THURSDAY, MAY 30

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Secularism and Its Discontents

By Yehudah Mirsky

The transformations of Jewish life in the last two-and-a-half centuries still boggle the mind. Deep ruptures opened to separate the present from the past, modernity from tradition, setting terms that have defined the contours of Jewish life until today. How did people try to think their way through the change?

That vital question is central to a new book, *Not in the Heavens* (Princeton), an investigation of what has come to be known in shorthand as Jewish secularism. In it, the accomplished historian David Biale sets out “to investigate the ideas of those who chose an ideological path to the secular.” Deeply researched and thoughtfully written, the book is a valuable attempt to start rethinking a familiar category. It is also ultimately unsatisfying, and ends by begging the difficult question it has set out to answer.

In his preface, Biale writes movingly of the secular Jewish revolutionaries of Eastern Europe, whose “generational revolt against a world in which Jewish religion, economic plight, political impotence, and cultural backwardness seemed wrapped up together in one unsavory package” was accompanied—and this is crucial—by a powerful

desire to remain within and even to renovate Jewish life. Writing less a definitive history of Jewish secularization than an inquiry into a number of interesting and important thinkers, he proceeds to walk us through their relationship to Judaism and the Jews in order to discern, as his subtitle puts it, “The Tradition of Secular Jewish Thought.”

The word “tradition” is key to Biale’s project. For him, a major narrative thread is the observation that many modern secularists have wittingly or unwittingly reworked ideas drawn from the traditional Jewish canon, which itself contains important elements of proto-secular thinking—above all in the more radical speculations of Moses Maimonides (1135-1204). This was very much the case with Baruch Spinoza, the enigmatic and alluring *converso* heretic with whom Biale’s story naturally begins and perhaps the first thinker to fuse God with nature, redefine religion as ethics and subjugate it to the state, and make a life for himself outside the bounds of any religious community. Since a slew of modern Jewish figures have looked to Spinoza as their touchstone and culture hero, we find ourselves savoring the irony of generations of secular Jews who, in Biale’s reading, are also

inheritors of a set of ideas refracted from the towering mind of the greatest Jewish medieval religious philosopher.

Following the classic triad of “God, Torah, Israel,” Biale divides his book into three sections devoted to modern secular Jewish thinking on, respectively, the divine; the Bible; and the cluster made up of nation, state, language, and culture. After Spinoza,



he re-visits a roster of mainly familiar figures, offering focused discussions of, among others, Moses Mendelssohn, Solomon Maimon, Ahad Ha’am, Heinrich Heine, Moses Hess, Hayim Nahman Bialik, Gershom Scholem, Hannah Arendt, and Mordecai Kaplan. Also making an appearance are certain political figures (Theodor Herzl, Zéev Jabotinsky, David Ben-Gurion), whom Biale reads,

interestingly, for their conceptions of Jewish identity. While most of his choices are obvious, some (like Albert Einstein) are peculiar, while some of his omissions are truly perplexing. Among the latter are Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, perhaps the first to put forward a unified conception of secular Jewish linguistic and political nationalism, and A. D. Gordon, who more than any other fused the ideas of kabbalah and Hasidism with a

vitalistic philosophy of ethical Zionism in which God simply disappears. Few novelists and poets feature in Biale's pages, and, aside from Scholem and Simon Dubnow, he scarcely mentions the historians who labored to provide secular understandings of Jewish religion and experience. For the most part, his survey pre-dates the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948.

But what sort of tradition is Biale trying to construct here? In fact, and contrary to his subtitle with its definite article—*the* tradition—there is no one tradition of Jewish secular thought, as there is no one tradition of Jewish thought, period. Above all, the very terms “religious” and “secular” are far more complicated than is allowed by the volume's framing and Biale's own narrative. In what way, for example, can many of the thinkers he discusses truly be called secular? Take Bialik: can one really think of the man behind *Sefer Haaggadah* (“The Book of Jewish Legends”), a monumental work of cultural retrieval and reconstruction, as a genuinely secular figure? And what of Scholem, who said that “I consider religion the center of everything—more so than, say, the social sciences”?

Of course, there is such a thing as Jewish secularism, and one key element in it is the abandonment of halakhah (traditional Jewish law) and rabbinic authority. This is a point of radical division between Maimonides, who saw himself as renovating and ultimately strengthening Jewish law, and Spinoza, who deliberately aimed to dissolve it. But Biale largely ignores this element, as becomes painfully clear in his chapter on Torah. There he largely devotes himself to biblical criticism (and yet another discussion of Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*) rather than to the lived reality of religious practice and study in which so many of the thinkers he discusses grew up and which they were seeking to refashion, less to find substitutes for Jewish belief than to create new grounds for Jewish obligation. Throughout, Biale also neglects the foundational insight of the late Jacob Katz that the religious ideology we call Orthodoxy is in its own way no less a product of modernity than the secularism it sought to oppose. In other words, secularism and Orthodoxy can hardly be understood apart from one another, and both are more dynamic and internally more nuanced than simple antinomies suggest.

When it comes to the crucial question alluded to at the beginning, Biale punts. “[O]ne might legitimately ask,” he writes at one point, “whether the search for a [secular] Jewish culture in the past was an optical il-

lusion of those in the present or whether it was a real object that required modernity in order to reveal it.” Well, which is it? He continues: “Either way, secular Jewish thinkers found reflections of themselves in the past, even as they blazed new trails.” Therefore?

This equivocation on the very heart of the matter may be admirable as historical circumspection, but it undermines the existential stakes of Biale's enterprise. To argue that the search for a usable secular past was and is an optical illusion is to open an unbridgeable gap between past and present, and to mark an end to Jewish experience as anything but one more set of tiles in the mosaic of contemporary multiculturalism. To explore the second possibility—that a secular past “was a real object that required modernity to reveal it”—is to force oneself to think of certain large ideas and sensibilities exerting and expressing themselves in and through history but ultimately free of the confines of time and space. It is, in other words, to jettison materialistic versions of secularism and to reengage with the search for the deepest structures of reality, with theology, and thus perhaps with God.

In his introduction, Biale rightly criticizes the clichéd assumption that “secularism” represents a simple, triumphal march of reason and goodness over stupidity and injustice. But that recognition scarcely shapes his work as a whole, and neither does the necessarily paired awareness of how very *Western* are the terms in which “secularism” is conventionally understood. Totally absent from Biale's book are any figures from the Sephardi world.

Western secularism has several dimensions: political (entailing the subordination of traditional religion to state authority); epistemological (defining knowledge as what we can derive solely from our senses and from reason); and cultural or spiritual (captured in the sociologist Max Weber's phrase, “the disenchantment of the world”). Like the term “religion,” “secularism” in the modern sense is the product of a period in which the truths of various traditions came to be viewed as no longer self-evident but rather as historically contingent and as sharing the stage with those of other traditions. Varying in form and content according to time and place, secularism—as a growing body of scholarship asserts—was not a transparent alternative to traditional theological understandings but a reworking of religious ideas of salvation, transcendence, and the sacred into a new key, and just one of the multiple forms of modernity.

And Jewish secularism? What is that? Some purchase might be gained by asking: how do you say “secular” in Hebrew? The current term is *hiloni*. (Roughly 45 percent of Israelis characterize themselves as *hiloni*, while another 25 percent call themselves, intriguingly, *masorti/lo-dati*, traditional/nonreligious.) The term appears to have been first used by Micha Yosef Berdiczewsky, the *enfant terrible* of modern Hebrew letters, and was intimately connected with the rise of Zionism. Yet it didn't become part of Israel's lingua franca until the 1950s; for decades, the reigning term had been *hofshi*, free—free, that is, of the law.

The shift is significant. As the historian Yochi Fisher points out, the “free” person is still tied to the law from which he is trying to liberate himself; the *hiloni* is one for whom that struggle is over. The latter word suggests, literally, an empty space: the space of disenchantment.

In a suggestive and muted Epilogue, Biale notes that most Jews today define themselves as secular, but less in the ideological than in the sociological meaning of the word. “In one sense,” he observes, “this means that the ideologues of Jewish secularism won their battle, but in another sense, they did not, since the secular culture that they had in mind was one intentionally chosen.”

And yet perhaps it seems that way to him because “secular” is too narrow and dimly-lit a category for the galaxy of fascinating and creative thinkers who populate his volume. Or perhaps it is because of the very palpable failures of the project of disenchantment. After all, the most compelling figures discussed by Biale were not *hilonim* but *hofshim*, struggling to articulate (in terms made famous by Isaiah Berlin in another context) both a “negative” freedom from traditional authority and a “positive” freedom to realize their deepest aspirations as Jews and human beings. This is a struggle they shared with many self-described “religious” thinkers; and the two camps together, in the dynamics of their disagreement, constitute the Jewish meanings disclosed by modernity.

Can Judaism endure in a world in which, as Spinoza might have said and Wallace Stevens did, God, if He exists at all, “must dwell quietly. He must be incapable of speaking”? No. Can it endure without accepting the precious and perilous freedoms awakened in modernity? No. Can it endure without a commitment to the Jewish people? No. Those are the paradoxical terms of future Jewish thought, if it is to have one.

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Come Swing with Me

By Aryeh Tepper

On May 25, a new sound was heard in Jerusalem. Combining the soulfulness and optimism of Moroccan Jewish liturgical music (*piyyut*) with the syncretistic and improvisational spirit of American jazz, the New Jerusalem Orchestra (NJO) made its triumphant debut at the 2010 Israel Festival.

Arrayed onstage in a crescent, the seventeen-piece orchestra featured a wide selection of instruments ranging from a cello, viola, and violin to two ouds, a three-part brass section, a Turkish nay (flute), and three kinds of Arabic drums. A twenty-man choral group encircled the orchestra from behind. Matching the variety of tone colors was the diversity of the vocalists and musicians themselves: men

and women, religious and secular Jews, Ashkenazim and Sephardim, and a celebrated tenor saxophonist from New Orleans. Center stage was occupied by the great singer and performer of Moroccan *piyyut*, Rabbi Haim Louk.

The performance consisted of *piyyutim* taken apart, recast, and propelled by Omer Avital, the orchestra's arranger, con-



ductor, and contrabassist. A critically-acclaimed fixture of the New York jazz scene during the 1990s, Avital has spent the last decade intensively exploring Middle Eastern and especially Moroccan Jewish music; the NJO is one of his first fruits.

Fusing the basic musical elements of Moroccan *piyyut* and the blues, Avital employed the original melodies as motifs, around which he and his troupe added layers of harmony and improvised solos. The result was a sensuous and sometimes raucous exercise in contrasting textures. The improvisations at the May 25 concert weren't overly daring, but they didn't have to be. The sustained elation of Avital's extended grooves powered the weird and wonderful mixture of tone colors splayed in and around Rabbi Louk's vocal arabesques. And just when the music seemed on the verge of bursting, the orchestra would drop out to give various instrumentalists their say.

The American tenor saxophonist Greg Tardy ended one *piyyut* with a bluesy solo so strange and so right that one could fairly imagine what it sounded like when Duke Ellington first transformed Tchaikovsky's "Dance of the Sugar-Plum Fairy" into "Sugar Rum Cherry" stomping her Christmas-time blues. In another highlight, the blind, Moroccan-Israeli poet Erez Biton vigorously intoned two of his verse

tributes to Rabbi David Bouzaglo, a monumental figure of 20th-century Moroccan *piyyut*. Biton's recitation was a reminder that poems don't always have to be whispered, let alone mumbled. "Pursuing myself," he chanted, "I came after you, Rah-bee Dah-vid Bou-zaglo!"

Including intermission, the show clocked in at an imposing two-and-a-half hours, but the crowd was ready to let the NJO do its thing until the authorities turned off the lights. Fully conscious of the cultural import of their performance, Avital and the NJO's artistic co-director, Yair Harel, had penned a one-page manifesto for the program: a dissent from David Ben-Gurion's notion that forming an Israeli Jewish identity requires erasing all traces of the Diaspora. In the words of Avital and Harel:

After the hard trial of the melting pot, and the attempt to uproot the exile from the Jew, . . . we seek . . . to connect the past with the future, tradition with contemporary creativity, . . . [and] to ingather the exiles of the Jewish soul that were exiled in, of all places, the Land of Israel.

But Omer Avital is a musician, not a polemicist, and his true goal in bringing the exiles home is only to get them to swing together. Thanks to the expansive spirit of New York jazz, Avital knows how to do his job; thanks to his own expansive spirit, jazz is now part of the Jewish musical tradition.