

# Summing Up



OWER IS EVERYWHERE,” wrote Michel Foucault. In today’s America, what’s “everywhere” is a grim, Foucauldian, post-modern obsession with power — who has it, who doesn’t, and what each category is supposed to mean, morally speaking. We live in a culture in which the “powerful”

are said to be malignant and the “powerless” virtuous, with little thought to possibilities in between.

Dualistic thinking poses a special problem for Jews. As Rabbi David Wolpe noted in the first issue of *SAPIR*, Jews generally “do not fit neatly into ... binaries.” The essays in this volume also do not fit neatly into predictable categories. What they do is explore the complexities, contradictions, and ambiguities of Jewish power that are at the heart of so many contemporary debates. Jews have power and do not; the Jewish state is exceptionally powerful and uniquely vulnerable; Jews welcome power, fear it, have misgivings about using it.

The articles in this issue of *SAPIR* do not always agree on the nature of Jewish power or how it might go astray or be squan-

dered. But they are united in their insistence that we should not be afraid of the existence of Jewish power, either in Israel or the United States, and that we must defend its necessity, however imperfectly it might at times be wielded.



**BRET STEPHENS** rejects the contemporary value system attached to power and powerlessness: “Power does not have to be an obstacle to a moral life,” he writes. “It can be a basis for it.” Jewish ambivalence about the uses of power may have much to recommend Judaism as a value system, but Jewish powerlessness has nothing to recommend it as a strategy for political and personal survival. Especially in an era when the safety of Jews in the liberal-democratic West no longer seems assured, Jews need to appreciate the profound benefits, pragmatic and ethical, of hard power found in political sovereignty. The reality of a Jewish state, he writes, “raises the possibility that a Jewish state might pioneer a Jewish way of practicing statecraft and peoplehood that is distinct from, and potentially better than, the way statecraft and peoplehood are practiced elsewhere.”

**RUTH R. WISSE** describes the allure of powerlessness among two of the contemporary groups that must soberly acknowledge the necessity of Jewish national power. On the right are ultra-Orthodox Jews, whose belief that only God can protect the Jewish people has led them to abjure the requirements of civic behavior in a participatory democracy, including military service and economic self-sufficiency. On the left, old-school Jewish Marxists and their progressive fellow travelers valorize Jewish statelessness and fetishize the Palestinian cause at the expense of their fellow Jews. “No other minority in America is ‘in sympathy’ with the war against its members,” she writes. Only Jews “lack the moral confidence” to defend their own people.

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**RUTH CALDERON**'s thoughts on the existential importance and obligations of Jewish power take on special meaning for having been written from Israel during the recent conflict with Hamas. Despite the impact of the Jewish tradition's long ambivalence about power, the Jewish people, she argues, must embrace power as an existential necessity. While Israelis understand this—they are, after all, the targets of very real missiles, knives, and suicide bombs—Jews in the Diaspora must overcome their discomfort with power, reject “immoral and naïve” blanket condemnations of Israeli power, and stand in solidarity with their diverse, complicated people. Zionism is no longer an idea; it has become a country. Condemning Zionism means condemning millions of people—representing many backgrounds and political and religious views—to oblivion.

**RABBI MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK** brings two vital Jewish voices, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks *z”l* and Natan Sharansky, to his discussion of the new power wielded by online mobs to destroy people's lives. From Sacks, he derives the primacy of Judaism's focus on forgiveness and mercy, so powerful that the Jewish people, *Yehudim*, are named for a biblical character of tremendous fallibility and then courageous repentance: Judah, Joseph's brother. Judah sells his brother into slavery but comes to understand his great sin and offers to trade his life for another brother's as repentance. Such acts require honesty, however, and from Sharansky we learn what a

profoundly dishonest society can look like: Obeisance to the totalitarian state led to widespread doublethink in the Soviet Union. Soloveichik weaves the lessons of these two thinkers together to argue that America is increasingly plagued by an unwillingness to forgive, which leads people to mask their true selves. “The perceived power of a vocal minority intolerant of dissent” poses grave dangers to a free society. Jews must channel Sacks's compassion and Sharansky's courage and stand up to such abuses of power, both for their own and America's sake.

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Nowhere is the complexity of Jewish power made more manifest than in the state of Israel, as several articles in this volume illustrate.

Historian **BENNY MORRIS** argues that while Israel has focused attention on gaining and sustaining military power, it has failed to address the threats posed by the demographic power of growing Arab, ultra-Orthodox, and right-leaning Mizrahi populations, which he believes undermine the secular and open nature of Israeli society. To mitigate the consequences of these demographic threats, he argues for government reforms in education, national service, and welfare that would better integrate haredim into Israeli society; for a vast improvement in Arab schools and economic development; a repeal of the nation-state law; and, perhaps, easing of restrictions on Gazan and West Bank Palestinians, investments in development, and even a confederation of Jordan, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip, involving some measure of Arab sovereignty in East Jerusalem.

**ANSHEL PFEFFER** observes that there is nothing immoral about Israel's “need to acquire powers that were incommensurate to its size and alien to its traditions.” Yet this cannot blind us to what Pfeffer describes as the abuse of Israel's power in its treatment of

the Palestinians, which erodes Israeli society and violates the “far higher standard” that Jews should use for judging their own uses of power. The Israeli Left, he asserts, must “stop talking about Israel’s interests and start talking about its character, its constitution, its ethics, and its highest aspirations”—because while Israel can survive “destabilizing rounds of warfare,” the price it pays for its treatment of Palestinians is “a steady and inevitable moral erosion.” Israel must explore “every alternative to using [power] in such self-destructive fashion,” even while unquestioningly accepting the need for power.

Ambassador **DORE GOLD** examines the opportunities for a fundamental realignment of power in the Middle East presented by the new rapprochement between Israel and her neighbors. The existential threats posed by Iran are leading to new and unprecedentedly public alliances, and to shore up these burgeoning relationships, the Middle East needs a “code of conduct,” an idea suggested to Gold by Henry Kissinger. With the Biden administration committed to renewing the Iran nuclear deal, Gold argues that the time to capitalize on the “improbable, promising, and essential” new Middle Eastern alliances is now.

Ambassador **MICHAEL OREN** reflects on his experience wielding power as Israeli Ambassador to the United States. These are lessons that can serve any leader well: “Listen to your predecessors, build a trustworthy team, play to your strengths, think and act out of the box, earn the trust of key players, reach out of your...comfort zones, direct your energies solely at those situations that you can affect, and understand the limits of your power.”

Shifting our lens to the United States, **MONA CHAREN** notes that American Jews are caught between two political parties that pres-

ent real challenges to Jewry and to Israel, with extremes on either end promoting fantasies about Jewish power. Charen believes that this political homelessness and “an acute historical understanding of the dangers of conspiracy thinking” mean that Jews have a unique role to play in helping to heal America’s current breaches: an opportunity to stand apart from and above polarization and to tell America’s story anew, championing the classic vision of America as “a pluralist society where Jews, and everyone, can thrive.”

In a discussion of the role that age-old antisemitic canards play in the thinking and behaviors of Iran (and its proxies Hamas and Hezbollah), **MARK DUBOWITZ**, CEO of Foundation for Defense of Democracies, offers a counterintuitive take based on personal experience of how antisemitic fictions about Jewish power can be used to Jewish advantage. “As in certain martial arts,” he notes, “the key to winning is to turn an opponent’s momentum against him.” Jewish communal leaders can leverage paranoid and illogical visions of outsized Jewish power to deter attacks on Jews, while also using them as a catalyst for explaining the very need for Jewish power.

The final essays in our volume address other elements of power: philanthropic, intellectual, and cultural.

**JEFF SWARTZ**, the former CEO of Timberland and a major philanthropic supporter of Israel and Jewish communal life, contrasts the ways that power works in the secular American philanthropy system against a mindset infused with the Jewish values of *tzedakah*. The former, in his view, invests too much power with the giver, who can be entirely independent and without accountability. The latter, by contrast, flattens power dynamics, empowers recipients, prioritizes principles of humility and communal responsibility,

and rests on “eternal standards” of accountability. “Building Jewish destiny,” he writes, “is not redistributing my wealth to you; it means sharing together the job of building a Jewish future.”

**ELISA SPUNGEN BILDNER** and **ROBERT BILDNER**, experienced and entrepreneurial Jewish givers, puncture the myth of the malevolent, power-wielding philanthropist. The lever the philanthropist wields is not power, they argue, but *influence*, which is built through relationships characterized by trust and mutual respect. Drawing on their years of philanthropic work, they describe the ways their mindset of “investment, collaboration, and partnership” can enable grant recipients to flourish, while creating strong boards and funder partnerships that are diverse and inclusive of multiple perspectives.

Professor **JONATHAN D. SARNA** calls our attention to an underappreciated area of power in communal life: the power the scholarly expert wields in producing knowledge about Jews. This power is compromised, he argues, by the contemporary turn to explicit scholar-advocacy. Scholars who replace liberal values of empiricism and political neutrality with politics and ideology threaten the trust placed in them by their students and the communities that often hire them to speak, teach, and conduct research. Given the degree to which Jewish communal organizations rely on academics to produce the knowledge that then leads to communal policymaking, it is critical to understand the new hybridization of scholarship and activism.

**THANE ROSENBAUM** closes the volume with an urgent polemic about the danger that “woke” beliefs pose not just to liberal American culture in general but, more specifically, to the Jewish place in that culture. The Jewish contribution to what we think of as “American culture”—from denim jeans by Levi Strauss to songs such as “White Christmas” by Irving Berlin—is undeniable and immense. Yet it is under threat by a new ethic of outrage and cen-

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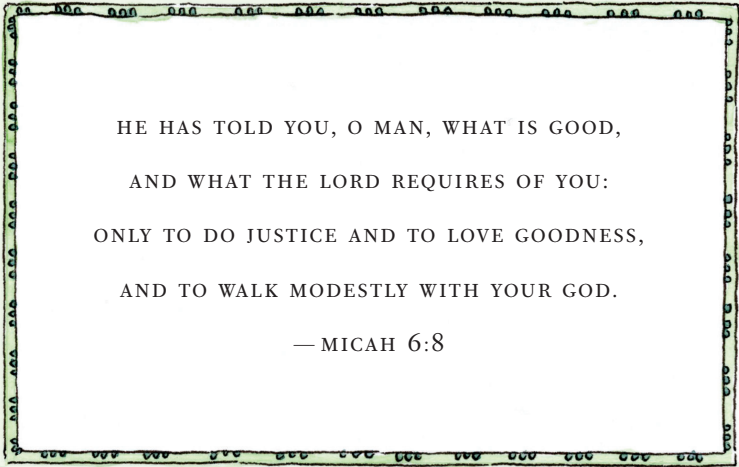
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soriousness and a commitment to equity over excellence or merit that undermines the creativity, individualism, and commitment to excellence that make great cultures thrive. Rosenbaum urges Jewish culture-makers to reject this framework and devote their considerable talents and resources to Jewish arts, culture, and humanities, “refocusing our energies on existing Jewish institutions and joining together with other true liberals to create new ones.”

For many Jewish communal leaders, the most dispiriting of the many public declarations about the hostilities between Israel and Hamas raging as the authors of this issue completed their essays was the letter signed by more than 100 American Jewish rabbinical students expressing sympathy for the Palestinians while ignoring entirely the suffering of those living in Israel (Jewish or otherwise). Among the many things the students expressed anguish and shock over was that “our Israel has the military and controls the borders... that... Israel’s choices come from a place of power.”

Reckoning maturely with the realities of Jewish power means acknowledging its necessity, in Israel and for Jews around the world. Since 1948, the existence of a sovereign Jewish state has backstopped Jewish life in a highly changeable Diaspora as much as it has protected the lives of Israelis. Jews are responsible for one another, even if we are also responsible for others.

Leading the Jewish people requires loving the Jewish people in all of its diversity — *ahavat Israel* — and accepting, as our tradition does, our frailties along with our strengths. It means striving to live up to Judaism's highest aspirations, while tempering idealism with reality. \*



HE HAS TOLD YOU, O MAN, WHAT IS GOOD,  
AND WHAT THE LORD REQUIRES OF YOU:  
ONLY TO DO JUSTICE AND TO LOVE GOODNESS,  
AND TO WALK MODESTLY WITH YOUR GOD.

— MICAH 6:8