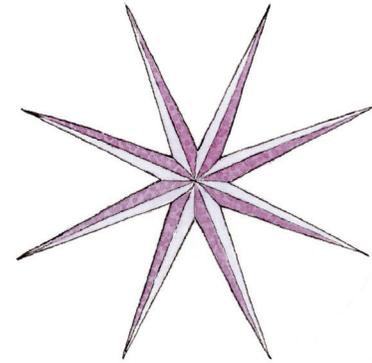


*And they saw the God of Israel:
Under His feet there was the
likeness of a pavement of
sapphire, like the very sky
for purity.*

— Exodus 24:10



S A P I R

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Note on the cover: The central illustration depicts the opening stanzas of Salamone Rossi's "Ha-shirim asher li-Shelomo," or *The Songs of Solomon*, a collection of 33 works for three to eight voices. Published just over 400 years ago in Venice, Italy, on Oct. 26, 1622, they are the first Hebrew polyphonic songs to be printed.

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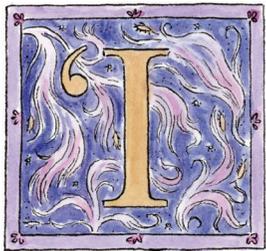
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Publisher's Note



'M DREAMING of a white Christmas.”

I'm writing this on a chilly Manhattan morning on December 20, from an office overlooking the gleaming windows of Macy's department store decked out in its holiday finest. My kids have long mocked my love of Christmas carols, which they had to endure every time they got in the car from Thanksgiving to New Year's. "They aren't our songs," they would protest. "They literally are," I would counter. All our (my) favorites were composed by Jews. But that's not really aberrant.

So much of American culture, especially throughout the 20th century, has powerful Jewish origins and influences. Dave Chappelle is right that "the Jews"—emphasis on the definite article—don't run Hollywood. But there have been a lot of Jews in that industry from its start. America was a place where dreams could be realized for Jews who had spent too much time not daring to dream. And if it didn't quite live up to their expectations, they would shape it into something that would.

"The Jews could simply create a new country—an empire of their own, so to speak... an America where... families (were) stable, people

attractive, resilient, resourceful, and decent," wrote the cultural historian Neal Gabler. Nor has the influence of Jews been restricted to Hollywood or holiday standards. It can be felt in theater, comedy, music, literature, the arts and more. While America has been very good for the Jews, the Jews have been very good for America.

Jews still have a disproportionate influence on American culture. But is that influence particularly Jewish? Irving Berlin's father was a cantor who gave Hebrew lessons to support his family when they moved to New York after fleeing the pogroms of Russia. Louis B. Mayer was raised in a Yiddish-speaking household. Philip Roth was, well, Philip Roth. Their worldview was shaped by a thick Jewish experience, lexicon, and values—no matter whether they were inspired by them or rebelling against them. We see a different version of this in Israel today, where young filmmakers are reclaiming biblical narratives and pop stars are quoting psalms in their works.

While there are some deeply Jewish purveyors of culture in America, I don't think that can be characterized as the norm. When does culture influenced by Jews who are bereft of Jewish literacy cease being Jewish culture, or even Jewish-influenced culture? Does American culture suffer as a consequence? Or does it simply find an alternative voice, better suited to a new century?

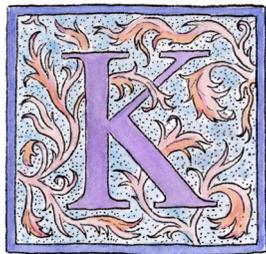
We hope these and other questions will appeal to our readers, those who have been with us from the start as well as new ones. And we hope you can enjoy them by the fire, along with the smell of roasting chestnuts. After all, it is the most wonderful time of the year—a song written in 1963 by Edward Pola, born Sidney Pollacsek, and George Wyle, born Bernard Weissman. In case you didn't know. *

PART ONE

CRITIQUING
CULTURE



From *My Dinner with Andre* to That Dinner with Kanye



KANYE WEST was nowhere near our minds when, last summer, the editors of SAPIR decided to devote the current issue to the theme of culture. We wanted to focus on the rich varieties of culture that Jews produce and participate in, rather than dwell on the larger culture we inhabit. The Jewish story has never been, and must never be, solely a matter of outrage and fear.

But when one of America's most significant cultural trendsetters decides to go "death con 3" on "JEWISH PEOPLE," and the former president of the United States has him and a notorious Holocaust denier over for dinner, then it's natural for nearly every Jew in America to ask some version of the same question: "WTF?" How did the cultural ground shift so suddenly, and so shockingly, under our feet?

The answer is that it did not happen suddenly. The shift has been taking place over decades. And it has less to do with the status

of Jews in America than it does with the transformation of American culture itself. Think of this as a journey—or a descent—from *My Dinner with Andre* to that dinner with Kanye.

My Dinner with Andre was a 1981 film directed by Louis Malle. It consists almost entirely of a long conversation at the Café des Artistes in Manhattan between the actor Wallace Shawn and the theater director André Gregory, each more or less playing himself. Shawn and Gregory are both Jewish, both products of Harvard, both New Yorkers, both deeply serious about art, theater, the future of humanity, both concerned with the question of the good life.

As a philosophical dialogue, the film is overrated. Still, it was a hit with audiences and critics and remained a cultural landmark for years. It operates on the premise that the things that really matter are the shape of ideas and the interpretation of experiences. And it models a sort of humane ideal for those who, even when at sea in their personal or professional lives, can always find a harbor in warm and serious conversation.

Could a movie like *My Dinner with Andre* be made today, much less do well commercially? It seems doubtful. There is no profanity, violence, comedy, sex, special effects, political diatribes, excursions into victimhood, or shocking personal revelations. The only action is speech. Its passing literary and historical references are to Austen, Bulgakov, Melville, and Speer, among others. To the extent that it has a central theme, it is the fears and anxieties of a pair of urbane middle-aged men.

But it got made because Shawn and Gregory were able to find a famous director who believed in the script. And it succeeded because there was a reasonably large audience that was in tune with its sensibilities and preoccupations and believed it was worth seeing.

This was an audience that shared a certain frame of cultural references. Edmund Wilson and Mary McCarthy would have been

familiar and important names. So would Saul Bellow and John Updike, Lionel Trilling and Christopher Lasch, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Andrei Sakharov. Politically, most of the audience would probably have seen Ronald Reagan as an intellectual lightweight unworthy of high office. But they would also have been electrified by the Solidarity movement in Poland and alarmed by the revolution in Iran. And the idea of Western civilization would have been precious to them.

That audience, and the culture that mattered to it, was not exclusively or even predominantly Jewish. But it was a milieu where Jews could thrive, and not simply because the barriers of discrimination had by then been mostly swept away. It was also a culture that delighted in the written word. It was familiar with the substance—and distrustful of the consequences—of Big Ideas. It saw skepticism as a virtue. If a single personal characteristic defined it, it was intelligent self-doubt. It knew how to be serious without taking itself seriously.

The culture in which *My Dinner with Andre* met with success was also, in many ways, a troubled one. A generation reared on books in the 1940s and '50s was raising children reared on TV. The rebellious but idealistic youth culture of the 1960s had dissolved into the self-involved and cynical culture of the 1970s and '80s. The academy was in the process of giving tenure to the same radicals who had trashed campus life a decade earlier. Urban life was collapsing. The country was reeling from Watergate, inflation, and the Iran hostage crisis.

But for all the culture's troubles, it was still one that had an instinctive reverence for the power of language, the life of the mind, the world of ideas. In 1982, a few months after *My Dinner with Andre* came out, Reagan gave a speech to the British Parliament. It contained the following lines:

We're approaching the end of a bloody century plagued by a terrible political invention—totalitarianism. Optimism comes less easily today, not because democracy is less vigorous, but because

But for all the culture's troubles, it was still one that had an instinctive reverence for the power of language, the life of the mind, the world of ideas.

democracy's enemies have refined their instruments of repression. Yet optimism is in order, because day by day democracy is proving itself to be a not-at-all-fragile flower. From Stettin on the Baltic to Varna on the Black Sea, the regimes planted by totalitarianism have had more than 30 years to establish their legitimacy. But none—not one regime—has yet been able to risk free elections. Regimes planted by bayonets do not take root.

It's hard to imagine any American politician employing (or even having the capacity for) this kind of oratory today, with its understated echoes of Churchill, its elegant use of metaphor, its philosophical appreciation of the inner weakness of all dictatorships, its accurate prediction that free societies would ultimately endure while Marxist ones were headed for the "ash heap of history." Perhaps the right measure of American culture in the early 1980s is that such a speech would be understood by a broad, and broadly educated, public. It was the kind of public that could turn *My Dinner with Andre* into a sleeper hit.

Some 40 years later came that dinner with Kanye.

Not everything that happened in American culture in the intervening decades was bad. Cities (at least until a couple of years ago)

became safer and more livable. Women, minorities, and openly gay people rose to positions of influence and power. New industries, based on technologies barely conceivable in the early '80s, were born and flourished. We lofted telescopes that stretched our vistas to the end of space and the beginning of time.

But bad things happened, too—six things in particular. We became ignorant. We became coarse. We devalued the notion of intellectual merit. We became obsessed with identity. We became addicted to outrage. And we got used to it all.

Ignorance: Until the 1970s, American grade schools led the world in educational attainment. No longer. Among Millennials, our literacy scores rank fourth from last among the world's developed nations. As for numeracy: dead last. "Whereas students in the 12th grade used to read at the 12th-grade level, our reading experts tell us that a large fraction, probably a majority, of our high school graduates read at 7th- or 8th-grade level now," the education expert Marc Tucker wrote in 2015. "Similarly, we have learned that the same high school graduates are not being asked to do high school math in our open-admissions colleges and many other colleges because they cannot do it, and are having a hard time with middle school math when they get to college."

Coarseness: In 2021, around the time that Dr. Seuss's publisher was pulling *If I Ran a Zoo* and several other of his titles from their catalogue over purportedly insensitive imagery, the No. 1 song in America was Cardi B's "WAP." It stands for...look it up. Children today frequently learn what they know—or think they know—about sex from hard-core pornography. Bill Clinton normalized sexually predatory behavior by a president, though the fact wasn't fully acknowledged until 20 years later, when Donald Trump normalized sexually predatory behavior by a presidential candidate.

Intellectual merit: The things American culture seems to value most today are self-expression, diversity, inclusion, participation, feeling "safe," and social justice. These are not necessarily bad values.

But, outside certain fields, the mid-century notion that top spots at elite institutions should go to the brightest and most capable people now seems quaint at best. As a result, these institutions, particularly in cultural spheres, are staffed and led by people who owe their position to a self-perpetuating, left-leaning system of race, gender, and ethnic quotas. On the opposite end of the political spectrum, intellectual achievement is often viewed with automatic suspicion, as if a degree from an elite university is evidence of cultural or moral unreliability.

Identity politics: The devaluation of intellectual merit is positively correlated with the rise of identity politics as the entrance requirement into an ever-growing number of conversations, opportunities, and positions in American life. "As a person of X, I think Y" has become the way in which many people now give themselves permission to speak. At the same time, it is also the mechanism by which people are denied that permission: A novelist who is not, say, Hispanic, had better not write a book with Hispanic characters, even heroic ones, if he or she hopes to get it published. Further: The weaponization of identity politics now works to silence not just speech but also, increasingly, thought, imagination, and empathy. That weaponization also finds echoes on the right, which is playing catch-up with the kind of repulsive identity politics typified by the "White Lives Matter" tropes favored by the likes of Tucker Carlson.

Outrage: America has been an angry country before—in the run-up to the Civil War; in the wake of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination; at the height of the Vietnam War. But now we have a kind of outrage culture—one that is incessant, often performative, and unappeasable. We have abandoned old habits of intellectual humility and adopted new ones of moral certitude. We have lost the art of conversation with people with whom we disagree. We are also losing the opportunity for conversation, living as we increasingly do in ideologically homogenous communities, both online and in actual life. The result is that half the country now looks

It used to be the case in American politics that the fringes bent toward the center — that is, extremists would try to present themselves in softer colors to gain political advantage. In recent years, it is the center that bends toward the fringe.

at the other half as a foreign and hostile tribe. We distrust their motives, disdain their thinking, despise their hopes. And, deep down, we want to destroy them.

Normalization: Daniel Patrick Moynihan coined the phrase “defining deviancy down” to describe the way in which Americans in the early 1990s had become accustomed to levels of criminality that would have been unthinkable, and unacceptable, to previous generations. Dostoevsky put it a different way: “Man grows used to everything, the scoundrel!” Americans have grown sadly used to a world where people who know nothing can say anything, no matter how vacuous or vituperative, provided they don’t run afoul of the shibboleths of identity that, not long ago, we thought it was America’s purpose to overcome.

This is the degraded culture in which Donald Trump had Kanye West over for dinner.

At first blush, the outcome of that dinner should give American Jews grounds for some hope. Neither Trump nor West seemed to emerge stronger from it. Among conservatives, the dinner

compounded the impression of Trump’s bad judgment following the disastrous performance of his preferred midterm candidates. Among progressives, it confirmed their view of West as the ultimate Uncle Tom.

And yet, as John Podhoretz astutely notes in this issue, people like West and Trump “are hearing and responding to cultural whistles inaudible to Americans who live where the transmission frequencies are within recognizable boundaries.” “Subculture hatreds,” he adds, “have a means of organizing themselves as they never have before.”

Contrary to suggestions that West’s hatred of Jews was a function of his “white supremacy,” in truth his hatreds spring from a tradition of black antisemitism that stretches back decades but is rarely discussed in mainstream media. As of 2016, roughly a quarter of black Americans harbored antisemitic views, according to years of survey data from the Anti-Defamation League. (For the general U.S. population, the figure was 14 percent.) Louis Farrakhan retains his cachet in much of the black community, particularly among celebrities and radical black academics. And Black Lives Matter has made common cause with the most extreme elements of the BDS movement, with some BLM leaders calling for the destruction of “the imperialist project that’s called Israel.”

As for Trump, many Jewish conservatives expressed shock that “the best friend Israel ever had in the White House” would be willing to sit down with West *after* the latter’s “death con 3” tweets. Why the shock? The former president is nothing if not the country’s foremost conspiracy theorist. Antisemitism is nothing if not the world’s foremost conspiracy theory. And West is nothing if not America’s foremost antisemite. These things have a way of meeting up, figuratively and, in this case, literally. Trump also has a history of playing footsie with the most extreme fringes of the Right, the ones who came out for him on January 6. Moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem does nothing to erase two inconvenient facts: first, that in Trump, the worst elements of the

American Right saw a champion; second, that he does nothing to dissuade them from their admiration.

American Jews should not underestimate the effects of this play to the extremes. It used to be the case in American politics that the fringes bent toward the center—that is, extremists would try to present themselves in softer colors to gain political advantage. In recent years, it is the center that bends toward the fringe. Chuck Schumer fears a political challenge from Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Kevin McCarthy needs the support of people such as Marjorie Taylor Greene. Primary voters reward candidates—such as Pennsylvania’s Doug Mastriano—who openly play to antisemitic prejudices. Whether the election results chasten those primary voters remains to be seen. But they have shown us who they are.

So it’s the deep cultural current, not the surface political wave, that should worry us most. As another Moynihan maxim reminds us: “The central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics, that determines the success of a society.” The politics that have been failing us for the past several years are the result of a culture that has been failing us for the past several decades. Eventually, the accumulating effects of a degraded educational system and the vulgarization of nearly every aspect of culture are bound to have consequences.



How, then, do we save the culture? As Frost might say, “I can see no way out but through.” Three thoughts:

First, we need to relearn the dying art of disagreement. To disagree well, it’s necessary to understand well. To understand well, it’s necessary to engage deeply and empathetically with opposing points of view. To engage that way is to open ourselves to the possibility that we might discover errors of our own, to open our ears so that we may be able to change our minds.

The politics that have been failing us for the past several years are the result of a culture that has been failing us for the past several decades.

That is what used to be at the core of a liberal-arts education. It’s been lost as grade schools and universities have become zones of intellectual mediocrity and ideological conformity. Since that is unlikely to change, we need to create workarounds. Summer schools such as those offered by the Tikvah Fund and programs like the Open Society Foundations’ Global Debates are good models. But how about media platforms that devote themselves to showcasing the intelligent confrontation of ideas, rather than advancing a single point of view? Or academic departments that deliberately seek ideological heterodoxy among their faculty? This is a task for university presidents and trustees as well as entrepreneurs and philanthropists. They need to step forward.

Second, we need the aid of religion. Cultural change does not inevitably mean cultural decline. Revitalization is also possible, but only if a culture knows that it is ailing, discovers a renewed sense of purpose, and develops practices that advance that purpose. Organized religion can help, provided it is yoked to a civic consciousness that understands that what America desperately needs is empathy, depolarization, and a recommitment to the foundational ideas of a free society and the rule of law.

The task would be helped along by charismatic clergy that can speak convincingly to audiences across sectarian and partisan divides. Here again, philanthropy plays a vital role—to train clergy in the habits of a free mind; to foster intelligent conversation

among leading secular and religious figures; to uphold the principles of a free society based on religious pluralism and respect for individual conscience. The John Templeton Foundation and Lilly Endowment are some of the organizations engaged in this kind of work. There need to be more.

Finally, we should do much more to confront the current plague of historical illiteracy, if only to remind younger generations of the catastrophic consequences of dangerous ideas left unchecked. The word “Balkanization” used to mean something to Americans, particularly those who witnessed the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia. But how many young Americans have even heard of Yugoslavia today, much less of the extreme identity politics that overtook Serbia in those years? Similarly, those who grew up behind the Iron Curtain have a keen understanding of what it means to live under regimes where mediocrity reigns, independent thought is forbidden, and political slogans are “true” — even when they are patently false. It would be a start if young Americans simply knew what the Iron Curtain was, why it descended across Europe, and how it was finally torn down.

Right now, the historical profession in the United States is in deep trouble, mostly of its own making. But the hunger for good history — history that tries to understand the past on its own terms rather than twist it to our current purposes — is strong. What kind of effort could restore it to health? The question should be on the mind of every ambitious philanthropist and university president.



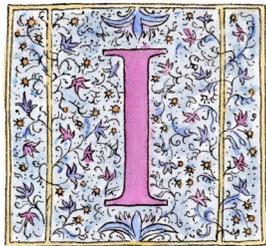
None of these steps alone will suffice to restore America’s culture to its former vitality. But we need to start with the recognition that the patient has been ailing for a long time and that a decadent culture inevitably has grave political consequences. For now, we are fortunate that both Trump and West are — or at least seem to be — two

of the culture’s most recent has-beens. Their day just passed, though mainly for reasons that have nothing to do with their innate odiousness: the former president’s midterm misjudgments; the artist’s apparent struggles with his mental health.

We won’t always be this lucky. The work of saving a culture from itself does not happen by itself. Let’s talk it over at dinner one evening. I know of a good place on West 67th Street. *

December 17, 2022

‘A Swinging Bunch of People’ No Longer



IN THE LATE 1950s, there was no one cooler than Sammy Davis Jr. That may seem hard to fathom for those of us who grew up during or after the revolutionary social and cultural changes of the 1960s, which made Davis’s greased hair, shiny clothes, and ring-a-ding-ding mannerisms seem dated and cringe-inducing. But Davis was, in the estimation of nearly everyone who saw him perform in person, the most talented entertainer anyone had ever seen—a singer with a gorgeous voice, a dancer of genius, and a mimic whose impersonations of other celebrities were uncanny. All that, and a certain indefinable sang-froid that peeked through even as Davis was thirsting for love and approval, gave him remarkable cachet.

Davis also became, in 1961, one of the most famous converts to Judaism in American history, if not the history of the world. And he

was hardly the only celebrity convert to make headlines. Elizabeth Taylor, maybe the biggest female star of the day and perhaps of all time, had converted in 1959 between her marriages to the impresario Michael Todd—the son of an Orthodox rabbi who died in a plane crash only a year into their happy coupling—and the Catskills crooner Eddie Fisher, whose big hit was “My Yiddishe Mama.”

Taylor had herself been preceded into Judaism by Marilyn Monroe, who converted in 1956. Monroe did so upon marrying the playwright Arthur Miller, who actually cared little for his Jewish heritage and explicitly turned away from writing about Jews in 1948. But the people Monroe trusted the most in the world were Jews like Miller—her acting teachers Lee and Paula Strasberg in particular—and she felt comforted by the religion.

It goes without saying that none of them would have dared or bothered or sought conversion if it had been inimical to their career interests, since for all three, career interests were paramount. Three generations later, we American Jews find ourselves facing a new cultural model of antisemitism. There’s an argument to be made that Kanye West is a 21st-century version of Sammy Davis Jr., but while Davis joined The Chosen, West has become the most nakedly antisemitic cultural figure we’ve seen in American public life in a dog’s age.

Sammy Davis Jr. was attracted to Judaism; West has been seduced by the oldest and most enduring hatred on earth. Why? For one thing, West may be mentally ill, while Davis most definitely was not. But West is also fashion-forward, as Davis was, and fashion-forward people have some sort of internal barometer that keeps them from going outside a boundary they cannot cross back from. That barometer helped guide West to the conclusion that he would not be in danger of seeming culturally off by expressing vile sentiments about Jewish doctors, among others. He might lose endorsements and become a font of scandal, but he wouldn’t be uncool.

But for Davis, cool was his brand, and that brand was somehow enhanced by choosing Chosenness. Jews, he said, were “a swinging

bunch of people.” So what was it about Judaism 60 years ago that made the Jewish people swing? And is that allure from long ago reproducible today, when Jews face a new cultural model of antisemitism? Can the old cool become the new cool? And would we want it to?

There was something culturally unprecedented about the rising status of Jewry in the period after the Second World War. Increasing Jewish success in America was an annunciation of a kind—a declaration that, especially in the wake of the Holocaust, this remnant of a nearly destroyed civilization-within-Western-civilization would flourish in America not only as a resounding refutation of Hitler’s evil designs but also as a mark of this country’s goodness and charity in having fought and won the war that saved them. The hunger to contribute to the American storehouse of riches helped drive Jews to great heights. American Jewish novelists took center stage, and Jewish artists moved to the forefront of American culture—as orchestra conductors, musicians, poets, painters. But this astonishing set of achievements wasn’t instantaneous. It had been built on a foundation of a half-century of quieter successes.

From the beginning of the 20th century, Jews had punched above their weight wherever they could in America, in areas such as the law and medicine. More important, they had been entrepreneurial in new industries that the old order overlooked and in which they could therefore circumvent the structural antisemitism of the older professions—in particular, the new media that took root in the motion-picture industry and in radio and television. A classic story: In 1912, a 23-year-old kid with a thick Yiddish accent named David Sarnoff was working for the Marconi Wireless Telegraph Company when messages began coming in about the disaster on the *Titanic*. It was one of the first worldwide news events unfolding in real time, and Sarnoff foresaw the future of global communications in that

Whatever we are and whatever we can be,
we cannot be cool. Cool has a transgressive
aspect, and Jews are the ultimate A students
who want to please the teacher and get in
good with the administration.

instant. He was there as the guiding hand over the next 15 years while Marconi morphed into RCA and then into NBC.

It was on Sarnoff’s national network, NBC Radio, that a writer and performer named Gertrude Berg created a program eventually called “The Goldbergs.” It was a show about a Jewish family in the Bronx that ran daily for two decades and did as much to provide a positive image of the Jewish people for non-Jews in its time as *The Cosby Show* did in the 1980s in showing Americans what an upper-middle-class black family looked like—thereby setting the stage a generation later for the rise of Barack Obama.

Through the first half of the 20th century, then, Jews were on the rise, with many Jews involved in building the entertainment industry and mass media from scratch—in part, as I said, because there were no barriers to entry as there were almost everywhere else. They were strivers looking for ways around locked doors, and they found interior resources to chart innovative paths from a rich cultural tradition that privileged brains over brawn. But while they were rising, they were still on the outside looking in.

So this duality—uncommon success without elevated social standing—made Jews seem admirable examples of an American ideal. They were self-made men, and if they could do it despite their social handicaps, maybe everyone else could, too. They knew something valuable, and that something valuable came from the thing

We need to capitalize on the century of Jewish-American achievement as a form of cultural self-defense—and use, on our own behalf, the very power the West and others are so disgusted by.

that made them different—their Jewishness, their Judaism. And the difference remained the point, as well as a spur to the resentment Jews could incur.

According to her friend Paula Strasberg, Marilyn Monroe said, “I can identify with the Jews. Everybody’s out to get them, no matter what, just like me.” Elizabeth Taylor told her biographer Kitty Kelley, “I felt terribly sorry for the suffering of the Jews during the war. I was attracted to their heritage. I guess I identified with them as underdogs.” And Davis told Mike Wallace in an hour-long interview that Jews and blacks had similar histories as oppressed people who found means to overcome adversity. In 1948, in *Commentary*, James Baldwin described a Sunday service in which a Harlem preacher condemned the Jews for denying Christ and said they deserved the suffering that has been their lot. The strange effect of his condemnation on his African-American congregation: “Though the notion of the suffering is based on the image of the wandering, exiled Jew, the context changes imperceptibly, to become a fairly obvious reminder of the trials of the Negro, while the sins recounted are the sins of the American republic. At this point, the Negro identifies himself almost wholly with the Jew.”

These three celebrity conversions took place just before the barriers to entry against Jewish participation in the most elite American institutions came crashing down. The Ivy Leagues lifted

their quotas on Jewish admission. Law firms and brokerages and banks and corporations became hospitable to Jewish professionals. Jewish presence and participation in all walks of American life are now taken almost entirely for granted—and when Gentile celebrities today convert upon marrying Jewish spouses or promise to raise their kids as Jews, it’s a matter only of delighted note to pop-culture-mad Jews happy to claim Zooey Deschanel or Michelle Williams or Quentin Tarantino as one of our own.

Which means that secular or mildly observant Jews can no longer claim to be outsiders in American culture. We may not have our Christmas mornings booked, and we may not paint Easter eggs, but we are not on the sidelines any longer. In fact, as shown in the disgraceful lack of Jewish participation in the lawsuits targeting the new Ivy League discrimination against Asians—a recapitulation in almost every respect of the barriers put up against us once upon a time—many Jews are themselves now beneficiaries of the ancillary boons that come from generations of elite education and professional networking, boons that they do not wish to sacrifice.

Therefore, whatever we are and whatever we can be, we cannot be cool. Cool has a transgressive aspect, and Jews are the ultimate A students who want to please the teacher and get in good with the administration. Nor can we hope to win over the likes of West with efforts to convince him that Jews also have a history of oppression, and that Jews today are under a new kind of threat—a threat that he himself represents in part. Indeed, West’s own conduct shows how potentially double-edged the undeniable Jewish success in non-Jewish America might be in the long term. Throughout history, Jews who have made their mark in Diaspora societies have seen their unexpected prominence used as a weapon against them. America has been different from every other place Jews have lived since the birth of Christ, in no small measure because protections of individual liberty and religious liberty are the country’s foundational writ.

But America is more than just its government. There is a continuity between Kanye West—the billionaire son of a college

professor — and a teenage thug on the streets of Brooklyn who comes up behind a Haredi Jew and punches him in the head. They are hearing and responding to cultural whistles inaudible to Americans who live where the transmission frequencies are within recognizable boundaries — just like the supremacists who have shot up three synagogues over three years in Pennsylvania, California, and Texas. That is another difference in the makeup of American culture from what it was three generations ago. Subculture hatreds have a means of organizing themselves as they never have before.

As Dara Horn and others have pointed out, Jews generate particular sympathy from non-Jews when they seem weak, or when they're killed solely for the crime of being Jewish. There is a strange but alluring temptation, therefore, to lean into the victimization of Jews over the past few years as a means of producing a more favorable atmosphere, the sort that might cause a West to consider conversion rather than becoming a modern-day mouthpiece for the ideas in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

But this would be exactly the wrong tack to take. For one thing, it would be a disgraceful way to respond to the violence being done to Jews today, and an intellectually indefensible way to instruct young Jews on how to respond to attacks on their identities as Jews. Instead, we need to capitalize on the century of Jewish-American achievement as a form of cultural self-defense — and use, on our own behalf, the very power that the West and others are so disgusted by. Just to offer a few possibilities: Rather than thinking efforts to combat Jew-hatred are best managed by nonprofit organizations excessively concerned with their own internal dynamics, Jews should go subject by subject, building coalitions of interest based on specific issues rather than the nebulous whole of “fighting antisemitism.” Localize things rather than fund nonprofit bureaucracies that do little but pay their staff to take lengthy vacations and participate in diversity, equity, and inclusion conferences.

Ad hoc gatherings of activists and donors at the local level can

demand the enforcement of laws in cities where the laws are now being ignored, and demand increased police presence in neighborhoods where Jews are at risk — and do so in the only way that works politically, by threatening politicians with resources spent against them if they fail to do so. When antisemites on college campuses say that Zionists are believers in an oppressive philosophy, take the fight to them by throwing historic Jewish indigeneity in the Holy Land back in their faces — and, again, use the community's very sizable resources to throw money at this argument.

We don't need to be cool. We need to be self-confident and angry and unashamed about using whatever power we have accrued to ensure that the demons of history do not emerge here. *

PART TWO

CREATING
CULTURE



Prophetic Fervor and the Jewish Writer



HE DECLINE AND FALL of everything is our daily dread, we are agitated in private life and tormented by public questions,” proclaimed Saul Bellow in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1976. “Give us this day our daily dread”—it would be interesting to know whether

Bellow’s Stockholm audience recognized the normality, for a Jew, of Bellow’s fraught disquiet. The decline and fall of everything, including the inner man, has been a Jewish study since there was an everything to decline and fall. Hence the proliferation of Jewish prophets for whom prophecies are not so much prognostications of trouble to come as scathing commentaries on the present: diatribes and lamentations that are terrible indeed, but at last, because they describe the way we are, consoling in the way that watching a tragedy can be consoling. If this is to be the consequence of how we live, let us behold and own it. In making us look at the worst, the

prophets performed functions we grant today to artists, writers, and even comedians who abuse us for our own good. Would it be too fantastical to think of Jeremiah and Isaiah as forerunners of Malamud and Mailer? Ezekiel as a dry run for Lenny Bruce?

I don’t mean to push personal resemblances, but the lives no less than the utterances of the great prophets are troubled in ways we have come to think of as the divine privilege of the literary. Jeremiah tells of God anointing him as a wordsmith when he was just a child, covering his mouth and telling him, “Go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak.” Thereafter, curses pour from him like the cries of a demented monologist. In his oddities—lying on his left side for 390 days, shaving his head, baking his lunch on dung—Ezekiel evokes a character out of Kafka. (A Hunger Artist, maybe.) Isaiah atones for “his unclean lips” by allowing one of the seraphim to place a burning coal upon them, eats the stomach-souring scroll of prophetic commission from an angel’s hand, and preaches naked, pronouncing the God-given words that have explained Jews to themselves and powered Jewish art for centuries: “I the Lord have called unto you in righteousness, and have taken hold of your hand, and submitted you as the people’s covenant, as a light unto the nations.”

Never mind what a light unto nations means exactly or whether the ambition is foolhardy or overweening; it is enough that the covenant enjoins a disinterested seriousness of purpose on the Jewish people and that Jewish artists and writers have found in it a spur for work of the highest order. The spiritual urgency of Rothko could not have been achieved without it; nor would the nagging irreligious priestliness of Philip Roth have otherwise dared show its face. In *Herzog*, Saul Bellow pulls off nothing short of covenantal comedy. Even as his plot to murder the man who cuckolds him degenerates into demeaning failure and farce, Herzog holds fast to his fastidious pedantry, an aspirant, come what may, to the crown of exemplary grandeur that Isaiah holds out to the Jews.

If there was an extraordinary flowering of Jewish writing in

A new prophecy for our times is what we look to Jewish writers for now. A flurry of art, hot from the mouth of God, as alive to the teeming world of men and women as were Jeremiah's denunciations, but no less admonitory.

America in the 1960s, it was because there was prophetic work of the old sort to be done. Along with the vitality of the times went gross laxities of morality, thinking, and expression of the kind that the new Jewish prophets felt that God had commanded them to assail. Think of it as a rage for seriousness. Roth's heroes would go on correcting their mistresses' grammar even while enacting the most outlandish desires on them. Bellow's exacting intellectualism survived every act of sexual indecorousness. To be a wife or mistress in a novel by Saul Bellow is to have Lionel Trilling in bed with you. And on occasions, Groucho Marx as well.

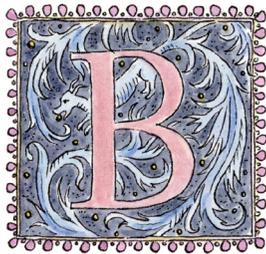
After a not quite explicable leave of absence (it might simply be that distractions from seriousness have multiplied or that the material success of the previous generation makes it ripe for reprimand), prophetic fervor seems called for once more. Bellow, a garrulous but reliable guide in these matters, alerted the civilized world to those distractions from seriousness in a lecture he wrote some dozen years after his Nobel acceptance speech. "The writer cannot make the seas of distraction stand still, but he can at times come between the madly distracted and the distractions." And how does the writer do that? "By opening another world."

Thirty years on again, the call to open that other world is still more compelling. The politics of diversity goes on distracting from the essential austerity of aesthetics. Language has stopped being

a currency in which the generations can communicate. Falsehood brazenly outfaces truth. That which is considered popular plumbs depths of unimaginable triviality. And cyberspeak cows the intellectual classes who fear sounding like relics of an older age if they dare inveigh against it. It is no surprise anymore to hear the educated affirm that if Shakespeare were alive today, he'd write for *Game of Thrones*, and God, could we hear him, would apologize for divisive language. This is what I take Julien Benda to have meant by *La Trahison des clercs*. But then Benda was a Jew.

A new prophecy for our times is what we look to Jewish writers for now. A flurry of art, hot from the mouth of God, as alive to the teeming world of men and women as were Jeremiah's denunciations, but no less admonitory, perhaps a little less Chicago and Newark street-smart this time around, and a little more "old European" in the Singer style, or "new Israeli" in the tragic manner of David Grossman, but still manic in its high-mindedness, blasphemous, hilarious, and above all unapologetic. The great prophets knew what to say to the back-sliding Jew, long before the back-sliding Jew had Zionism as his excuse. They cannot be a light unto other nations who denigrate their own. *

Judaism Without Borders, Diaspora Without Tears



BACK IN 2008, I heard the feminist critic Vivian Gornick speak at the Radcliffe Institute about Saul Bellow and Philip Roth. Gornick said that these novelists represented the full flowering of Jewish-American literature—and the end of the line. Post-immigrant, urban, misogynist, funny, angry, and famous in the broader literary world, Bellow and Roth bookended a particular cultural moment. Their work was inimitable, and their stature could not be replicated.

At the end of this talk, historian Steven Zipperstein stood to ask a long, erudite question. I don't remember exactly how he phrased it, but the gist was—don't you think Jewish-American writing continues? Isn't it possible that others are carrying the torch?

Gornick listened intently. Then, smiling, she answered, “No, sweetheart. You don't understand.”

It's not wrong to look at Roth and Bellow and call their accomplishments unique. But art evolves even after great artists are gone. To name just a few, Michael Chabon, Jonathan Safran Foer, Nathan Englander, Nicole Krauss, Molly Antopol, Omer Friedlander, and I continue to contribute to Jewish-American literature. We differ in background, style, and interests, but we engage with Judaism and Israel and the aftermath of the Holocaust. I am sure that each of us would define Jewish-American writing differently—but this is how I would describe my work.

I was raised far from the large Jewish communities that Roth and Bellow knew. *The World of Our Fathers* was not the world of my father, who grew up in Los Angeles, where he attended Hebrew High School. I was born in Brooklyn, but when I was two, my parents moved to Honolulu to teach at the University of Hawaii.

I read about the Lower East Side in books such as *All-of-a-Kind Family*. In the summers, I flew with my family to New York to visit—but in my experience, the cultural neuroses Roth mocked and celebrated did not loom large, nor did Bellow's sense of overcoming and self-fashioning. At school, my classmates were Asian and Polynesian. The immigrant experience in Hawaii had nothing to do with Ellis Island.

Lacking numbers, Jews in Hawaii had little visibility in the 1970s and early 1980s. Our Israel Independence celebration, our tiny Hebrew school, the olive tree we planted at the zoo—all our activities were homemade. Really, we were just a few families. Parents trying to teach kids. I did not know what it was like to participate in a thriving youth group or attend day school. My biologist mother grew up in Brooklyn, and she was a graduate of Yeshivah Flatbush. She told me about the dual curriculum there, and when I was in elementary school, I remember her saying, “If we move back East now, you could catch up—but in a few years, it will be too late.”

The academic job market did not permit a quick move, and

my parents could not provide a day school education on their own—but they did instill a strong Jewish identity. This came from attending services on Shabbat. My philosopher father led *shacharit*, a Yemenite man named Tuki Barzilai read Torah every week, and we all pieced it together in a minyan that met in a Quonset hut and then in a Unitarian church and finally at the Reform temple, which did not hold services on Saturdays.

Through repetition, I learned the parts of the service. Because of my parents' commitment, Shabbat became a habit. This childhood practice shaped life for my sister and me. It influenced my work as well. I grew up knowing little about institutional Judaism, but Jewish spiritual life fascinated me. At 17, I wrote my first story about a tragicomic Hawaiian Yom Kippur led by a pair of Hasidic “baby rabbis” sent from the Mainland. The story, published in my collection *Total Immersion*, is called “And Also Much Cattle” and juxtaposes the Yom Kippur liturgy with the squabbles of a chaotic minyan.

Funny, sad, and intertextual, “And Also Much Cattle” touches on questions I continue to explore. What does it mean to be a Jew? How do people practice Judaism? What is it about Jewish liturgy that moves us even now? In style, my early stories were satirical, their situations odd. “Diaspora without tears,” my poet grandmother called my work.

Later, I adopted other voices, some serious and elegiac. “Where is the sparkling Allegra Goodman I used to know?” my editor Ted Solotaroff asked when he read an early draft of my novel *Kaaterskill Falls*. An old friend of Philip Roth's, he was a fan of my early stories. But I was interested in many moods and modes of Jewish life. Over time I've written about an Orthodox literary critic who does not believe in God (“Variant Text”), a seeker who travels to Jerusalem to learn (*Paradise Park*), a family sitting shiva for one day (“Apple Cake”)—these are all my people. I write about observance and its lack.

When Jewish life is lacking in my fiction, readers sometimes wonder how I position myself as a Jewish writer. Sometimes cautious,

I do not consider an observant Jew more Jewish than a secular one. And I don't think stories about observant Jews are more Jewish than those about assimilated Jews.

sometimes curious, sometimes challenging—the tone varies—but the observation is that at the beginning of my career, my work was very Jewish, and now it's less so. Why the change?

It's a fair question. While *Kaaterskill Falls* was about a deeply observant Jewish community, I seem to stray in later books. I write about scientists in *Intuition*, tech entrepreneurs in *The Cookbook Collector*, and teachers and gamers in *The Chalk Artist*. These novels contain Jewish characters whose Judaism is incidental rather than essential. But I don't think of this as a departure. The reason is that I do not consider an observant Jew more Jewish than a secular one. And I don't think stories about observant Jews are more Jewish than those about assimilated Jews. As a writer interested in the full spectrum of Judaism in America, I take nonobservant Jews—even non-identifying Jews—as my subject, too.

Right now, I am writing a story cycle informed by specifically Jewish occasions. Like my book *The Family Markowitz*, this collection is a multigenerational portrait of a family coming together and coming apart, celebrating a bat mitzvah, fighting at a seder, praying on the High Holidays, naming a baby at a bris.

In contrast, my new novel *Sam* is a coming-of-age story without Jewish holidays or rites of passage. Sam is about a girl growing up on the North Shore of Massachusetts. Her father doesn't live with her, and when he and Sam see each other, she is surprised to hear that he is Jewish.

On winter break, [Sam] . . . goes over to Halle's house and helps light candles for Hanukkah. Halle's mom and dad are Jewish, so they don't put up decorations. They don't even have a tree—but they do give one present per night for eight nights.

Sam tells her dad about this, and he says, "Oh yeah, I know. I'm Jewish too."

"What?" They are eating burgers on Rantoul Street, and he is stealing Sam's fries. "You never told me that. You never gave me eight presents."

"I'm non-practicing."

It's a small moment, and by the standards of Jewish educators, a sad one, but this conversation is part of Sam's life, and it reflects what I see in the world. American Judaism is rich. It's also impoverished. It is flourishing, and it is also dying. I am no demographer. I'm not an anthropologist or sociologist. I write about individuals, not groups—but my subject is broad. As a novelist, I write about the varieties of Jewish experience. My work is about Judaism in its specificity and its lingering traces. In some of my books, Judaism is overt on the page. In others, it is barely visible, an impression underneath the words, like a watermark on paper.

It is tricky to write about Judaism as a culture, and I think it's problematic to argue for a Jewish voice or a particular Jewish sensibility, or a Jewish sense of humor. Today, the Jewish-American community is both diffuse and diverse, lacking a shared idiom and collective memory. Few of us speak Yiddish, although many Americans know a few Yiddish words. Even our greatest novelists have, as Vivian Gornick suggests, become victims of their own success, their work assimilated into the canon of American literature. What's left, then, for latter-day Jewish-American writers? I would argue that for all of us, the Jewish-American community remains a rich source of material.

Assimilation is a rich subject in itself. As the immigrant experience recedes, intermarriage is more than a personal heartbreak,

as in Sholem Aleichem's *Tevye's Daughters*. It becomes a shared reality—and not always a tragic one. Conversion, adoption, heterogeneity enrich our community.

Many Jewish novelists touch upon the Holocaust, but few tackle the topic directly. We write at a moment when the last survivors are elderly, and the Holocaust is passing from living witnesses to historical record. The Holocaust has been a galvanizing force for many Jews—and Zionists. Will it remain that way? Will the Holocaust fade from Jewish consciousness? Or is the tragedy essential and indelible? I'm curious to see how Jewish-American writers engage with these questions. Nathan Englander does some of this work in his story "What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank" and his play by the same name.

I'm curious as well to watch the evolving role of Israel in Jewish-American writing. Instead of unifying our community, Israel has become a contentious subject. Certainly, Jewish-American writers take on the debate in editorials and essays. I wonder whether it is possible for us to reflect on Zionism not just politically but personally and aesthetically, as David Grossman and Etgar Keret do in Israel.

In America, our community is deeply divided and at the same time resurgent, with Jewish learning in day schools and adult education classes. This renaissance seems to me a vital subject. We live in an age of assimilation, but also the age of *Sefaria*. This is the nonethnic, post-deli Judaism that fascinates me. Jewish life beyond Roth, and Bellow, Woody Allen, and bagels and lox. I am interested in belief and skepticism, separatism and universalism, scripture, and tradition. And so, for me, there is no finer setting than a Reform synagogue, a fractious seder, or a traditional Yom Kippur service in Hawaii. Culture is in many ways ephemeral, but our religion endures. Judaism without borders, Diaspora without tears. *

The Jewish Future Needs Yiddish



AS MUSIC DIRECTOR for the Arbeter Ring (Workers Circle) network of schools and camps, Mikhl Gelbart wrote over 300 Yiddish songs, including songs for Purim, Passover, and everyday life. He was beloved by generations of students as a warm but demanding teacher. Gel-

bart died on December 20, 1962, exactly 60 years ago. You may not know his name, but one of his songs has endured in the wider world: If American Hanukkah can be said to have its own theme song, Gelbart's "Ikh bin a kleyner dreydl" is surely it.

Of course, the song is much better known in its English translation as "The Dreydl Song" or "I Have a Little Dreydl," with lyrics by Samuel Grossman. Grossman's translation-adaptation appeared not long after Gelbart's original. The exact timeline is still unclear, but one need only compare the two songs' lyrics to comprehend which came first.

Here is Gelbart, with my own literal translation: *Ikh bin a kleyner*

*dreydl/Gemakht bin ikh fun blay/To lomir ale shpiln/In dreydl
eyns tsvey dray:* "I am a little dreydl/Made out of lead/So let's all
play/Dreydl, one-two-three."

Grossman's translation-adaptation—"I have a little dreydl/I made it out of clay/And when it's dry and ready/Oh dreydl I will play"—features two transitions, changing the meaning of the song in both subtle and dramatic ways. The song's point of view is shifted from the dreydl itself to the child playing, while the dreydl's material changes from lead to clay.

Cast lead was the most common material used for dreydls in Europe, a tradition that continued in the United States until molded plastic became cheap and ubiquitous. Dreydls are never made out of clay, except as inert ornaments: Clay ones aren't balanced, and they wouldn't survive regular use. Grossman's dreydl is made from clay only because it rhymes with "play."

The cast-lead dreydl was a perfectly self-contained toy: It was fairly easy to manufacture and then recycle for other purposes after the holiday. Its Yiddish instructions were engraved on its body: nun (*nisht*, or nothing), giml (*gants*, take the whole pot), hey (*halb*, take half the pot), and shin (*shtel*, put in). But in America, those Yiddish instructions have been replaced with the Hebrew slogan *nes gadol hayah sham*, a great miracle happened there. It's a nice holiday sentiment but exasperatingly useless when no one can remember the rules of play.

Changing lead to clay also obscures how Yiddish culture was embedded in the larger culture in which its speakers lived. Unlike the clay dreydl of the American song, lead dreydls were material objects with a long European history, one that connects Jews to their neighbors. "Teetotum" and "trendel" were Latin and German names for spinning tops also used for games of chance, in which letters on each side also determined the outcome. It's not clear when the teetotum arrived in Europe, but it may have been well over a thousand years ago. It was probably in Germany that the Jews first encountered it, under the name "trendel."

The letters on the teetotum originally referred to Latin words

but were later adapted to new contexts. In England, the letters became T (take all), H (take half), N (take nothing) P (put in). The 1882 edition of *Cassell's Book of In-door Amusements, Card Games, and Fireside Fun* says that teetotums were used for a game called “Put and Take,” with small stakes like nuts used for betting. It’s no coincidence that *Cassell's* game sounds exactly like dreydl, for Jews were Europeans too and absorbed much of what their neighbors did. But they were also masters of cultural transformation, taking outside forms and putting them to Jewish uses.

All of this is buried by Samuel Grossman’s one-word lyric change from “lead” to “clay.” Of course, cultural change goes both ways: The American version also reveals an ocean of sociocultural transformation. The clay dreydl is a kind of golem of American Judaism, part of a powerful spell chanted endlessly by schoolchildren every year. It is an avatar of self-mystification on the part of American Jews, embodying the paradox of assimilation: the urge to forget in constant conflict with that which insists on being remembered.



But how much has been forgotten! A few years ago, I read Norbert Guterman’s translation of Bella Chagall’s beautiful Yiddish memoir, *Brenendike Likht*. In the chapter on Hanukkah, I was disappointed to see that he had chosen to use “teetotum” for what was obviously a dreydl. But when I went back to the Yiddish, there was no “dreydl” in sight: Bella Chagall calls it a “gor.” I was perplexed. After doing some digging, I eventually came across an entry in Dovid Katz’s atlas of Lithuanian Yiddish. He lists 16 different regional words for the thing we think of as “dreydl,” including “beyndl,” “varfl,” and yes, “gor,” in use in the Vitebsk area where Bella Chagall grew up.

I’m not suggesting that American Jews need to know that there are 16 different regional Yiddish terms for dreydl. But I am trying to illustrate the richness and variety of a Yiddish culture thoroughly obscure to almost all American Jews. The most basic competency in

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Yiddish, a language once spoken by 10 million Jews, somehow falls outside even the highest levels of Jewish literacy in America. The exception, of course, are those Haredi communities in America in which Yiddish is a first language. There are, in addition, “Yeshivish” communities of Orthodox Jews whose English incorporates traditional Yiddish terms, concepts, and even syntax. Of these two groups, however, the first live almost entirely in self-enclosed communities such as Williamsburg and Monsey; the second don’t use Yiddish as a vernacular. Today, then, only formal language-learning experiences can transmit Yiddish culture in mainstream American-Jewish culture.

And yet, if you suggested that your local Jewish day school make Yiddish a standard element of the curriculum, you’d probably be laughed out of the room. More than a century of denigration, shame, and erasure of Yiddish language and culture have made it almost impossible to have such a conversation. But modern American Jewish culture was built, in large part, by Yiddish-speaking Jews and their descendants. That is an objective, descriptive statement. That we trivialize and diminish the language reveals how much we have internalized the immigrants’ shame about their own culture and, by extension, about themselves.

This state of affairs is even more dramatic in Israel. Yiddish sits just beneath the surface of every modern Hebrew conversation: *Ma nishma?* How are you? —but literally, “What is heard?” —is a calque,

or direct translation of a phrase, in this case from the Yiddish, *vos hert zikh?* Similarly, *Lekh teda*, go figure, is literally, “go know,” a calque of *gey veys*. A whole culture is hidden in these ubiquitous calques. But they aren’t the only way Yiddish directly shaped modern Hebrew. Want to get down to *takhles*, to essentials? *Takhles* comes into modern Hebrew directly from Yiddish. How do we know? Like many words, *takhles* was brought into everyday Yiddish from Mishnaic Hebrew. When it finally came into modern Hebrew via that language’s first generations of “revivers,” its spelling preserved the Ashkenazic pronunciation, with a samekh at the end instead of a sof. Almost no one knows any of this. An Ashkenazi Israeli acquaintance recently told me she had always assumed *takhles* was an Arabic word! The marginalization of Yiddish in Israel, as well as America, is hard to overstate.

The examples cited above come from *Revivalistics: From the Genesis of Israeli to Language Reclamation in Australia and Beyond* (2020), by a linguist named Ghil’ad Zuckermann. He argues that in order to properly understand modern Hebrew (which he calls “Israeli”), we must first accept the “founder principle,” which states that “Yiddish is a primary contributor to Israeli because it was the mother tongue of the vast majority of the revivalists and first pioneers” of modern Hebrew, and that all other languages are secondary in this regard except for classical Hebrew.

What if we accepted the proposition that Yiddish culture was not marginal, but integral, to American- as well as Israeli-Jewish identity? The implications are profound and certainly not limited to matters historic or linguistic. I could fill a book, but I’ll bring (to borrow another Yiddish locution) just one small example here.

Consider the story of my friend Alex Weiser, the director of Public Programs at YIVO, the premiere center for Yiddish research in New York City. He was a composer of modern chamber music who knew very little of Yiddish when he got the YIVO job in 2016. A few months later, he took YIVO’s famously intensive summer course. That sparked a passionate interest in the language. In 2019, he

released an album of new musical settings for Yiddish poems by modernist masters such as Avrom Sutzkever and Anna Margolin. That album, *and all the days were purple*, was a finalist for the 2020 Pulitzer Prize in music.

I recently asked Alex why he set Yiddish poetry to music that doesn’t “sound Jewish” in the ways we might expect. Yiddish, he told me, is the key to thinking about what it means to be Jewish. “It opens up this wider world that is not just religion, not just national identity. It’s a different path, it can be complementary, it’s broader.” As Alex reminded me, composers such as Schubert and Schumann took up classic German poetry for their art songs. “If you’re Jewish and you want literary touchstones to deepen your sense of identity beyond what is easily available in mainstream Jewish or American culture, you get those things in Yiddish poetry, theater, novels. It’s a deeper sense of who you are as a Jew or who you can be.”



My own engagement with Yiddish has not merely enriched my life. I don’t know what kind of Jewish life I’d have at all, if not for Yiddish. Learning Yiddish made sense of my own life and family history. It gave me incredible community and endless creative material.

Many people assume Yiddishists are focused on movement in one direction, toward the past. But Yiddish culture isn’t simply some endpoint to be grasped and “preserved.” It is a vehicle by which we are always traveling between worlds, making discoveries, music, meaning, and, inevitably, remaking ourselves. The Yiddish cultural world, marginalized though it may be, has consistently been one of the most exciting centers of creativity and youth engagement in modern Jewish culture.

Over the past 40 years, thousands of young people have gone through programs at YIVO, the Yiddish Book Center, Klezkamp, Klezkanada, and other cultural festivals and events around the world. These young people are highly motivated and return to their

Jewish communities as leaders and innovators. Their participation is limited only by the very finite resources of most of these programs. And yet, the mainstream institutional world remains apathetic to the Yiddish world, if not outright hostile at times. I once heard a major Federation professional refer to Yiddish culture as an “off-ramp” away from Judaism!

How should the mainstream institutional Jewish world help Yiddish in America? Step one is to recognize that Yiddish and the people who are working with it are a crucial part of American Judaism. Step two, on the back of such a recognition: We must work toward making Yiddish part of the practice of mainstream American Jewry. For that, we need data. The next big population survey must gather data on language use and study. And step three is a commitment to making Yiddish available in Jewish schools. Such an initiative would require a serious investment in language teachers and resources. Yiddish culture is not an “off-ramp” away from Jewishness but a source of oxygen much needed by a living religion if it is to remain alive.

It’s a big ask. But the payoff would be immense. The Yiddish world would absolutely benefit from the support of the “mainstream” Jewish world. But the Yiddish world has even more to offer American Jews, in terms of knowledge, experience, and even leadership. Radical though it may seem to say so, American Jews need Yiddish more than Yiddish needs American Jews.



Composer Mikhl Gelbart himself is emblematic of everything gained and then lost in the sociocultural transformation from Europe to America. In his Yiddish-language memoir, *Fun Meshoyre-rim Lebn (Cantorial Choir Singers)*, published in 1942, Gelbart wrote about his childhood in Poland in the early 1900s. In a series of downright picaresque episodes, he describes being sent away from home and apprenticed to a cantor. He and the other boys in the

choir weren’t paid for their work, so they relied on tips to survive, supplemented by whatever else they could find.

The word “dreydl” comes up exactly once in Gelbart’s memoir, recalling the arrival of the gentleman who cast lead for that year’s dreydls. Presents were few and far between in his childhood, but that does nothing to diminish the obvious joy an adult Gelbart associated with that time. Perhaps that’s why he was so good at writing songs for children: He could still identify with them and their rambunctious ways. Either way, once settled in America, he quite literally helped invent the soundtrack to a new kind of Jewish childhood, one vastly different from his own.

In one final cultural transformation, however, Gelbart’s impact on American Jewish culture got written out of the record. In the United Synagogue Commission on Jewish Education songbook of 1950, for example, the author of the song “My Dreydl” is listed as S.S. Grossman, with no indication that it is a translation at all. Indeed, Gelbart barely makes the record in the English-language Jewish world, aside from two superb CD recordings of his songs by Yiddish educator Lori Cahan-Simon in the early 2000s.

Let’s write Mikhl Gelbart back into the story of American Judaism as one of the authors of its culture. Anyone looking at his body of work would find not just one very simple, very famous song, but hundreds of songs, as well as operettas, oratorios, and more. Half high art, half folk art, Gelbart’s example alone shows that Yiddish culture is far richer and offers far more than the narrowly nostalgic box in which American Jews usually place it. Gelbart passed away without any children to insist on his legacy for future generations.

On his 60th *yortsayt*, it seems appropriate to celebrate the continuing vitality of Jewish “folk” culture, the people who created it, and, of course, the man who made the dreydl a superstar. *

How Funders Shape Jewish Culture

A conversation with

MEM BERNSTEIN &

SHAYNA ROSE TRIEBWASSER



ARTS AND CULTURE are often deeply intertwined with philanthropy. From Michelangelo to MoMA, artists and the institutions that showcase their work have long been supported by patrons. Some fund the arts for their aesthetic power and because they believe in the value of art for art's sake. Others do it to promote specific values and ideas they want to see out in the world, knowing the unique power of arts and culture to educate, inspire, and make change—to open minds, touch hearts, and broaden our understanding of the world.

To explore some of the interactions between philanthropy and culture, SAPIR's Associate Editor Felicia Herman invited two funders of Jewish arts and culture to discuss their distinct approaches to this work. Mem Bernstein is a philanthropist who has supported a wide variety of media in North America and Israel as a board member of the AVI CHAI Foundation, Keren Keshet, and the Tikvah Fund. Shayna Rose Triebwasser is

the executive director of the Righteous Persons Foundation (RPF) and senior program officer of the Hearthland Foundation, both funded by Kate Capshaw and Steven Spielberg.

Felicia Herman: You both represent important and rare streams of funding for Jewish cultural projects. There are areas of overlap and also areas of real difference between you. Let's start with the basics: What does "Jewish culture" mean to you, and why is funding culture part of your respective philanthropic strategies?

Mem Bernstein: My definition of Jewish culture is anything that's tethered to Jewish text and Jewish heritage. The goal of all of the foundations I'm involved with is to support projects grounded in strong Jewish content, related to our people's sources and stories. This takes many forms: publishing, podcasting, online and print journals, art exhibits, lectures, scholarship. I'm particularly proud of our film and television projects in Israel, where we partner with the Maimonides Fund and the Israeli government's Geshet Multicultural Film Fund. We supported *Shtisel*, which has expanded so many people's understanding of the ultra-Orthodox world. Many of our films have won Israel's Ophir Awards and been nominated for Academy Awards, such as *Footnote* (2011), about a father and a son who are both Talmud professors at Hebrew University, and *Black Notebooks: Ronit* (2021), an intimate look at a Mizrahi family in Israel. I'm also very proud of our support for *Tablet*, a daily digital magazine, which includes everything from news about Jewish communities, Israel, and the Middle East, to arts and letters, food, science, history, sports, culture, and a growing array of podcasts.

Culture is part of my philanthropic strategy because it appeals to everyone. We're hoping that through our cultural programs, we have an opportunity to enlighten people in a positive way, to showcase the diversity of the Jewish story through historical as well as

contemporary Jewish narratives. Since 1999, we have funded over 500 hours of primetime television, cinema, and documentary films.

Shayna Rose Triebwasser: My definition of Jewish culture is a little broader than the one Mem articulated, although that is an impressive slate of projects! I would include all arts, rituals, and customs that are expressive of Jewish history, values, or ideas. They aren't necessarily text-based, but they're joyously broad and reflective of the way that many people live today.

I can't overstate how central the arts and storytelling are to RPF's theory of change. Steven Spielberg and Kate Capshaw created RPF with the proceeds from *Schindler's List* (1993) and have supported it with additional profits from *Munich* (2005) and *Lincoln* (2012). The foundation is built on the power of stories. We're rooted in Jewish values and dedicated to building a more just and vibrant future, for the Jewish community and beyond. The belief that the arts and storytelling matter—that they change us, help us make sense of our lives, connect us to one another—flows through everything that we do.

The majority of our arts and culture funding centers on field-building and film, but we have funded everything from photography to performing arts. A few examples: Twenty years ago, Rachel Levin, our former executive director, co-founded Reboot, which gathers Jewish creatives and connects them to Jewish ideas and to one another. This incredible network has generated powerful cultural projects, some of which we've also supported directly. More recently, we've launched a few major philanthropic collaborations to strengthen the culture field more generally: Jewish Story Partners (JSP), which in just two years has become a significant new source of funding for Jewish film, and Canvas, which provides grants and capacity-building assistance to a wide variety of arts and culture organizations.

Herman: In a definition that is so broad, how do you know where the boundaries lie between “Jewish” and “not Jewish” culture?

Culture is part of my philanthropic strategy because it appeals to everyone.

Triebwasser: This is a beautiful and tricky question. There's no scientific answer. The goal of all of this work is to be part of a 4,000-year-old story, a story that has something to say about how we might make meaning of our lives today. There are a lot of ways to tap into that. For JSP for example, this is a live question for every project they consider supporting. For example, would JSP support a biography of someone who happens to be Jewish if the film itself had no explicit Jewish content? Eventually they came to a “person on the street” consensus: If the subject of the biography was widely known to be Jewish, then the film was eligible for support, because the Jewishness of the subject would necessarily shape the audience's understanding of Jewish life.

Herman: Both of you are trying to use film and media to fill gaps in people's Jewish knowledge and to inspire emotional connections to Jewish stories. This is important work and also quite rare—many Jewish funders are reluctant to support arts and culture projects because the impact is so hard to measure. How do you know what you're supporting is working in the way you want it to?

Bernstein: I understand the reluctance. It is difficult to measure success, and programs can be quite costly. This funding is also risky: You can't know what a project will ultimately look like when you start out. We've even taken our names off a few projects because the end result was so different from the initial concept. There are some ways to measure success—awards, ratings, ticket sales, etc. But in this field, these aren't perfect measures, so in a way, you also have to use your own judgment and common sense.

I meet many people who tell me that what we're doing is great, and I believe it is, even if it's hard to know for sure.

Triebwasser: I'd add that we need to have a creative approach to *qualitative* measurement—the way art and culture get into our souls, shaping the ways we think about the world. This is difficult to measure using traditional tools, yet we all know it to be true from our own experiences.

In funding arts and culture, sometimes you just need to take a leap of faith. Few people believe in their ability to identify a great piece of art before it's been completed—they get tripped up by thinking their mission is to find the next Marc Chagall. But there is no “next Marc Chagall.” There is, however, a choreographer like Adam McKinney, a filmmaker like Lacey Schwartz, a photographer like Frédéric Brenner—working artists who have something important to say. The closer we can get to their work and the ideas they're exploring, the better our funding can be. As Mem mentioned, the creative process isn't always linear—we don't know where projects will wind up. So we have to practice patience and have a longer view.

Here's the thing, though: It's hard to be patient when our problems feel so incredibly urgent. At a time when our world feels as if it's on fire, with racial injustice, threats to democracy, a climate in crisis, many people think that art is a luxury, not a necessity. I don't agree. The Jewish story always has something to say about the moment that we find ourselves in, something we can learn from. Even in the darkest of times, the art and culture that's produced can be beautiful and joyous. And I believe that beauty and joy can be fuel for movements for justice.

Herman: This also connects to one of the core debates about philanthropy and culture: Should we fund art simply for art's sake, for the sheer quality of it, or should we fund art in an instrumentalist way, toward particular ends? The former might seem like more

of a luxury, while funding art that's intended to educate or shape hearts and minds in particular ways might seem more necessary and urgent. But does the instrumentalist approach compromise the artist's autonomy and authentic artistic expression?

Bernstein: Our goal is to marry artistic talent and value with Jewish content, to use art as a vehicle for disseminating Jewish content. Philanthropists are motivated by a mission and a purpose, and the artists, filmmakers, or writers they're supporting are driven by the desire to make the beautiful and meaningful creations of their dreams. There's no conflict as long as there's alignment between the funders and the people telling the stories.

As to the question about the influence funders might have over artists they support, I see myself rather as being able to help gifted people whom I admire to do the things that they do best. When, for example, talented artists, writers, and filmmakers are exposed to the richness of Jewish life and culture in a serious way, without watering down the Jewish content, it enhances the quality of their art. Through Gesher, we've created multiday educational programs where artists engage with Jewish texts and culture that are tailored to the scripts they're developing. Leading Israeli film and television writers from diverse cultural and social backgrounds study together in a *beit midrash* setting. They tell us that the texts, the process of study, and the sharing of ideas and challenges have become an integral part of who they are as people and as artists.

I don't think of myself as pushing a point of view. I think of myself more as bringing to light the kinds of information that most people don't have, information that comes from who we are as a people, from our texts and from our history.

Triebwasser: For me, it comes back to relationships and trust. Artists need to be trusted to do what they do best. Some need funders to get out of the way, while others want and benefit from collaborative partnerships. Funders need to be very clear about

Even in the darkest of times, the art and culture that's produced can be beautiful and joyous. And I believe that beauty and joy can be fuel for movements for justice.

their values and their intentions. We're not top-down or directive; we're communicative and collaborative.

Art absolutely deserves to exist for its own sake. At the same time, it doesn't exist in a vacuum—it's produced and, at least initially, consumed within a particular context. As my colleagues and I often remind one another, it can heal *and* it can harm. Our grantmaking seeks to amplify stories that complicate existing narratives and that are in conversation with the broader culture. That often means lifting up storytellers whose voices have been underrepresented in public conversations.

The funders behind RPF are artists, so there's lived wisdom, lived understanding, about the work of creating culture. And not just any artists: They're master storytellers. A key way this plays out for us is in the primacy of artistic excellence. None of what we've talked about—the ways art can inspire, educate, build empathy, and move us to take action—works if the art in question doesn't work *as art*. Outside of the field-building initiatives we support, when RPF is funding artists or work directly, we have to know the artists, their past work, how they connect with audiences, who they are working with on marketing and distribution, all of those pieces of the puzzle. Artistic excellence and ability to connect with an audience—that's the kind of risk we try to mitigate up front.

Herman: Great artists are often great, though, because they offer

unique insight into the human experience—because they're standing outside the mainstream and they're willing to be critical of it. How do you address the tension between supporting artists who might see their role as exposing problems and exploring important issues from new angles—if you also have the goal of strengthening Jewish life? Can you support artists who might criticize the very thing you're there to promote?

Triebwasser: A big piece of Jewish culture is that we are a people who grapple with the big issues of life, and often, with one another. Our foundation's support for arts and culture is about humanizing people and showing complexity. We're living at a time when portrayals of Jews have been flattened and oversimplified. But we want to help create a multidimensional, multiracial representation of what Jewish life and Jews actually look like. The more we can showcase the diversity of thought, experiences, perspectives, lifestyles, and the racial makeup of our communities, the more authentic, impactful, and humanizing our stories can be. If we're only flattering, I don't think we're fully humanizing. Humans are messy.

In other words, for me, "good for the Jews" includes complicating our narratives. That absolutely does not mean perpetuating harmful stereotypes. A portrayal that seeks to harm, that is not individualized, that demonizes a group of people—that is not something we're going to fund. But something that asks hard questions, or that calls us into a process of reckoning and repair—we might be more willing to support such a project than others would be.

Bernstein: I'm guessing we would draw the line in different places on this question. I want our funding to be used to tell realistic, constructive, thought-provoking stories about things going on in Israel and in Jewish communities everywhere. We don't want to do harm, we want to do good. We've been fortunate to work with gifted filmmakers, writers, and artists who understand the richness of Jewish

life and culture—and who, at times, highlight problems and ways we can improve Jewish life that should be on our individual and communal radars. But there are limits. We’ve turned down projects that we thought struck bad notes, that seemed to us to be bashing the Jewish people or Israel.

But we will fund controversial stories. For example, we supported the film *Fill the Void* (2012), about a Hasidic family in which a young wife dies in childbirth, and her mother suggests that the wife’s sister marry the widowed husband to keep the son-in-law and grandson connected to the wife’s family. It’s a deeply Jewish story. And it was very controversial. But it wasn’t negative, it was thought-provoking. When a piece of work spotlights a problem in a way that feels sensitive and insightful, it can also offer us a way forward. This doesn’t feel like bashing the Jews or Israel—it feels like educating, informing, and enlightening.

Herman: Your reference to controversy and “bashing” raises for me the question of the relationship between art and politics. What do you think about the use of the arts for political purposes, as opposed to educational purposes or, as we said, simply to showcase artistic excellence?

Triebwasser: I think art can be a powerful tool for advancing rights and building connections that shape our politics. The Hearthland Foundation has a strategy called “art x justice” that recognizes art and artists on the front lines for justice. It funds artists who are creating public work that sparks moral imagination about the issues we are facing, and that offers different visions for a better world—one that we could build together if only we could see it and commit to working on it together.

Bernstein: I think the challenge with that approach is that while artists often think they’re on the front lines for justice, there are, of course, different understandings of what justice looks like. It’s often

hard, if not impossible, to judge until a particular moment is in history’s rearview mirror. So many people who have stood for terrible, even tragic ideas believed in the moment that they were acting in the name of justice. I also think that it’s too limiting to reduce art to politics or ideology. In my view, art can be—it should at least try to be—bigger, more transcendent than that. *

PART THREE

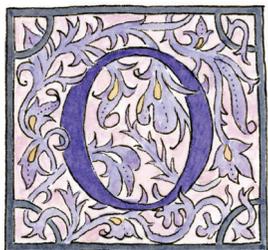
CONSUMING
CULTURE



From Mouth to Mind: Food and Jewish Engagement

A conversation with

MICHAEL SOLOMONOV



VER THE PAST 15 years, Michael Solomonov has helped put Israeli food on the culinary map in the United States. His first restaurant in Philadelphia, *Zahav*, received the James Beard Foundation Outstanding Restaurant Award, and the recently opened NYC location of *Laser Wolf*, his Israeli *shipudiya* (*skewer house*), is one of the hottest reservations in the city. Chef Solomonov sat down for an interview with SAPIR's associate publisher, Ariella Saperstein, to talk about food as a linchpin of Jewish culture and how it connects to Jewish identity and Zionism.

Ariella Saperstein: In preparation for our conversation, I was looking at your first cookbook, and I was struck that when you

opened your restaurant *Zahav* in 2008, Israeli food was relatively unknown outside of Israel. That seems hard to believe now; I can't keep up with all the Israeli restaurants opening in New York City! Can you reflect on what it means to be a pioneer in popularizing Israeli food for mainstream American audiences?

Michael Solomonov: Well, I remember a couple of things very vividly. When I wrote my business plan with my partner, Steve, a lot of Israeli expats had opened "Mediterranean" restaurants they didn't call Israeli. And the idea was probably a smart one, because people thought Israeli food was falafel or shawarma or hummus or kosher food. But we wanted to call our restaurant what it was, and I think it was bold for the time. It required a bit of explaining to our investors, our PR company at the time, and certainly to our guests. But after we opened, it didn't seem like it should have been that much of a conversation. A lot of people thought maybe it would be political, or too risky from a messaging standpoint, which I find insulting. I'm Israeli — it's insulting to say that to me.

We opened *Zahav* because when we'd go back to Israel, there were 20 different gastronomies in the first course of *salatim* [salads]. And then it was all this meat cooked over charcoal. It was so robust and so soulful. And the question was, why is nobody doing this yet in the United States?

But we can't just copy and paste from Israel — to be a part of this movement meant combining all those elements in a region with a very different climate. Pennsylvania basically has butter-nut squash and cabbage most of the year, so we need to roll up our sleeves and spread our wings a bit, looking at different spices and techniques found in the *shuk* or around the table at Shabbat meals. All that informed how we put together our menus.

Saperstein: At *Zahav*, you won't mix dairy and meat in the same dish, which imposes some limitations on your cooking. How much do you think about kashrut laws when you are designing a restaurant,

bringing people to Israel, or hosting a cooking demonstration? It's limiting, but you argue that it's more authentic.

Solomonov: It is, and I would say those limitations are liberating. You have a framework in which you can really push things and excel. If we'd put butter on meat, or yogurt on lamb, we would've been like every other restaurant. I'm not doing that. This isn't "French chef cooks Middle Eastern." I'm Israeli. That's not the *nefesh* [spirit] or the terroir of Israeli cooking. Which is lamb fat, charcoal, tehina, a ton of olive oil.

Saperstein: You've made bold changes to common Israeli dishes like Israeli salad, to which you will add mangos because we don't have good cucumbers and tomatoes in the Northeast during winter. How do Israelis visiting your restaurant respond?

Solomonov: In true Israeli fashion, they either love it or hate it. Often, they'll tell you that it's wrong and how they would do it better—which is great! Most of our Israeli guests understand what we're trying to do. For us, it's less about making the Moroccan carrots "right," than "wow, when I eat this kohlrabi poached with cumin, orange, garlic, and harissa, it reminds me of the carrot salad that I had on Friday night at home."

Saperstein: That point about harking back to people's memories is a good segue to how Jewish food relates to identity. How does the work you've done reviving Jewish and Israeli food connect with your own Jewish identity? Do you think food can strengthen Jewish identity, particularly among more secular Jews?

Solomonov: I grew up in a Conservative Jewish community in Squirrel Hill, Pittsburgh, which is a very Jewish neighborhood. My shul was great. The people in it were great. But I never really felt like I belonged. My Israeli identity was complicated because my parents

Food is part of who we are, what identifies us as Jews. We cook food a certain way; we don't mix milk and meat, while other foods are *treyf*. And food informs the way that every Jew has celebrated or mourned or wed or recognized a birth.

didn't speak Hebrew in the house, and we didn't go back to Israel that often. My dad was born in Bulgaria—a Sephardic Bulgarian who grew up in Lod as an atheist eating pork.

This is so cliché because every chef has a grandmother thing, but cooking was an expression of endearment for my grandmother. Her English was not awesome. She lived in Lod, we didn't see each other very often. Whenever she would visit, she would fill the fridge and freezer with borekas. I was a really picky eater as a kid, but I loved borekas. As I got older, I realized what the borekas said about her family, my ancestors who were pushed out of Spain after the Inquisition. Some say that the French appropriated puff pastry from a dough created by Spanish Jews. Whether or not that's true, Jews brought this pastry to the Balkans. After the region was conquered by Turks, they started stuffing the pastry with a form of feta cheese. After Jews survived the war by being protected from the Nazis by the Bulgarian king, many made aliyah to Israel. And now there are borekas on every street corner in Israel.

Food is part of who we are, what identifies us as Jews. We cook food a certain way; we don't mix milk and meat, while other foods are *treyf*. And food informs the way that every Jew has celebrated or mourned or wed or recognized a birth. As my business partner,

I think that any avenue that can strengthen the Jewish future should be embraced. If food is a way for young people to express themselves as Jews, then you have to promote it.

Steve, wrote in our cookbook, *Zahav*, you bring food to a bris, and you bring food to a shiva. And there's obviously symbolism in the food itself [as during Passover].

My faith is ever-changing. I have practices that anchor me sometimes closer and sometimes less closely to Judaism, but food has the utmost importance.

Saperstein: Recent surveys about Jewish engagement have shown that making and eating Jewish food tend to be among the top ways that young Jews feel connected to Judaism. You're on the board of the Jewish Food Society, which was founded only in 2017 and has 100,000 followers across social media. Maybe it's a larger trend related to food more generally, but I wonder whether you think there's anything unique about the current generation in its use of food as a connection to Jewish identity.

Solomonov: Opening an Israeli restaurant was a way to be able to advocate for Israel. And I would say the same thing with Judaism — people are looking for ways to connect.

When you're hesitant or apprehensive about institutional religion, there's a way to relate with food. Everyone can agree that hot challah is the best thing ever, right? Most of us can agree that breaking bread with your friends and family is a spiritual experience, even if you don't also say the prayers or light candles. That's why I think the

Jewish Food Society is incredibly important: It's giving everybody more ways to connect, whatever their level of observance.

Saperstein: On the flip side, do you think there are limits to food as an engagement tool? There's a concern among some Jewish leaders that in the near future, eating bagels and lox—and maybe at *Zahav!*—will be the primary connection to Judaism for most non-Orthodox Jews, instead of anything more substantive. Is that a risk?

Solomonov: I think that any avenue that can strengthen the Jewish future should be embraced. If food is a way for young people to express themselves as Jews, then you have to promote it. I don't think there's a limit. Nobody's ever going to get sick of food.

Do you think there's a limitation? That it's a mistake to push as much as we can with food?

Saperstein: I don't think that it's a mistake, because it is a successful engagement tool. But if it becomes a substitute for other modes of connection—if it's seen as “enough” of a connection, not as an entry point—then we risk a future generation with a relatively thin connection to Judaism that can't stand the test of time. And then not much will hold Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews together. So I wouldn't put all our eggs in the “food” basket, as it were, though I think it can be one component of outreach to less engaged Jews, ideally if it's also a route to deeper engagement.

Solomonov: I want people to leave *Zahav* and think: *I've never been to Israel, I see a lot of its conflict on the BBC, but man, that was delicious. And I felt good. And it was warm. And wow, I didn't know that there were 100 different cultures in Israel.* If Jewish food makes Jews feel proud of who they are, then that's actually enough for me. What's interesting, though, is I feel that Zionism is such a core part of Judaism. And it would be hard for me to separate that out of the equation.

Saperstein: Your point about Israeli and Jewish foods drawing from many different cultures is important, especially because of the accusations—recently featured in the *New York Times* Style section—that Israelis are appropriating Palestinian cuisine or calling dishes Israeli that are authentically Palestinian or originated elsewhere. What do you have to say about that?

Solomonov: It's something that I've unfortunately had come up in my life, and I think that there are a couple of truths to all this.

One is that if you want to make a case for why Israel doesn't or shouldn't exist, you can certainly use food. Saying there's no such thing as Israeli food is a way of saying there's no such thing as Israel. Saying that Israeli food is stolen is a way of saying that Israel's been stolen, and so on. But this is just lazy. We could go through each dish. Falafel is what Coptic Christians made from the fourth century—the vegetable patties were to mimic meat during Lent. Shawarma was Arabic, but from before the Ottoman period. And hummus is probably originally Egyptian. None of those dishes were created by Palestinians. They're regional, and Jews are from those regions, too. They're hybrids of many cultures, and Jews were part of those cultures, too.

I think it's ironic that Lebanon and Syria have the same national dish [kibbeh] and nobody makes any sort of political accusations there, even though we could talk about the Syrian occupation of Lebanon. But the moment I make any of that food, I'm the occupier, or I'm perpetrating apartheid. Food transmits across cultures and geographies. But I get it—if I were Palestinian, striving and suffering, wanting independence and self-determination and things to claim as my own heritage, I would probably feel exactly the same way [angry].

When the world blames Israel for things that other countries or cultures do all the time without criticism, I find that to be a double standard, antisemitic, and anti-Zionist.

Israeli food is my life. Israel is a very important part of my life.

But we should also be able to say “This is Palestinian” or “Palestinians taught us this.”

Saperstein: I'm reminded of the BDS campaign in 2018 to get chefs to drop out of the Round Tables Festival in Tel Aviv. A number of prominent chefs signed a letter pressuring their peers not to participate. There are many educational trips now to Israel for different demographics, including non-Jews who are influential in various fields, often those most vulnerable to anti-Zionist narratives. Are politics so dominant now in the culinary world that we should be thinking about trips for people in your field?

Solomonov: Absolutely. The easiest way to understand Israel is to be there for three days and to just see it for yourself.

Can you oversell food when it comes to Jewish identity or getting people to connect? Maybe, but we have to continue to use whatever methods we have to promote dialogue and conversation. Frankly, at the end of the day, we don't have anything else. *

Why Israeli TV Is So Good



IN THE BEGINNING, there was Yifat.

Sure, there had been religious characters before her on Israeli TV and in the movies, but never like this: She was the star, the center of attention, the one whose love life you were more invested in than your own and whose hair style you secretly tried to emulate in front of the mirror. And if that wasn't enough, her show, *Srugim*, wasn't just *about* religious Jews, it was made *by* religious Jews, aired in prime time on a major network, and won a bunch of awards and the highest ratings imaginable.

For three years, secular Israelis who could barely tell their Rambam from their Rambo fantasized about the mikveh and the shtiebel and all the other mystical, magical places that drew the show's gang of young and attractive and religious and very single Jerusalemites. It was like Israel's version of *Friends*, if Rachel and Monica had met in Ulpana and spent every Shabbat singing zemirot. And just like that, religious Jews, more or less invisible in Israeli pop culture for six decades, were everywhere.

If you watched every Israeli production made before *Srugim* debuted in 2008, you would be able to count all the religious characters you'd seen on two hands. If you discounted the ones who were mere comic reliefs or silly foils, one hand would suffice. The screens, small and large, were for the rugged and the tanned, the bold and the beautiful, the secular Sabras who worked the land and fought the wars and roamed the streets of Tel Aviv looking for love. And then came Yifat, and after her, the deluge: There were the Haredi women of Rama Burshtein's *Fill the Void* in 2012, a big hit at the Venice International Film Festival as well as on Israeli TV; *Shtisel*, father and son, lonely and yearning for connection in their eponymous TV series, still a crowd-pleaser nearly a decade after its 2013 debut; *Shababnikim*, streamed here as *The New Black*, a raucous comedy about four misfits at an elite yeshiva; *Autonomies*, a dystopian drama imagining Israel split into two states, one secular and the other religious. The list goes on, a flowering of frum fun.

It hardly takes a Talmudic scholar to figure out why Israeli entertainment these days is so obsessed with the faithful. For one thing, show business, like any other business, is about numbers, and the numbers are resolutely on the side of the believers—while the average Israeli woman has three kids, her religious counterpart welcomes twice as many children into the world. This means that within the next three decades or so, one in four Israelis is likely to be Haredi, a group increasingly swapping its reticence for full-on engagement with the culture at large. More immediately, though, ever since Uri Zohar—Israel's most radiant comic, director, and movie star—abandoned the bohemian life for one of studying and teaching Torah in 1977, scores of Israeli actors, directors, writers, musicians, and entertainers have traveled some way down a similar path, growing more pious and producing works that reflect their spiritual journeys.

These lovely and introspective works—throw Shuli Rand's *Ushpizin*, a film about a Breslov Hasid forced to reckon with shady friends from his unsavory past, onto the pile, too—would've

likely reached few outside of Israel had it not been for streaming, a technology that meant shows enjoyed in Bnei Brak could now be cherished in Boise as well.

Shtisel was the watershed. Making its debut on Netflix in 2018, the show—it seems silly, at this point, to summarize such a smash hit, but in case you’ve spent your evenings with quainter pastimes, such as knitting or novels, the show is about a young Hasidic man who wants to be an artist and fall in love and gain the respect of his hardened father—soon developed a cult following. The *New York Times* parsed its meaning, the *Atlantic* dispatched its bien-pensants to unpack its popularity, and its stars packed Manhattan’s Skirball Center whenever they flew in for a tour.

Hollywood being the Great Regurgitator that it is, foreign rights were soon acquired and an upcoming American version of *Shtisel* announced with much fanfare. And it was then that keen observers were treated to a delightful peek at the pathologies that plague American Jewish life.



How would Tinseltown, rarely accused of an excess of profundity, grapple with a show about men and women whose values and practices are distinctly, to borrow a phrase from academia, Other? One early, promising hint was the news that the American adaptation’s director would be none other than Kenneth Lonergan, the Jewish playwright whose forgotten masterpiece, *Margaret*, remains one of the most haunting and profound meditations on religion, morality, family, loss, and love ever committed to celluloid. Not much imagination was needed to picture the Academy Award-winning writer and director of *Manchester by the Sea* training his eye on young Hasidim and producing a work every bit as delicate and as true to Orthodox life as the original.

Such hopes were soon shattered by reality’s brute force. The show, *Deadline* soon announced, would be written by Lauren Gussis, the

Few critics bothered with basic critical thinking, such as asking whether it was actually possible that Hasidic life really was bereft of everything that didn’t resemble an especially vigorous Marines hazing ritual.

creator of the very dark-humored Netflix hit *Insatiable*, and would focus on “the privileged daughter of a Hollywood power couple” who falls in love with a religious Jew.

Shtisel fans raised an eyebrow—save for one character being religious, the new show seemed to have nothing in common with the heartfelt and candid original—but not for long. The show was swiftly suspended, then canceled.

Why? Hollywood is as inscrutably mute about its failures as it is insufferably vocal about its success, but what happened next gives us a pretty good clue. While the American *Shtisel* languished in production purgatory, a powerful one-two punch of shows focused on Hasidic life appeared, to great critical acclaim and much fanfare.

First came *Unorthodox*, which, despite sharing a name with a very good Jewish podcast, showed nothing but a cold contempt for Jewish life in all its forms. The show’s premise is simple: Esty, a 19-year-old girl from the Satmar Hasidic sect, is abused within an inch of her life by her gelatinous husband and his exacting mother. Eager to regain her independence and recover her soul, she flees to Germany in search of the good, free life.

A few critics, Hasidic or otherwise, argued that the show got pretty much everything about the community wrong, but that didn’t matter much to the intelligentsia. The show, sprach the *New*

How to explain this discrepancy between American and Israeli Jews? Why do the latter churn out intricate works that observe and reflect on religious people and life while the former forge steely rejections of the very same?

Yorker, was “wrought with anthropological specificity”—a description that made it sound as if the characters in question lived among the remote Sentinelese tribe of the Indian Ocean islands rather than a short train ride from midtown—while NPR hailed it as “an upbeat tale of a woman who escapes into a glorious new future.” Few critics bothered with basic critical thinking, such as asking whether it was actually possible that Hasidic life really was bereft of everything that didn’t resemble an especially vigorous Marines hazing ritual. Facts be damned: A show that portrayed faith and religious life as benighted and oppressive and destined to crumble before the liberating and libidinous force of individual promiscuity—Esty’s awakening, of course, is purchased at the price of intercourse with a smoldering Herr—was not so much entertainment as it was a principle of secular American faith.

But if Hasidic representation on mainstream American TV started off as melodrama, it soon became farce, when the reality show *My Unorthodox Life* debuted in 2021. The show’s star, Julia Haart, boasted a story every bit as sweeping as Esty’s: Growing up oppressed and suppressed and depressed in Monsey, New York, Haart works up the courage to leave the Hasidic community, becomes a lingerie designer and modeling maven, and lives a large life of joy and sex and earthly delights with her Italian husband.

Once again, real, live religious Jews cried foul, pointing out that

some of Haart’s autobiographical claims didn’t add up to recorded and observable history and that the show repeated the same vicious trope, portraying all Hasidic life in a dark and twisted monolithic fashion. And yet, once again, the show generated considerable attention. Publicity shots for the upcoming second season show Haart staring resolutely into the middle distance, wrapped in a revealing slip of a black dress that would hardly suffice to make a smallish tallis.

Again, there’s very little here by way of intricacy or complexity. The show is about as subtle as college sophomores, hoarsely shouting their convictions: Religion bad, men stupid, orgasms good, money best.

How to explain this discrepancy between American and Israeli Jews? Why do the latter churn out intricate works that observe and reflect on religious people and life while the former forge steely rejections of the very same? It’s a complicated question, obviously, but a brief history of the past few decades in the emotional evolution of both communities is instructive.



On this side of the Atlantic, Jews have spent much of the past century learning to be Americans. Our shuls, our Federations, our novels, our schools, our customs, our movies, our domestic lives—all are variations on one powerful theme, namely that great things happen when Jewish and American are fused into one syncopated beat. We are raised to believe that the two can never be in contradiction, at least not for real, at least not for long. America, we’re told, is a country founded on Judeo-Christian ideas, whatever that strange locution means. We read George Washington’s letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, and our hearts swell with reassurance that the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, will forever continue to merit and enjoy the goodwill of the other inhabitants. We’re troubled by

the rise of antisemitism, but not enough to believe that America could ever become another Egypt or Spain or Germany or worse. Our individual paths may differ slightly, but our destination is the same: We're traveling to the heart of the American mainstream, or as close to it as we can get. Harvard can take us there. So can Hollywood, and Goldman Sachs, and Silicon Valley, and while we may feel proudly and uniquely and incontestably Jewish, the coins we truly value were forged in all-American smithies.

Meanwhile, just by living their lives, Haredi Jews are the great What If: What if we had made different choices? What if we opted for tradition over assimilation? What if we sought truth and beauty in our own sacred books rather than turn for meaning to partisan affiliations, political ideologies, cultural proclivities, or exercise regimens? It's a vexing question because it forces us to rethink the very foundation of our existence. This is why, Stateside, the stories so many non-Orthodox Jews tell about the men in black and the women with the covered hair are always grim: They're too restrictive. They don't educate their young. They inhibit women. They're nothing like us. To believe otherwise is to believe that modernity is not the only possibility, and that it was designed precisely to allow for every permutation save for that one.

Israelis have taken a very different route. Having spent the first five decades of their collective existence fighting for survival, they started pondering, sometime in the 1980s, once the country was safe and sound and strong, what, precisely, the meaning of it all was. Zionism was always a hodgepodge, a movement that united observant Jews and avowed Marxists, cultural warriors and political hawks, men and women of all convictions and backgrounds; now that the Jewish state was all grown up, it needed to decide just what it wanted to be. And, increasingly, the answer was obvious: It wanted to be Jewish. Hence all those artists seeking God. Hence the recently elected Israeli cabinet, the first ever in which non-observant Jews will be in the minority. Hence hit movies about the destruction of the Second Temple, hit songs about Yom Kip-

The arc of pop culture is long, but it bends toward empathy. The better storytellers, those who give us complexities and intricacies and humanity in all its messy glory, always win over the facile propagandists.

pur, hit novels about priests and ritualistic sacrifices. Increasingly, Israelis think of Judaism not as a stubborn rejection of progress but as a rightful return to a tradition that continues to be an engine of creation, of growth and change and hope. That's how you get *Shtisel*, and *Srugim*, and so many other explorations of what it means to wrestle with faith, with community, with family, with God, with self.

Hallelujah, the Israeli model is carrying the day, not only in the most promised land but also, it now appears, here. Hollywood might see things differently, but on any given day, 34,000 American Jews—and some non-Jews—now turn to *Shtisel*'s Facebook fan page to exchange ideas and impressions and have real and intimate conversations. And when the show's stars tour America, they still attract healthy crowds, there not only to gaze at the celebrated actors but to feel, if only for a moment, as if they're a part of the soulful world of *Shtisel*, a world not of grievances and power struggles and intimations of oppression and performative liberation but of mutual care and responsibility and charity and grace.

Unorthodox and *My Unorthodox Life* may be trendy and liked by the cool crowd, but most Jews are looking for warmth. They don't want another affirmation of rights or a reminder of wrongs. They don't want to persist or resist or paint themselves by numbers delivered by cultural commissars. They want the sort of Yiddishkeit that

a show such as *Shtisel*—or *The New Black*, or *Srugim*, or all the other gems made in Israel—delivers. They want something that brings them closer to that old-timey religion, not something that pushes them further away. Like Yifat, all those years ago, they want more: more feeling, more knowledge, more passion, more connection. And now, courtesy of more and more Israeli shows and movies each year, they can have it all.



The remarkable growth and success of the Orthodox community in America as well as in Israel—success as measured by retention, something other Jewish communities struggle with—is likely to increase empathy for a community historically regarded with suspicion by Jews and non-Jews alike. Whether or when Hollywood will catch up is another question.

And not, mind you, a particularly new question, at that. Jews have spent decades telling themselves stories designed to explore their fundamental otherness, and to ask whether there could ever be a path that leads into something like acceptance. That's why we have Spider-Man and the X-Men and Superman and all the other comic-book greats, dreamt up by Jews on the margins of the publishing industry. It's why we have so many of the classic songs of the Brill Building, composed by Jews who were yearning for an uncomplicated American young adulthood yet knew that few of their neighbors looked at them and saw them as the attractive boy- or girl-next-door type. It's why we have *Jaws* and *E.T.* and other celluloid fantasies about scary monsters and cuddly aliens and other creatures who stand athwart society, yelling "Let me in."

Now, however, decades later, "mainstream" Jews have become Americans, just like everyone else, and it is the Orthodox who are the new Jews, telling stories in the hope of gaining a sliver of visibility and a bit of warmth, and balking when the same American media depict them as heartless creeps.

No worries, though: The arc of pop culture is long, but it bends toward empathy. The better storytellers, those who give us complexities and intricacies and humanity in all its messy glory, always win over the facile propagandists. Let a thousand Yifats bloom. *

JAMES S. SNYDER

The Role and Relevance of Museums Today: From the Universal to the Particular



MUSEUMS have been a part of the fabric of history for a long time. In the Western world, they range from the great European royal collections that evolved into national museums to the local, regional, and metropolitan museums and historical societies that have emerged across America over the past 150 years. Their role is to serve as custodians of culture, preserving works of art and artifacts of life from different time periods and contextualizing them within ever-changing perspectives. Museums can be universal and all-embracing or, like Jewish museums, particular in their focus. Each has the potential to place the material heritage of individual cultures into a broader context, producing powerfully illustrative stories of communal connection with special meaning in their own time as well as for us today.

Many of us first experienced museums as children, traveling on school buses for group visits that may or may not have left an impression, or as young adults traveling internationally and making obligatory stops to see icons of world culture. With the proliferation of smartphones, these stops have often devolved into Instagram moments, sometimes without the museumgoer casting even a glance at the object or work of art itself or absorbing when it was created, why, or by whom.

Museums have also always had devoted followers who appreciate, on their own, the importance of the timeline of material culture as an illuminating narrative of world history. Whether as patrons, collectors, scholars, or devoted visitors, these audiences have enabled museums to become a flourishing part of the global landscape. They have also stimulated a robust culture for creative making in our own time—contemporary art—and a market that embraces an impressively broad following with an interest in emerging visual culture.

The past few years have presented challenges that call into question the meaning of museums today, the role they play in our lives, and the purposes they serve. Covid put on hold the opportunity for a live museum experience at the same time that we are losing our ability to experience material culture firsthand as museums increasingly embrace the digital world's capacity to create museum-like experiences online. While the virtual museum experience cannot replace the live experience, this shift only underscores the question of how and why museums can and should remain relevant to us in our increasingly virtual era.

By way of context, my own experience began in a rural setting, not far from a major city whose encyclopedic museum—the Carnegie Museum of Art—offered an opportunity to see works of art and objects of antiquity and to think of them as illustrations of the cultures and periods in history when they were created. My academic path took me to literature and art history, and the study of the connection between words written in different periods of

time and objects of art that illustrate the history of those times. I focused particularly on the middle of the 19th century, when art not only told stories in a literal way but began to offer visual vocabularies that would, over the succeeding century, create the story of modern, classic-contemporary, and contemporary art.

Good fortune brought me to the start of my professional life at the Museum of Modern Art, where I had the privilege to absorb the wondrous unfolding of the invention of modernism from the 19th century to the present and across all disciplines of the fine arts. By the time of MoMA's founding in 1929, these disciplines had already grown to include photography, film, and architecture and design as relevant modernist mediums. Throughout my MoMA years, I focused on 1850 or thereabouts as the stage on which the narrative of modernism—from that moment to the present—would play out. This experience was revelatory, allowing me to understand and appreciate the role that visual culture in any medium might play in illuminating our times—resonating as well with the social and political phenomena that shape our lives and become our history. The immediacy of modernism also underscored the connection between art and politics, helping us grasp how the social and political developments of any given moment might influence the art produced at that time, and how the art of any given moment might in turn help shape social and political perspectives.

When I was invited to become director of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem—not just an encyclopedic museum, but rather a universal museum—my perspective shifted dramatically to the full narrative of material cultural history from 1.5 million years ago to the present, embracing cultures from around the world. This was another revelatory moment, as was the evolving definition of the “universal” museum as one whose collections were deep and extensive enough to connect cultural history—from the first evidence of human hands touching matter in a creative way—to the present, while also looking at art's resonance among cultures globally.

Today the Israel Museum's collection galleries tell a remark-

Museums dedicated to specific cultures, like Jewish museums and others devoted to singular themes or subjects, can and should take advantage of the opportunity to look at examples of their cultures in the context of when and where they were created.

able tale. They are divided among the archeology of the ancient Near East, principally the ancient Land of Israel and its neighboring cultures; Jewish art and life, being the story of sacred and secular Jewish practice from the Middle Ages onward and across the global Diaspora; and the fine arts, being the Western art traditions from the Renaissance to the present and the arts of Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas. The message that unfolds across the museum's galleries is that all things connect across time and geography—from man's first encounters with materiality to the seeds of existential reflection and the invention of monotheism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; then to the story of the Jewish Diaspora from the Holy Land to the east and west from the end of the Byzantine era to the present; and then to the parallel narratives of the fine arts worldwide.

Because the Israel Museum covers within its broad brief the archeology and history of the ancient Land of Israel and the story of Jewish culture worldwide, there is also a dimension of its mandate that easily connects with the foundational mandate for all Jewish museums. For me, this personal trajectory—from a museum such as MoMA devoted to the phenomenon of modernism to a museum whose reach is universal and yet includes an important Jewish-

Few cultures have ever existed in isolation, and how they live, work, and create is always subject to the influence of those living, working, and creating around them.

museum component—may offer some special insights into the essential role that museums can and should play today.

To say that we live in complex times is an understatement. Not just because of Covid, but also because of political shifts globally, we are experiencing a kind of turbulence that we have not known since emerging from World War II. We are seeing in some parts of the world a drift toward nationalism and accompanying trends of supremacism and racism, and in other parts of the world a social awakening that underscores the importance of diversity and inclusiveness. Pervasive everywhere is also the phenomenon of global migration that is creating a culture of exile—of exile as home—at a level that is without precedent in modern times.

In this context, while art and politics remain distinct, art has become increasingly engaged with social activism. Art and art history offer examples for this phenomenon, and museums such as MoMA and the Israel Museum are able to tell these stories with clarity. As an example, the political upheaval of the period between World War I and World War II in Europe produced the Dada and Surrealist movements which forged a new definition of artists as creative practitioners. These creative makers expanded their mediums and their ways of working, forging an engagement between art



Canaanite sarcophagi at the entrance to the Israel Museum's Samuel and Saidye Bronfman Archeology Wing
(Photo © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Elie Posner)

and activism that then spread globally with the migration of artists from Europe to the Americas and to the emerging Soviet Union. This phenomenon remains foundational for art-making today.

The notion that all things connect across time and geography could not be more meaningful than in an era as complex as ours. Universal museums embrace distinct cultures globally and demonstrate how these cultures resonate with others that share their place on the timeline of history. A museum such as the Israel Museum notably demonstrates how the world is always a mosaic of cultures—an example of definitional diversity—and the stories it tells place these distinct cultures in the context of others. Often these stories also demonstrate the cross-cultural engagement among individual cultures that history otherwise might portray as disconnected. An iconic example might be the museum's 2016 exhibition *Pharaoh in Canaan: The Untold Story*, telling the story of the time around 1,600 B.C.E. when the Canaanites lived in Egypt and then, a century or so later, when the Egyptians ruled in the land of Canaan. Their practices and aesthetics became merged—and even the seeds



Installation views of *New York: 1962–1964* at the Jewish Museum, New York. July 22, 2022 – January 8, 2023. (Photo © Frederick Charles)

of monotheistic belief were formed in this time—and these two cultures became integrated and engaged. In today’s divisive world, examples like this can be enlightening.

In the same way, museums dedicated to specific cultures, like Jewish museums and others devoted to singular themes or subjects, can

and should take advantage of the opportunity to look at examples of their cultures in the context of when and where they were created. This practice exactly defines inclusiveness. Given today’s world climate, demonstrating this phenomenon of diversity and inclusion throughout history could not have more meaning.

Subject-specific museums abound across the American and European landscape. Historically, they have tended to look at their subjects in isolation, often elevating their content to a platform of identity and appreciation that may serve their own culturally specific audiences but rarely reaching beyond to attract and educate others. They are often also site-centric, highlighting the achievements of their own community within the geography where they reside.

This is certainly the case for many local and regional Jewish museums, raising the question of the role and relevance of these institutions today and even the question of whether they should exist at all. In my view, the answer is yes—and the path to relevant engagement and success may be to follow the example of universal museums such as the Israel Museum in looking at specific cultures and their unique attributes in the context of history and in relation to other cultures and communities around them in their era. Few cultures have ever existed in isolation, and how they live, work, and create is always subject to the influence of those living, working, and creating around them.

Stories emerging through this lens can inspire us to celebrate diversity and embrace inclusiveness. Again, taking Jewish museums as an example, placing such stories into context enables Jewish audiences to appreciate Jewish achievement in the setting of where and when it took place. This approach can also engage other audiences and help them understand and appreciate the foreignness of Jewish culture. Embracing diversity through cultural narratives in museum settings, rather than through political narratives in the public arena, can also offer an important model today.

For example, just now at the Jewish Museum in New York, the exhibition *New York: 1962–1964* explores the seminal role of the

Jewish Museum in the early 1960s in pivoting the global spotlight on emerging contemporary art from Paris and Europe to New York and the United States. It illustrates an important moment in the history of postwar contemporary art, and it amplifies a subtext about the exodus of creative makers from Europe to America during and after World War II. While its subject is not specifically Jewish, there is much to explore in the meaning of the Jewish Museum's role in this phenomenon and the part played by artists of Jewish heritage for whom America became home during and after the war. For museum professionals, as well as for patrons and museum audiences, this kind of expansive reflection can be engaging and energizing.

With regard to the broader phenomenon of the social awakening in America that seeks to bring diversity, equality, and inclusion to communities that have been overlooked and underrepresented, the traditional mechanisms of museum practice can and are playing a critical role. As an example, the museums of Historically Black Colleges and Universities across the country actively mine their collections to surface artists and art movements that are central to the stories that American and international museums need to tell.

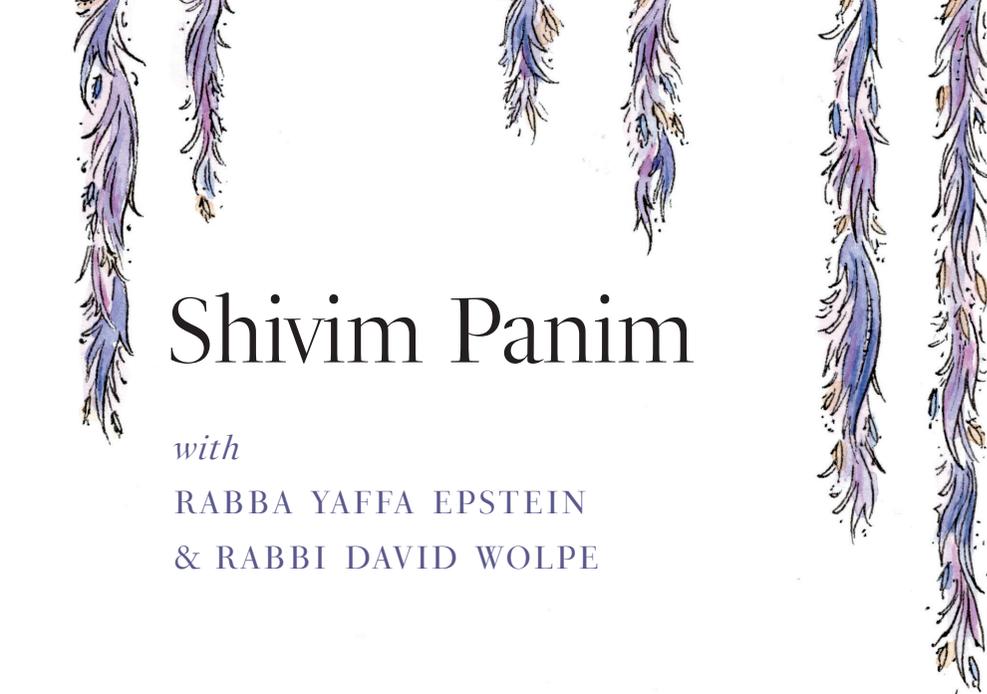
The Venice Biennale has also played a role here for a very long time, with exhibitions percolating from the work of museum curators worldwide. The central exhibition of this past year's Biennale, *Milk of Dreams*, looked back at the invention of Surrealism during the period of social and political unrest and uncertainty between World War I and World War II, and then at how artists are responding to the same circumstances of unrest and uncertainty weighing on the world today. More than 80 percent of the participating artists were women—and from cultures worldwide—and their work was anchored in the achievements of the avant-gardists of nearly 100 years ago, whose work shines masterfully today and sets the stage for identifying and displaying artists from across a much broader playing field.

In these times of social and communal awakening, museums

have a responsibility to follow examples like these. With the level of cultural engagement that has flourished worldwide since World War II, they can open the door to cultural diplomacy as an antidote to the fractiousness of today's increasingly extreme politics. For them to assert their relevance, they need to tell stories drawn from diverse cultures around the world, and explore and celebrate the wonders of social and communal inclusion and integration that give strength to the backbone of world history. *

DEPARTURES





Shivim Panim

with

RABBA YAFFA EPSTEIN
& RABBI DAVID WOLPE

NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER: One of the hallmarks of SAPIR is its connection between theory and practice. We ask our authors not simply to make arguments but also to offer policy prescriptions. In *Shivim Panim* (referencing the 70 faces of the Torah), we ask two leading Jewish thinkers to apply Jewish wisdom to ethical dilemmas faced in Jewish communal life. The dilemmas are real, as are the people who pose them.

We invite you to send your own queries to us at info@sapirjournal.org.

Rabba Yaffa Epstein serves as the senior scholar and educator in residence at the Jewish Education Project.

Rabbi David Wolpe is the Max Webb Senior Rabbi of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles and the author, most recently, of *David: The Divided Heart*. He is a senior adviser at Maimonides Fund.



What are the ethical implications of considering whether philanthropic gifts are “tainted” by the personal or professional activities of the giver? Should recipients accept money to support their important work even if they are embarrassed to be associated with the giver? What if the funds are acquired in ways that contravene the values of the recipient organization?

For example, many cultural institutions worldwide have taken the Sackler name off their museum wings because of the family’s affiliation with opioids. The family itself has never been convicted of a crime, even though they were forced to dissolve their company and to pay billions of dollars to addiction-treatment and -prevention programs. Their gifts were generous enough to lead to naming rights, and most were made many years ago. They have presumably resulted in good things, including a great deal of cultural richness and important medical research. But there has been enormous public pressure for institutions to remove the Sackler name wherever it appears. What would you advise institutions to do in cases such as these?



Rabba Yaffa Epstein: This is indeed a thorny issue and one that is so relevant in our times. There are essentially two different questions here. The first is: What does Judaism have to say about tainted money? And the second: What is the obligation of nonprofits to accept, reject, or return such monies?

Regarding the issue of tainted money, it must be considered in two ways as well—is the money earned through explicitly

illegal activity, or is it money made legally that is somehow morally repugnant?

David, what would you say about the obligation of a nonprofit organization regarding a donation of stolen money?

Rabbi David Wolpe: If money was received that is clearly stolen and one can work toward its restoration, the answer is clear: Give it back. If the money cannot be restored—if it was earned through shady financial trades, for example—then the answer may depend on the nature of the institution. A charity that saves lives should not be required to return the money; that is a kind of foolish piety (Sotah 21b) where rules override good sense. We don't forfeit the life of a starving person for the ethical purity of a charitable organization.

Money that has been used by an institution but is later discovered to be tainted is close to the talmudic case of the “stolen beam” (Gittin 55a). If a person builds a house using a beam he has stolen, he need not tear the house down so he can return the beam—instead, he should restore the value of the beam to the person from whom he stole it. The larger point is: When a donation is already “baked in,” the institution should find a way to use it that is a restitution, a partial cleansing, a *tikkun* for the stolen money.

Epstein: There's another element to the case of the stolen beam in Gittin 55a: The reason Hillel does not require the demolition of the house derives from *Takanat HaShavim*—an ordinance instituted for the penitent. The Talmud is teaching us that requiring the thief to destroy the edifice he made with the stolen beam would prevent thieves from ever admitting their mistakes. There's a fascinating message here that the Jewish community should *want* to make it as easy as possible to admit mistakes, face them, and make restitution.

There is a fundamental question here about how philanthropy becomes a means to allow people to rehabilitate their reputations

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reputations through their giving.

through their giving. How must nonprofits relate to this rehabilitation—and in what ways does the system of philanthropy that we have built allow donors to use their philanthropy to continue to commit crimes?

Indeed, in the case of the Sackler family, for example, New York State claimed that the family “used their ill-gotten wealth to cover up their misconduct with a philanthropic campaign intending to whitewash their decades-long success in profiting at New Yorkers' expense.”

Perhaps the Tosefta (8:26) can help us. There we are taught that if a thief has stolen money and is unsure about exactly whom he stole from, then he must return the funds whose provenance he does know to their rightful owner, and donate the rest of the stolen money for the needs of the community. In a situation where someone truly wants to rehabilitate himself (not just his name), supporting the public good is the best way to do this.

What do you think, David? How do we build philanthropic systems that don't allow despicable people to whitewash their bad behavior, but do allow mechanisms for restitution?

Wolpe: We have to acknowledge the power of money. Wisely, Exodus 23:8 tells us: Do not take a bribe because a bribe puts out the eyes of the wise in judgment and subverts the words of the innocent. Notice the specifics—money changes the judgment of the wise and the innocent, so imagine what it does for the rest of us. One

‘Oh look, Ima — isn’t that the shul that took the brothel money?’ is not a sentence we want any of our kids to say.

safeguard could be to create a panel of non-stakeholders advising the staff of the charity on what to do in complex situations.

I once refused a charitable gift to my synagogue both because the giver had an unsavory past and because it would appear we were helping him “buy” redemption. But if you ask me whether anyone in the history of the shul has donated under similar conditions, I would have to imagine that the answer is yes. There is an element of how it feels at the moment that is hard to corral in abstract rules.

This also goes to intent: Is the donor assuaging a guilty conscience or whitewashing misdeeds in public? It’s not easy to say. But if, on the positive side of intent, a donor has publicly acknowledged his wrongdoing and is declaring the gift to be an act of teshuva (repentance), I would *dan l’chaf zechut*, that is, judge the person favorably and accept it.

A kindred question is — what if we know the money was made in a morally questionable manner? If a well-known madam wants to contribute her brothel’s proceeds to the synagogue, should we take them? What if it is in Nevada, where the proceeds are legal?

Epstein: The Torah considers that exact case. In Deuteronomy 23:19 we are told that a prostitute’s earnings are not to be used in the Temple. Clearly, the Torah feels that there is payment that can be morally compromised and should be kept far away from the pristine holiness of the Temple.

However, the Mishna in Temura 6:4 teaches us that if she was paid in money (rather than in animals), this money may be used

in the Temple, or, if she is paid in livestock, the animals may be redeemed for money, and used in the Temple. Indeed, if the object has been changed in any way, then it is no longer prohibited. Seemingly, this paves a path for a separation between a problematic act and the resulting payment, in order to allow people the chance to give to the Temple and be full members of the community, despite what may feel like a tainted source.

Wolpe: According to Balzac, who knew something about human nature and money, “behind every great fortune is a great crime.” We may know of the brothel’s source of money, but what about the donor who is giving away money made (now or in previous generations) through using child labor or ruthlessly undercutting competitors or buying influence? Is there any “pure” money?

Epstein: Ah, the million-dollar question: Where and how do we stop searching for the “source” of the money? It seems too heavy a burden to place on nonprofits to have to assume a thorough investigation of every gift. Maimonides states that as long as a person is not a known thief, I can trust that the goods I am buying from him are permissible. Organizations should also assume that the money is from an acceptable source. However, if they know that the person making the donation has acted criminally, they have an obligation to refuse that money.

Organizations need to have clear red lines and high ethical standards, but also a reasonable way to check their donations without putting undue burden on them.

Wolpe: Yes, it is almost literally the “million-dollar question,” Yaffa! Allied to it is the reputational issue. “Oh look, Ima — isn’t that the shul that took the brothel money?” is not a sentence we want any of our kids to say. In Joshua, God commands the Israelites to take nothing of the spoils of Jericho after the city’s conquest. There is then a huge upheaval because one fellow, Achan, indeed steals some

of this proscribed money (7:1). This is a question of not only ethics but also reputation: Israel does not want to be a power that conquers and loots. Similarly, Jewish organizations do not wish to be seen as rapacious or indiscriminate in taking money from anyone who is willing to give.

Epstein: Even more than reputational harm—some donations actually undermine the very mission of the organization, as when a health-focused organization takes money from a tobacco or candy company.

We need to hold ourselves and our community accountable: Are we allowing money and power to make us forget our own moral standards? Are we giving inappropriate honor to those who commit great evils in our society?

There is an amazing moment in the Jerusalem Talmud Tractate Bikkurim where the Rabbis discuss scholars who have bought (rather than earned) their Rabbinic ordination. Several Rabbis say that they won't give those people public honor. The charge is that they have turned God into gods of silver and gold.

We must take great care that, even for the sake of doing good and holy work, nonprofits do not allow themselves to become worshipers of gold over worshipers of God.

Wolpe: As a coda, the collapse of FTX ought to remind us that professed charitable intent and even previous charitable donations are not a reliable guide to probity or reliability. Yet final judgments are rarely easy. Between sheer scoundrelism and innocence lies the vast land of teshuva, but perhaps we should save that for another time.

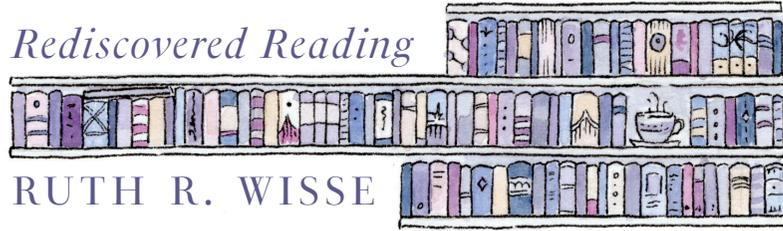
So Yaffa, what general guidelines do we offer? I'll go first:

1. If it is a known bad source, stay away for ethical and reputational reasons.
2. Don't be so scrupulous that you deprive a legitimate charity of

the means it needs, since most fortunes are not collected with entirely clean hands.

Epstein: I'll add:

3. Philanthropy has done so much good for the Jewish people, but sadly, it has also been corrupted to help bad actors continue their bad acting. We must create mechanisms that will support our nonprofits in upholding high ethical standards while still letting them do their important work.
4. Don't forget that the person who donated this tainted money is also a human being. Yes, he acted badly, but Jewish tradition requires that we do not write him off. We must remember that teshuva and repair are possible. *



Philip Roth: *Portnoy's Complaint*



AT A GET-TOGETHER of college friends in the late 1960s, a decade after we had graduated and were already married with young families, the most literary member of our group insisted on reading us aloud something that he had just discovered.

We much preferred to go on eating and talking, but he overrode our objections, and once he began to read, we were laughing so hard that we begged him to stop—so that we could catch our breath.

The author was Philip Roth, and the work was soon to appear as a chapter of *Portnoy's Complaint*. Our friend was right: This work was meant to be performed. We were then in the great age of American Jewish comedy, with comedians for every taste—Mort Sahl and Tom Lehrer, Sid Caesar and Mel Brooks, Jackie Mason, Joan Rivers, and Danny Kaye. In those years, about three-quarters of American comedy was fueled by Jews. Mike Nichols and Elaine May were already national celebrities, and Lenny Bruce was being tried on charges of obscenity. *Portnoy* rode the crest of that wave,

topping the verbal exuberance of Groucho Marx and pushing the depictions of explicit sex much further than *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *Ulysses*, the once-censored books that our boldest teacher had assigned us in college. Roth had broken the boundaries between lowbrow and highbrow culture and turned Jewish stand-up comedy into *literature*.

I usually choose to write about works of lasting importance—works I like so much that I want to share them with others. Revisiting *Portnoy* is a little different. Here, I'm interested in why a work that felt so fresh in its time now feels troubling in ways that did not occur to us then. Humor is bound to lose some of its bite once its references need explaining, and popular taste can sometimes shift enough to make us question what we once admired. The changed status of this book has a lot to do with what has since happened to this country's culture, and with the newly precarious standing of its Jews. It is hard to imagine a gathering of Jews convulsed with laughter over this book today.

As everyone came to know, Roth's novel comprises Alex Portnoy's six sessions with his psychoanalyst, a certain Doctor Spielvogel whose German-accented voice we hear only after the book is done. Hilarious that a 30-some-year-old would lie on the couch, pouring his guts out to someone as silent as a cigar-store Indian. Like stand-up comedy, psychoanalysis was also a mostly Jewish profession, and Roth ingeniously blends one into the other.

Freud had written poignantly about the importance of joking as a means of coping with the painful demands of civilization: "What these jokes whisper may be said aloud: that the wishes and desires of men have a right to make themselves acceptable alongside of exacting and ruthless morality." Portnoy might have taken that for his motto; he is using humor to free himself from the neurosis brought on by the repressive moralism of his Jewish family and

culture. Freud considered joking the safety valve that allowed “men” (he was thinking of Jewish men) to continue being upright and moral. Roth might have thought that he was doing the same when he set out to write this book.

Like the classic bildungsroman, this novel follows the hero’s development—through free association rather than chronologically—from childhood to maturity, or what should have been maturity. The opening monologue introduces us to Sophie Portnoy, “The Most Unforgettable Character I’ve Ever Met”—its title borrowed from a then-popular feature of *Reader’s Digest*. Sophie is the Jocasta to her son’s Oedipus in the psychological formation called the Oedipus complex that Freud identified as a universal condition of males, sometimes described as “being in love with one and hating the other part of the parental pair.” Alex Portnoy considers himself a comic twist of that Freudian disorder, the only son of a Jewish mother all of whose passions and ambitions are centered on him. He is inhibited by suffocating mother love from becoming a proper man, and by his bourgeois parents from developing a normal happy sexuality.

Look, am I exaggerating to think it’s practically miraculous that I’m ambulatory? The hysteria and superstition! The watch-its and be-carefuls! You mustn’t do this, you can’t do that—hold it! don’t! you’re breaking an important law! *What* law? *Whose* law? They might as well have had plates in their lips and rings through their noses and painted themselves blue for all the human sense they made! Oh, and the *milchiks* and *flaishiks* besides, all those *meshuggeneh* rules and regulations on top of their own private craziness!

Portnoy breaks all the rules of decorum and grammar, railing against the “restrictions” as though he were being raised in the Haredi community of Monsey rather than by nominally affiliated parents in Newark. When he asks “Am I exaggerating?” he knows he is inflating the American Jewish stereotypes. The Sixties were the

Although the sexual content of this book got all the attention, inviting questions about Roth’s misogyny, the anti-Christian zingers aim deeper, as if he were releasing payback that had been stored up against the Gentiles for two millennia.

years of shedding inhibitions, and when the Hombres sang “Let It All Hang Out,” Roth exuberantly took up the charge to write what one critic called “the dirtiest book” ever published. Take that, you meshuggeneh keepers of the kosher laws!

From the second session, “Whacking Off,” which describes adolescence as “half my waking life spent locked behind the bathroom door,” the book veers into the lower depths. Jewish parents, the epitome of bourgeois morality, instill in the boy habits of responsibility and proper social behavior at the stage of hormonal development when his instincts are profoundly asocial or antisocial. In the rest of the book, Alex relates how the kid masquerading as a good Jewish son gets to “put the id back in Yid and the *oy* back in *goy*.” (It really was a funny book.) The *goy* comes into it because once Alex begins to chase skirts, he is after Gentile women—an added taboo. The id is governed by the pleasure principle, and Alex feels that Jews have gone too far in repressing some of the sexual impulses they consider evil. But since all this is being spilled out by a man in the modern confessional who is seeking absolution through psychoanalysis, and since this patient is employed as assistant commissioner for the City of New York Commission on Human Opportunity, Roth makes it clear that Portnoy never

altogether deactivated his Jewish superego. He may have stood among the Jews at Sinai after all.

Back when this book was published, the sexual ribaldry that brought it notoriety genuinely alarmed members of the older generation such as Marie Syrkin, a liberal Zionist intellectual who compared *Portnoy* to the caricatures of Nazi master propagandist Joseph Goebbels: “In both views the Jewish male is not drawn to a particular girl who is gentile, but by a gentile ‘background’ which he must violate sexually.” Gershom Scholem, the most famous of the German-Jewish intelligentsia in Jerusalem, said that antisemites had always tried to prove the degeneracy of the Jews, and along comes a brash young Jew who does their work for them. “Here in the center of Roth’s revolting book...stands the loathsome figure whom the anti-Semites have conjured up in their imagination and portrayed in their literature, and a Jewish author, a highly gifted if perverted artist, offers all the slogans which for them are priceless.” He wondered “what price the world Jewish community was going to pay for this book.”

These European-born Jews knew the dangerous outcome of cartooning that cast the Jew as corrupter. They could not grasp that Philip Roth was writing this book as the freest Diaspora Jew who had ever taken pen to paper, reveling in the liberation of language and libido. He was not merely following Freud in trying to rid the human animal of its neurosis but expecting to reap huge rewards for advertising all the sexual acts and fantasies that had once been concealed. As Roth explained it, Portnoy’s obscenity was part of his attempt to be saved: “An odd, maybe even mad, way to go about seeking personal salvation; but, nonetheless, the investigation of this passion and of the combat that it precipitates with his conscience, is what’s at the center of the novel.” Roth had mastered the art of making sin pay dividends by playing lewd sexual confessions as therapeutic comedy.

His timing was perfect. It was because he was *not* living in Germany, because Goebbels and his family had been driven to suicide,

and because American culture was becoming so pagan that he felt no longer bound by taboos, whether personal or public. Syrkin and Scholem had no comparable experience of trust in Gentile society and could not imagine such freedom. But then, just try imagining Roth publishing this a little later in his career, say, during the #MeToo movement. Which of the two would have been coming after him first today — the feminists or the antisemites?

Had Jews continued to feel at home in America, *Portnoy’s Complaint* might have become a once-hilarious literary landmark that had lost its explosive power. Instead, attitudes toward free expression, humor, sex, and the Jews have changed so dramatically that even quoting from it has become uncomfortable. How about this excerpt from the scene where a sexually eager Alex goes to the home of Bubbles Girardi, who is known to be “easy”?

Tacked above the Girardi sink is a picture of Jesus Christ floating up to Heaven in a pink nightgown. How disgusting can human beings be! The Jews I despise for their narrow mindedness, their self-righteousness, the incredible bizarre sense that these cave men who are my parents and relatives have somehow gotten of their superiority—but when it comes to tawdriness and cheapness, to beliefs that would shame even a gorilla, you simply cannot top the *goyim*. What kind of base and brainless schmucks are these people to worship somebody who, number one, never existed, and number two, if he did, looking as he does in that picture, was without a doubt the Pansy of Palestine.

What trigger warning should we issue to Christians before that “potentially disturbing content”? Humor may be a protected outlet for aggression, but not even in Yiddish, their internal language, would European Jews have allowed themselves such fun at Gentile expense. Although the sexual content of this book got all the attention, inviting questions about Roth’s misogyny, the anti-Christian zingers aim deeper, as if he were releasing payback that had been

Portnoy's Complaint is not quite the wildly comic experience it seemed to us at that first hearing. Now that comedy has become more suspect than predatory sex, we discover warnings not fully recognized at the time.

stored up against the Gentiles for two millennia. The word “goyim,” which is etymologically neutral to designate the nations among whom Jews have always lived, becomes for Roth almost what “kike” was for the anti-Jews.

So the book is not quite the wildly comic experience it seemed to us at that first hearing. Now that comedy has become more suspect than predatory sex, we discover warnings not fully recognized at the time. Alongside the reflexive satire of Jewish mothers were rough takeoffs of non-Jews, all of which culminated in doubts about the therapeutic promise itself. Alex makes the point with increasing intensity that he is the unhealthy part of the Jewish condition, aware of his disorder and seeking a cure he suspects he will never find.

Doctor Spielvogel, this is my life, my only life, and I'm living it in the middle of a Jewish joke! I am the son in the Jewish joke—*Only it ain't no joke!* Please, who crippled us like this? Who made us so morbid and hysterical and weak?...Doctor, what do you call this sickness that I have? Is this the Jewish suffering I used to hear so much about? Is this what has come down to me from the pogroms and the persecution? From the mockery and abuse bestowed by the *goyim* over these two thousand lovely years?...Doctor, I can't stand any more being frightened

like this over nothing! Bless me with manhood! Make me brave!
Make me strong! Make me whole!

Philip Roth was onto something important that Freud had ignored when he analyzed joking as a creative means of *restoring* psychological balance. What if there is too much reliance on joking, and the cure proves worse than the disease? Laughter may be an excellent way of coping with anxiety, and is it not wonderful that a quarter century after Treblinka, Maidanek, and Auschwitz, the American branch of a decimated people should have become the national champions of comedy? But Roth identified a streak of hysteria in all that laughter and a heavy dose of pathology in letting it all hang out. Portnoy feared that he was spinning out of control, not just a beneficiary of the Sixties but a casualty of its unhinged freedom.

In the final session of this book, called “In Exile,” our American Jew heads for Israel, looking to be healed. Aboard his El Al flight, Alex recalls the warm Sunday mornings near his home where 20 neighborhood Jewish men, briefly sprung from their familial and economic responsibilities, played their weekly game of softball.

Not boys, you see, but men. Belly! Muscle! Forearms black with hair! Bald domes! And then the voices they have on them—cannons you can hear go off from our front stoop a block away. I imagine vocal cords inside them thick as clotheslines! Lungs the size of zeppelins! Nobody has to tell them to stop mumbling and speak up, never!

That little boy wanted only to live out his life like one of those men right there in New Jersey. “Why leave, why go, when there is everything here that I will ever want?” Those Jewish family men once defined for him what it meant to be a man, yet instead there he is, escaping to Israel from yet another sexual liaison that has gone wrong. He may be hoping to recover in the Jewish homeland the

healthy sense of manhood he associates with those Jewish fathers of his childhood.

Portnoy dutifully tours the country, and being the immature, undereducated American Jew that he is, he has pretty trite reactions, like, Wow! Everyone here is Jewish! But far from putting him at ease, familiarity becomes his undoing. He is once again his mother's Oedipal son, obsessed with proving his manhood in forbidden ways. If every Jewish woman is really his mother, it is no wonder that he finds himself impotent when he tries to seduce an IDF lieutenant he meets on the beach. "Doctor: I couldn't get it up in the State of Israel! How's *that* for symbolism, *bubi?*" His final downfall comes with Naomi, a post-army 21-year-old nearly six feet tall who "gave the impression that she was still growing," and with coloring so similar to his mother's that "*this might have been my sister.*" First, she parries his advances with a lecture on the corruptions of the Diaspora, and when he tries to tackle her by force, she calls him "Pig!" and kicks him "just below the heart."

At this last stage of his analysis, the secular Jewish analog to Catholic confession, Alex veers into a rant that ends in an extended scream. And then:

PUNCH LINE

"So [said the doctor]. Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?"

Roth presents this one-liner in a separate section with its own chapter heading, as if telling us that we are expected to treat this whole book as a running joke. But self-mockery has taken down the mocker, and no one wants to see the comedian crawling away on his knees.

The joke turned out to be on us readers who thought it was a joke. It is easy to see the influence of this book on the classic Woody Allen film *Annie Hall*, which develops the same story of the neurotic Jew chasing down the delectable shiksa. But whereas Allen tried to get movie audiences to love his character, Philip

Roth was competing with Kafka. Portnoy is not meant to be loved or pitied but approached with a stick like the creature in *Metamorphosis*, hoping that it does not venture too close. Like Kafka, he did not think he could ever live up to becoming the bourgeois Jewish father whom he tried to escape.

When we laughed at Portnoy (marveling at the writing), we did not think of him as sick. Now that we see what has come of that age of comedy, we read it and weep. Well, not quite, but read (or reread) it and see for yourself. *

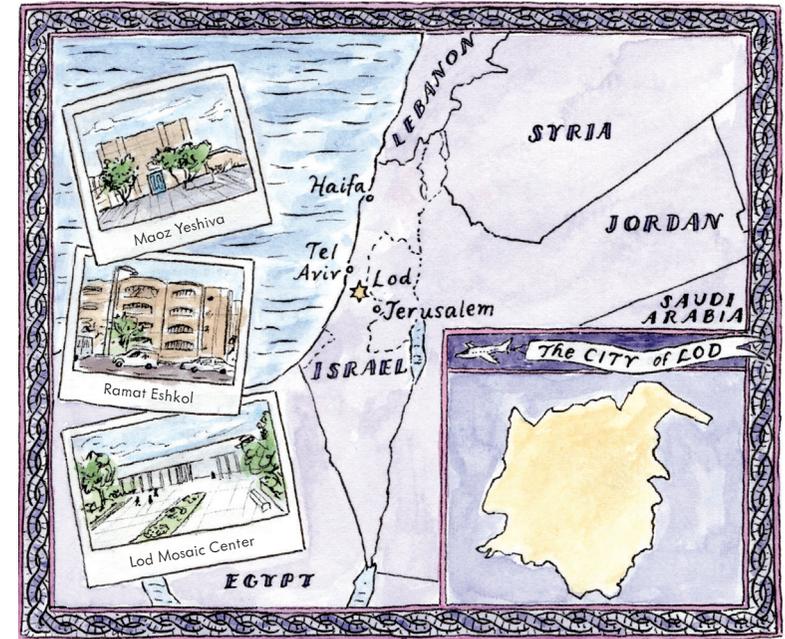
Postcard from Lod



THE 1,700-year-old Roman mosaic, discovered in 1996 at the end of a street in Lod, is one of the largest and best-preserved mosaics ever discovered in Israel. Dozens of land and sea animals cavort across its tiles. Indeed, it is so magnificent that the Shelby White and Leon Levy Lod Mosaic Center was built around it.

The museum also contains a small exhibit dedicated to the 8,000 years of continuous human habitation of Lod. On the last frame, the caption reads, “During the War of Independence, the city was captured and many of its Arab inhabitants fled. In the 1950s, thousands of new immigrants settled in the city, and Lod became a mosaic of ethnic and religious groups living side by side.” The last major event to take place in this city of 85,000—three-quarters Jewish, the rest Muslim or Christian Arab—was the outbreak in 2021 of rioting in which the mosaic museum was one of the targets. But it is not mentioned there.

Leaving the mosaic museum, you turn right onto He’Halutz Street. If you ignore some roosters and ducks wandering on the



pavement, most of the street seems a normal, though rather run-down, Israeli *shikun*—a building project.

There are two public buildings on He’Halutz (which becomes Exodus Street), though you wouldn’t expect to find them on the same street of an Israeli city. One is the Al-Razi Elementary School, the sign outside in Hebrew and Arabic denoting that this is an official Israeli state school serving the Arab community.

A bit farther down is the Maoz Yeshiva pre-military academy, where about 40 high-school graduates study Torah and undergo physical training for a year before they enlist in the IDF’s combat units. The fences around Maoz are festooned with large Israeli flags. A new outdoor gym is dedicated to the memory of Noam Raz, a member of a counterterror unit killed in 2022 in an operation against Palestinian terrorists near Jenin. At the end of the street, you arrive at the bustling open-air market in the center of old Lod.

There’s a parallel street connecting the museum and the market.

It's named for Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, the visionary who devoted his life to reviving ancient Hebrew. Yet on the Lod street bearing his name, all the signs in Hebrew have been removed from the houses, replaced by green-and-white signs in Arabic. Another nearby school, this one run by a private Christian foundation, posts its signs in Arabic and English. It's as if Israel doesn't exist on this street.



Welcome to Ramat Eshkol, the most explosive neighborhood in Israel. These are the streets where the rioting that swept Israel's "mixed" cities in May 2021 broke out.

Most of the shoddily built four-story apartment blocks were built for the families of Jewish immigrants who had arrived in Israel from North Africa in the 1960s and later from the Soviet Republic of Georgia. As tourism expanded, many were employed in menial jobs at nearby Ben Gurion Airport. But the neighborhood was never an attractive place to live, and when the new towns of Shoham and Modi'in were built in the early 1990s, there was a mass exodus from Exodus Street.

In their place came two groups. One consisted of Ethiopian Jews who had arrived in Israel a few years earlier with no property of their own. The others were Arab families, mostly the descendants of 1,000 or so essential employees of the Palestine Railways company who had been allowed to remain in the city when the rest of the 20,000 Arab residents were forced by the IDF to leave after the city's capture in July 1948.

Within the space of a few years, Ramat Eshkol had an Arab majority. In a remarkable historic turnaround, the Weizmann Elementary School, almost emptied of pupils, became the Al-Razi School.

The last time I'd been to Ramat Eshkol was on the second day of clashes in Lod. I'd arrived in the morning when most of the rioters were sleeping off the previous night's mayhem. There were

Ramat Eshkol was never an attractive place to live, and when the new towns of Shoham and Modi'in were built in the early 1990s, there was a mass exodus from Exodus Street.

squads of Border Police stationed in the neighborhood, but they didn't seem enough to quell another night of violence. By then, the rioting had spread to a dozen other locations across the country, and a 12-day war against Hamas in Gaza had begun.

I parked next to the deserted market square, mindful of dozens of burnt and still-smoldering vehicles in the parking bays beside me. The upper floor of the small municipal office was also burnt out, as were a few windows of apartments facing the market. "Our neighbors knew exactly which cars and apartments belonged to Jews," one of the Jewish residents told me.

The police were hunkered down in their armored vehicles. The only other people were a group of young Arab men lounging on the other side of the square while one of them did doughnuts in the square with an old Honda. Perhaps they were just tired, or maybe it was the low-grade weed they were smoking, but they were happy to talk. They didn't try to deny they had been among the rioters the previous night.

But why?

The imams had called them out to protest "the Jews defiling al-Aqsa." But for most of them, it wasn't about what had been happening on the Temple Mount. They had never even been to Jerusalem, one admitted, in perfect Hebrew. It was about life in Lod.

"It's only 20 percent about religion," said one. "And it's not really about the Jews here either, some of them are our friends. But the

Every Jewish voter I met said that they voted for Religious Zionism ‘out of recognition of what they had done for us during the riots.’

police and the city council have been oppressing us, arresting every kid who sets off fireworks on Ramadan, forcing the mosque loudspeakers to turn down their volume, and demolishing buildings they say were built without a permit. There’s so much pressure and poverty here that it was going to burst at some point like a balloon. Al-Aqsa was just the spark.”

“How do you expect us to calm down when the police come here only when the victims are Jews?” said another. “When an Arab murders an Arab, they come the next day, arrest a member of each family, and then release them for lack of evidence.”

As I was leaving Ramat Eshkol on that second day of rioting, a convoy of private vehicles had drawn up outside the Maoz academy, which, along with a number of shuls, had also been the target of arson attacks during the night. Groups of Jewish men, many armed, were disembarking. It was a motley group of settlers, recently discharged soldiers, far-right activists, and members of the racist “La Familia” ultra-supporters of Beitar Jerusalem Football Club. All were coming in response to appeals from the Jews of Lod for protection.

Not all the Jews in town were entirely happy to see them. “I personally had to check each of them, and there were those I told to leave,” says Noam Dreyfuss, the CEO of Lodaim, an organization representing Dati-Leumi (National Religious or Modern Orthodox) families who started to come to and live in the town over the past 20 years. “But the bottom line is that they came here when we needed them, and it was the MKs [members of Knesset] of

Religious Zionism who helped to organize them. Which is one of the reasons many people here voted for them.”

Lod has for decades been a Likud stronghold, and the party came first as usual in November’s elections. But its showing this time was relatively weak. Only 28.5 percent of Lod citizens voted for Likud, significantly under the 34.3 percent it took just 20 months earlier in the March 2021 election. More intriguing were the parties that came in second and third place.

Balad, the most nationalist of the Arab-Israeli parties, won 15.7 percent of the Lod vote. Another 15.5 percent of the city voted for the far-right Religious Zionism list. In other words, nearly a third of Lod’s residents voted for the most radical Jewish and Arab parties on the ballot in the last election.

Every Jewish voter I met said that he or she voted for Religious Zionism “out of recognition of what they had done for us during the riots.” So did Dreyfuss, who stressed that he aligns himself with the more religious wing of the list, led by Bezalel Smotrich, rather than with Itamar Ben-Gvir’s Jewish Power faction. The vote for Religious Zionism in Lod is significantly higher than its national share of 10.8 percent, but the doubling in its strength from the previous election is actually identical to RZ’s growth nationwide.

The change in the Arab vote in Lod is more ominous.

Three Arab-Israeli parties ran in this election. Ra’am, the Islamist-conservative party that had been in coalition with the government of Yair Lapid and Naftali Bennett, won the most votes nationwide, followed by Hadash-Ta’al, who are less enthusiastic about joining an Israeli coalition but do not rule it out. Balad, by contrast, is opposed to any cooperation with a sitting government as long as Israel regards itself a Jewish state. It came last among the three in the election, with only 2.9 percent of the nationwide vote, failing to cross the threshold needed to win seats in the Knesset.

In other words, Balad won just a quarter of the votes cast for Arab-Israeli parties nationwide. But in Lod it won three-quarters.

“I wouldn’t read too much into the result,” says Fida Shehade, a city planner, prominent Arab activist, and until recently a member of the town council. “Don’t forget that Sami was born in Lod and he has a lot of family here,” she adds, referring to Sami Abu Shehadeh, the party’s leader. “The Arab vote is primarily tribal. But also it’s a rejection of the establishment. People didn’t want to vote for Ra’am because there’s a feeling that the Jewish center-Left just used us to bring down Netanyahu, and for Hadash who were always the largest Arab party and too complacent. Here in Lod at least, we saw Balad people working hardest and voted for them.”

But what does the vote say about the future of Lod?



Based on its location alone, Lod should be one of the most desirable places to live in Israel. “For people like me who really don’t like Tel Aviv but need to be there every day for work, Lod is almost ideal,” says the founder of a tech company who lives in the city. “I have a great community here as well. But the violence, not just last May but also on a daily level—robberies, fires, people, usually Arab youths, hitting kids or sexually harassing girls on the street—makes me wonder if there’s a future here.”

Lod’s greatest asset—being an affordable and accessible town at the intersection of Israel’s two main highways—is also its biggest drawback. Whether by design or coincidence, it has become the place where a wide variety of “outsider” communities have sprung up. There is a neighborhood of Palestinian “collaborators” who fled their homes in the West Bank and were allowed to settle in Lod. There is a Bedouin community from the south. There are large groups of foreign workers, from dozens of countries, employed in Tel Aviv.

It hasn’t helped that the city has had a weak and inept leadership, and in many cases the central government had to step in and

Most people I spoke to in Lod after the election, both Jews and Arabs, were pretty certain that another round of rioting, like the one last May, wouldn’t break out. But not necessarily for positive reasons.

appoint a mayor from outside. The current mayor, Yair Revivo, has been in office for nine years. He has persevered largely because he has succeeded in pushing new building projects in the southern part of the city, which is predominantly Jewish. The older neighborhoods in the central and northern parts, where most of the Arab and the poorer Jewish communities live, remain dilapidated.

In these areas however a new community has built its home: the *garin torani*.

A *garin*, not a word easily translatable into English but familiar to anyone with a background in Jewish youth groups, is a group of young people with a mission. In this context, the *garinim toranim* are groups of young religious couples who have made their homes in Israel’s development towns and less desirable working-class areas. Their mission is the building of God-fearing Zionist communities. In some towns, they have been credited with boosting local society, but they are often accused of elitism. In mixed towns such as Lod, they are viewed by the Arabs and some of the Jews as settlers.

Lod’s *garin torani* was founded in the mid-1990s. Today it is the largest of the *garinim*, with nearly a thousand young religious families. Because of the city’s circumstances, it is also the most controversial. Its members prevailed on the Housing Ministry to build an exclusively Dati-Leumi neighborhood, Ramat Elyashiv,

in the old center of the city, just next to a predominantly Arab area. In recent years, more of its members have been moving to Ramat Eshkol.

For many, the *garin* are the only ones guaranteeing that half of Lod doesn't become an Arab-controlled semiautonomous area. Others accuse them of exacerbating tensions. One thing is for certain: They are the only Jewish community that chooses to live in Lod.

"The left-wing media focus on the tensions with our Arab neighbors," says one member of the *garin*. "They don't cover all the things we do for the many communities here, helping families access services and demand things from the local council and government departments they never dreamt they deserve."

Fida Shehade begs to differ. "We don't have to be good friends, just have a dialogue. But there wasn't this type of hatred before the *garin* came along. I meet them at city-planning committees, and they're the ones who know as much as I do as a city planner, but they're not aware of the privileges they have as the most politically connected group here."

Most people I spoke to in Lod after the election, both Jews and Arabs, were pretty certain that another round of rioting, like the one last May, wouldn't break out. But not necessarily for positive reasons. The hatred and tension haven't gone away. But the police and Shin Bet won't be caught unprepared again. Mayhem in such a central part of the country can't be allowed to happen.

But, surprisingly perhaps, the outlook on both sides is similarly optimistic.

Shehade thinks that ultimately "market forces will decide." Since "neither community is going to evaporate," Lod will eventually become lucrative enough for both sides to share and enjoy its location.

"Better life and better conditions will create security," says Dreyfuss, one of the leaders of the *garin*. "New residents of higher class will come, also Arabs. Those are the powers of the market. And they

will have what to lose here, culture, community centers, mosques, and schools. They won't leave and neither will we. I always say that Jews should learn love of the land from the Arabs. Jews have left Lod. But an Arab who was born in Lod dies in Lod." *

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וַיִּרְאוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַתַּחַת
רַגְלָיו כַּמַּעֲשֵׂה לְבַנְת הַסִּפִּיר
וּכְעֶצֶם הַשָּׁמַיִם לְטָהָר:

— שמות כד:י

What was it about Judaism 60 years ago that made the Jewish people swing? And is that allure from long ago reproducible today, when Jews face a new cultural model of antisemitism? Can the old cool become the new cool? And would we want it to?

JOHN PODHORETZ • 22

Would it be too fantastical to think of Jeremiah and Isaiah as forerunners of Malamud and Mailer? Ezekiel as a dry run for Lenny Bruce?

HOWARD JACOBSON • 32

Many people assume Yiddishists are focused on movement in one direction, toward the past. But Yiddish culture isn't simply some endpoint to be grasped and 'preserved.'

ROKHL KAFRISSEN • 42

When talented artists, writers and filmmakers are exposed to the richness of Jewish life and culture in a serious way, without watering down the Jewish content, the quality of their art is enhanced.

MEM BERNSTEIN • 50

The arc of pop culture is long, but it bends towards empathy. The better story tellers, those who give us complexities and intricacies and humanity in all its messy glory, always win over the facile propagandists.

LIEL LEIBOVITZ • 70