

# S A P I R

IDEAS FOR A THRIVING JEWISH FUTURE

THE ISSUE ON

## FAITH



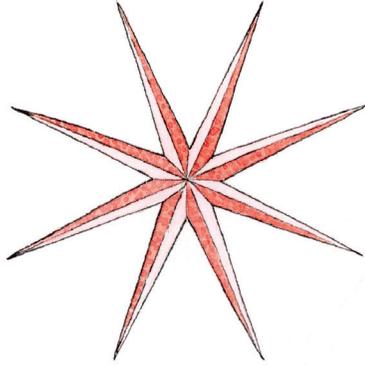
*Volume Fourteen*



*Summer 2024*

*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



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Note on the cover: The name “Israel” was given to Jacob in Genesis 32:29 after he had “struggled with beings Divine and human, and prevailed.” It is the name with which the Jewish people—the Children of Israel—have identified more than any other, for how it encapsulates the Jewish experience of faith in both God and man. We, Israel, are perennially engaged in struggle, but as the shade of blue surrounding the struggle changes, dawn approaches with the rising sun, just as it did for our forefather, Israel.

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S A P I R

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# Publisher's Note

*Where is faith in Jewish life?*



IT HAS LONG PERPLEXED ME that American Jews talk so little about faith.

I understand that being Jewish isn't only about religion: We are a nation, a culture, a family. Much of institutional Jewish life shies away from faith talk out of a desire to create a home for

as many Jews as possible.

There's also the question of which faith we would be talking about if we did. It's been said that being Jewish requires the belief in one God—or fewer. Jewish organizations are loath to find themselves embroiled in theological controversy, which can be even more fraught than the political kind, if that's possible. Jewish communal groups try to avoid this by adopting a non-denominational approach.

Finally, I think there is something particularly American (or Jewish American) at play in this self-censorship. Jews have been at the forefront of defending the separation of church and state. The history of our people has conditioned us to feel threatened by the

appearance of religion in the public square, and I think that has led us to treat faith as something intensely private. Freedom of religion has become freedom *from* religion.

This might be okay if it were working. I don't think it is. Synagogues outside the Orthodox community are serving increasingly older congregations each year. Young people are voting with their feet, walking away from the synagogues where discussion of God or faith is least present.

One of the interesting developments since October 7 has been the increase in Jewish faith and religiosity. Talk to Chabad rabbis and rebbetzins and they will tell you about running out of mezuzot for people's doors. Talk to Hillel professionals and they will tell you about not being able to accommodate the number of students who want to be around the Shabbat table. Part of it comes from a desire of young Jews (and not-so-young ones) for community and human connection. But for many, that human connection is tied to a faith experience.

This is Jewish identity performed in a faithful key, and the counterintuitive truth is that this chorus has been rising for some time. The insatiable demand for song leaders in the Jewish world is a clear indication of the renaissance in religious and spiritual expressions of Jewish belonging. Take, for example, Yeshivat Hadar, which began as a Talmud-focused institution. Now, thanks to Joey Weisenberg, it can boast nearly 2 million streams of its Rising Song Institute recordings, not to mention the widespread use of its cantorial resources.

What all this means is that the Jewish epic, with its countless twists and turns, is largely a story of searching for our voice, collectively and individually. Ever since God implored us to "hear" Him — *shema yisrael* — at Sinai, we have been developing ever-evolving ways for Him, and His world, to hear *us*. In this issue of SAPIR, we have brought many of those different voices together. I pray that we all listen a bit more closely to the ones we may not have yet heard. \*



PART ONE

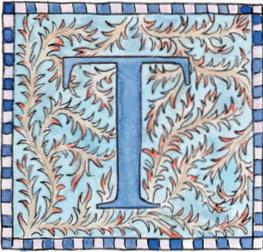
IN OURSELVES



DAVID WOLPE

# The God Who Dwells in Doubt

*The philosopher Bertrand Russell was famous for his paradoxes, but he left the greatest one to the rest of us*



THE MOST PROFOUND experience I have had of God occurred when I was a devout atheist. At 17, I took a cross-country Trailways bus to work at a Jewish summer camp in California. Although not hostile to Judaism itself, I had spent my teen years reading Bertrand Russell, the marvelously witty logician who wrote convincing diatribes against God. One day, we were riding through the Colorado Rockies, and I was struck by the certainty that those mountains showed the hand of an artist. I knew the arguments against my intuition: the apparently blind yet beautiful forces of geology that formed the slopes and rock formation. Yet what I felt was awe and surrender before something infinitely greater than anything I had ever known. It shook me.

I pushed the feeling away because of how unsettling it was. Following the example of Russell, I thought that people who believed in God did so as a result of some personal weakness. They needed a crutch or were afraid of death or did not have the wisdom to construct a life for themselves without guidance from a sacred book.

In other words, when it came to faith, I was a jerk.

I then came to learn that Russell himself was kind of a jerk. Upon reading his autobiography, I realized that this paragon of logic had lived a supremely messy life: multiple marriages, affairs, estranged children — all the wreckage of someone who is personally unwise. And I met people of deep religious faith who were as strong, as deep, and as thoughtful as any others I had known. The older I got, the larger the puzzle of life well-lived. It was clear to me I was missing some pieces.

“The fool says in his heart there is no God,” says the Psalmist (14:1). Foolishness is generally a quality we associate with the head rather than the heart, and atheism is as well. Yet the Psalmist is wise. Both belief and its negation are not purely intellectual exercises. For many years when I taught Jewish philosophy, I put proofs for God on the board: the ontological proof, the teleological proof, the cosmological proof. Never did I have a student slap her forehead and exclaim, “Now I believe!”

Conversely, many people lose faith in God because of tragedy. Yet tragedy gives them no new information. Did anyone not know before they got cancer that human beings get cancer? Or before a loved one dies that people die? Our deepest connection to this world is not reason but relation. People who, in tragedy, lose their faith do so not because they learn something new about God but because their relationship with God changes from experiencing God’s world in a new and painful way. Though reason must be allowed its say and sway, we come to God as we come to any deep relationship: through the pathway of the heart.

The Kotzker Rebbe famously asked his disciples where God dwells. Schooled in the rudiments of theology, they answered,

“Everywhere.” Doesn’t the prophet teach us that “all the world is filled with His glory” (Isaiah 6:3)? But the Kotzker was having none of it. “No,” he told them, “God dwells wherever we let God in.”

This belief by volition is also a heart message. The central declaration of the Jewish prayer service, the *shema*, teaches that these words of faith “should be on your heart.” The Kotzker, again, remarks that they should ideally be *in* one’s heart, not *on* it—but hearts aren’t always open. If you put the words on your heart, then, when your heart is open, receptive—when the ego wanes, when vulnerability cracks it even a tiny bit—the words will seep in.

For some, this poses no challenge. As people are gifted with musical or mathematical ability, there are prodigies of faith. Reading the theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel, whose magical prose casts a sheen on the world, you feel that he was born to belief. His gaze was attuned to enchantment. People of steady faith cannot always understand why the rest of us do not simply open our hearts.

For me the skepticism of distance is always pushing at the edges of my faith. Is the awe that strikes me in the mountains the sensation of faith or just a desperate wish? Am I reaching for a fantasy to make the world meaningful, or intuiting something that in less attuned moments eludes my grasp?

I am moved to faith because even in God’s apparent absence I have a sense of the shape of what is missing. Sartre once spoke of what it is like to wait for someone in a café. As strangers walk in, each one disappointingly not the person for whom you yearn, you suddenly recognize that the one you anticipate, the absent one, is more real to you than all those who stand before you. Sometimes the God I cannot reach still feels more real than the world I see simply by opening my eyes.

Even since before my Russell-reading teenage years, I have never known faith without doubt. Periods of belief have always been punctuated by moments of dark unbelief, a feeling of disenchantment and abandonment, as though the world has no curtain to pull

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God will not dispense health like a cosmic vendor, or be enlisted as a party to our quarrels. The only real promise is presence. What God wants from me is me; from you, you.

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back, a world of no Oz, no wizard, no home. And like most people, I have a powerful impulse to identify my bleakest visions with the truest ones, as though disillusion were the test. Why should the world not disappoint us? It makes no promises.

But paradoxically, the moments of faith feel more true to me, as though they are more in line with the deeper reality of things. My best self is my believing self, and it is not courage or wisdom that leads me beyond it to disbelief, but rather a tightness or closedness that makes me insensible to the secret chord.

In darkness, through losses, cancer, heartbreak, and the times I have beaten my fists futilely against the walls of an unyielding world, I have been tempted to treat the Divine instrumentally. Yet God refuses to be shrunk to human polarities: Victory is not God's assurance; nor is tragedy God's banishment. Accepting that I am small, fragile, and fleeting, I know how many before me and around me grow through their pain to *bitachon* (trust). God will not dispense health like a cosmic vendor or be enlisted as a party to our quarrels. The only real promise is presence. What God wants from me is me; from you, you.

As I have gotten older, God has grown at once more abstract and more personal. A two-year-old cannot know what an adult is, cannot even know what he doesn't know. God is far greater in relation to us than an adult is to a two-year-old. Therefore my sense of God is mystic and unknowing. When people confidently

pronounce “God wants” or “God says,” it reminds me how small and limited we are, and how childishly bold are some of God’s presumed spokespeople.

At the same time, God and I have lived with one another for a lifetime. There is a strange intimacy to this old, unfathomable companion of my life. “You have searched me and know me” (Psalm 139). I am no surprise to God, even when I surprise myself. There is both an unease and a great comfort in feeling oneself known.

When the Seer of Lublin, a great Hasidic master, was a child, he would wander in the forest. His father asked him why, and he said, “I go there to find God.” “That’s beautiful,” his father answered, “but haven’t I taught you that God is the same everywhere?” “God is,” said the boy, “but I’m not.”

We shift with the landscape. Alone in prayer, I am certain, sometimes, that I am not alone. So much of faith and history and practice in Judaism is about the collective, and I have had moments of singing with the congregation when the boundaries of self seem to dissolve, and we are one voice ascending. I have had moments of communion with one whom I love, when the oppression of the everyday is shed like an extra skin and joy seems too pale a word for the experience of transcendence shot through with the presence of God. How can those things be less real, less true, than the moments when I chuckle at the witty shaft of the atheist? In those moments of transcendence, it is time that feels less real than God.

I have grown old enough to doubt even my doubts, and to stand beside Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav, who declared himself a “moon man” whose faith waxed and waned.

This year with my students, we studied the thought of the Esh Kodesh, the remarkable rabbi of the Warsaw ghetto, Kalman Schapira. The Esh Kodesh suffered terribly in his lifetime and while not entirely absolving God for his suffering, he wrote that the destruction of the rational mind by extreme suffering left open a channel by which one could reach directly to God. This was not

a repudiation of the rational or a glorification of suffering; it was a recognition of the limits of our reason and the reality that suffering can place us on a different plane of existence.

I think about the Esh Kodesh, mourning his son who was killed in the bombing of Poland at the beginning of the war, grieving his community whose destruction he witnessed, people he could not save, and the deep learning that he must have feared would be lost. The Esh Kodesh's writings were accidentally unearthed in Poland after the war in which both he and his family had perished, a salvage of the sacred that has the tinge of miracle. I want to stand with his insight, that suffering is a depth experience, the kind of experience that suspends thought if only for a brief time and opens us to the overwhelmingness that we usually try to channel through our powerful but bounded intellect. The heart may be chaotic and undiscerning. But it is vast. It can receive and nurture things of which the mind does not know.

So I hold together a certain faith and a persistent doubt; a God who is beyond all imagining and closer than I am to myself. How can life be less than a paradox, a motionless dance, a silent scream, a prayer whose destination can never be known? \*

BRET STEPHENS

# My Liberal Faith

*The beginning of wisdom is neither the sum  
nor the end of it*



WHEN I WAS 18 and a second-year student at the University of Chicago, I enrolled in a seminar on the Book of Genesis taught by the bioethicist Leon Kass. The class changed my life. Never had I been in the company of smarter peers, a more interesting text, or a wiser teacher. I discovered, after a religiously indifferent upbringing, that Judaism has profound things to say about our place in the cosmos, the origins of society, divine and human justice, family obligations, and the duties of upright men. I learned that close textual study of the Bible can reveal layers of meaning I never would have noticed otherwise. To this day, my proudest boast is that you can find a reference to a midterm paper of mine, on the war of the nine kings (Genesis 14), in Kass's landmark book, *The Beginning of Wisdom*.

And then I put Genesis down and moved on. To books that shaped my political philosophy: Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*,

Locke's *Second Treatise*, Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, the speeches of Abraham Lincoln, the anti-totalitarian writings of Hannah Arendt, Friedrich Hayek, and Czesław Miłosz. To novels that shaped my inner life: Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Conrad's *Lord Jim*, Mann's *Magic Mountain*, Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian*. To a career in journalism that took me from anti-globalization protests in Sweden to the hinterlands of Pakistan, and from a stalwart neoconservatism to a more middle-ground type of politics. The beginning of wisdom, I learned over time, was neither the sum nor the end of it.

I discovered my faith at the University of Chicago, but it wasn't religious. It was a liberal faith.



What is a liberal faith? There are specifically political ways of addressing that question—that is, faith in a liberal order that puts the protection of individual liberty, conscience, and initiative at the center of its concerns. That's a faith I share, even if I don't subscribe to the more common understanding of "liberalism" as a program of big-government responses to economic and social problems.

But what I'm writing about here is something more personal: liberal without the "ism." This is liberal as an attitude toward life; an openness to new ideas and different ways of being; a readiness to accept doubt, ambiguity, uncertainty, and contradiction; an ability to hold a conviction while occasionally allowing it to be shaken; a right to change your mind and reinvent yourself. It is the belief that, at its best, a liberal faith can be a more honest, interesting, and rewarding approach to life than alternatives based in tradition, dogma, or ideology.

My liberal faith is rooted in three well-known lines that have stuck with me over the years. Thomas Jefferson: "the pursuit of Happiness." Learned Hand: "The spirit of liberty is the spirit which

is not too sure that it is right.” And Pericles: “Happiness depends on being free, and freedom depends on being courageous.”

### *The pursuit of happiness* —

It’s the thought that animates Elizabeth Bennet, the heroine of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, when she tells off the pompous, interfering Lady Catherine: “I am only resolved to act in that manner, which will, in my opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to you, or to any person so wholly unconnected with me.” It’s the idea that persuades Philip Carey, the unlucky protagonist of Somerset Maugham’s *Of Human Bondage*, finally to stop living “by what he thought he should do and never by what he wanted with his whole soul to do.” It’s the conviction that life comes with the God-given right to live for ourselves, rather than for the sake of social expectation, cultural convention, or the demands of the more powerful.

What makes the pursuit of happiness so compelling to billions of people around the world is its combination of radical universalism and equally radical subjectivity. To whom does the right to pursue happiness belong, according to the Declaration of Independence? To everyone. Who gets the last word in defining your happiness? You—and you alone. The novelist (and later Nobelist) V.S. Naipaul—who migrated in the 1950s from colonial Trinidad to England, where he rose to the summit of the literary establishment—gave what I think is the best description of what the pursuit of happiness meant in a 1990 speech to the Manhattan Institute. “It implies a certain kind of society, a certain kind of awakened spirit,” he said.

I don’t imagine my father’s Hindu parents would have been able to understand the idea. So much is contained in it: the idea of the individual, responsibility, choice, the life of the intellect, the idea of vocation and perfectibility and achievement. It is an immense human idea. It cannot be reduced to a fixed system. It cannot generate fanaticism.

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The liberal faith is therefore one of unsought, but unavoidable, opposition. It takes courage.

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In a liberal society, it is easy to notice the ways in which the pursuit of happiness can go astray: in pleasure-seeking, greed, or disdain for ancient wisdom and long experience. But it shouldn't be hard to see, also, the good that comes when people's imagination and initiative are freed so that they may pursue their notion of happiness—or when they learn to accept that their pursuit must find ways to coexist with everyone else's. The result is a kind of squaring of the circle: In giving each person a fair shot at fulfilling his heart's desire, the liberal faith generates respect for the right of others to do the same. Instead of teaching selfishness, it enlarges our sympathetic imagination.

*The spirit which is not too sure it is right —*

The line is from a lapidary speech that Learned Hand, the legendary jurist, delivered in 1944 for “I Am an American Day.” It goes to the core of the liberal faith, which is the check against certitude and the despotic mindset that certitude spawns. It also entails a paradox: The liberal faith asks us to be certain about our lack of certainty, to commit ourselves to being, in a sense, uncommitted.

This attitude is why democracies generally allow illiberal parties to compete in free elections, while crossing fingers that the bad guys don't win. Sometimes the results have been catastrophic—it's what made possible Hitler's rise to power—but it also denies those illiberal parties the ability to claim that they are victims of a hypocritical system rigged against them.

But the more important point is personal: To be “not too sure” we are right isn't to say we are wrong. It isn't a recipe for crippling

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The liberal faith is the faith that gives us freedom not only for its own sake, but also for what it chiefly offers: the chance to pursue our happiness.

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self-doubt. Instead, it's an invitation to a productive middle ground between confidence and skepticism, between having enough of the former to move ourselves forward and enough of the latter to revisit our assumptions and admit our mistakes.

It isn't easy to live with an inner tension between impulses that pull in opposite directions. But just as religious faiths impose certain disciplines, such as abstaining from some foods, so does the liberal faith. It does so in the service not of holiness but of intelligence. It asks us to subscribe not to a belief, per se, but rather to a method, a practice of advancing our thoughts the way a person climbing a mountain slope of loose rock advances his steps—one step up and a half-one down—until the ground settles securely underfoot. The nagging doubt of being not too sure we are right may be tiring, but it keeps us mentally fit and intellectually honest.

It also allows us to keep an open mind. To be not too sure we are right is to adopt the spirit of John Maynard Keynes's famous riposte: "When the facts change, I change my mind—what do you do, sir?" That could usefully serve as the motto for any university where certitude has replaced skepticism as the dominant intellectual attitude. For that matter, the motto works for any institution that seeks to process all new information merely as confirmation of its prior assumptions. Certitude is a road to intellectual stagnation and the mistakes that flow from it. It's the path of personal and social decay.

A final point: To be not too sure we are right strengthens our

minds, but it also softens our hearts. To preserve a touch of self-doubt means looking for extenuating motives before we make hard-and-fast judgments, looking for complexities where others insist on pitiless simplicities. The liberal faith does not insist that we “judge not, that ye be not judged,” because judgment is also a part of wisdom. But it does insist that we judge more carefully—which will, in most cases, move us to judge more kindly.

### *Happiness, freedom, and courage—*

Pericles’s Funeral Oration, delivered around 430 B.C.E. in memory of the war dead and recorded by Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, tells us that the liberal faith is not for the faint of heart. This is true in at least two senses.

First, the liberal faith is not “self-evident”; it has external enemies. The world is filled with people who do not want you to speak your mind, pursue your bliss, express your individuality, and maintain your freedom of action. They are numerous, willful, and usually aggressive, whether they sit in Russian Army APCs, fundamentalist religious institutions, or university DEI offices. Because their aim is to impose themselves, they tend to leave liberals with no option to ignore or avoid them. The liberal faith is therefore one of unsought, but unavoidable, opposition. It takes courage.

Sometimes the courage is martial. On July 14, 1861, Sullivan Ballou, a 32-year-old major in the 2nd Rhode Island Infantry, penned a famous letter to his wife Sarah on the eve of the Battle of Bull Run. “If it is necessary that I should fall on the battlefield for my country, I am ready,” he wrote. “I have no misgivings about, or lack of confidence in, the cause in which I am engaged, and my courage does not halt or falter.” Ballou’s leg was shattered by a Confederate six-pound cannon ball; he died of his wounds two weeks later.

At other times, the courage is moral. Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat on a bus in segregated Alabama is a famous example. More often, the courage goes unsung or belittled. When I think of

moral courage, some of the names that spring to mind today are Abigail Shrier, for questioning transgender ideology, and Hadley Freeman, for calling out the Left's antisemitism, and Masih Alinejad, for fighting for women's freedoms in Iran, and Lionel Shriver, for her amused and determined indifference to every politically correct piety.

But the external enemies of the liberal faith are only half the story. The other half is the story of the enemy within each of us: the inner voice that whispers a preference for conformity, or that wishes others would make our choices for us, or that seeks to avoid the moral accountability that goes with personal liberty. As the proto-totalitarian character Leo Naphta says in *Magic Mountain*, "It is ultimately a cruel misunderstanding of youth to believe it will find its heart's desire in freedom. Its deepest desire is to obey."

Liberal faith is the faith that inspires us to resist that grim analysis. It's the faith that tells us to summon our courage, to vanquish those who would have us submit, to still the inner desire to surrender. It's the faith that gives us freedom not only for its own sake, but also for what it chiefly offers: the chance to pursue our happiness.



So where does all this leave my Jewish faith?

The answer is: more or less where I left it after that unforgettable seminar with Leon Kass. I think of my Jewishness as an identity, a sensibility, an inheritance, a fate, a gift, a weight—above all, as a fundamental responsibility. "A Jew I am, and a Jew will I remain" is what one shipwrecked Jew (described in the *Shevet Yehudah*, a 16th-century record of the persecutions of the Jews in different countries and times) supposedly cried out after the loss of his whole family. It's a good enough motto for me.

Still, I will continue to raid the proverbial cupboards of Judaism to reaffirm my liberal faith. The iconoclasm of Abraham. The freedom-seeking of Moses. The warts-and-all humanity of

our prophets and heroes. The monotheism that undergirds the ethical universalism and, ultimately, intellectual rationalism without which liberal faith could not exist. The commitment to universal literacy and education. The joy of argument and respect for dissent.

That Jewish faith whose rituals I rarely practice and sometimes disdain nonetheless laid the foundation stones on which my liberal faith is built. For that, I remain deeply grateful. One day, perhaps, the gratitude will blossom into something more. \*

*July 9, 2024*

ALBERT EISENBERG

# Show Up to Synagogue

*It is time for Jews to gather together once again. And Jews who gather do so in prayer*



THE TORAH'S TALE of Moses's heroism is a rather unlikely one. Saved at birth from certain death at the hands of Pharaoh's executioners, he comes to maturity in the house of Pharaoh himself, raised in worldly privilege as a prince of Egypt only to escape once again to the wilderness after killing an Egyptian slave-master.

It is only when he stumbles upon the preternatural burning bush, which burns yet is not consumed, that God speaks with him, charging him "to lead the Hebrews out of bondage." His immediate reluctance and protest is genuine, not to mention legitimate, for he is "slow of mouth and slow of tongue" (Exodus 4:10)—variously interpreted as referring to a speech impediment or an inability with words.

This line of Torah often comes back to me at moments when I feel a bit tongue-tied during the Shabbat prayer service; when I

am, amid my fellow congregants, less than fluent in the liturgy and alienated from those with stronger Jewish backgrounds than mine, those who can read Hebrew faster and seem to know every tune without hesitation. I remind myself that God chose Moses in spite of his impediment — or maybe because of it.

Although our Jewish tradition, unlike other monotheistic faiths, shies away from imitating the lives of our prophets, I think there is something to Moses's biography as an unaffiliated Jew-turned-leader that is relevant to the current generation of young American Jews as we face the rising threats of violent antisemitism and the spiritual vapidness of our time.

Our technological era has distanced us from our neighbors and torn the traditional fabric of social bonds. The most recent social schism, the Covid pandemic and our collective response to it, significantly increased both our personal isolation and the divisions we face.

This century, the United States has also seen a steep falloff in religious observance, with church and synagogue attendance declining precipitously and the number of the religiously unaffiliated rising, especially among younger people. For American Jews, the most privileged and fortunate Jewish community in history, this great secularization has been in the works for decades, if not centuries; our grandparents and great-grandparents came here and assimilated, exchanging the Old World's cultural and religious identities for a chance at the American Dream — to succeed and to blend into the multicultural oasis around us.

What their living descendants now face is not just the harsh return of the antisemitism they thought had been left behind, but its coupling with the same troubles experienced by their non-Jewish peers: alienation from neighbors, resultant mental-health issues, and a profound sense that we've lost our way in a new wilderness.

There is a framework to respond to these twin threats of dangerous Jew-hatred and soul-eroding social-media consumerism, one that has been developed over millennia of wanderings. Like Moses's

burning bush, it stands on the path, burning and not consumed, waiting for our curious approach. That framework is Jewish communal prayer, and the vessel that houses it: the synagogue.

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While I was blessed with a Jewish upbringing and some understanding of our faith and holidays, I did not regularly attend synagogue until I became an adult.

I felt called back to the idea of Jewish worship — something I had done, but never enjoyed, growing up — in my early twenties. Emerging from a college bubble into work-life in a world that appeared deeply unstructured and increasingly fragmented in the social and political decay of America in the 2010s, I felt adrift. In a daily rise-crash cycle of cellphone notifications, I yearned, as many of us do, to feel “present” in the world, so I found my way to synagogue as a weekly reprieve from the buzzing stimulation of the everyday.

Synagogue offered much of what was missing from an increasingly noisy, petty, and spiteful environment: stillness, depth, knowledge, and a sense of the holy. The people I met there valued these things as well, and our participation in this ancient practice was a quiet, worthy response to the culture around us. Incorporating it into my return made it feel like a weekly homecoming, an escape hatch from the profanity and evil we witness all around us.

This practice allows me, at least temporarily, to put the outside world on mute and immerse myself in a ritual that has been practiced, in one way or another, for an inconceivable 20 centuries (at least), in every corner of the globe, in the least hospitable political environments. That we repeat the same prayers our ancestors uttered millennia before is, to me, reason enough to compel my curiosity in this burning, yet not consumed, fire. It is a reminder that I, like every Jew, have a role to play in the most extraordinary story humanity has ever known, of an adaptive and unique exiled people, whose journey has been so strange, shocking, and uncertain,

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The structure of group worship, the sitting and standing and noshing together afterward, is an antidote to alienation.

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it could hardly be an accident that God promised Abraham and Isaac that their descendants would be “as numerous as the stars in the sky” and just as scattered.

There is a pleasant rhythm to the service, an aspect of communal meditation, and an activation of synapses that fire off with synchronized activities—areas of our brain that have atrophied in us, social animals degenerated by device-curated individualism. Just as certainly, areas of the brain *deactivate* as one enters spiritual space: specifically, whichever part of it that has been conceptually retrofitted to contain our phones as appendages that command our minute-by-minute attention. All that falls away as I sit, stand, and chant together with my brethren in shul.

I now attend Shabbat morning services most weekends and have grown more and more familiar with the structure of the service, which at first bewildered me—when to stand and sit, which lines to repeat, when to exclaim “l’chaim!” with the full congregation during the rabbi’s kiddush. And after a decade of striving, I can mostly keep up with the Hebrew chanting.

On the way to becoming more fluent in Jewish prayer, I have discovered the beautiful tribute to the *Eshet Chayil*, the woman of valor, whose worth is more than rubies. I have contemplated the longing couplets of the *Anim Z’mirot* hymn, composed in the 12th century and sung at the end of services: “He adorns Himself for me and I adorn myself for Him; He is close to me when I call.” I have experienced the righteous justice that Joseph, sold into slavery before rising in Egypt, shows his jealous brothers, his

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The reflex to act against antisemitism will not matter if American Jewry does not exist in any concrete way to replicate itself.

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bitterness turned to strength: “Fear not, for am I in the place of God? What you intended for evil, God meant for good.” I have uttered the potent, Zen-like prayer at the conclusion of the silent *Amidah* meditation, so applicable to today’s grievance-driven culture: “Let my soul be silent to those who curse me; and let my soul be as dust to all.”

I have also met and befriended people across political, age, and geographic divides. Our divisions dissolve at the kiddush table after services. The structure of group worship, the sitting and standing and noshing together afterward, is an antidote to alienation.



I have had to trade very little of my secular life to become more engaged and involved in synagogue. I don’t keep kosher. I have a tattoo. I return to my phone on Saturday afternoons and do not cover my head in public. My life would probably appear quite similar on the outside had I not embarked on this journey, but I would feel more scattered and less grounded by an ancient and enduring spiritual identity—one that binds me to my great-grandparents and, I hope, to my great-grandchildren to come.

I don’t always feel “God” because of it. I do feel—in the warm greetings from fellow congregants whose names I can’t quite recall or as I join the other voices to support those saying the mourner’s kaddish, thinking of my grandparents—much more than myself.

There are millions of Jews with backgrounds like mine in our

country: people with vague memories of Hebrew School, a rusty concept of the synagogue service, and a lingering sense of something missing. They are disconnected from our birthright, what God promised to our ancestors: “I make this covenant . . . not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day . . . and those *who are not with us here this day*” (Deuteronomy 29:13–14, emphasis mine). It is impossible to measure how many unique talents exist among this group that could greatly benefit our people — and the world.

What has felt like a vague memory of home is now tugging at us. We must gather as Jews, and Jews who gather do so in prayer.



While antisemitism had lain dormant for many young American Jews, it is a menace that has never left us, and never will as long as there are Jews left to hate.

As individuals and as institutions we have mobilized: organizing marches, calling out antisemites from Congress to campus, and shepherding resources for Israel’s humanitarian and military needs.

But the reflex to act against antisemitism will not matter if American Jewry does not exist in any concrete way to replicate itself.

Because if Jews, and particularly *non-Orthodox* Jews, are not willing to tend to the flame of actual Judaism, to be passed on tangibly to the next generations, our collective outrage about antisemitism will be a footnote at the conclusion of a long and winding story. Hamas and the mullahs and the white nationalists and the raging “from the river to the sea” leftists will have gotten their wish. Modern Jewry will have disappeared into the whirring fog of modern life, the flame kept alight only in Hasidic and other Orthodox enclaves.

Owing to lack of observance and demographic trends—namely, a low birthrate and a high intermarriage rate—non-Orthodox Jewry could face a “significant collapse” in our lifetime, according to Pew

data. The community of affiliated, non-Orthodox American Jews may dwindle by the end of this century. Opposing trends, including greater engagement from interfaith families and renewed interest since October 7, may combat these trends. But to reverse them entirely begins at the individual level—and perhaps today, with you.

We must not be satisfied with rallying against antisemitism, donating to Israel-related causes, and sharing social-media content; we must make plans, too, to return to synagogue and to ensure that our children and theirs receive a Jewish education. Those who are already engaged in religious life must call back our unaffiliated friends and family.

Even those who feel alienated from Jewish observance must hear that call. Even those who are living totally secular lives. Even those who have never been to synagogue in the first place must return, for, as the Torah teaches, each of our souls was born at the creation of the universe.

And our Jewish leaders, our Federations and our nonprofits and our influencers and our rabbis, must be unafraid to call us back to synagogue, remembering that the worst nightmare of the antisemite is a thriving, growing Jewish population.

Like Moses the Prince, so many of today's Jews are worldly, privileged, and exposed to the best of our culture, but are slow of tongue when it comes to our traditions.

To remedy the disconnect, the powerlessness, the feeling of not knowing what to do or how to be, the best thing to do is to be a Jew, joyfully or haltingly, with or without reservations. And being a Jew means practicing Judaism, in a Jewish community. There is no other way to do it.

Come, pray for our world's salvation and better days for our people and all people, as our ancestors have done for millennia, in times of light and more frequently in times of darkness.

Connect, whether it's with God or the scripture or the memory of your late grandmother whose parents fled the Pale of Settlement when she was a child.

Sit, too, with your embarrassment and alienation and awkwardness at the whole ritual, your nonexistent grasp of the Hebrew, the confusion of when to rise and when to sit back down, when to speak and when to be silent, when seemingly random words are repeated and melodies are abruptly changed. Your discomfort will be the source of spiritual growth, for nothing valuable in this world is easy, and the Jewish journey—singular, painful, enduring—has been anything but.



On a recent summer night in Charleston, South Carolina, I was driving home over one of the city's stunning marshlands when I saw a dense, vibrating cloud that hovered neither near nor far away from me. As my car arched over the bridge, the cloud passed directly in front of a blazing full moon. I was struck by its ethereal, strange quality; it seemed to be placed there for me, and yet I was among a dozen cars that passed by that minute at 50 miles per hour. What if I had pulled over and looked, and listened? Would I, like Moses, have received some Divine revelation? Driving at full speed on a Saturday night, I did not find out.

And what if the burning bush that awaited Moses had been ablaze for years, or had not been the first light in the wilderness? What if there had been many burning bushes, generations of them, passed over by countless shepherds and traveling merchants and water-maids, waiting for the person who would notice?

There are clouds of smoke and fiery pillars and slow, still voices in each of our lives. And there is an eternal light burning right now in every synagogue, for us to seek out if we so choose. \*

ADENA PHILIPS

# The False Binary of Theism vs. Atheism

*Why ‘Do you believe in God?’  
is the wrong question*



AS A YOUNG philosophy student flirting with the boundaries of my Orthodox upbringing, I was often asked whether I “still” believed in God. One day, I found myself warily defending my evolving beliefs in response to a strident interrogation from a family member. “Are you asking me if I believe there is a Man in the sky, who concerns Himself with what we eat and what we wear, and has a book of good and evil that he tallies once a year to determine who will die by fire or water, or wild beast or strangulation?”

My exasperated response was less a criticism of the God of my family’s Shabbat table and the melodic High Holiday prayers—whom I often experienced as the majestic Father, Shepherd, Creator, and King—and more a reaction to what felt like a diminishment of my enchanting and expanding sense of the

Divine. Asking me whether I believed in God felt reductive. The textureless oversimplification of a yea-or-nay question landed as a blunt dismissal of my theological, even existential, journey, of the thoughts that kept me up at night and that were steering my early-adult life choices. What I so deeply craved to be asked was “What *do* you believe in?” or “What do you think is going on here?”



At least as far back as the ancient Greeks, societies have categorized thinkers into the binary buckets of theists and atheists. Theists pass the test with a simple “yes” —backed up by often inflexible internal forces that run the gamut from ecstatic conviction to the probabilistic pragmatism or spiritual laziness of Pascal’s wager. Atheists and their inner abstractions were, for many centuries, banished or shamed, their writings removed from libraries. The pre-Socratic philosopher Anaxagoras spent his late years in exile for rejecting classic Greek conceptions of God. Despite this, he became an essential contributor to modern views of a purpose-driven order in the world and what would later be contained in the teleological argument for the existence of God.

This binary construct of theist vs. atheist, the classification that is all too often relied on to help communities of faith delineate “who is with us and who is not; who is in and who is out,” grants little space to the intricacies inherent in the universal human quest to grasp at the transcendent, or to cling to a God figure (what the Jewish mystics call *devekut*).

How many people, for thousands of years and still today, buy into this binary when taking their very last precious breaths? “Do you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? You still have time. Even as you approach the gates of death, it’s not too late; all you have to do is say ‘I do!’”

Not to suggest this is a purely Christian phenomenon. The Jewish tradition, too, clings to this false binary even while its vocabulary

subverts it. Biblical Hebrew espouses myriad conceptions of God, beginning with the character's first appearance in the Torah as Elohim (curiously, "Gods," a plural form that takes a singular verb). The name itself is an expression of God's plural nature, or pluralism, perhaps reflected in Walt Whitman's description of self: "I contain multitudes." Elohim has an internal dialogue, or one with a council of angels, and bears at least some conception of a likeness of self; "Let us make man in our image and likeness!"

In contrast, fast-forward a few biblical chapters, and the God that Moses encounters introduces himself as an eternal transience, "I will be that I will be," asserting that his name forever shall be YHVH—a word that is an amalgamation of "was, is, and will be" (and is, by design, unpronounceable, literally undefinable).

Our sages and mystics refer to God at times as *Ha-makom* (the place) and at others as the apparent opposite, *Ein Sof* (without end, infinity, or, in Kabbalah, the void). And then of course there is *Shekhinah*, the divine feminine "presence" or "dwelling." Which is it then? The omnipresent place, the infinite void, or the dwelling presence? Our sages consider each name to highlight a different attribute or character trait of the Creator. (Incidentally, the multiplicity of names for God in the Jewish tradition has analogs in other traditions, such as Islam's 99 names for God that appear in the Koran, the various Hindu expressions of Brahman, a single divine power, and Christianity's holy trinity.)

What do each of these names for the Divine imply about what the Divine might be, the nature of our existence, and what is being asked of us? One could argue that the Elohim of the creation story teaches us not only that we are all created in the image of God, but that our purpose is to behave as expressions of the Divine. Or that Moses's YHVH portends a divinity in the sum total of all that is and that will ever be, in the oneness of all existence. Perhaps YHVH nudges us to recognize the distinction between the human and the Divine as illusory in the first place—and instead to embrace a non-dual reality that is infused everywhere, including our selves—in

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Religious experience — as modeled by our biblical ancestors — is animated by feelings of loving, fearing, challenging, and doubting God, sometimes in quick succession or simultaneously.

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body and thought — with Divine energy. Aren't then all constructs of God in essence conceptions of the why and the what of existence, reflections of the manifold ways in which people experience and interact with the transcendent?



Do you believe in God? Which one? Divergent conceptions, like the ones above, entreat us to probe more deeply into the nature of existence and our purpose here. Our tradition bestows on us this richness, and — much to our spiritual detriment — we bypass it by oversimplifying our conversations about God.

The Pew Research Center's U.S. Religious Landscape Surveys in 2007 and 2014 revealed a downward trend in respondents indicating a belief in God or a universal being. In 2017, Pew took the commendable step of expanding this inquiry, following the question "Do you believe in God, or not?" with questions about what respondents believe this God to be like, and how they interact with said God. Roughly half of the respondents who answered "no" to believing in God still indicated belief in some higher power or spiritual force, and 30 percent of those who answered "yes" to believing in God indicated that they do not believe in the Bible. These data reinforce the challenge to the believer/nonbeliever, theist/atheist

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Sometimes the Divine is pronouncedly shouting to me, other times I have to quiet my mind to hear only a faint whisper, and at times the Divine is entirely absent.

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paradigm. Jews were much less likely to believe in the traditional God of the Bible than were Christians, and more likely to believe in a higher power. One might read this evidence of the secularity of American Jewish respondents, but isn't it possible that their belief in a higher power has an expression in Judaism we have not yet fully recognized?

What the binary does is belittle God and the majesty of existence. As the writer Michael Kingsley said of the notorious atheist Christopher Hitchens, "Unlike others, he treats God like an adult."

So instead of asking each other "Do you believe in God?" what should we be asking?

How about: Are you concerned with the nature of existence? Are you curious about it? Do you wonder what we're doing here? What are the instances that pique your cosmic curiosity, where does your mind go when that happens, and what is the texture of that experience for you? *What do you believe in?*

I suggest that this litmus test serves as a more effective classification system than the binary we've inherited. The categorization of "those who are concerned with the nature of existence" versus "those who don't think about it, aren't interested, and don't care" is far more useful in guiding us to meaningful conversation, and in making sure that the conversation includes the full range of insights it can expose. Consider, based on the Pew study, that an atheist may have more in common with a believer who ascribes

to a universal consciousness than to an absurdist, and that same believer may have more in common with an atheist than with a Pascal's wagerer.

The “abominable heresies” for which Baruch Spinoza was excommunicated from his Jewish community arguably dovetail harmoniously with those who connect with the Divine through nature or earth-based Judaism. Does his once controversial phrase *Deus, sive Natura* (God, or Nature) offend one's spiritual senses, or can it deepen the shuckling of a pious Jew reciting a benediction over a flash of lighting, or a rainbow?

People love to debate whether Einstein was an atheist, but doesn't the fact that he called the mysterious “the source of all true art and science” render moot the meaningfulness of that debate?

If you believe in God, or a universal power, what are either or both of them like, and how do you interact with them? What does your theory, whatever it is, indicate about how you are called to conduct your life, weigh your decisions, treat others, and establish societal norms? What do you think we're doing here? In effect, what's going on, and why does it matter?

Opening the aperture of this conversation with our peers, our students, our children, and our communities can unlock the depth of spirituality that the believer/unbeliever or theist/atheist taxonomy has stymied. It shifts the “Are you in or are you out” dynamic by including in the conversation all seekers, the curious who feel that this question matters. It includes the valuable perspectives and community members who would otherwise be left out.

Religious experience—as modeled by our biblical ancestors—is animated by feelings of loving, fearing, challenging, and doubting God, sometimes in quick succession or simultaneously. A person of faith may be, during some periods, deeply connected to this line of spiritual inquiry and, at other times, more distanced from it. Engaging “seekers” rather than “believers” allows for a sincere grappling with faith that may not be a constant and consistent position. An earnest seeker's connection to the Divine

would naturally oscillate through circumstance. A member of my community, when asked recently whether she believes in God, responded “most of the time.” What would the permission to answer this question in a nonbinary way do for us? Allowing for a broader spectrum honors the diversity of spiritual journeys that shape our collective tapestry of beliefs.

I believe that the paradigm I’m suggesting more accurately honors the ethos of our people, who bear the name *Israel*—literally, “God Wrestler.” It enables more intimacy and connection among people with diverse viewpoints and experiences in our shared spiritual spaces, and it creates the conditions for a more authentic relationship with the Divine. Asking these questions allows us to tease out the richness of the Jewish spiritual tradition and find points of intersection with, and distinction from, other faiths. Most important, these conversations create a bridge between our spiritual beliefs, sometimes privately held, and our behavioral and moral choices, and the norms and policies we establish in our communities. It makes it harder to ignore that these choices should be driven by our deepest connection to purpose, to whatever we think underlies the mysteries that shape our lives, and to the most profound questions that stir our souls.



Today when asked whether I believe in God, I no longer feel confined to a singular doctrinal response. Not without a little sympathy for my interlocutor who may not be ready for these musings, I’ll expound upon my non-dual experience of the Divine (for me, reinforced in the declaration that God is “One” in my recitation of the *shema*) and the myriad places I experience transcendence, from nature’s intricate designs to the kindness of a stranger. The God of my Jewish upbringing lives for me in the warmth of a Shabbat table, the liturgical depth of our prayers and their accompanying melodies, and in the mystical underpinnings of the Jewish

annual cycle. She also appears in the ecstasy of the dance floor, the belly laughs between friends, the eruption of a volcano, and in sacred tears on a dark night of the soul. Sometimes the Divine is a pronounced voice shouting to me, other times a faint whisper I have to quiet my mind to hear, and at times a complete absence.

As my conception of God has evolved throughout my journey with Jewish spirituality, I've come to see it as a mirror—a projection of my own inner state, constellation of beliefs, and learning at a given point in time. What does your conception of God, or your community's, signal about your beliefs, your current state of being, and how you are choosing to live? As we are created in God's image, perhaps so is God in ours. \*

REBECCA NEWBERGER GOLDSTEIN

# Why Is a Jewish Atheist Different from All Other Atheists?

*The tradition of Jewish nonbelief is as rich, powerful, and distinctive as that of faith*



DON'T THINK I HAVE to name the tune humming beneath my title. Even if you are, like me, a Jewish atheist, you've probably attended a seder recently.

That the ghost of the seder's Four Questions haunts my title encapsulates the paradox I'd like to explore. It's the paradox embodied in those I'd call—and, more important, in those who would call themselves—Jewish atheists. The paradox begins with giving both words equal importance, making it more an exclusive term than an inclusive one: Not all non-believing Jews qualify as Jewish atheists in my sense.

To narrow the class down even further, here are Four Questions, sung accordingly:

While other atheists don't identify themselves with their birth religion, why does a Jewish atheist continue to actively identify as Jewish?

While other atheists don't necessarily highlight ethics, why are ethics of such central concern to a Jewish atheist?

While other atheists don't necessarily emphasize the primacy of reason in human endeavor, why does a Jewish atheist see reason as redemptive?

While other atheists may be indifferent to the flourishing of those who share their birth religion, why does the well-being of Jews remain of paramount concern to the Jewish atheist?

These questions indicate a type of atheist with a pronounced ethical sensibility, committed to a reasoned moral universalism that would eliminate all boundaries between peoples, and yet who is acutely responsive to the particularism that goes by the name of "Jewish identity." Jewishness matters to such atheists, in a way not logically entailed by—perhaps not even entirely reconcilable with—robust universalism, despite their abiding faith in the redemptive value of reason. The tension of quasi-paradox lives within the Jewish atheist, and tensions are known to inspire creative resolutions.



In 1958, Isaac Deutscher, who had been born in Poland of a Hasidic family and had fortuitously left in 1939 to take a job as a journalist in England, gave a talk at London's Jewish Book Week entitled "The Message of the Non-Jewish Jew." He meant this description as laudatory and named as his exemplars Baruch Spinoza, Heinrich Heine, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Rosa Luxemburg, and Leon Trotsky.

As you might have guessed from his valedictory list, Deutscher had strong Communist commitments, of the Trotskyist,

anti-Stalinist variety. Today he's best remembered for his three-volume biography of Trotsky. During his lifetime, he was often linked with two other prominent Jewish public intellectuals, both fellow émigrés to England, Arthur Koestler and Isaiah Berlin. Acting out Freud's observation concerning "the narcissism of small differences," all three detested one another. Berlin blocked Deutscher's appointment to the University of Sussex as "morally intolerable." (Berlin fits my category of the Jewish atheist, while Koestler's complexities make categorization impossible.)

There's some overlap between Deutscher's non-Jewish Jew and my Jewish atheist. Like the Jewish atheist, the non-Jewish Jew wreaths his atheism in ethical concerns rigorously argued. But whereas Deutscher's non-Jewish Jew resolves the tension between moral universalism and Jewish particularism by renouncing the latter, my Jewish atheist dwells within the tension.

Marx, Luxemburg, and Trotsky legitimately belong to Deutscher's category of non-Jewish Jews; Spinoza and Freud we can fight over; Heine belongs to me.

That Deutscher gets Marx, Luxemburg, and Trotsky is so indisputable, it is immaterial that all three were attacked by their enemies as Jews. The entire notion of internationalism was perceived as insidiously Jewish, a stateless people plotting to abolish the nation-state. But to be passively attacked as Jews is not the same as actively identifying as Jews. And though who can say for sure what hidden contradictions lurk in the recesses of others' psyches, the explicit statements of these three place them far from the quasi-paradox of the Jewish atheist.

Luxemburg, writing from a prison cell during World War I to a friend, the German-Jewish socialist and feminist Mathilde Wurm, expressed exasperation with Wurm's Jewish particularism: "What do you want with this theme of the 'special suffering of the Jews'? I am just as much concerned with the poor victims on the rubber plantations of Putumayo, the Blacks in Africa... They resound with me so strongly that I have no special place in my heart for

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One of the most telling aspects of Heine's Jewishness was his brand of wit, playing with paradoxes and foibles.

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the ghetto.” Trotsky, too, when asked by the leader of the Bund, Vladimir Medem, whether he was a Russian or a Jew, answered, “I am neither. I am an internationalist, a social-democrat.” And when it comes to Marx's distancing from Jewish particularism, we have only to read his 1834 article “On the Jewish Question” to know how alien he was to Jewish particularism. Having indicted the Jews as the primary agents of the money economy that dehumanizes all of humanity, he proclaims that the emancipation of the Jew in society is one with the emancipation of society from Jewishness.

Marx, as a non-Jewish Jew, is in sharp contrast with an early Communist ally and Jewish atheist who influenced him greatly, Moses Hess. It was Hess who gave the word “Communism” to Marx and who converted Engels, the son of a rich factory owner, to the cause. Marx dubbed Hess the “Communist Rabbi” and eventually distanced himself from him, growing impatient with the Jewish particularism that eventually led Hess to advocate Jewish nationalism. Theodor Herzl confessed that had he known of Hess's book, *Rome and Jerusalem: The Last National Question*, he wouldn't have bothered to publish his own pamphlet, *The Jewish State*. “Since Spinoza,” wrote Herzl, “Jewry had no bigger thinker than this forgotten Moses Hess.”

Marx also knew Heinrich Heine. In fact, the two were third cousins. Deutscher's lumping them together regarding their attitudes toward Jewishness would have offended them both. Heine beautifully exemplifies the Jewish atheist, even though it was Heine, and not Marx, who converted to Christianity—the baptism certificate

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Theology isn't necessary for feeling deeply about being a Jew — a member of a distinctive people, with a distinctive history and culture, shaped by the complexities of standing both inside and outside the history and culture of others.

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being “the ticket of admission into European culture,” as Heine sardonically put it.

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In his *Confessions*, published at the end of his life, Heine wrote lovingly of Jewishness, albeit with the quasi-paradox sensibility of the Jewish atheist. “Were not all pride of ancestry a silly inconsistency in a champion of the revolution and its democratic principles, the writer of these pages would be proud that his ancestors belonged to the noble house of Israel, that he is a descendant of those martyrs who gave the world a God and a morality, and who have fought and suffered on all the battle-fields of thought.” When he was told on his deathbed that his return to Jewishness, as evinced in his confessions, was causing a sensation across Europe, he responded, “I never returned, because I never left it.”

One of the most telling aspects of Heine's Jewishness was his brand of wit, playing with paradoxes and foibles. For example, on his inability to believe in Jesus, despite his baptism certificate: “No Jew can believe in the divinity of another Jew.” George Eliot, in her essay “German Wit: Herman Heine,” used what lies

to the right of her title's colon to absolve as an oxymoron what lies to its left. "True," she concedes, "this unique German wit is half a Hebrew."

As far as a God to believe in, Heine relied less on the God of his ancestors and more on the God of his fellow Jewish atheist, Baruch Spinoza. Though Heine mangled Spinoza's precise views, as did most of the Romantics, it's nevertheless true that, in embracing Spinoza, Heine was knowingly disavowing belief in the personal God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He was also embracing a moral universalism that seeks the grounding of ethics in human nature rather than any supernatural events associated with Sinai. *Ethics* is, of course, the title of Spinoza's magnum opus. It is the first work of the modern age to dispense with using a religious context to derive an objective ethics, appealing instead to reason alone. In writing the *Ethics*, Spinoza took up once again the project initiated millennia before by the ancient Greek philosophers. Of all the creative results generated by the inner tensions of the Jewish atheist, perhaps none quite compares to this work, which seeded nothing less than the European Enlightenment.

In his reliance on Spinoza's God, Heine is similar to another whom Deutscher puts on his list but who, I'd argue, belongs on mine: Sigmund Freud. Freud refers to Heine as a "brother in unbelief," which is a term that Heine had himself applied to Spinoza. And linked in this brotherhood is yet another, Albert Einstein. "I believe in Spinoza's God" was the response Einstein typically offered when questioned about his faith, identifying this God with the laws of nature, as Spinoza did:

My views are near those of Spinoza: admiration for the beauty of and belief in the logical simplicity of the order which we can grasp humbly and only imperfectly. I believe that we have to content ourselves with our imperfect knowledge and understanding and treat values and moral obligations as a purely human problem—the most important of all human problems.

In a letter he wrote a year before his death to an author, Eric Gutkind, who had penned a reinterpretation of the Jewish Bible to make it more appealing to the modern Jew, Einstein's rejection of the Abrahamic God is unambiguously stated:

The word God is for me nothing but the expression and product of human weaknesses, the Bible a collection of venerable but still rather primitive legends. No interpretation, no matter how subtle, can (for me) change anything about this. . . . For me the Jewish religion, like all other religions, is an incarnation of the most childish superstition.

And yet, as a Jewish atheist, Einstein actively—one might even say lovingly—identified as a Jew. “The pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, an almost fanatical love of justice and desire for personal independence: These are the features of the Jewish tradition that make me thank my lucky stars that I belong to it.”



And now we get to the quasi-paradox that dwells in the heart of the Jewish atheist while the non-Jewish Jew successfully quells it. What is it that disturbs the Jewish atheist's perfect consistency? It is love, of course, a love that isn't the conclusion of reasoned argument, any more than personal love ever is.

It isn't unusual for a person to love his people. What complicates the issue for the Jewish atheist is that Judaism is a religion, making it seem contradictory to continue to feel and to love as a Jew when you've concluded that there is no such God as Judaism posits. But theology isn't necessary for feeling deeply about being a Jew—a member of a distinctive people, with a distinctive history and culture, shaped by the complexities of standing both inside and outside the history and culture of others. But there it is, and you can love it. Or as the Communist Rabbi, also a self-identifying

Spinozist, had put it, “In religion, as in love, especially in a religion like Judaism, which is neither one-sidedly materialistic nor one-sidedly spiritualistic, body and spirit merge into one another.”

Who’s got the right to argue the Jewish atheist out of her love? Who’s ever got the right to argue a person out of his love? It can even be argued that a rigorously impartial universalism, prepared to make no exceptions for love, is morally odious. The philosopher Bernard Williams remarked—concerning the impartiality of those moral theorists, whether utilitarian or Kantian, who have to think about whether they could justify rushing into a burning building to save their own spouse rather than those to whom they have no personal connection—that these are people who have “one thought too many.”

And so it is that, without having one thought too many, we Jewish atheists religiously (so to speak) attend our yearly seders, perhaps making cynical jokes in the spirit of Heine, maybe objecting in the spirit of Spinoza to the narrative of miracles that a supernatural God supposedly performed on behalf of a chosen people. But we are there to celebrate an almost fanatical love of justice and desire for personal independence. We are there to sing, in the spirit of love and eternal hopefulness, “Next year in Jerusalem.” \*



PART TWO

IN AMERICA



PAMELA S. NADELL

# For America's Jews, Past Is Prologue

*The message of our history is fight, not flight*



HE *Atlantic* proclaims “The Golden Age of American Jews Is Ending.” Campus walls are graffitied with calls for “Death to Zionists.” A synagogue gets an email with the message, “Praise Allah! Praise Hamas! Death to Israel! Burn the Jews!” When a Jewish reporter, writing for Columbia University’s *Daily Spectator*, covered an assault on an Israeli student, the student journalist was so harassed that she left campus. Colleagues tell me: “Unquestionably, antisemitism is abominable”—then call for the destruction of Israel in the next breath. No wonder we are worried that our halcyon days are ending. We are reeling from a spike in antisemitism that most of us never imagined we would see in our lifetimes.

Does this spike portend a dark future for America’s Jews? Or does our history suggest that, despite these outbursts of venom, we will not only survive but thrive?

Before trying to guess our collective future, an admission: I am a historian. Historians know a great deal about the past, a modicum about the present, and nothing about the future. We are so bad at looking ahead that, as recently as 2016, Leonard Dinnerstein, author of *Antisemitism in America*, wrote of “the plague of antisemitism: *most American Jews don’t see it, feel it, or fear it. . . . Antisemitism is too minor an issue to disturb the daily lives of American Jews.*”



Mindful of that caveat, I still have faith that America’s Jews will continue to flourish. Lessons from our past can guide us. But that first requires us to understand a past that we have either so idealized, or else know so little about, that we misread the present wave of antisemitism as a rupture rather than a continuity.

America, the *goldene medina*, has hosted one of the most remarkable Diaspora communities in all of Jewish history. Even so, in every era, our predecessors faced Jew-hatred. When 23 Jews landed in New Amsterdam in September 1654, the colonial governor, Peter Stuyvesant, tried to expel “this deceitful race” of unscrupulous users, who were “enemies and blasphemers . . . of Christ.”

More than 200 years later, in December 1862, General Ulysses S. Grant—enraged at what he saw as Jewish speculation in the cotton trade—issued General Orders No. 11, expelling Jews “as a class” from his military district in western Tennessee and surrounding areas.

Following the Civil War, Bavarian-born banker and businessman Joseph Seligman, who had started out in the United States as a peddler, declined President Grant’s invitation to become secretary of the Treasury. But neither Seligman’s wealth nor political connections prevented the Grand Union Hotel in Saratoga Springs from refusing his family rooms in the summer of 1877 under their new “No Israelite” policy. Two Jewish women took up their pens to

expose this prejudice to a wide audience. One of them was Nina Morais, author of “Jewish Ostracism in America,” an exposé published in the *North American Review*, then a leading journal of contemporary affairs. The other was the poet Emma Lazarus, who in 1883 (the same year she wrote “The New Colossus”) gave readers of the popular *Century* magazine a lesson in the history of this persecution in “The Jewish Problem.”

“Since the establishment of the American Union, Jews have here enjoyed absolute civil and political freedom and equality,” she wrote.

And yet here, too, the everlasting prejudice is cropping out in various shapes. Within recent years, Jews have been “boycotted” at not a few places of public resort; in our schools and colleges, even in our scientific universities, Jewish scholars are frequently subjected to annoyance on account of their race. The word “Jew” is in constant use, even among so-called refined Christians, as a term of opprobrium, and is employed as a verb, to denote the meanest tricks.

Things remained much the same, if not worse, throughout the 20th century’s early decades. Leo Frank was lynched by a Georgia mob in 1915. Restrictive quotas on Jewish applicants to Harvard and other elite universities were instituted in the 1920s. So were de facto quotas and other restrictions on Jewish immigration, culminating in the tragic 1939 voyage of the ocean liner *St. Louis*. Indeed, prejudice against Jews after World War I became so pervasive—restricting where Jewish Americans could live, vacation, work, and be educated—that these years have been called “the high tide” of antisemitism in the United States.

When antisemitism surged again after World War II, the writer Laura Z. Hobson published a novel about a journalist who pretends to be a Jew to expose the discrimination Jews faced in jobs, hotels, and apartments. Informal quotas on Jewish applicants

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endured at the Ivies until the early 1960s. Even in the 1990s, if not later, certain Palm Beach country clubs effectively forbade Jews from membership. And powerful strains of antisemitism persisted on the political fringes of American life, finding their ugliest manifestations in the neo-Nazi efforts to march through Skokie in 1978 and the Crown Heights riots of 1991.

Against this grim history there is, of course, a counter-story.

Governor Stuyvesant may have been a vehement antisemite. But a company in the mother country, the Netherlands, set colonial policy. So Amsterdam Jews, some of them its stockholders, went to bat for colonial Jews, and Stuyvesant was ordered to let them live in peace. He made additional attempts to make Jewish life untenable, but each one failed.

Then New Amsterdam became New York. Although colonial Jewish communities were tiny, many prospered, as suggested by the life of Joseph Bueno de Mesquita. Arriving in New York from the Caribbean in 1680, he started out as a debtor. Thirty years later, when he died, this merchant-shipper, an importer of fabrics

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and cocoa and an exporter of furs, was one of the richest men in the city and hobnobbed with its political elites. He left behind such luxuries as Delftware dishes, a Torah scroll with its silver ornaments, and, it must also be noted, five slaves.

After Grant issued his infamous orders, Cesar Kaskel, a Prussian-born Jewish haberdasher from Paducah, Kentucky, was so outraged that he sent a telegram to the White House decrying this violation of the Constitution. Just two weeks later, as the Jewish organization B’nai B’rith and rabbis began protesting the orders, Kaskel boarded a steamer bound for Washington. There, this Jewish immigrant met with President Lincoln. The orders were countermanded, and a penitent Grant later came to consider them among the greatest blots on his record — leading to his subsequent efforts to appoint Jews to senior positions in his administration.

In 1866, less than four years after Grant’s order, Cincinnati’s magnificent Isaac M. Wise Temple arose on Plum Street, its exotic minarets soaring above the skyline. It sent a powerful message: Jews were at home in America. By the time World War I engulfed Europe, about 2 million Jewish immigrants, mostly from Eastern Europe, had settled in every corner of America. In 1887, Californians elected a Jew, Washington Bartlett, as governor. In 1906,

Teddy Roosevelt appointed Oscar Straus as secretary of labor and commerce, making him the first Jew in the cabinet. Ten years later, the Senate confirmed Woodrow Wilson's nomination of Louis Brandeis to the Supreme Court. In 1947, when *Gentleman's Agreement* landed on the silver screen and went on to win the Academy Award for best picture, it helped make antisemitism unfashionable in American life. Today, the secretaries of state, Treasury, and homeland security are Jewish, as are the director of national intelligence and the chief of staff to President Biden, as are the majority leader in the Senate and eight of his colleagues—each of them powerful reminders of Jewish acceptance and thriving in today's America.



With the past as prologue, what lessons does it hold for confronting antisemitism today?

First, it shows persecuted Jews enlisting powerful allies: Gentile government officials, Jews in positions of influence, and those we might today call influencers—publishers, editors, filmmakers, even cartoonists. We continue to have powerful allies today. In May 2023, well before the horrors of October 7, the White House, recognizing that antisemitism was tearing at the fabric of American society, announced a plan to combat it. Informed by conversations with more than 1,000 people, the first U.S. National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism rests on the premise that antisemitism is not just a Jewish problem; it is an American problem. The Strategy's 60 pages are filled with recommendations for steps government and civil society can take to counter antisemitism. They need to be put into action.

Second, history shows that Jews succeed when they can capture the sympathy and imagination of our Gentile neighbors. Leon Uris's *Exodus* sold millions of copies after it was published in 1958; its 1960 film adaptation, with Paul Newman and Eva

Marie Saint, brought the story of Israel's founding home to tens of millions more. Israel's Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion said of the book: "As a literary work it isn't much. But as a piece of propaganda, it's the best thing ever written about Israel." Yet by the time the Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said published his influential *Orientalism* in 1978, the radical Left had already begun recasting Israel as the epitome of evil. Embracing the anti-Zionism of the Soviets, they viewed Israel as a white, settler-colonial, apartheid state that had to be dismantled like other colonial projects in Africa and Asia. It took decades for that view to gain traction, and it may take decades to reverse the trend.

Still, it isn't mission impossible. Jews have a compelling story to tell. Israel remains the only democratic state in its region, an American ally, a nation of immigrants, more than half of them descendants of 700,000 Jews expelled from North Africa and the Middle East after Israel's founding who would in any other narrative be labeled people of color. Ameliorating attitudes toward Israel is utterly essential to fighting antisemitism in America. As American Jews, we need to think deeply and strategically with our partners here and in Israel about long-range plans to advance understanding of the country in all its complexity, to affirm its centrality to the Jewish people, and to recognize its right to exist among the nations.

Finally, the past shows that antisemitism has come from very different directions, from southern Klansmen to northern WASP elites to groups such as the Nation of Islam. Today, American Jews are deeply alarmed by what they see on campus, where young anti-Zionists, joined by not-so-young faculty, have used their opposition to the war in Gaza to traffic in antisemitic tropes and blood libels. But it was only a few years ago that we saw an eruption of antisemitism at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville. As Tufts University political scientist Eitan Hersh and Harvard doctoral candidate Laura Royden noted, "The epicenter of antisemitic attitudes is young adults on the far right."

Any campaign aimed at combating antisemitism will need to address both groups, albeit in different ways. We sued the white nationalists who had marched across the University of Virginia campus chanting “Jews will not replace us” and whose threats had forced the local synagogue to remove their Torah scrolls and its members to sneak out of Shabbat services by the back door. We are responding to the massacre at Pittsburgh’s Tree of Life synagogue with a new building, designed by the architect Daniel Liebeskind, to house the synagogue, remember those we lost, and tell the story of American antisemitism. Our response to campus antisemitism will also have to be smartly tailored to their circumstances, especially as we try to win over progressive-minded students who, should we fail to reach them, might be lured into thinking that the destruction of Israel is a form of social justice.



Again, none of this is new. At some point in the early 2000s, I learned that, every morning, bomb-sniffing dogs went through the Jewish day school my children attended before students, faculty, and staff arrived. Even in that purported golden age of American Jewry, we were vigilant, aware that bigots could try to harm us at any moment.

Antisemitism has been, is now, and always will be part of what it means to be a Jew in America. But history tells us that, grim as the story has sometimes been, it has also, and more often, been good and even glorious. Knowing my history gives me an abiding faith that it will continue to be so. \*

TAL FORTGANG

# The Constitutional Case for Jewish Charter Schools

*Jews have long taken the view that a strictly separationist reading of the First Amendment is better for Jewish thriving. But the time has come to change course*



JEWISH charter schools (JCSs)—publicly funded but independently operated K–12 schools teaching Jewish and secular subjects—would address many of the American Jewish community’s most vexing problems. JCSs avoid the “tuition crisis” that has put Jewish day schools out of reach for middle-class Jews and forced schools to rely on massive donations. They provide an alternative to public schools where Jews have traditionally thrived but feel increasingly unwelcome because of the rise of DEI programming and concurrent anti-Israel orthodoxy. And JCSs in fledgling communities would have the salutary

effect of allowing Jews to start branching out geographically, easing the pressure to live in expensive neighborhoods.

Yet no JCSs exist. Why? Simple: The First Amendment — at least in the minds of most Americans and nearly all Jews — seems to prohibit the use of taxpayer funds to charter religious schools. What’s more, Jews have long believed that construing the First Amendment to preclude JCSs is not just constitutionally required but a worthwhile trade, because a strict approach to the “separation of church and state” is, overall, good for the Jews. Leonard Fein, the writer and activist known as “the father of Jewish social justice,” exemplified this view: “Among our interests, the continuing separation of church from state must rank very, very high,” he wrote in 1992. “There is likely no aspect of the American constitutional arrangement that has meant more to Jews, has been a more consequential factor in Jewish safety and success in this country.”

Both of these claims—that the First Amendment prohibits sending public funds to religious charter schools and that this has been good for the Jews—are questionable at best. They may even be wrong—belied by history, legal analysis, and American social developments over the past 75 years.



The Bill of Rights’ first command is known as the establishment clause: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.” More than a decade after the establishment clause became law, Thomas Jefferson (who was in France when the First Amendment was written, debated, and ratified) wrote a letter to the Danbury Baptist Association in Connecticut, interpreting those words to mean that the First Amendment had built “a wall of separation between church and state.”

It wasn’t until nearly 90 years later, in 1879, interpreting a different part of the First Amendment, that the Supreme Court

treated Jefferson's letter as relevant to the law for the first time, calling it, in passing, "almost...an authoritative declaration of [the First Amendment's] scope and effect." In the 1947 case *Everson vs. Board of Education of the Township of Ewing*, Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black dropped the "almost" and declared for the first time that the establishment clause required what is now called strict separationism: "The First Amendment has erected a wall between church and state. That wall must be kept high and impregnable. We could not approve the slightest breach."

This is not how constitutional interpretation usually works. Usually, the Supreme Court examines materials that might illuminate a legal provision's meaning: the plain meaning of the text; what its authors were trying to accomplish by passing the law; how the public understood the words when they were ratified; common practices at the time that reflect how Americans thought the law applied to them; or even abstract values that would justify construing the law in a particular way. There is plenty of debate over which of these methods is best. But in *Everson*, Justice Black picked none of the options from the interpretive menu. Instead, he eschewed legal reasoning altogether and simply declared that Jefferson's letter had morphed into binding law, a century and a half after the ratification of a constitutional amendment Jefferson neither worked on nor even voted on.

No individual's interpretation of the establishment clause is dispositive, but it is worth noting that many of Jefferson's contemporaries disagreed with him about the proper relation between religion and American government. John Adams, who as vice president supported the Bill of Rights, famously noted the complementary relationship between our Constitution, which liberated citizens, and religion, which constrained them: "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people," he wrote in 1798. "It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other." Adams was opposed to state establishment of religion, but he nonetheless saw the public interest—that is, an interest

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There is some good evidence that the American people did not adopt strict separationism until the Supreme Court foisted it upon them.

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shared by all members of the political community—in the proliferation of religion and religious ideas.

Adams's view, often called the civic republican position, is enshrined in the Massachusetts Constitution:

The people of this commonwealth have a right to invest their legislature with power to authorize and require, and the legislature shall, from time to time, authorize and require, the several towns, parishes, precincts, and other bodies politic, or religious societies, to make suitable provision, at their own expense, for the institution of the public worship of God, and for the support and maintenance of public Protestant teachers of piety, religion and morality, in all cases where such provision shall not be made voluntarily.

There is some good evidence that the American people did not adopt strict separationism until the Supreme Court foisted it upon them. Public schools across the country regularly taught the Bible and other Protestant texts since the early 19th century. (In 1963, the Supreme Court announced that such schools had been violating the Constitution all along.) It's especially curious that Justice Black could make such a pronouncement in *Everson* given the fact that the Supreme Court itself, among many other government bodies, begins its sessions by invoking God. Historian

Jonathan Den Hartog notes, “While citizens knew of Jefferson’s metaphor, it was neither endorsed broadly nor practiced as Jefferson intended.”

Under my preferred theory of constitutional interpretation, this kind of evidence makes rejecting strict separationism a slam dunk. But regardless of whether you agree with me, a more modest conclusion is inescapable: It is far from obvious that strict separationism is what our Constitution requires. It is, at best, a choice among others.

The key question, then, is the perennial one we all know: Is it good for the Jews? Which interpretation—Jefferson’s or Adams’s—should Jews support? What relationship between church and state is best for American Jewish flourishing?



For many decades, strict separationism’s role in the American Jewish interest was an article of faith. Prominent Jews and Jewish organizations considered advancing strict separationism a key part of their contribution to American life.

Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, who joined a dissent in *Everson* excoriating the majority for not taking a harder line against state funding of religion, was one of at least three Jewish co-founders of the American Civil Liberties Union. The ACLU immediately became a thorn in the state’s side on religious issues and remains so to this day. Historian Samuel Walker has identified the three largest organizations that fought to banish all remnants of religion from public schools: the ACLU, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, and the American Jewish Congress. As law professor Michael Avi Helfand has summarized, “During the 1950s and ’60s, few—if any—faith communities were more active in church-state advocacy than American Jews.” One notable detractor from the apparent American Jewish consensus during this time was Norman Lamm of Yeshiva University,

who said in 1966, “A Jewish organization which regards a dubious legal interpretation of the Constitution as more important than Jewish education must prepare to acknowledge that it has no faith in the Jewish future.”

It is not hard to see why Lamm’s was a minority position (as prescient positions often are). Seeking social and economic opportunity in America, Jews reasonably feared that Christian principles of social organization would yield unfavorable conditions. At best, Jewish misalignment with a Christian culture could hamper Jews’ economic flourishing, as in the case of Sunday-closing laws that forced Shabbat-observant Jews to do business only five days a week. At worst, Jews could one day be excluded from full citizenship, expelled, or subjugated in the name of their religious or ethnic difference if the Christian culture infused the coercive powers of the state, as in Europe.

Understandably, Jewish separationists shared Jefferson’s dim view of European history, seeing state-enforced religious intolerance at the heart of its persecutions. Just as Jefferson believed that America would be tolerant in inverse proportion to religious influence on public life, Jewish separationists saw the consignment of all religion to the private sphere, combined with a robust right to free exercise of religion within the confines of the home and synagogue, as beneficial for Jewish flourishing in America. As long as America stayed out of the religion business, it would not stumble into crusades, inquisitions, or any other holy wars.

In short, mainstream Jewish organizations chose separationism for largely Jeffersonian reasons. Equality was the goal, and the gradual diminishment of religion from the public square—replaced by objective, nonsectarian, *secular* reason—would get us there.

An irony drawn out by historian Richard Samuelson, however, shows why advancing Jewish interests by choosing Jeffersonianism over Adams’s civic republicanism should have been suspect from the beginning. Before Jews embraced Jeffersonianism, Jefferson himself, by way of an unflattering appraisal of the Jews, whom

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The idea that secularism, having displaced religion, would lead to an inclusive paradise of reasoned debate has discredited itself.

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he considered the paradigm of superstitious legalists, downplayed religion's role in promoting the public good. "Moses had bound the Jews to many idle ceremonies, mummeries and observances, of no effect towards producing the social utilities which constitute the essence of virtue," Jefferson wrote in 1820. Being God's chosen people is only as honorable as the God who chose them, and the Jewish God ordained "priests of the superstition, a bloodthirsty race, as cruel and remorseless as the being whom they represented as the family God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob, and the local God of Israel." The seeds of secularist antipathy toward Jews may not have been apparent to later Jeffersonians, but they were certainly there—and prefigured contemporary anti-Jewish slanders in tone and substance.

By contrast, Adams, the conservative New England Protestant, saw wisdom and glory in the miraculous survival of the Jews and their precepts. "I will insist that the Hebrews have done more to civilize men than any other nation," he wrote. "If I were an atheist, and believed in blind eternal fate, I should still believe that fate had ordained the Jews to be the most essential instrument for civilizing the nations." Like Jefferson, Adams thought of the Jews as emblems of history. Unlike Jefferson, though, Adams was inclined to see that as a positive. Adams credited the Jewish people and their legal tradition with teaching the world "the doctrine of a supreme intelligent, wise, almighty sovereign of the universe," which was "the great essential principle of all morality, and consequently of all civilization."

Put another way, Jefferson lumped the Jews in with the benighted Old World that America was meant to leave behind, whereas Adams celebrated them for laying the groundwork of the New World. And though Jews had largely been successful and free in America for centuries prior to *Everson*, many Jewish organizations took up the Jeffersonian cause, haunted by the specters of European Christian antisemitism.



Even if Jeffersonian analysis rang true to the cautious Jews of mid-20th-century America, the past several decades have shown that it was predicated on some significant miscalculations. Perhaps the biggest mistake of all was an abstract philosophical error. Jewish Jeffersonians thought that in a secular nation, the problem of lacking shared reason would be solved. After centuries of different religious groups grounding their behaviors in different texts and sources of authority, subduing religious reasoning would allow Americans of all backgrounds to debate and cooperate within a shared, objective, near-scientific system of facts and logic. All would agree at least on the basics of what it meant to pursue life, liberty, and prosperity. American public discourse and politics would be smoother, less riven by group differences, and generally more inclusive.

The rise of postmodernism, a movement with decidedly secular origins, put an end to that dream. Instead of a shared moral language, the ascendant philosophy among our sensemaking institutions is that nothing is objective, because all truth is constructed by powerful groups to serve their own interests. Equality isn't the goal anymore; even "equity," which prizes equal outcomes for groups, is falling out of favor. Now the goal is obtaining and asserting power on behalf of one's own group. As John McWhorter has pointed out, even these attempts have come to look more and more like the religions they were to displace. Activists championing

fully secular causes such as “liberation” and “social justice” engage in “rituals of subservience and self-mortification” that “parallel devout Christianity in an especially graphic way,” McWhorter says. The idea that secularism, having displaced religion, would lead to an inclusive paradise of reasoned debate has discredited itself.

In hindsight, the belief that strict separationism would elevate our public discourse was badly misguided. Separationism instead had several ill effects on the way we as Americans work out our differences. It led Americans to distinguish artificially between religious ideas and nonreligious ideas, systematically denigrating the former and exalting the latter. Worse, it trained Americans to view religious or traditional thinking as categorically less respectable than ideas justified by a narrow set of secular principles, such as personal autonomy and authenticity, which gained something akin to state endorsement. At a profound yet subconscious level, it suggested that there is a shortcut to winning arguments: Instead of debating an idea’s merits, deem it “religious” and it will be disqualified. (Substitute today’s disfavored labels for “religious” and you see where such training leads.)

This is all to say that one thing separationism did not do is what American Jews, and Jefferson, had counted on it to do: foster pluralistic coexistence. We should stop expecting it to do that or hoping that, suddenly, it will. Separationism is not pluralism. It is closer to the opposite, because it wrongly suggests that we address the problem of coexistence by leveling down — that is, trying to achieve equality by excluding certain forms of argumentation, specifically pushing faith-based ideas out of the public square. We should instead commit to leveling up, encouraging all voices to speak up, thereby allowing Americans to persuade and be persuaded.

As Lamm recognized decades ago, embracing true pluralism requires faith in Jews and Judaism. Unlike separationism, pluralism stakes the Jewish future on its ability to advance its own interests through persuasion. It similarly requires us to withstand a cacophonous public square, full of proselytizing members of

other religions trying to persuade us that their views are true. Supporting a JCS movement today would demonstrate in dramatic fashion the American Jewish community's confidence in itself and a pluralist America. Needless to say, this will mean accepting that Christians, Muslims, and other religions will be able to use public money for their schools, too. What will justify funding them is not that they advance a "legitimate secular purpose," as the Supreme Court used to say, but that they further the public interest as determined by the people's elected representatives. In general, all religions should try to regain their ability to argue from that premise. If religious schools are committed to cultivating pious, charitable, good citizens, they should not be excluded because of the source of their beliefs.



The law is beginning to reflect a rejection of strict separationism in a few realms, but most pointedly in state support for education. In June 2022, the Supreme Court ruled that a Maine tuition-assistance program could not deny payments to parents who wished to use the funds at religious schools. "A State need not subsidize private education," wrote Chief Justice John Roberts, "but once [it] decides to do so, it cannot disqualify some private schools solely because they are religious." The Court may decide to extend that logic to states chartering public schools. Litigation over a new Catholic charter school established in Oklahoma raised the issue in that state's supreme court, and it's likely to appear before the nine Supreme Court justices in D.C. on appeal.

American Jews are expected to blanch at the possibility that the Court takes up the case and rules in favor of the Catholic school. But that intuition, based on a kind of separationist faith, is worth interrogating. Doing so, as Lamm argued decades ago, can be a profound expression of faith in the Jewish tradition and its future. \*

ELIE KAUNFER

# Faith vs. Faithfulness in American Jewish Institutions

*The case for a ‘surge investment’ strategy*



AMERICANS’ faith in their institutions has famously been on the decline since the Watergate era. Given the presidential scandal of that time, one might not be surprised that average confidence in major American institutions at the end of the 1970s stood at 48 percent. But according to a 2023 Gallup poll, we have that period beat by a longshot: 26 percent, an all-time low. These institutions include Congress, the presidency, the Supreme Court, the police, public schools, and the media.

What tops the chart for confidence in the list of 15 categories measured? Small businesses (65 percent). Apparently, Americans much prefer a decentralized, community-based institution over large banks (26 percent) or “big business” (14 percent).

This trend is playing out in the American Jewish world as well. It was clear even by the year 2000 that American Jews were less connected to Jewish institutions than in previous generations, a trend

that's only continued. Pew's 2020 study of American Jews showed that only about a third were synagogue members; more than half reported that they seldom or never go to synagogue, and another 27 percent said they go only a few times a year. The number of Jews donating money to Jewish Federations has shrunk significantly in the past 30 years.

What do Jews prefer instead of synagogues and rabbis? According to Pew: home-based rituals such as a Passover seder (62 percent) or marking Shabbat "in a personally meaningful way" (39 percent). Think of this as the "small business" alternative to "big business" synagogues and Federations.

If Jewish faith in these core Jewish institutions has declined so drastically, why do they persist? While there is a financial element in some cases (substantial assets like buildings or endowments make going out of business very complicated), there's a larger issue at play: "Faith" as we commonly understand it is not the right measure of institutions' ability to last. After all, 52 percent of voting-age Americans still vote in congressional elections, despite the fact that only 8 percent say they have faith in Congress. Americans may not have faith in public schools or the police, but they still overwhelmingly use their services. They might tell pollsters that they question the effectiveness of city government, but that doesn't stop them from putting out their trash on Tuesdays.

The disconnect here comes down to different conceptions of faith. In Hebrew, the word for faith is *emunah*, from the same root as the word *amen*. This is often translated as "faith" or "belief," as in: "I believe in the existence of God," or "I believe this claim to be true." But as Menachem Kellner, among others, has explained, this is not what the term means. It does not connote the kind of "propositional" belief one has in mind when answering the survey question "Do you believe *x*?" Rather, it refers to a more practical meaning: reliable. In the daily Amidah prayer, we call God *ne'eman* (faithful). This doesn't mean that God has faith, or that God is believable. It means that God is reliable, can be counted on, is rock solid.

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Mainstream American Jewish institutions are not going away; they are too valuable and too reliable. But they can—and they must—change.

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Consider the medical system, one of the institutions measured by Gallup. Only 34 percent of us have much confidence in it. Like most of us, I'd rather stay healthy on my own, if I can. But if I get sick, I know it is there. I don't think too much about it when I don't need it; but when I do, I use the system. Like most people who enter the medical system, usually I get better and move on with my life. This is true even though I know that there are many other people whom the system does not serve well, at all, or affordably and that it too seldom fosters a healthy nation. My answer to a survey question about faith in the medical system would probably employ the more propositional definition of faith than the one at play in my life.

So, too, the Jewish institutional world. Most Jews, it seems, would prefer to celebrate their religion on their own or with their family. But when they need to interact with the system—asking a rabbi to bury their loved one, getting married, or joining a synagogue for a bar mitzvah—they know it is there, waiting for them. Most of the time, the system works well enough. Indeed, ATRA's 2023 research into young American Jews' relationships with rabbis shows that when people finally interact with a rabbi, most have a positive experience.

In moments of existential crisis, the value of this reliability is heightened. It is true that Jews have been giving less to the Federation system over time and that observers have long criticized its inefficiency. But in just a few months following October 7, the Jewish Federations of North America and local affiliates raised

more than \$750 million—and gained 30,000 donors in New York alone. People wanted to give, and the Federation system was there—waiting, ready, reliable.

But we need to ask ourselves: Is this kind of passive, reactive relationship to the institutional world an optimal dynamic for Jewish thriving? For most Jews, these major institutions languish—reliably—in the background of their lives. How much better might Jewish life be in America if, instead, our institutions shined? If they worked efficiently, effectively, and inspirationally?



If you work long enough in the Jewish communal world, you'll hear Jewish leaders fantasize about completely reorganizing the system. All the mediocrity endemic to large institutions would disappear, and many more people would engage in Jewish communal life with more enthusiasm. This is the opposite of stability and reliability—it is a call for radical change.

And therein lies its shortcoming. In its fervor, the call for radical change fails to acknowledge the value of institutional reliability. Consider, if you will, the model of significant improvement rather than replacement. The goal is not to tear something to the ground, but rather to make improvements to a system that tends toward stagnation or erosion when left unchallenged. In this view, alternatives to the system are not meant to replace the system, but to offer different paths and, in so doing, to upgrade the status quo, strengthening the faithful elements of the system in the process. It is an attempt to lift all boats with a rising tide.

The independent-minyan movement provides an excellent example. When more than 60 independent minyanim launched in the early 2000s, led by educated volunteers rather than by ordained rabbis, meeting in people's living rooms rather than in official religious buildings, some predicted the end of synagogues. This faulty narrative presumed that new institutions always arise to

replace old ones, rather than to influence and pressure the system as a whole. No minyan put any synagogue out of business. Instead, 20 years later, the two models operate in tandem. Synagogue rabbis who were originally threatened by the minyanim came to see them as places of experimentation and drew some—but certainly not all—of their innovations into synagogue life. If your (Ashkenazi) synagogue now has a prayer leader stationed in the middle of the sanctuary, leading the congregation in participatory singing, chances are it's because of the influence of independent minyanim.

Sometimes the best way to reform the institutional world is to build models outside it. These initiatives are not meant to overtake, but rather to coexist—and ultimately inspire—the mainstream.

The problem with this model of change is that it rarely goes far enough. New options arise and generate interest, but they are low-powered and remain marginal: Their ultimate impact is muted. How might we turn up the volume of the start-ups' influence on Jewish institutions? This demands a new approach to Jewish philanthropy—a “surge investing” approach. When useful alternatives to the mainstream emerge, donors should pour money into them, on the theory that only a well-capitalized alternative framework can put sufficient pressure on mainstream institutions to force them to change.

The Jewish philanthropic sector itself is actually an illustration of this approach. While, a generation ago, Jewish philanthropy was led by Federations, today it is led by private Jewish foundations. Federations still exist—indeed they remain among the most reliable forces in American Jewish life—but the rise of significant foundations have put pressure on many of the Federations, forcing them to sharpen their efforts. Foundations reduced the monopoly that Federations had on philanthropic power in communities, opening up new areas of investment. Over time, the giving power of this sector has eclipsed that of Federations, without making Federations any less reliable, particularly in times of crisis. Judged by their total assets, foundations are not just a sideshow to the mainstream; they are an equal player, performing different functions in a diverse

ecosystem. One could argue that Federations have upped their game in response to these foundations.

Imagine if this dynamic also played out more broadly in the non-profit arena. So often over the past 20 years, nonprofit start-ups, the alternatives to legacy Jewish institutions, win foundation money, but not enough to grow into organizations that can materially affect the communal status quo.

Perhaps this is because they seem risky; who knows if they will last? But on the flip side: What if they're never given the chance to make real change? As Cecilia Conrad, a leader in the "big-bet philanthropy" movement, recently wrote: "The size of philanthropic gifts should be guided not by the size of the organization's current budget, but rather, the size of the challenge it is positioned to address." What if the philanthropic investment strategy was to match the budgets of the institutions they are trying to affect, rather than simply nipping at their heels? Then we might be able to build the kind of communal ecosystem we really need, full of inspiring, effective institutions — not simply ones that continue to exist.

Mainstream American Jewish institutions are not going away; they are too valuable and too reliable. But they can — and they must — change. Perhaps our question should not be whether American Jews are losing faith in institutions, but rather whether those of us in positions of communal power will dare to dream big about how to change institutional life altogether. Not through revolutionary change and radical overhauls, but through investing in the incremental change offered by new institutions that are already in the landscape, making some waves on the sides. A serious "surge investment" strategy could become a major lever of change, improving the Jewish institutional landscape to help it meet the unprecedented moment we are in. Let's not continue to settle for reliable old standards that simply do the job for a shrinking audience, or only at moments of crisis. Let's build institutions that inspire real faith in the Jewish future. \*

ANNE GORDON

# The Search for God in the Jewish Classroom

*Teaching students what, how, and why  
to believe is both necessary and impossible.  
Judaism demonstrates that we are up for  
the task*



WHEN LOUISIANA governor Jeff Landry recently signed into law a statewide requirement that all public classrooms display the Ten Commandments, social media rose to the occasion with some very amusing memes. My favorite, which presented a Louisiana second-grader purportedly on the verge of committing adultery, but “now he definitely won’t,” reminds us how the law misses the mark in trusting that prominent positioning of the Ten Commandments in schools will affect the students’ behavior. The wall hangings will surely familiarize Louisiana’s youth with the list—just as an outdated map that hung in my middle-school history classroom taught me the countries that once made up Africa—but the assumption

that such signage will result in students' greater adherence to these precepts places far too much burden of responsibility on placards and posters. Consider, after all, that the many artistic renderings of Moses carrying the tablets of law, found throughout the world, including in Washington, D.C., have not deprived the scandal sheets of fodder. As much as décor matters, at least as part of the "hidden curricula" of norms, values, and beliefs conveyed in both the classroom and social environment, those who worry for the souls of Louisiana's students should perhaps continue to worry, and those who fear religious coercion on the part of the government can probably breathe a sigh of relief. The experience of setting alone is not sufficient to teach faith.

The very term *faith* is enough to give the heebie-jeebies, as it were, to many adult American Jews, especially those who are not Orthodox. Faith and conversations about what it means to believe smack of Christianity, with its focus on belief over practice, and a particular preaching, missionizing Christianity at that. Even conversation about having faith, or being part of a community that believes, seems off-limits. Rather than focus on faith per se, then, we do well to infuse all aspects of the Jewish curricula with elements of faith education, allowing the relevance to permeate throughout.

Jewish educators, clergy, and parents who care about instilling in the next generation actual tenets of belief—in God, Torah, and the observance of the commandments—must reflect on what it means to teach faith. They may well begin with how the synagogue (*beit kneset*), a place of expressing one's faith through prayer, differs from the study hall (*beit midrash*), or even the classroom, where Judaism is explored via debate, interpretation, discussion, and even contradiction. It is faith expressed in discourse. Tellingly, artful representations of Moses's tablets are not uncommon in the synagogue; inasmuch as the place is designed for prayer, any depiction of the Decalogue above the *aron kodesh* (holy ark) is likely intended to evoke reverence for

the approach to the Divine. In contrast, study halls, rather than engraving the list in stone, invite students to investigate the “Ten Commandments,” beginning with the imprecise translation for what the Torah calls *Aseret ha-Devarim*, or “ten utterances,” and moving on to their context, the way these texts shed light on others, and more. Classroom study of the Decalogue goes beyond the reverence of worship to the task of probing one’s own beliefs. For example, discussion may well veer into the eternal dispute over whether “I am the Lord your God,” the first of those utterances, constitutes a commandment, as Maimonides thought, or whether it is a prerequisite—prologue to the rest, as thought Nachmanides, for how can one be commanded without first believing in the One who commands?



But can faith in God be commanded? If one does not intuitively believe in the Divine, how can a command supplant that lack of belief? And practically, how can faith be taught in school?

Simple faith (*emunah peshutah*) surely comes more easily to those whose philosophical worlds are less cluttered by mitigating ideas. Young children, for example, can jump or glide straight into belief. Early-childhood teachers tell the kids that every time they say “Amen” to another person’s blessing, they create an angel. The teachers feed the children’s imaginations (and self-esteem) when they explain that the kids’ kindnesses and performances of mitzvot add bricks to the Heavenly Temple that will be rebuilt on earth one day if we only do enough mitzvot and kindnesses. And the children respond with sincerity and urgency in performing those actions, with no whiff of the scientific inquiry they may initiate, as they grow, to check the teachers’ accuracy. The Haredi world that allows a tunnel vision to God and what He wants from His Chosen People accommodates a comparable simplicity as well. Those who are able to find a

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Study-hall discussions bring students to articulate, and then internalize, Jewish beliefs, as they question and probe for truth.

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direct simple faith, whether because of age, culture, or even just personal disposition, may have an easier time not only finding God, but also talking about Him than do those whose systems of belief are complicated by contradictory ideas and the inherent incomprehensibility of the Divine to humanity.

But teaching faith in a way that is too simplistic crowds out the nuance of Jewish experience—the complicated discussions of competing ideas that have permeated Jewish belief since the Talmudic sages began debating ideas of faith, and since Torah scholars of a philosophical bent, such as Maimonides and Nachmanides, confronted the fundamentals of faith. Jewish education is replete with complex discourse, not the least of which is about the Ten Commandments.

Those rabbinical models of dispute can therefore be converted into a new model of faith education. The many arguments among the scholars in the study halls and classrooms throughout millennia of Jewish learning and intellectual creativity are faith manifest. Moreover, those study-hall discussions bring students to articulate, and then internalize, Jewish beliefs, as they question and probe for truth. The hammered-out nuances of sincere exploration lie at the heart of faith within a Jewish context—attending to the questions, rather than presuming answers that can be hung on placards. The alternative—boiling faith down to black and white—risks losing the complexity of Jewish faith, and also risks losing those who would believe.

How are Jewish educators to meet these challenges?

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Many elements of Jewish education are not classroom-based, whether through prayer services, Shabbatonim, informal discussion, and indeed, the personal conduct of students' teachers.

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Eighteen years ago, under the auspices of ATID, the Academy for Torah Initiatives and Directions, Rabbi Jason Knapel and I developed a curriculum to incorporate Jewish thought into the regular Jewish-studies classroom. That is, instead of teachers solely teaching courses in Torah or Jewish Law or even Talmud, courses clearly worthy subjects in and of themselves, they could prompt students to expand their philosophical chops, encouraging them to see the threads connecting the material. In the study of *Bereishit* (Genesis), for example, raising the question “What is the purpose of creation?” should be natural, and recourse to the many sources that address this question (we suggested four different approaches) impresses upon students its relevance to their studies across disciplines. Similarly, classes in Jewish law may easily give rise to discussion of the meaning of the mitzvot (for which myriad sources are available) as well as the question of what it means when we say that the Torah originated in “Heaven” (or with God). Simply setting the stage to facilitate students’ working through the implications of the vast amount of information they are taught should have a salutary effect on their beliefs, ideas, and perspectives on the world. When teachers can enrich their curricula in these ways, the students—and their spiritual growth—benefit.

Moreover, trusting that nearly everyone is educable and nearly everything can be taught does not mean that the classroom is the right setting for all education. Many elements of Jewish education are not classroom-based, whether through prayer services, Shabbatonim, informal discussion, and indeed, the personal conduct of students' teachers, as demonstrated, by Shira Weiss, in her 2006 Yeshiva University doctoral dissertation, "Letting God In: The Spiritual Development of Modern Orthodox High School Girls." All these elements, Weiss showed, are essential to the formation of Jewish identity and a spiritually rich sense of Judaism. Another Yeshiva University dissertation from 2009, Chana Tannenbaum's, "Gender Differences in the Perceived Religious Influence of Yeshiva Programs," attests to the fact that students' involvement in academic studies is rarely a driving force in their religious observance or spiritual motivation. (Both Weiss and Tannenbaum focus on girls' spiritual development, but their findings are salient in this context for boys as well as girls.) It is not that school-wide programming has no influence on students' religious life. To the contrary! But the kind of influence that rouses students' interest and willingness to try religious practice on for size entails active engagement by Jewish educators in ways that go beyond formal curricula and personal pronouncements of belief, perhaps to an awareness of their potential as role models. Unsurprisingly, Doug Oman and Carl E. Thoresen also found that religious education involves more than classroom instruction. As they explained in their now classic 2009 article, "Spiritual Modeling: A Key to Spiritual and Religious Growth?" in the *International Journal for Psychology of Religion*, religious traditions are often best transmitted via observation of those who exemplify the given religious tradition—or, as we might prefer to call them, role models. (The Talmud itself suggests as much, and in the most mundane of contexts. Rabbi Zeira hears Rabbi Yehudah instruct his servant in the bathhouse and acclaims him as a role model for how to speak in that setting: "Had I come only to hear this [from him], it would have been enough for me" (Shabbat 41a).

Finally, one's overarching perspective is also likely to affect how one relates to questions of faith. A recent discussion between Rabbi Yitzchak Blau and Rabbi Scott Kahn on the Orthodox Conundrum podcast ("Hareidi Messaging in Modern Orthodox Institutions") acknowledged that those who are not Hareidi may have less propensity to the more intimate relationship with God that can emerge from one's simple faith, but that, as Blau put it, God essentially lurks in the background of everything we do; it is all at His behest. In setting up a world with "incredible resources," the Divine fundamentally provokes those who pay attention to connect to Him.

I, for one, am not terribly upset that our schools focus on practice and exegesis and heritage, rather than drive our children toward a blind faith. Because even if simple faith has its advantages, insistence on specific beliefs smacks of the brainwashing that made George Orwell's *1984* famous, and is, I believe, anathema to Judaism. Worse, see the militant youth of radical Islam's death culture for a system of faith that is fundamentally inserted into children who have no choice to opt out. Though the usual day-school curricula may risk free-thinking students, it also yields those who delve deeply and in wide-ranging ways. Personal grappling with a deep-rooted belief system is much preferred, to my mind, to a faith system that does not allow for choice.

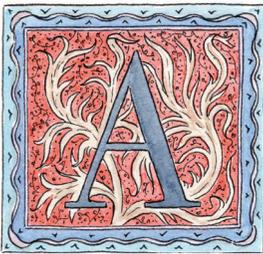
Formal Jewish education in the modern era would benefit from the addition of education oriented around a Jewish system of belief, especially in the communities where "simple faith" is not easily achievable, and *faith* itself may be a loaded term redolent of evangelism. But more, we members of the Jewish community would do well to turn our own focus to the Divine, open ourselves to the bounty that faith provides, and teach our children of those incredible resources that God has provided. Judaism is rich and sophisticated and will bear up under the weight of a discourse about Jewish belief. And the reminder that God is foundational to all Jewish education is a useful prod to expand the horizons of

those in and out of the classroom. That said, the Jewish focus on faith is likely to remain integral to Jewish education, rather than become its focus, and to that, I will note, with thanks to Robert Browning, that one's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for? \*

YUVAL LEVIN

# The Trust Trap

*Greater public faith in elite institutions requires evidence of restraint, not just of competence*



AMERICANS DON'T HAVE much confidence in their leaders, authority figures, and major institutions. Decades of survey research describe an accelerating mistrust on almost every front. From organized religion and major corporations to journalism, the medical system, banks, and universities, we have become deeply skeptical of established power centers. And that collapse of trust has been especially acute when it comes to the institutions of government.

The results are on display in a culture drenched in divisive cynicism and conspiracy theorizing and too often incapable of concerted action. Few of us are happy with this state of affairs, but we see no obvious way out of it. Is it even possible to recover lost trust in authority figures? Can we consider anyone to be properly in charge of anything, or are we doomed to be forever

led around in angry circles by a succession of online blowhards of different partisan flavors?

Such questions can help clarify the character of the challenge we face. It is a crisis of elite legitimacy. That means more than just public doubts about whether leaders deserve to lead. It's also that those leaders often can't quite justify their places, even to themselves.



Elite legitimacy is an inherent problem in any free society. We believe in equality, so how do we explain why some people have more power and privilege than others? What justifies their positions and their claims over us?

In 1970, in what may well have been the best of his many landmark essays, Irving Kristol took up this peculiar challenge of legitimacy. “The results of the political process and of the exercise of individual freedom—the distribution of power, privilege, and property—must also be seen as in some profound sense expressive of the values that govern the lives of individuals,” Kristol wrote. If elites hold power or privilege for reasons that most of their fellow citizens don't consider adequate, the entire society will lose respect for the rules by which it says it lives.

Not many would enjoy living in such a society. It would feel not only unequal but also unfree. “People feel free when they subscribe to a prevailing social philosophy; they feel unfree when the prevailing social philosophy is unpersuasive; and the existence of constitutions or laws or judiciaries have precious little to do with these basic feelings,” Kristol concluded. The principles according to which our elites exercise power must somehow be, as he put it, persuasive.

So how do our own elites now justify their status and that of the institutions they lead? Implicitly, without ever quite articulating it, they tend to fall upon a mix of technocratic credentials and

progressive high-mindedness. This broadly describes the self-image of the unusually cohesive elite class that now runs most of our major institutions. Its members (at least most of them) earned their places by demonstrating a peculiar sort of merit—through admission to a selective university, followed by various honors, certifications, rites of passage, jobs, and stamps of approval that signify competence.

This is a cold and almost clinical standard of worth, but the nagging guilty feeling that it may not be a sufficient rationale for status and authority is then allayed by a kind of secondhand atonement—a ritual acknowledgement of the sins of others that played a part in creating today's conditions of inequality. This might entail, for instance, naming the privilege that results from the inegalitarianism of prior generations or naming the Native American tribes that once occupied the lands we now possess.

The bizarre intensity with which such rituals are enforced sometimes feels like the working out of an authoritarian instinct, but it is at least as much a function of the depth of the guilt they are meant to placate. And if, after all that proof of formal qualifications and moral purity, the public is still skeptical of elites, then their skepticism is presumed to result from the failure of ordinary people to value rational competence, or from their bigotry or small mindedness. What else could explain it?

Technocratic prowess is not the craziest imaginable principle of legitimacy. Some portion of the public's mistrust of elites actually begins from an acceptance of that standard, and merely finds our leaders wanting in light of it. Surely one key reason why Americans' confidence in institutions has collapsed in this century has been some prominent failures of competence—of the foreign-policy establishment after 9/11, the economic-policy establishment in the financial crisis, the public-health bureaucracy in the pandemic, and so on.

And yet, it would be strange to argue that today's frustrated populists just want their leaders to be more effective technocrats. Better management might well have better kept the lid on the

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The public's mistrust of elites has more to do with character than competence — and with a sense that the ambitions of the leaders of important institutions aren't being harnessed in the service of others.

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anger that now boils over in every Western society, but that anger is plainly rooted in a more profound suspicion.



Simply put, the technocratic case for elite legitimacy is not persuasive because it does not describe a society worthy of the name. It makes our leaders accountable to generic performance standards, rather than to an ethos shared in common with the broader public. Indeed, it often renders them contemptuous of the broader public.

What troubles many Americans who find themselves frustrated with our institutions has less to do with doubts about competence than with suspicions of motives. Populist conspiracy theories don't allege that elites are feckless — in fact, they often assume the people in power are much more capable than they really are. But they take those people to be radically self-indulgent at the very least, and to have their own and not the public's best interests at heart.

Populist publics are more worried that contemporary elites are unrestrained than that they are incompetent. The problem is not with who gets into our elite universities, but with the fact that too little is demanded of them once they do. It isn't that Americans don't respect the credentials of their leaders but that they think

those leaders look down on the public and are unconstrained by a meaningful code of conduct.

If this is an important source of the public's frustration, then our leaders face a dangerous kind of trap: Their attempts to overcome public doubts by demonstrating technocratic prowess or progressive high-mindedness can only reinforce the sense that they are unaccountable.

Treating public resentment as evidence of willful ignorance, and thereby effectively equating yourself with neutral, elevated expertise, is ultimately a way to avoid accountability. When the National Institutes of Health's Anthony Fauci said a few years ago that his critics were "really criticizing science, because I represent science," he ended up justifying his angriest critics, not answering them. When disgraced former Harvard president Claudine Gay insisted earlier this year that criticism of her amounted to a racist smear, she was proving herself unworthy of the public's confidence.

Treating public resentment as evidence of prejudice or backwardness—and equating yourself with social progress—substitutes narrow partisanship for a broadly persuasive case for legitimacy. Even when it is well intentioned, as it surely is a lot of the time, this attitude radiates contempt. When elite institutions—from universities to corporations to major newspapers and federal agencies—use their cachet and leverage to advance political and cultural agendas unrelated to their missions, they don't justify their privileged positions. Instead, they only provide evidence for the claims of the cynics. They offer a critique of our society as a defense of their high status in it, which can't help but be unpersuasive to most people.

In effect, the public's mistrust of elites has more to do with character than competence—and with a sense that the ambitions of the leaders of important institutions aren't being harnessed in the service of others. That mistrust points to a set of institutional failures. Effective institutions form and shape the people in them into agents of others, whose purpose and integrity are functions

of the institution's aims — be it civic, religious, commercial, educational, cultural, political, or communal.

Trust in experts and elites is the result of some perception of this kind of formative restraint even more than of a recognition of their ability or competence. We know there are things a decent accountant, physician, journalist, or religious leader would never do. We have faith in them at least as much because of what we believe they wouldn't do as because of what we think they're good at. They act in accordance with a discernible code that defines them as professionals, and that's a crucial part of why we entrust them with influence over parts of our lives. When they violate that code, we lose our trust in them — even if they're otherwise still very capable.

Such a code of elite responsibility, writ large, is a key missing ingredient in our contemporary public life. We don't just mistrust our elites because they can't do what they claim, but also because it seems there is nothing they wouldn't do. It turns out that democratic publics prefer evidence of responsible restraint and accountability to evidence of technocratic prowess.

None of that is to excuse the tenor of much of today's populism — or of the often right-leaning counter-elites who seek to lead populist voters by indulging their most reckless excesses. The sour mix of self-pity and self-righteousness that defines that populism, its raging refusal to take ownership of any problem or to seek accommodation of any sort, and its cynicism that so smoothly blends into the most astonishing gullibility amount to a grand civic failure too. A democratic public has responsibilities at least as great as those of its leaders. But in a crisis of legitimacy, elite obligations are more urgent.

For our leaders to be more trusted, they must be more trustworthy. (If they were, fewer people would be drawn to populist demagogues.) Demonstrating such an ethos will require a recommitment to distinct institutional obligations. It will mean grasping their particular roles and doing their actual jobs.

That requires comprehending that a university, a newspaper, a

corporation, and a national legislature (to take a few prominent examples) are different institutions, with different purposes that demand different kinds of responsibility—they are not all just interchangeable platforms for cultural-political performance art. Each one comes with its own mode of integrity, which creates an opportunity to prove its legitimacy and that of the people who populate it. Each one provides a way to transform oneself into an agent of the interests of one’s fellow citizens in a particular way, and so to demonstrate competence while also offering persuasive evidence that the leader holds his or her position and status for good reason.

Many of our most profoundly vexed public controversies, in America and around the modern democratic world, involve conflicts between different sets of unrestrained elites. Think of former president Donald Trump and an assortment of prosecutors competing to see who can more thoroughly shatter the norms that guard public power against reckless politicization. Or think of an Israeli government and supreme court setting undiluted parliamentary power against unfettered judicial fiat. Such confrontations can only produce and perpetuate public cynicism.

The opposite of cynicism is not blind faith but earnest confidence, and achieving that requires the channeling of personal ambition through an institutional code in the service of some shared good. That is what today’s elites too often fail to show the public.



Seeing that hardly proves we can restore the trust we’ve lost. In fact, it suggests that restoration is the wrong way to think about the challenges we face. Waiting around for the return of mid-20th-century levels of trust won’t do any good. The extraordinary (at times excessive) confidence that Americans had in their society’s core institutions and leaders in the halcyon 1950s and ’60s was built on a foundation of tremendous common sacrifice, particularly

wartime sacrifice. You would not have found such trust in our culture before the middle decades of the last century, and we should not expect to find it now. Nostalgia for the childhood years of the oldest Baby Boomers (who somehow still define our self-conception) is not a reliable guide for the future.

Rather, grasping the nature of our legitimacy crisis can help us see what each of us could do, and what our leaders could do, to build a distinctly 21st-century mode of trust through greater humility, restraint, and an ethic of service. This wouldn't require superhuman feats of virtue on the part of American elites. But it would require stronger institutions, a greater commitment to the distinct aims and character of each, and a greater willingness for leaders to be shaped by the aspirations of these institutions rather than their own.

By allowing ourselves to be formed by the ethos of an institution that matters to us, each of us can play some role in building up the kind of trust we all sense is sorely lacking now, and so in more persuasively justifying the legitimacy of the institutions we are part of. By approaching little moments of decision with the question "Given my role here, how should I behave?" we can take small steps toward a culture of greater confidence.

That doesn't amount to a panacea for a healthier society. But it offers each of us something more to do than just complaining and vaguely hoping for better days. It suggests that what stands in the way of greater faith in our society and leaders is a shortage of responsibility across the board, and we can all work on that. \*



PART THREE

IN ISRAEL



# Haredi Faith: Theology and the Draft Controversy

*Reliance on miracles is not a sustainable  
political theology*



STORY IS RELATED in the Talmud about Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa, the wise and astute miracle worker, finding his daughter distressed at having confused a container of vinegar for one of oil when lighting the Shabbat candles. Hanina, unfazed, abates her worry by saying, “He who said to the oil that it should burn can instruct the vinegar to burn.” And so, says the Talmud, the candle “burned continuously the entire day, until they brought from it light for havdalah” (Ta’anit 25a).

The charm of the story is multilayered, a kind of personalized Hanukkah miracle (but on Shabbat) that doesn’t even require oil at all. On a deeper layer, it is not really a miracle story but a theological teaching: The difference between flammable and nonflammable substances is a mere earthly illusion. What makes oil ignite is not its physical properties but God, the true cause of every effect.

The Talmud in its wisdom, however, relates this tale as a miracle,

an anomalous divergence from the laws of nature that govern our everyday world. We do not attempt to light our Shabbat candles with vinegar because, as the Talmud teaches several pages earlier, we are “not to rely on miracles” (Ta’anit 20b). Rabbi Hanina is the exception that demonstrates the rule of nature to which we are beholden in our everyday lives.

In the following lines, I will argue that when it comes to matters of civic life, central elements within Israeli Haredi society—the society in which I live and where I proudly raise my children—have defined a faithful life on God’s earth in a radical and somewhat anomalous way that shifts the balance between the natural and the miraculous in strong favor of the latter. Given current challenges concerning Haredi participation in Israel, this definition requires urgent adjustment. The future of Israel, no less, hangs in the balance.



A relatively recent example of how this definition of faith shows up in Haredi thought is the work of Rabbi Aharon Shub, *mashgiach ruchani* (spiritual guide) at Yeshivat Beit Meir. In lessons he delivered to students (later published in his book *Shaarei Aliyah*), he was abundantly clear about what a life of faith entails: “All the practical actions we perform make no impact on the actual outcome... there is no correlation between the labor we input and the ultimate results, which are wrought entirely by the Creator.”

The phrase “no correlation” sounds extreme. Is there really no connection between the outcome and the human initiative and labor we invest in trying to reach it? Are we wrong to assume that a real-estate developer will probably have a higher income than a schoolteacher? Are we misguided to expect that earning a degree from an elite medical school will probably enhance a person’s earning potential? To do so runs against how we—everyone, Haredim included—live our lives. When we find ourselves in financial distress, we will be sure to work overtime, look for a side job, or reduce

expenses. In a similar vein, a childless couple wishing to beget children will, in time, turn to in vitro fertilization (IVF) technology or other options of fertility treatment. We do not rely on miraculous unforeseen events to carry us out of difficult circumstances, and we know it would be folly to do so.

Yet I am convinced that Shub did not consider his teaching innovative or novel. He was merely reiterating a simple article of faith he had received from his own teachers. In his 1971 *Sichot Mussar*, the Haredi leader and head of the Mirrer Yeshiva Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz asserted that “the extent of one’s labor is immaterial, for each person will attain that which he was predestined to receive.” Citing Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, known as the Chafetz Chaim, he noted that a person who struggles for his livelihood is akin to somebody hurrying to work who pushes the train car from the inside to speed it on its way. The thought that there is a causal relationship between work and income is no less nonsensical.

Rabbi Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, too, the first spiritual guide of Ponovezh Yeshiva and a prominent rabbinic leader, expounded on the theme that “augmenting effort (*hishtadlut*) will never lead to greater achievement.” Somebody who gives credence to earthly endeavors denies the fullness of faith in God and is guilty (on some level) of heresy. The natural “ways of the world” that indicate otherwise are but a trial, a mirage that tricks us into disbelief and attributes to nature what is in fact God’s will. While it is incumbent on us to make some minimal exertion, the capital-T Truth is that our efforts are wholly inconsequential. In fact, those on a high enough level of devotion would rely on virtually no earthly effort, thereby allowing Divine providence its full expression. For Rabbi Zundel of Salant, buying a weekly lottery ticket sufficed.

I could go on with citations, but the message and persistence of the idea is clear (as is its uncomfortable proximity to the Calvinist doctrine of predestination). The result of this approach, common to rabbinic thinkers of Haredi society, is a constant negotiation between faith and earthly living. Faith in God and the significance

of one's actions in the secular space of earthly living are inversely proportional. Those of little faith live under the illusion that acts matter, while the faithful realize that they are exactly that: acts that disguise the reality of God's choreography. Trust in God encroaches on trust in human endeavor in the physical realm, and absolute trust entirely negates it. To quip, the material becomes immaterial.

This “negation” approach—faith as the negation of human works—is a new one. Certainly, it is based on sources that indicate the futility of human action. Ecclesiastes, with its list of earthly vanities, is one source that comes to mind. A second is the midrashic critique against Joseph's attempts to escape Egyptian incarceration by his human efforts. A third is Luzzato's statement whereby work is the human tax incurred for Adam's sin; absent his (original) sin in the Garden, there would be no need for human efforts. Yet the faith model of 20th-century Haredi Judaism has made two novel and fundamental expansions of this smattering of sources.

First, it has made this mindset ubiquitous, intrinsic to how the Haredi Jews see themselves and the world. As I will show, sources such as Ecclesiastes are exceptions; they make important points against a backdrop of a general rule accepting human endeavor as a given. In today's Haredi society, the opposite is the case, swapping the exception for the rule—that human endeavor is futile and meaningless. Second, it is extreme. Though some sources indicate a tension between faith and human action, precious few will deny any correlation between human endeavor and results. Such approaches would lead us down a deterministic alley that raises troubling questions over the nature of prayer and the veracity of human accountability. Given such a framework, human justice and the commandment to pursue it become an elaborate, even paradoxical, fiction.



The entire biblical narrative of the Jewish people and their relationship with God is a tale of deep human involvement in earthly

affairs. From the forefathers to the Children of Israel who settled the land, all tended their flocks, worked the land, fought wars, engaged in statecraft, and made alliances with other groups and nations. Faith, of course, is a central part of the Jewish mission, yet it does not curtail or negate earthly works. It rather pervades them. Shabbat, by way of illustration, does not stand in tension with the six days of labor. It redirects them, infusing them with holiness as part of a sacred cycle of work and rest.

In this vein, the Talmud (Nida 70b) mentions three matters that Rabbi Yehoshua taught the elders of Alexandria. All three matters relate to human achievement in various areas of earthly conduct. One of them runs as follows:

“What should a person do to become wealthy?” He said to them: “He should increase his business and conduct his dealings in good faith.” They said to him: “Many have done so, and it did not avail them.” [He answered them:] “Rather, they should pray before the One to whom wealth belongs, as it is stated: ‘Mine is the silver, and Mine the gold.’” (Chaggai 2:8)

The other two areas Rabbi Yehoshua addressed, wisdom and children, follow the same pattern. In all of them, we must engage in worldly activity and add a prayer to Him who bestows the earthly pleasures of wealth, wisdom, and children through earthly means. After each statement, the Talmud asks and answers what Rabbi Yehoshua meant to teach us: “One without the other is not sufficient.” We need them both.

Rabbi Yehoshua’s clear message is that the path to wealth is paved with stones of work and commerce. Indeed, the connection between effort and results is a simple and self-evident assumption about God’s world. Shmuel called himself “vinegar son of wine” because his father would check up on the family’s property twice a day, while he would check only once (Hullin 105a). Shmuel’s plain assumption is that his father’s extra vigilance was praiseworthy and would yield better

results. Moreover, the concept of *haadafa*, making “extra money” in excess of basic income, is a familiar concept in the halakhic system (see, for instance, Ketubot 66a). That no Talmudic commentary questions the theological foundation of this concept—that one can make more money by working harder or longer—shows how foreign today’s Haredi ethos is to that of the Talmud itself. Rabbi Avraham Gombiner, in his commentary to Magen Avraham 248, permits a person to leave the Land of Israel for the purpose of amassing wealth even beyond his basic requirements. Apparently, human action is causally efficacious, and the Talmud recognizes it as such.

Rabbi Isaac Arama therefore advises us “not to abandon diligence and effort...for behold, when a person has done everything he can, it is impossible for the majority not to earn good reward for their labor.” *Sefer Ha-Ikarim*, the classic 15th-century text, states that “diligence and industry is advantageous and necessary in all human matters” and recommends that people engage in all manners of human endeavor. And the great 13th- and 14th-century biblical commentator Rabbeinu Bachya warns his readers to “never neglect the matter of earning an income” and urges them to be occupied with worldly matters. More recently, the renowned 19th-century work *Peleh Yo’ez* states that outcome will forever be based on “a person’s industry and diligence.”

In other words, it is up to us to engage the world fully, while ensuring we do so in partnership with God. This is the attitude of Rabbi Nissim of Gerona, who comments in his homilies that the verse “For it is He who gives you strength to make wealth” (Deuteronomy 8:18) must be read simply and literally: We create wealth by means of our own labor, yet it is God who gives us the capacity to do so. “It does not state that Hashem, your God, gives you the wealth [...] but rather that although you create the wealth by your own power, remember that it is God who grants you the power” (*Derashot Ha-Ran* 10). Faith and human industry are not at odds with each other but complementary. Human industry is what we do. Faith—the infusion of the Divine into our world—defines how we do it.

As noted, there are sources that indicate the contrary, but they remain few and far between. Why did the Haredi ideology take such a radical turn, elevating rabbinically marginal ideas that negate the value of human endeavor as a denial of Divine will? What changed in the 20th century?



Haredi Judaism is distinguished by a unique strategy to combat the threats modernity has long posed to religious life. The rival strategy, that of Modern Orthodoxy, is, in a nutshell, education. Modern Orthodoxy, in name and ideology, accepts modernity as a fact of reality and strives to integrate what is good and positive in modern life into religiosity, rejecting what is negative and dangerous. Such acceptance and engagement come with inherent, undeniable risks. Unwilling to take such risks, Haredi Judaism adopts a simpler and inelastic strategy: withdrawal. By isolating itself from modernity, Haredi society attempts to keep the claws of liberalism—its individualistic values, caustic culture, and scientific pretensions—away from the delicate fabric of religious life.

Set against the irresistible forces of Enlightenment, emancipation, and secular movements that have sucked in Jewish youth—among them, Zionism—the strategy proved to be an abysmal failure in Eastern Europe. At the outset of World War II, the Orthodox remnant had dwindled to a remarkable low. In Israel, however, owing partially to significant support on the part of the Jewish state, it has met with unprecedented success in building what has become its enclave society. This isolationism is not merely a technical description of Haredi society. It defines a mindset, an internal motion, an identity that determines its every interaction with the broader polity. It is, itself, a faith.

Is isolationism a viable philosophy for religious life? The answer depends on how one views the world. If earthly reality is replete with value and meaning, goodness and Godliness, then the very concept of

a segregated Haredi space becomes religiously and morally untenable. There can be no withdrawal from the world, modern or otherwise, if the earthly reality, in all its richness, is where God's commandments are meant to be practiced. If the Tree of Life is implanted within the garden of *derech erez* (the way of the earth), then the only way to eat its fruit is to live within the spheres of the earthly. But if this is not the case—if the Tree of Life grows outside of the world, leaving the secular space devoid of meaning and bereft of significance—then isolationism becomes a valid and realistic option. As Rabbi Yaakov emphasized in Pirkei Avot 4:16, the entire world becomes merely a vestibule for reaching the World to Come—and who in his right mind invests attention and resources in vestibules?

The Haredi faith model rose to prominence together with its isolationist strategy. When taken to mean that human industry in worldly affairs is futile, “vanity of vanities,” Haredi faith itself dictates a segregationist model that channels all investment and resources into the realm of the spirit. It provides the primary foundation for a society that sees itself as ontologically distinct from non-Haredi Jews and delineates a division of labor that has passed the test of many decades. *We*, the Haredim, focus on Torah study, religious devotion, faith communities, Hasidic courts, personal growth, religious education, and so on. These are matters of the spirit—things that really matter. *They*, the secular—the Haredi-secular dichotomy tends to leave out the complexity of the religious Zionist space—focus on all the rest. Moreover, all are welcome to join. When a Haredi yeshiva student invited his secular (Channel 12) interviewer to join him in the Torah study hall, the latter replied that there are other pressing issues, such as army service, that he must tend to. “Don’t worry,” retorted the yeshiva boy. “God will take care of that.” Precisely. Or, in the words of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai—perhaps the greatest protagonist of isolationism among the Talmudic sages—“others will do the work on your behalf” (Berachot 35b).

Times, however, are changing. The unanimous Supreme Court decision from June 25, whereby all Haredi males of conscription age

must enlist in the IDF, sends a sharp message—not from the court, but from Israel. In contrast with other court interventions in Israel’s delicate social issues, this time there was no backlash from the Israeli political Right. After months at war, thousands of dead and wounded and many more families who have borne the harsh burden of having fathers away for months on end, even those who sympathize with Haredi communities see the status quo as unsustainable and indefensible. Changes are already afoot, with careful movement toward greater participation in the Israeli workforce, education and higher-education apparatus, and, of course, military service. With this, a reformulation of the Haredi faith doctrine is essential. Continuing to preach a doctrine that negates the world even as we begin a deep reengagement with our earthly reality is a recipe for disaster, akin to a space shuttle returning to earth while leaving its fuel in space.



Three points are noteworthy in this context.

First, an essential aspect of a person’s endeavors is the satisfaction he experiences from his achievements. The Psalmist writes of the joy of eating the fruit of our own labors (128:2), and the sages go so far as to state that “one who eats the fruit of his labors is greater even than [one who is] God-fearing” (Berachot 8a). Natural joy in what we do is essential to a good and healthy life. Devaluing earthly activities can work for a person (or group) totally immersed in a world of Torah study and religious devotion. He will draw his fulfillment from his achievements in the study hall. However, as more and more Haredi individuals join the workforce and engage in the productive earthly labors, it is essential that they internalize the value of their works and take satisfaction in the fruit. The Psalmist turns heavenward to declare, “May Hashem rejoice in His works” (104:31), and the same is true of us: Our work must be a source of pride and gratification rather than one of shame and frustration.

Second, among the benefits of Haredi entry into broader Israel is

the opportunity to translate all that is good and pure within Haredi Judaism into the proverbial cultural language and thereby join the discourse over the national character of Israel. This newly invigorated conversation and its inevitably broad-minded outcomes will not happen if Haredim go through the gates of Israel's workforce, army, and academy with their heads hung low. Entering the arena as one does a spiritually lethal zone—one rabbinic colleague categorized leaving Kollel as facing a firing squad—will deny us the capacity to raise and elevate it. This issue is doubly relevant in an era of Jewish sovereignty, when our earthly actions are, unlike in days of old, consequential not only for the private Jewish sphere but even the public sphere of the State of Israel—authorities, institutions, public spaces, municipalities, and so on. The entry of Haredi Judaism into these spaces ought to bring them Divine blessing—a blessing that cannot shine if their very engagement is perceived as a curse.

Third, the growth and rise to prominence of the Haredi sector ensures that Israeli public policy will be heavily influenced by Haredi attitudes. How does a Haredi individual define the goals of the Jewish state? What ought the country be proud of? How shall we realize the scriptural injunction “You shall be unto me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6)? The answers to these questions involve deciding between the theological approaches to earthly reality: Does it contain inherent value or not? To be more specific, should the State of Israel invest in medical research, technological development, innovative food engineering, and solving the great questions and challenges facing humanity in our times? Should we take pride in important inventions, Nobel prizes, distinctions in the field of science, research, and other critical fields of the secular world? In line with the Haredi faith doctrine described above, the answer of Rabbi Chaim Greinman, זצ”ל, is a definitive no:

We are used to thinking that the advancement of medicine adds life, and that someone who contracted a certain disease today would be treated, which is not the case had he contracted

it yesterday, and if it were not for traffic hazards many people would be living with us today, and some accident victims remain alive because they were treated in a timely fashion. However, all thoughts are founded on heresy concerning Divine supervision, for in truth, the one who is destined to die never remains alive, and the one whose days are not over does not perish. [...] The truth is the precise opposite: so-and-so was condemned to die, and therefore fell ill with a disease that has no remedy. [...] Those who make a statistical accounting of how many died in a given month and how many perished in road accidents are engaging in inadvertent heresy and mislead readers into relating everything to chance, as if all things are random and happenstance. (*Michtavei Hitorerut* 6a)

In a state run by Rabbi Greinman, there is zero value in medical research, technological advancement, and the development of other areas of the world. Intuitively, we believe there to be a correlation between the development of IVF and the relative paucity of childless couples; in Rabbi Greinman's reality, medical matters are of no consequence. "Superficially, it looks like people make a difference. The truth, however, is that everything is an absolute lie, and there is nothing but God," wrote Rabbi Zeev Getzel in *Ashira*. The future of Israel as a country that invests in infrastructure, promotes a robust economy and strong army, and supports research and development in cutting-edge fields, in contrast to one that denies the value of such activities and subsists on minimal investment, depends on these rabbinic assertions being appreciated for what they are: well-meaning conceptions of faith that are incompatible with the responsibilities of our time and place. They are fitted to a non-earthly reality in which we dwelled, for several decades, allowing the Torah world to rebuild and grow strong. Today, we are called to move back to the earthly abode where God intends us to live, partnering with Him in mending the world and healing its fractures. The time is ripe; great matters beckon.

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Faith is a dynamic quality. It ebbs and flows, never remaining the same for too long. This axiomatic statement is true of humans as individuals. You don't have to be a soldier to know that there are no atheists in foxholes, and you don't have to be an atheist to know that foxholes are helpful tools for reminding us of the human vulnerabilities we are inclined to forget. But it is also true of humanity in history. Faith in the age of penicillin and birth control is different in kind from faith before the scientific revolution, just as faith in the age of prophecy is incomparable to faith in the absence of prophecy. The Talmudic sages teach that the One God has multiple faces (Mechilta, Exodus 20:2), and the same is true of our faith: It has many expressions.

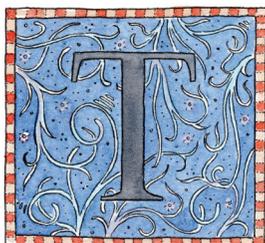
As Haredi society faces a profound turning point in its relationship with Israel, the deepest shift will be a matter of faith. The strength to make the shift, in mind and in deed, draws on the impressive structure that our fathers bequeath us.

In a wonderful twist, the tale of Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa we opened with concludes with the miraculous flame being used for lighting the havdalah candle. Why is this significant? The Talmud teaches that the reason why we recite a blessing over a candle after Shabbat terminates is that this was when Adam, by Divine inspiration, discovered fire (Pesachim 54a). Throughout Shabbat, we rest from human labor, foremost of which entails fire: "You shall not kindle a fire in all your abodes on the Sabbath day" (Exodus 35:3). On Shabbat, we bask in Divine light alone—an experience that empowers us, at Shabbat's termination, to kindle our own light. In a similar vein, the miraculous Shabbat candle of Hanina was itself the source for the havdalah light. And so, too, for us. For decades, Haredi society has lived by a Shabbat light and its attendant faith mindset. As we make havdalah and move into the realms of deed, we kindle a new light from the power of the old flame. \*

RUBY NAMDAR

# Emunah & the Artist

*On faith in literature*



THE WORD *faith* often makes me cringe, especially when it is uttered or written in English. It feels too concrete, too categoric, to describe the subtle, ethereal relationship between the individual (and especially the artistic) mind and the sublime, or the Divine. The Hebrew *emunah*, with its lexical flutter toward the word *aman* (artist), finds itself more palatable on my tongue.

The assonance between faith and art in my native language offers a reflection of the great presence the two have shared in my life and writing. From a very young age, I was drawn to all things religious. One could say that even as a child I heard the soft hum and felt the strong pull of “oceanic feeling,” as the French writer Romain Rolland put it in a famous letter to Sigmund Freud in 1927, describing what he saw as the essence of religious sensibility. But it was not only the lofty, mysterious sense of “eternity” and “being one with the external world as a whole,” to quote Rolland,

that drew me into the religious realm—it was the also the rituals, the theatrics, and, most of all, the alluringly arcane world of ancient Jewish text that fascinated me and infused my work with religious symbolism and meaning.

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Having grown up in a traditional Jewish home (both my parents immigrated to Israel from Iran and had a pleasant relationship with Judaism, one that was not marred by conflict and rebellion, or the overbearing yoke of Orthodoxy or a strictly halakhic lifestyle), I had the privilege of living between the worlds: receiving modern, secular education while having access to the warmth, depth, and beauty of the Jewish tradition. The synagogue, for example, was not part of our everyday routine, but it was by no means an alien place for me growing up. We went to synagogue on occasion, often crossing Jerusalem and visiting the old neighborhood where our community, the hidden Jews of Mashad, Iran, first settled upon arriving in Jerusalem in the late 19th and early 20th century.

This long march, which I now view as a form of unofficial pilgrimage, was part of the experience. We would leave the modern, secular part of the city where I was raised and venture into the old, religious sections where none of my nonreligious friends at school ever set foot. Everything looked and felt different there. It was as if even the light and air were other than those of the modern quarters. Long-bearded, pious old men shuffled along the dusty sides of the road; young Hasidic men stood tall with their crowns of fur and long, exotic-looking robes; old women threw breadcrumbs for the birds as an act of *chesed* (loving-kindness) that was meant to evoke the divine *midat ha-rachamim* (the attribute of mercy), the kind and forgiving element of God's presence in the world. At times we cheated, driving halfway on Shabbat, finding a hidden spot, leaving the car in haste, quickly donning the kippot that were neatly folded in our pockets, and pretending to fit perfectly into

the Orthodox surroundings. This added a certain twist of mischief to the experience, a slight sense of guilt that was not altogether unpleasant, teaching me that religious life does not have to be so earnest, that it can also be playful, and that a touch of sin can spice up a religious experience and even enhance it. In hindsight, I am sure that everybody around us knew about our little antic, and that this almost-comedic charade was part of the social norms of the time—norms that were so much more fluid and organic than nowadays, when the boundaries between religious and secular have become overly defined and almost impassable, a character of political tribes. I've realized that this whimsicality, this fluidity, enabled me to play around with religious themes in my writing, freeing me to take artistic liberties while also preserving the sense of awe and yearning that is its base. It is an abundant flow in the varieties of faithful experience, to make a bastard of William James.

But it wasn't only the journey to the synagogue that imprinted itself in my young mind. My early encounters with the *siddur* and the *machzor* were also formative for me. The language—ancient, regal, glowing with beauty and authority—won me over completely. For a young boy who was hypersensitive to the nuances of language, this exposure was life-changing. To this day, in my writing, I find myself drawn to both the modern and ancient layers of the Hebrew—and these layers are heavily hued in religious colors. As in my childhood, I still savor the friction between the modern vocabulary and syntax and its ancient ancestors, the biblical and rabbinic languages, and bring that friction to my work. I also still enjoy the religious—and I mean religious, not “spiritual,” or “transcendental,” or any other laundered, noncommittal term used by people to bypass the fence of organized religion, its symbolic universe, and its demands from the individual—tension and the creative conflict it creates between the text and the often secularized consciousness of the reader. (You might say those who prefer the more santized terms risk confusing the fence and the garden, and they should be so lucky to take the risk.)

The confused tension is a common motif in my writing. It came to its peak in my novel *The Ruined House* (masterfully translated to English by Hillel Halkin and published in the United States in 2017 by HarperCollins) when the unsuspecting protagonist, Professor Andrew Cohen, a secular Jew and a leading expert on contemporary culture, is visited (or seized) by a string of visions taking him back into the depths of Jewish memory, all the way to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem where his ancestors served as members of the priestly clan. Poor Professor Cohen—who is probably the least likely candidate for a sudden, unwarranted, ancient Jewish epiphany—all but collapses under the burden of this strange religious eruption and the suppressed collective memories it brings back.



The fertile dialogue with faith, religion, and Judaism is very present not only in my writing but also in my personal and family life. It was very important for me to live a Jewish life and raise my daughters to be “thickly” Jewish. Reflecting on my religious and cultural choices, I now realize that I created a certain split: I preserved the warm, loving, traditional Jewish environment that I grew up with in my homelife—and allocated the dark, edgy, and dangerous elements of religion to my writing. As a writer, I prefer my metaphors and images to stick to their role—fertilizing and expanding the human and Jewish imagination—rather than detach themselves from the page (or screen) and become too concrete and realistic. I love listening to the distant, soft hum of the oceanic feeling but know that it is much more dangerous for those from much more stressful religious backgrounds who must struggle with the waves of this vast ocean. I therefore feel blessed to have been taught to swim. \*

BENNY LAU

# The First Tisha B'Av Since October 7

*Jewish history saw the transition from the  
Covenant of Fate to the Covenant of Destiny,  
and back again*



IN TISHA B'AV in 1934, the Labor Zionist youth movement named HaNaor HaOved, affiliated with Israel's Histadrut (Workers' Union), went on a camping trip, much to the chagrin of Berl Katznelson, one of the Histadrut's founding leaders. The following day, on

the tenth of Av—when Jewish tradition stipulates we commemorate the final embers of the fire that burned the Temple—the Hebrew newspaper *Davar*, of which he was the founding editor, contained his impassioned denunciation of the movement's flouting of the day's significance in Jewish memory.

It is inconceivable that someone did this deliberately. It is inconceivable that the pioneering youth counselors, who educate toward “a life of fulfillment”—that is to say, the efforts of freedom from exile and of repairing the lesions and defects in us due to the destruction—it is inconceivable that they did this while being aware of what they were doing.

After lamenting the apparent ignorance of the Jewish youth leaders to schedule such a recreational activity on a day devoted to remembrance, Katznelson offered a clarifying declaration about the relationship between Jewish memory and the secular workers’ revolution to which he was committed.

What is the value and what is the product of a freedom movement that does not have roots, and forgets? . . . The movement of resurrection would be unable to do anything at present if the people of Israel did not keep in their heart the stiff-necked holiness of the memory of the destruction. If it did not dedicate to its memory and its sense and its behavior the life of the day of the destruction from all other days? This is the strength of the consolidated and fertilized essential symbol of the history of a people. If Israel did not know how to mourn for generations the destruction on a memorial day, all the severity of the feeling for those who died before it, of those who have just lost their freedom and their country, we would not have had Hess and Pinsker, Herzl and Nordau, Sirkin and Borochoy, A.D. Gordon and Y.J. Brenner, and Yehuda Halevi could not have created “Zion, Will You Not Ask?” and Bialik would not have written “The Scroll of Fire.”

The list of thinkers at the end is notably secular (all except the one who happened to have lived nearly a millennium earlier). Katznelson’s declaration reflects, beautifully and forcefully, the role of Tisha B’Av in the history of Zionist consciousness and the intensity of

mourning that accompanied Israel throughout the years of exile.

But the nature of the day underwent a huge change with the establishment of the state and an even greater change after the Six-Day War. The feeling of victory seemed to displace the many centuries of destruction and mourning, generating the sense that we were living in messianic times in which the narrative of Jewish history would finally shift from one of tribulation to one of triumph.

Immediately after the liberation of Jerusalem in June 1967, a group of religious scholars gathered in Jerusalem under the name The Movement for the Judaism of the Torah, with the aim of addressing questions about the renewal of halakhah (Jewish law) in the State of Israel today. One of the first topics discussed in their group was the Tisha B'Av liturgy—its description of Jerusalem as a “mournful, ruined, wretched, and desolate city”—and its apparent obsolescence in this moment of redemption. The members of the movement honestly and thoroughly claimed that this is now a false prayer: Far from wretched and desolate, Jerusalem is being rebuilt. They formulated a new prayer, based on “consolation,” the main purpose of which was to change the prayer from the present tense to the past (“the city that was destroyed”).

Then came the Yom Kippur War, when Israel’s near-defeat had a sobering effect on the messianic fervor. In response, the country split into two distinct directions. One side pulled Israel east, toward traditionalist and religious nationalism. The other pulled Israel west, toward secular liberalism. These opposing winds kept blowing, eventually forming the storm of judicial reform, until October 6, 50 years to the day after the start of the Yom Kippur War—when the split began.

The eastern and western pulls weren’t merely figurative but literal. Those imbued with the eastern spirit excitedly gravitated toward the Temple Mount, the Cave of the Patriarchs, Joseph’s Tomb—places associated with the roots of the Jewish national story in the Bible, in the east. The Western intellectuals chose to turn a cold and alienated shoulder to exactly these places. To

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Who can cry on our Tisha B'Av as the generations before us cried? What would my grandparents who were murdered in the Holocaust give to walk down the cobbled steps of the City of David?

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them, these sacred sites were symbols of the Jewish occupation and control of the Palestinian people.

But there was something these spirits had in common: an undeniable feeling that the exile had ended. In the language of Jewish thought, from the secularists of Labor Zionism to the religious writings of Joseph B. Soloveitchik, this paradigmatic change was defined as the transition from a “Covenant of Fate” to a “Covenant of Destiny.”

The Covenant of Fate expressed the existence of the Jewish people as a persecuted minority in the lands of the Diaspora, beholden to the choices and external powers around them. It was a mode of survival built on a common memory of powerlessness.

The Covenant of Destiny was configured around the opposite: power and agency, the will to express the Jewish experience through a national mission, unencumbered by external powers, seeking to realize its special role in history as a member in the family of nations, to be an *am segula*, a term often translated as a “treasured nation,” but more accurately, a “dignified one.”



For many generations in the Diaspora, Tisha B'Av served as the spiritual center of the Covenant of Fate. It represented, in the words

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The pain of this Tisha B'Av comes not only from the horrific events of October 7, but from the burden of our former Covenant of Fate.

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of the mishnah, the many calamities that had befallen the Jews as a part of this covenant, beginning with the seed of exile: “On the Ninth of Av it was decreed upon our ancestors that they would all die in the wilderness and not enter Eretz Yisrael” (Mishnah Ta’anit 4:6).

But ever since the arrival of the eastern and western winds, even Tisha B'Av has been marked in terms of the Covenant of Destiny. Fewer tears over the days of destruction and more sweat over building the character of the state. For the past several decades in Israel, Tisha B'Av has been a day of reflection on where we are going as a nation, with discussion circles and panels held both in the places of the east (such as the Old City) and the west (such as Rabin Square).

On the most recent Tisha B'Av—last year, during the height of the anti-coalition protests—I sat on one such panel with journalist Gal Gabai, my partner in 929, the Israeli Tanakh project that seeks to bring the Book of Books to the heart of every Israeli. The event was held in the City of David, a heritage site located in the heart of a Palestinian neighborhood in East Jerusalem, at the foot of the Temple Mount and the Western Wall. Needless to say, this is a place with an eastern spirit, and most of the thousands of attendees that night were Jews who identified with that powerful wind and came to this place precisely on the night of Tisha B'Av to say to their God in heaven: “We returned to Zion, we returned to build Jerusalem.”

For Gal Gabai, entering this site was fraught. Her spirit is of the west, which directed her gaze toward the Palestinian neighbors watching beyond the walls, from the streets of Silwan, the Arab neighborhood that surrounds this ancient site. Still, she wanted to be there, bound as we all are by the Covenant of Destiny, to meet with her eastern-spirited brethren, to connect with them in truth on this powerful day of remembrance, a genuine encounter to protect against the kind of baseless hatred our sages say led to the Temple's destruction on that very spot nearly two millennia ago.

At that event I felt with full force that we, Israeli society, find ourselves in an exhilarating and special phase of challenge and revival, a window of historical time that invites us back into our real space to become an independent nation that realizes itself here. Even with so many problems to be solved, so many realities to be changed, so many bumps to be smoothed out along the road—I thought, *Who can cry on our Tisha B'Av as the generations before us cried? What would my grandparents who were murdered in the Holocaust give to walk down the cobbled steps of the City of David?* In that period of great domestic turmoil, I still felt wrapped in the Covenant of Destiny.

And Gal felt the same way. In our conversation there was no room at all for the Covenant of Fate. Like the old Tisha B'Av liturgy, it felt obsolete in the light of a new covenant between ourselves and between us and God, the Covenant of Destiny that asks something deep from us: to thrive rather than survive. We didn't even think to talk about pogroms or of our heritage of victimhood. We are the fruits of the tree planted and rooted in the secure Land of Israel, not the Diaspora wanderings. What mattered in that conversation was not what we had experienced at the hands of other peoples but what the work of our own hands can give to the world. We sat from a place of home, not of refuge—a beacon, rather than an island. It was the feeling of a dark day turned lighter.

Then, only two months later, we woke up on the morning of a different holiday, Simchat Torah, this one turned from light to dark.

In an instant, the post-exilic winds, both east and west, stopped. There we were, thrown from the messianic age back into the feeling of exile, standing still with trembling hearts — seemingly from the Covenant of Destiny back to the Covenant of Fate.



Like the post-exilic return to the east, this return to the Covenant of Fate and its stories of the Jewish past was more than a feeling. It was literal. My first personal encounter with the October 7 tragedy was with Rotem Matias, the 16-year-old son of Shahar and Shlomi Matias, grandson of Professor Ilan Troen, who wrote of his loss in these pages. Rotem survived the attack on his family home in Holit because his mother, Shahar, shielded him with her body. The bullet that killed her pierced him as well, and she lay on top of him for hours as life left her.

Standing in his grandparents' home, Ilan pointed to a picture on the wall: "That's my mother," he said. In 1919, her parents were murdered in their home when a yearslong series of attacks known as the Petliura Pogroms came to her village in Druzhne, Ukraine. She survived the attacks only because Ilan's grandmother pushed her under the bed when the marauders entered the house. Ilan's mother left her village for another Diaspora community: Boston. There, she rejuvenated the family tree and named her son after his heroic grandmother. And now, more than 100 years later, her great-great-granddaughter was murdered in nearly exactly the same way, in the act of saving her own child in her home.

Telling me this story, Ilan stopped abruptly. Restraining himself, he said to me: "But that was there, and now it's happening here."

Suddenly, I was reminded of something Joe Biden said Golda Meir had told him many years ago: "We Israelis have a secret weapon," she said. "We have nowhere else to go."

When the exile of Europe became unbearable, hundreds of thousands of Jews migrated to a new exile in the Americas. This is

what the Jewish people have always done. Exile after exile, wandering and more wandering. But as the Torah tells us of exile:

[You] will flee from them by many roads; and you shall become a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth... even among those nations you shall find no peace, nor shall your foot find a place to rest. God will give you there an anguished heart and eyes that pine and a despondent spirit. The life you face shall be precarious; you shall be in terror, night and day, with no assurance of survival (Deuteronomy 28:64–67).

So many times it was our dream to find rest and inheritance in other lands, but the Torah was clear about this futility.

The pain of this Tisha B'Av comes not only from the horrific events of October 7, but from the burden of our former Covenant of Fate. Here in Israel, our first non-Diaspora destination, the last stop on our exilic journey, the catastrophe of Black Shabbat forced us from the Covenant of Destiny—the clash of the east and west winds—back into the Covenant of Fate.

The historic lesson of this moment is the persistence of the Covenant of Fate: the hostages and their families, the refugees from the north, the injured and fallen from the war.

This year, our Tisha B'Av is more similar to those marked by the generations that came before us, those whose memories Berl Katznelson knew were so precious. From the arguments about our future we shifted to the tremblings of our past. Perhaps with this we feel a bit closer to those who came before us and to the covenant they carried.

Now we carry both covenants, and this year, as in the past, we will get up from the ground, daven mincha, and march to the remnant of our temple, the Western Wall, and stand there to end the fast with a promise and hope that we will do everything in our power to be worthy of this house. \*

BARBARA S. OKUN

# Faith & Fertility in Israel

*Israel's birthrate is uncommonly high among Western countries, but the implications of this are not entirely positive*



**T**HAT WOMEN are having fewer children all over the world, from Europe (about 1.5 children per woman in the EU) to East Asia (less than one child per woman in Korea) to the United States (slightly below two), has been a matter of concern for some time now. Even the religious Middle East and North Africa have experienced a decades-long decline in fertility. At the time of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iranian women had 6.5 children on average. Today, the fertility rate is on par with that of the United States. In Tunisia, fertility is nearly as low today as in France, and in Yemen—one of the highest-fertility Muslim countries in the world—childbearing has fallen by more than half in 30 years.

In this global story, Israel is an outlier. For decades, its fertility rate

has held at around three children per woman on average, according to Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics. But this rough stability obscures wide variation and dramatic change within population groups. For example, fertility has fallen dramatically in recent decades among Muslim women, so that in recent years, Muslim women in Israel have almost the same number of children, on average, as Jewish women in Israel do. In contrast, fertility remains very high among the Haredi Jewish population, who are at the same 6.5 rate of pre-Revolution Iran. Even Jewish Israelis outside the Haredi community have higher fertility than their counterparts in other countries.

What, then, are we to make of Israel's outlier status when it comes to fertility among wealthy nations? What role does faith play in that status? What explains the positive relationship between religiosity and fertility among Jews in Israel? And why do secular and other non-Haredi Jews in Israel have relatively high fertility compared with their Diaspora counterparts?



Beyond the biblical injunction to be fruitful and multiply, it is the embrace of religion as a political and social institution that is key to high Haredi fertility. Haredi groups in Israel are politically organized and have leverage in coalition politics. This has empowered their religious leaders and enabled their communities to receive much government financial assistance. As is well known, the Haredi community has leveraged its political power to ensure subsidies for yeshiva study and exemption from military conscription (until the recent Supreme Court of Israel ruling against the legality of current exemption practices). They've even pushed lawmakers to scrap legislation to tax single-use plastics that are widely used in their community.

Socially, the institutionalization of patriarchal, religious family law serves as a code for dictating the proper life for women and men, emphasizing familism, marriage, marital stability, and high fertility. Religious values—for example, about family life and gender rela-

tions—matter because religious institutions communicate those values to their community members, promote compliance with those values, and have the means to punish those who do not conform.

The impact of religion and faith on fertility in Israel is not monolithic, even when it comes to the delicate matter of religious attitudes toward birth control or abortion. For instance, even though Haredi fertility is high, it is far below maximal levels observed in other populations (10 children per woman on average), and it is consciously limited and controlled by married couples, implying that family planning and family limitation in this population is widespread. Fertility in this community does not have to and will not necessarily remain as high as it has been for the past several decades. In fact, in order to maintain overall fertility rates at their current levels, there have to be very substantial reductions in the rates among the Haredi population.



Beyond the wide disparities in fertility among various Jewish subpopulations, Israel is also unique in the value placed on having children among self-described *secular* Jews, who most commonly have three children by the time they complete their families, a markedly higher rate than their Diaspora counterparts. Why?

Among Jews in Israel who are not Haredi, religion has a similar if more subtle role in fertility via its interconnectedness with Israeli nationalism and familism. These are the factors that set Jewish fertility in Israel apart from that in the Diaspora, and they by turns inform and are informed by a fertility-friendly social ethos.

The linkages among religious traditionalism, familism, and nationalism are seen, for example, in extremely generous public subsidies for assisted reproductive technologies (ART). As of 2016, the per capita use of these services was higher than anywhere else in the world, and 4.7 percent of all births were products of in-vitro fertilization (IVF), which is among the highest percentages recorded globally.

Perhaps as important as the direct effect of ART programs on raising fertility rates is their symbolic meaning. As the scholar Sigal Gool-din has argued, broad public support for subsidized ART in Israel is based on the widely held belief that the opportunity to experience biological parenthood is a kind of civil right. Infertility, on the other hand, is seen as a source of human suffering (as it was for the biblical matriarchs) that needs to be addressed with public policy.

This pro-natalist policy ethos has remained constant even as other social norms have evolved. In 2022, during the brief non-Netanyahu government, equal rights to the use of surrogacy services in Israel were extended to include same-sex couples, single men, and transgender individuals, not, as was previously the case, only heterosexual couples and single women.



The sociologist Kevin McQuillan once argued that religion is most likely to affect fertility “where religion and nationalism blend together, and where religious identity distinguishes a people from other groups in the territory who are either competitors or aggressors.” For most Jewish Israelis, national identity means feeling connected with the Jewish people and being a member of the Jewish majority of Israel. This idea differs from one that is strictly based in religion. Although some argue that nationalism may be receding from secular Israeli spaces, one thing we learned from the civic response to October 7 is that commitment to the nation remains a prominent feature of Jewish Israeli society. Moreover, considerations of national security reinforce group cohesion among Jewish Israelis. This goes a long way in explaining why familism has persisted despite Israel’s transformation into a start-up nation that rewards individual achievement. As Israeli sociologist Sammy Smooha put it nearly two decades ago, “Individualism as a value and a behavior has to compete hard with collectivistic and communitarian orientations.”

Here we see the peculiar durability of Israel’s fertility, unique

in ethnically diverse societies. The collectivist and communitarian core of Israel's social philosophy places a family-shaped framework around its mores at all levels of society. Individuals rely to a great extent on their families within and across generations, strengthening family bonds and engendering a broad and expanded conception of the family: in size, relational lines, and responsibility. Put another way, cultural codes for family behavior and commitment are rather extensive because familial feeling extends beyond the boundaries of the nuclear family. Taking this into account, we can understand Israel's high fertility in part as springing from the institution that serves as the foundation of family life: marriage.

Back in 2010, demographer Ron Lesthaeghe referred to marriage as a “fertility-enhancing prop.” Although delayed marriage, non-marriage, and marital dissolution are on the rise, fertility is still marriage-based in Israel, to a much greater degree than it is in most Western countries. Marriage stability and prevalence contribute to higher desired family sizes and to larger completed families. Another way of putting this is that Israel's high fertility is rooted in the near universality of marriage among most Jewish groups.

As in many Western countries, clear social expectations are that women will work to contribute to household income. According to World Bank data from 2022, the labor-force participation rate for women ages 15–64 in Israel is around 71 percent, which is comparable to that of France, the U.S., and Germany, much higher than Italy's, lower than Sweden's—but with higher fertility than all of them. Proportions of Jewish women and men in Israel who state a desire for no children or at most one child are very low. There is also research suggesting that the generally negative relationship between women's educational level and their completed family size (i.e., the higher the education level, the smaller the family) is less pronounced among Jewish Israelis than it is, for instance, in Europe.

But here is where we may be witnessing some shifts. While Israel remains a pro-natalist society and one supportive of working mothers, traditional familism is weakest among the most educated and secu-

lar groups in Israel, and collectivist values may be waning. Fertility is falling among many Jewish Israelis as marriage and childbearing are delayed and divorce and non-marriage increase along with the increasing cost of living and housing. For many Jewish Israelis, the shift toward cultural values that accompany low fertility in many rich societies, alongside changing economic realities, may eventually lead to smaller families. Reductions in family size among secular Jews in Israel has been slowly progressing over the past 25 years or so, with reductions in proportions of families with three or more children.

And perhaps not too soon. Although Israel's high fertility has been celebrated by many, notably Dan Senor and Saul Singer in their book *The Genius of Israel*, for its promise of a youthful population and the potential for a more innovative labor force and creative society, it comes with very real challenges. Rapid population growth, increasing population density, environmental threats, limited natural resources, youth dependency, and threats to economic well-being are among the issues that require serious forethought.

While you might think that a difference of one or two children per woman in Israel versus countries in Europe, East Asia, or the United States doesn't mean much, the demographic, social, and economic implications of these sustained differences are enormous. Israel is already one of the most densely populated countries in the world among those with populations over 2 million. Israel is similar in land area, total population, and population density to the state of New Jersey—the densest of the 50 states. But Israel continues to grow at nearly 2 percent annually, which compounds to a population doubling time of only 35 years. In contrast, New Jersey's population grew only 1 percent from 2010 to 2019.

And Israel's increased population density will occur in an environmentally sensitive geographic area, particularly vulnerable to climate change and extreme climate events, and with access to limited natural resources. The health, welfare, and transportation implications of these changes are potentially grave.

Other concerns are the differential population growth rates

of economically active populations. Although the situation is dynamic—for example, labor-force participation among underrepresented groups, such as Haredi men, is increasing, albeit from low levels—Israel will undoubtedly need to successfully invest resources in the human capital of underrepresented populations and to promote their active participation in the labor market. If not, the economy will suffer and poverty rates will increase.

Rapid population growth presents additional challenges on top of other demographic realities that are inevitable regardless of any fertility-rate changes in the coming decades, such as the aging of large cohorts born in the 1970s. This generation—the grandchildren of mass migrants who arrived in the early years of statehood—will begin reaching retirement ages in the mid-2030s. The aging process in Israel is already under way.

Facing fertility rates below that required to replace their populations in the long run (roughly 2.1 children per woman), many countries have emphasized immigration as a way to maintain their population sizes. Here again, Israel bucks the trend and is experiencing transition in the opposite direction. Historically, immigration was the engine of population change in Israel. Following the last massive wave of migration from the former Soviet Union in the 1990s, fertility has replaced immigration as the major driver of Israel's rapid population growth. Future trajectories of population growth hinge on fertility. Needless to say, the math simply determines that fertility today will affect population growth decades ahead, as babies born today will become parents in a generation; large cohorts born now come with the promise of further population growth down the line.

Bluntly, population growth, in the short-to-medium run, is nearly unstoppable, owing to numbers of young people already born who will enter the prime childbearing ages. That is why even Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics' moderate population forecasts, based on projections of declining numbers of births per woman among the Haredi community, other Jews, and Arabs, show that Israel's population may exceed 13 million by 2040, compared with 9.8 million at

the end of 2023, astounding growth of roughly 33 percent. Although other forecasts are slightly lower, such as that of the Taub Center think tank (on the order of 12.8 million), there is no doubt that Israel's population will continue to grow and that the growth will be exponentially greater if fertility does not fall.



Sadly, there has been little public discourse concerning the implications of high fertility for social, economic, and environmental change in Israel. Some of this is because the trauma of October 7, the persistent demands of war, and internal political strife have combined to cast this incubating set of challenges to the side. But this interpretation misses the unstated assumption regarding fertility in Israel: that it is an unadulterated good, a symbol of a thriving, vibrant society, and one of the characteristics that is associated with greater levels of life satisfaction and happiness in Israel, compared with other countries. But it is past time to take a critical look at what Israel's fertility patterns will mean for the country's future, and to explore potential avenues for responsible and gradual fertility decline. For example, research indicates that if Israel were to lower its aggregate level of fertility and its consequent burden of youth dependency (usually defined as the proportion of the population age 19 or younger) in the coming decades, the result would be an increase in the proportion of the population at the working ages of 20–64, a factor that positively affects per capita income. In contrast, if aggregate fertility remains unchanged, the dependency burden will grow and the proportion of the population at the working ages will decline.

While no one can foretell the distant future, we need to think about Israel's population goals, how to design population and social policy to address these goals, and what we should do in the meantime to meet the challenges that we know are coming. We need a serious, strategic discussion of these issues, which will help to inform policymakers and planners. \*



# DEPARTURES



# Jewish Masterpiece: ‘Hatikvah’

*Israel’s national anthem is one of the only anthems in the world to be written in a minor key. That’s no accident*



IN A FRIDAY EVENING in April 1945, five days after British troops first entered the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, a reporter for BBC Radio captured a group of survivors singing “Hatikvah.” They were taking part in an open-air service led by a Welsh army chaplain, the Reverend Leslie Harmand, who had spent the past days saying Kaddish over mass graves overflowing with tangled corpses. In his report, the journalist described the scene:

Forty thousand or more [bodies] had been cleared, but there were still one or two thousand around, and people were still lying down and dying in broad daylight in front of our eyes. This was the background to this open-air Jewish service. During the service, the few hundred people gathered together were sobbing

openly, with joy of their liberation and with sorrow of the memory of their parents and brothers and sisters that had been taken from them and gassed and burned. These people knew they were being recorded. They wanted the world to hear their voice. They made a tremendous effort, which quite exhausted them.

In the haunting recording, now posted on YouTube, you can hear the exhaustion in the frayed first notes of the hymn that had become the as-yet unofficial anthem of the Jewish people. *As long as in the heart within, the Jewish soul yearns, and the eye gazes east toward Zion, our hope is not lost...*

The opening notes of the Bergen-Belsen chorus rise in an unsteady slur as if the tune were dragging itself up from the ground, its contours blurred from the slight differences in tempo and pitch. One woman's voice emerges as the leader, and on the words *nefesh yehudi* ("Jewish soul") she accentuates the beginning of each syllable, which has the double effect of rallying the other singers around a clear beat and asserting the survival—in a place where the evidence to the contrary could be measured in mounds of bodies and discarded shoes—of the Jewish soul.

By the time the melody shoots up on *od lo avdah tikvateinu* ("our hope is not lost"), the octave jump is clean and confident across the whole chorus. You can even hear one female voice splitting off from the group by a major third to harmonize the flourish on *tikvateinu*. She might have learned it that way at a Zionist summer camp, or maybe she had grown up in one of those parts of Eastern Europe where spontaneous harmony is just one of the skills you absorb early and then always carry in your bones.

With its hopeful lyrics based on an 1878 poem by Naftali Herz Imber set to a melancholic tune by Samuel Cohen in 1888, "Hatikvah" seems eerily suited to the Jewish experience at that moment in history. There's the opening shuffle up and down the minor scale that evokes the motion of wandering and the

pain of exile. There's the cadence, or harmonic homecoming, on the final mention of the ancestral Jewish land, and in the middle—on a modulation into sunny major—the radiant octave jump toward hope.

In the Diaspora, “Hatikvah” became so closely associated with the Zionist movement that it seemed to many inevitable that it should become the national anthem at the founding of the Jewish state. But in Israel, it has been controversial and was only legally adopted as the state anthem in 2014.

To some of its critics, the anthem is too Jewish to represent a population that is one-fifth Arab. One of them is the left-wing former Knesset member Uri Avneri, who in a podcast interview dismissed “Hatikvah” as a product of the Diaspora. “It is about Jews somewhere abroad, who are longing for the Land of Israel,” he said. “It has nothing to do with people in the Land of Israel. I don't turn to the east, because I live in the middle. The east I am looking at is Jordan, or India or China. It is a completely irrelevant song.”

To religious critics, it's a scandal that the lyrics never mention God. Wouldn't “Shir Hama'alot,” the mystical setting of Psalm 126, be a more appropriate anthem? Or would Israelis be better off rallying around “Jerusalem of Gold”? After all, that song was not only written by a sabra but also seemed to have prophetic powers, given that its release at the cusp of the Six-Day War ushered in the recapture of the Old City.

Meanwhile, the melody of “Hatikvah” has been its own source of anxiety. The minor-scale opening matches almost pitch for pitch the theme of Bedrich Smetana's 1879 “Moldau,” part of the symphonic poem “Ma Vlast” that was itself an expression of Czech nationalist aspirations. The similarities are so strong that when authorities in British-occupied Palestine banned broadcasts of “Hatikvah,” Jewish radio stations would play Smetana's work instead. But Smetana in turn had only borrowed the tune from an existing folk song. This led a slew of Jewish musicologists to

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Now the melancholic shuffle of the exiles gives way to radiance as the melody soars up an octave right as the lyrics invoke the hope of a return to the Holy Land.

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hunt down the origin of the melody and — if at all possible — find a Jewish antecedent.

They seemed to strike gold with the Sephardic *piyyun* to “Lekh le shalom geshem,” a blessing over dew recited during Passover. There was that minor scale again, climbing to the sixth degree of the scale before settling back down with a couple of gracious arabesques along the way. If this tune could be traced back to pre-expulsion Spain, wasn’t it possible that all the other melodies resembling it — folk tunes from Poland and Sweden, art songs from Renaissance Italy and Elizabethan England — were actually based on a Jewish pattern? From there, it was a small step to suggest that Mozart himself had unknowingly quoted the Sephardic prayer in the eighth of his 12 piano variations on “Ah! vous dirai-je, maman” (a nursery rhyme set to the same melody as “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star”).

This game of Jewish geography works best as long as a melody is reduced to its crude outline. In the first half of “Hatikvah,” that is a simple minor scale. Yet what turns a scale into a melody are the rhythmic variations and small ornaments that shape the progression along the steps. It’s the ornaments — which do not feature in “Hatikvah” — that lend “Lekh le shalom geshem” its medieval flavor. What makes Smetana’s “Moldau” flow like a river are those lilting triplets propelling the tune downstream. You can dismiss such differences as details, but then you risk arguing for family resemblance on the basis of skeletons.

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Humble and egalitarian, it reflects an ideal of bottom-up social cohesion that is ultimately very Israeli. The D minor–F major-and-back modulation befits the anthem of a minority people striving for autonomy in their own land.

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To say that the tune to “Hatikvah” is built on an archetype rather than on a Jewish invention does not detract from its power. In fact, today’s anthem derives much of its emotional impact from the juxtaposition of the humble opening phrase with the one that follows. This second part can be traced more confidently to a Romanian peasant song about driving an ox cart, an upbeat number in a major key. In the ox-and-cart version, that octave jump sounds like a cue for some exuberant dance move.

When Samuel Cohen set it to a verse from Imber’s poem “Tikvateinu,” he slowed the Balkan peasant dance down to a reverential tempo. Suddenly, the rustic tune takes on the worshipful gait of an anthem. Now the melancholic shuffle of the exiles gives way to radiance as the melody soars up an octave right as the lyrics invoke the hope of a return to the Holy Land. A note transposed up an octave is the same note—the same degree of the scale—just vibrating at a higher frequency. It’s an almost literal rendering of the concept of aliyah.

The beginning of “Hatikvah” is written in D minor, the “heartbreak key” often used in classical music to convey grief and brokenness. Even the 1984 rock-’n’roll mockumentary *This Is Spinal Tap* defines it as “the saddest of all keys,” one that makes people “weep instantly when you play it.” Mozart used it in his Requiem and to depict Don Giovanni’s descent into hell.

Beethoven's Ninth Symphony begins in tortured D minor before finding redemption in the D-major "Ode to Joy." As "Hatikvah" moves into the slowed-down Romanian dance on the words evoking hope, it modulates into F major, a contemplative key often associated with pastoral settings in Western music. On the final words, the music settles back into D minor, the familiar melancholy now endowed with new dignity, the final steps paced like a ceremonial march.

The elegiac character of "Hatikvah," with its chiaroscuro shift from suffering to hope, is one reason it stands out among national anthems. The few other minor-key anthems tend to be marches, where the dark harmonies conjure a sense of tragic courage. Other slow hymns, like the British "God Save the King" and the German anthem it inspired, project political stability with all-is-well harmonies. But as a rule, anthems are victory parades or calls to arms. The most triumphant ones are often the least singable, such as "La Marseillaise," which sounds like one elaborate trumpet signal, or "The Star-Spangled Banner," which features such treacherous jumps that it can humble the most seasoned vocalist.

"Hatikvah" leaves no room for the kind of melismatic runs and other personal touches that American pop stars pile on top of their anthem at sports events. Humble and egalitarian, it reflects an ideal of bottom-up social cohesion that is ultimately very Israeli. The D minor–F major-and-back modulation befits the anthem of a minority people striving for autonomy in their own land.

It almost ended differently. In 1947, four days before the United Nations voted on the establishment of the State of Israel, "Hatikvah" underwent a cosmetic intervention to give it a happy ending. The surgeon in question was Kurt Weill, the composer whose *Three-penny Opera* captured the gallows humor of the Weimar Republic and who had since fled the Nazis and landed in America. His orchestration of "Hatikvah," commissioned for a New York fundraiser for the nascent Weizmann Institute, is brash, edgy, and triumphant. Chirpy woodwinds flit about the melancholic tune,

which proceeds in an uncomfortably light-footed, dotted rhythm. The central octave jump is smothered in dense chromatic chords before a snare drum rallies its troops, the brass cuts through decisively, and the whole thing ends in technicolor major.

Weill's instrumental setting received its premiere on November 25 at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel by the Boston Symphony Orchestra conducted by Serge Koussevitzky. Chaim Weizmann, who would go on to become the first president of Israel, liked the arrangement so much that he expressed his hope that it would become the official anthem of the Jewish state. In fact, the orchestration most commonly used these days bears the imprint of an Italian conductor and orchestrator, Bernardino Molinari, who, following a vision of the Virgin Mary, moved to Israel in 1948 and went on to lead the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra for three years. (He was later outed as a Fascist.) This orchestral version of "Hatikvah" beautifully dramatizes the anthem's pathos. The conductor Zubin Mehta once told me about an emotionally charged concert in Berlin in 1971, part of the Israel Philharmonic's hotly debated first tour to Germany, which ended with a rousing encore of "Hatikvah." The German audience went wild, he said, and there was not a dry eye in the house. "Of course," Mehta added with a wink, "half of them thought we were playing the 'Moldau.'"

While few renditions of "Hatikvah" have been as haunting as the one captured for the BBC that Kabbalat Shabbat in Bergen-Belsen, the anthem continues to cast a spell. The handful of YouTube videos showing it being played in various Gulf States in recent years, for instance at a medal ceremony honoring a victorious Israeli athlete in Abu Dhabi, or during an official ceremony at the royal palace in Bahrain, may soon seem as quaint as Weill's forced Hollywood ending. A decade before the attacks of October 7, Hamas put out a video with crude graphics depicting humiliated Jews over the sounds of a rewritten "Hatikvah" that celebrated the failure of the Zionist project — all sung in Arabic-inflected modern Hebrew. For now, though, the version that Jewish students intone

at campus demonstrations and that IDF soldiers sing whenever they enter Gaza is the one sung by that spectral chorus of survivors: a hymn rooted in heartbreak minor that keeps its heart wide open to the possibility of hope. \*

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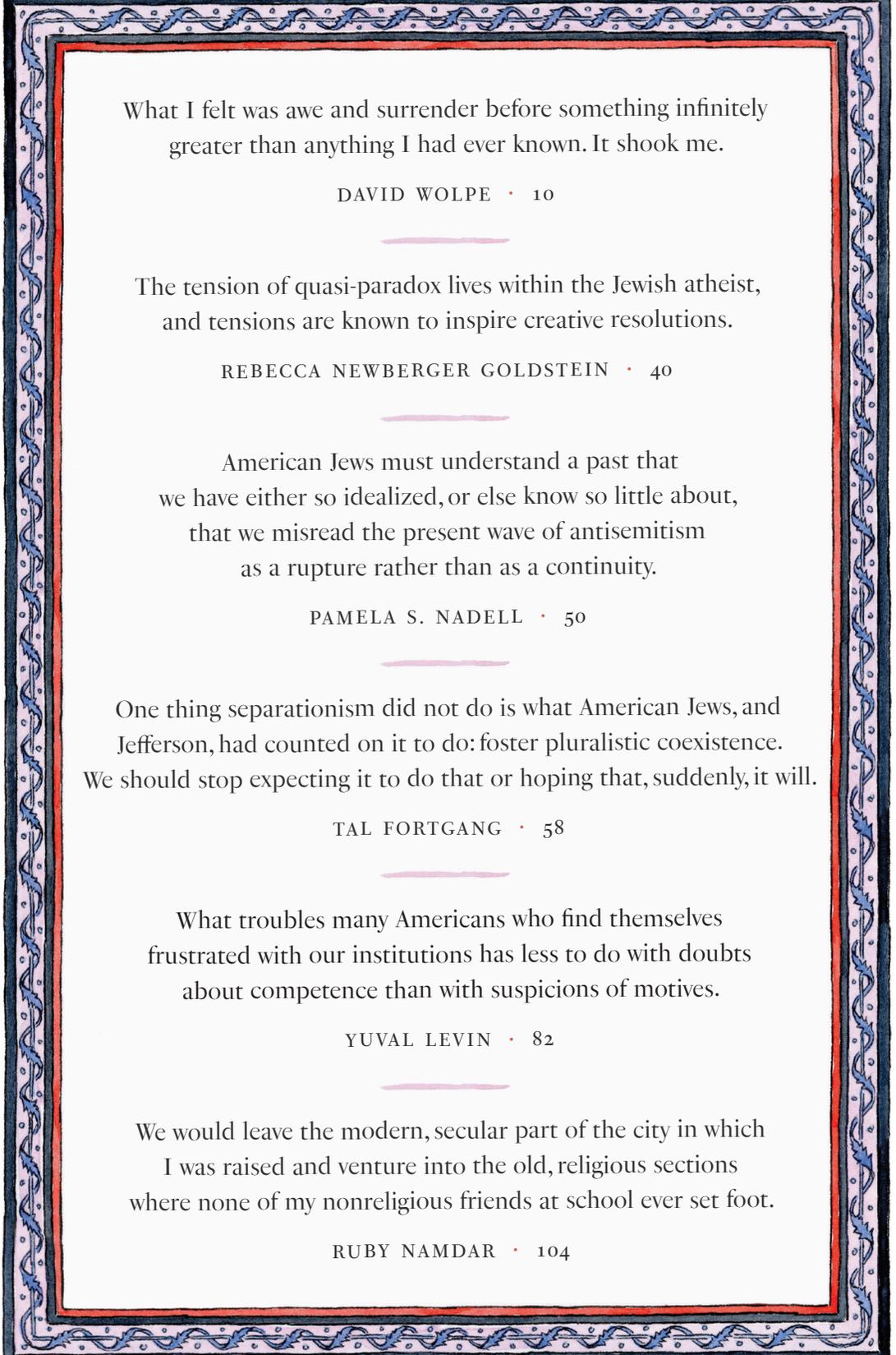
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וַיִּרְאוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַתִּחַת  
רַגְלָיו כָּמַעֲשֵׂה לְבַנְת הַסִּפִּיר  
וּכְעֶצֶם הַשָּׁמַיִם לְטֹהַר:

— שמות כד:י



What I felt was awe and surrender before something infinitely greater than anything I had ever known. It shook me.

DAVID WOLPE • 10

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The tension of quasi-paradox lives within the Jewish atheist, and tensions are known to inspire creative resolutions.

REBECCA NEWBERGER GOLDSTEIN • 40

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American Jews must understand a past that we have either so idealized, or else know so little about, that we misread the present wave of antisemitism as a rupture rather than as a continuity.

PAMELA S. NADELL • 50

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One thing separationism did not do is what American Jews, and Jefferson, had counted on it to do: foster pluralistic coexistence. We should stop expecting it to do that or hoping that, suddenly, it will.

TAL FORTGANG • 58

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What troubles many Americans who find themselves frustrated with our institutions has less to do with doubts about competence than with suspicions of motives.

YUVAL LEVIN • 82

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We would leave the modern, secular part of the city in which I was raised and venture into the old, religious sections where none of my nonreligious friends at school ever set foot.

RUBY NAMDAR • 104