

THE YARID

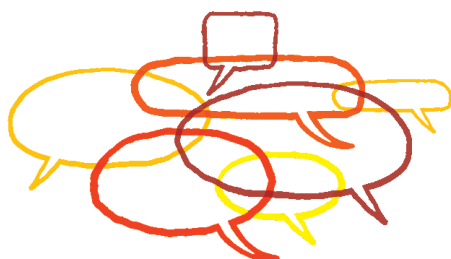


A GOLDEN AGE
INAUGURAL EDITION

The YARID explores the future of Jewish thought and culture through curating and publishing collegiate voices. The word “*yarid*” means market or gathering; it is where trading, haggling, arguing, innovating, and exchanging ideas take place. A forum for serious intellectual and imaginative inquiry, *The YARID* collects a wide range of perspectives from Harvard and other universities. Representing college students in the ongoing effort to form, question, and engage with the Jewish tradition in a changing world, *The YARID* believes that surprising discoveries come from placing differing viewpoints in close proximity.

The YARID believes the pieces it publishes have something important, interesting, or meaningful to contribute to Jewish thought and conversation; it does not endorse the arguments presented in the pieces it publishes.

THE YARID
2026
INAUGURAL EDITION



Contents

7	Editor's Note
9	Introduction
11	LEO EIGEN <i>That Which Stands: Reclaiming Covenant in American Jewish Life</i>
17	MAYA ROSEN <i>A Jew in China</i>
29	JUDAH HAIN <i>The Danger of Jewish Self-Defense</i>
35	RABBI CRAIG MARANTZ <i>The Laws of Spiritual Thermodynamics</i>
39	MIKHAI SHVARTSMAN <i>Tzvat</i>
40	NATHAN KAHANA <i>The Messianic Ideal</i>
45	CAROLYN BERNSTEIN <i>The Many Worlds That Make Us: Toward a Renaissance of Jewish Disagreement</i>
53	MAEVE KORENGOLD <i>The Homes We Carry: Diasporism and the Future of Jewish Life</i>
59	SHILO SAPIR <i>A Judaism Worth Living For</i>
64	ALMA BIELENBERG <i>On Certainty</i>
66	SHAYNA RUDOREN <i>Shabbat Table</i>

CONTENTS

- 69 MIRIAM GOLDBERGER
An Interview with Dr. Rivka Press Schwartz
- 75 PROFESSOR ABRAHAM SOCHER
The Honest Fool
- 76 REBECCA VOORWINDE
Embracing a Legacy of Apikorsim
- 78 RABBI JASON RUBENSTEIN
Lishmah
- 80 ILANA KURSHAN
Reverence and Responsibility
- 81 DR. JEREMIAH LOCKWOOD
Jewish Noise
- 82 DR. MASUA SAGIV
Political Imagination
- 83 RABBI CHAIM STRAUCHLER
Malchut Shel Chesed
- 84 NESSA RAPOPORT
The Ever-Singing People
- 86 PROFESSOR DEREK PENSLAR
Chosenness and Normality
- 87 DANIEL PESIN
An Interview with Modi Rosenfeld
- 93 Selected Bibliography

Editorial Board

Isaac Mansell¹

Abel Bellows

Avi Burstein

Miriam Goldberger

Azaria Sussman

Advisory Board

Professor Derek Penslar²

Professor Noah Feldman

Rabbi Dr. Sarit Kattan Gribetz

Ilana Kurshan

Dr. Jeremiah Lockwood

Nessa Rapoport

Rabbi Jason Rubenstein

Dr. Masua Sagiv

Rabbi Dan Smokler

Professor Abe Socher

Professor David Stern

Rabbi Chaim Strauchler

Rabbi Rachel Timoner

Rebecca Voorwinde

¹ Chair of Editorial Board

² Chair of Advisory Board

Contributors

Carolyn Bernstein
Alma Bielenberg
Leo Eigen
Judah Hain
Nathan Kahana
Maeve Korengold
Rabbi Craig Marantz
Maya Rosen
Shayna Rudoren
Shilo Sapir
Mikhal Shvartsman
Dr. Rivka Press Schwartz
Modi Rosenfeld

Production

Peter Hamlin (cover, graphic design)
Daniel Pesin (interviews editor)
Color Graphics & Communications NYC (printing)
Jonathan Wayne (graphic design)
Lea Grossman (interior art)

Institutional Support

Harvard Hillel
Harvard Center for Jewish Studies
Harvard University Intellectual Vitality Initiative

Editor's Note

A CENTURY AGO, thousands gathered for a *yarid* on Mount Scopus to inaugurate the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Attending, both in person and in spirit, were Albert Einstein, Lord Arthur Balfour, Sir Herbert Samuel, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, Hayyim Nahman Bialik, Rabbi Judah L. Magnes, Chaim Weizmann, and Martin Buber. People traveled from as far as Canada and South Africa to witness the moment.

Speaking on behalf of the Yishuv, Bialik warned that the new university was “an empty vessel which has yet to be filled.” Raised in traditional study yet secular in outlook, he described the *heder*, *yeshiva*, and Talmudic school as “our national spiritual fortress in the Diaspora,” though no longer able to withstand “the storm.” Yet even as he invoked ruin, he imagined renewal: that “among the ruins of those sacred institutions there still remain perfect slabs of stone” that could serve as foundations for something new.

Bialik, characteristically dramatic, overstated the ruin. Jewish learning in 1925 was not crumbling—nor is it now. The enduring challenge is not decay but distance. Over time, distance hardened into separation and separation into fragmentation. Communities formed around different centers of Jewish life—ritual, text, justice, culture—each preserving something vital, yet seldom encountering one another. The result is a Jewish world that hums with life but whose voices rarely overlap.

The American college campus once embodied the spirit Bialik invoked: a meeting ground where differences sharpened understanding. Today, that ideal feels newly fragile. Since October 7, the space for Jewish thought on campus has narrowed. The language we use to describe ourselves—and our permission to use it freely—has increasingly been defined from the outside rather than generated from within.

The YARID is our response: an independent forum for serious, spirited engagement with the ideas shaping Jewish life today. We draw inspiration from a long lineage of Jewish *yaridim*: the Jewish Theological Seminary of Breslau and Franz Rosenzweig's Lehrhaus; the Vilna Gaon's Beit Midrash and the Maskilic salons; the literary journal Ha-Shiloach and the Shalom Hartman Institute. In moments of hostility, it is natural to build walls. We seek instead to build a marketplace of ideas.

We are optimistic about the future. Argument, tension, and curiosity must not be symptoms of division but instruments of renewal. We hope to publish work that moves the Jewish conversation forward—creative, novel, constructive, deep, well-argued, informed, timely, and genuinely interesting. Each issue of *The YARID* will pair discourse with imagination: half guided essays around a shared theme, half open submissions of creative and cultural work, capturing the full range of Jewish expression.

We expect readers to find things they disagree with; indeed, we hope they do. When that happens, we invite them to respond in kind, articulating their own vision within our pages. Disagreement is not a flaw of this project but its engine. We believe understanding begins not with consensus but with conversation—with the willingness to risk being wrong in order to learn. The best way forward is still together: reading one another charitably, speaking across difference, and searching for unexpected points of contact. What we build can only be understood through the totality of Jewish thought.

Rabbi Nehemiah taught that “the words of Torah are poor in their place and rich in another place,” likening them to a merchant fleet bringing food from afar. The value of thought, like commerce, depends on exchange. *The YARID* is founded on our belief that Jewish thought grows richer when it travels—between disciplines, between communities, between worlds.

— *The YARID* Editorial Board

Introduction

WELCOME to the first issue of *The YARID*, a journal of Jewish thought and culture based at Harvard College. This collection has been a labor of love, and we're proud of what these pieces reveal, taken collectively, about who we are and where we might be headed as a people.

For this inaugural issue, we asked contributors to share ideas, practices, traditions that feel absent or underappreciated in today's Jewish life. Reckoning with the notion that the "golden age" of American Jewry—the postwar era of safety, prosperity, and influence—may be ending, authors imagined embracing of covenant, messianism, music, argument, sacrifice, diaspora, mysticism, food.

This journal is a healing project. In soliciting submissions, we invited all kinds of individuals to contribute their voices in constructive argument. The path to healing divides runs through bringing more people to the table. Gathering such a diverse group of thinkers inevitably produces dissonance and tension. Let the web of tension pull on your own convictions.

This journal is an optimistic project. Our experience as Jewish undergraduates is vibrant. We think constantly about the questions of Jewish life: how to build community, what ritual and personal practice should look like, and how to hold Jewish identity within a secular university. These questions rarely yield "lachrymose" answers. Jewish discourse is often focused on antisemitism, danger, and fracture—real issues—but we think there's more to Jewish life than fear and isolation. Read *The YARID* as an example of what's possible when we have the courage to imagine.

The YARID may feel cacophonous, full of competing perspectives and forms. It's meant to. Creating this journal was itself cacophonous: we argued over our mission, over the word "pluralism," over who to partner with, over the cover, and over timing. Those arguments made the product better, and brought us closer as collaborators and then as friends.

Some pieces here will resonate with your prior beliefs. There will also be pieces which feel surprising, hard to read, and unintuitive. We hope that these pieces will be close in proximity, and that in the whiplash you experience while reading, you are struck by something new.

We published these pieces not because we think they are “right” or “true” but because we found them interesting, moving, or valuable. These arguments are worth sitting with regardless of where you land. We believe that the juxtaposition of arguments and individuals we present in *The YARID* is generative and positive.

You, too, are part of the conversation. If this journal sparks something—an idea, an emotion, a response, anything—please share it with us at theyarid@theyarid.org.



That Which Stands: Reclaiming Covenant in American Jewish Life

Leo Eigen

AMERICAN JEWS are witnessing a distinct “Golden Age” draw to a close.¹ The evidence seems to indicate that an emerging trend—“the Jewish vacation from history ended”—is here to stay, to borrow a phrase from Franklin Foer. This impulse makes factual sense: it is tempting to view history as the enemy. After all, history carried swords, stormed houses, incited pogroms, massacred villages, and decreed conversion. In his 2024 piece for *The Atlantic*, Foer rightfully emphasizes the improbability that Jews have survived in the face of unrelenting persecution. However, a strange and somewhat cosmic paradox surfaces if we conceive, as he does, of Jewish flourishing as an utterly ahistorical phenomenon: a Judaism that is so eager to escape its history begins to require it. What we need is a renewed and active covenant, a revitalized communal framework that binds us with a continued sense of meaning.

Foer’s mode of gauging Jewish thriving mirrors a prevailing mindset amongst Jews that has proved curiously inadequate at leading the way forward. Jews during the supposed Golden Age were secure, prosperous, and acculturating. Antisemitism as a collective binding force seemed to be waning, and hopefully so. Yet a now infamous Pew study from 2013 found that a staggering 73 percent of American Jews responded that their Jewish identity was based on remembering the Holocaust, the most common response.²

**“What we need is a renewed and active covenant,
a revitalized communal framework that binds us
with a continued sense of meaning.”**

This ought to seem incongruous. In an American setting truly conducive to cultivating richer Jewish life, our connection nonetheless came to be largely rooted in a defensive reflex. American Jews ostensibly thrived, while Judaism, in

1 Franklin Foer, “The Golden Age of American Jews is Ending,” *The Atlantic*, March 4, 2024, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/04/us-anti-semitism-jewish-american-safety/677469/>.

2 “A Portrait of Jewish Americans,” Pew Research Center, accessed June 25, 2026, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/>.

its broadest form, did not. This anxiety is hardly a new phenomenon. Indeed, the twentieth-century philosopher Simon Rawidowicz, in his essay, “Israel: The Ever-Dying People,” draws a direct line back to Abraham, who feared he would have no children to carry on his legacy.³ But the truth is that upholding such an approach today, which often speaks of “continuity” as its supreme virtue, is ultimately myopic, neglecting the profound substance Judaism contains beyond its own self-preservation. Describing Judaism exclusively through the vocabulary of “securing” and “maintaining,” or clinging to lingering feelings of trauma, guilt, and victimhood in order to engage people sells short our aspirations. The journalist Batya Ungar-Sargon further contends that rhetoric squarely focused on continuing the line can make it seem as though Jewishness is no more than a constant friction between individual freedom and coercion in the big picture.⁴ A reactive Judaism becomes unmovable and unmoved: it offers—and, perhaps more importantly, asks—the bare minimum.

And so, I would like to advocate the covenant as a different answer to Foer’s premise of the “Jewish vacation from history,” and suggest that perhaps we should not pack our suitcases just yet. Foer concludes his essay with a powerful line from the Passover Seder, part of *Ve-hi Sheamda* in the Haggadah, “In every generation, our enemies rise up to destroy us.”⁵ This assertion, though, is missing the essential context preceding it: “That (*hi*) which has stood for our ancestors and us.” The key to our dilemma might lie in that ambiguous *hi*, which alludes to the covenant forged in the Book of Genesis that is retold in the prior paragraph of the Haggadah. *Ve-hi Sheamda* recognizes that Jewish survival exists very much within, and not above, the prism of history, and that perpetuation must be self-motivated, embodying more than seeking aberrations from difficult periods. During this fragile post-October 7 juncture, amid a well-documented surge of interest in Jewish affiliation, it is imperative that we engage in the longstanding Jewish act of *cheshbon ha-nefesh*, soul-searching. It is time for American Jews to reclaim our sense of covenant.

The very word itself might initially sound heavy or overbearingly theological. Can it really serve as an effective model to guide communal discourse today? Rembrandt completed a pen-and-ink drawing in 1658 titled “God Making His

3 Simon Rawidowicz, “Israel: The Ever-Dying People,” in *Israel: The Ever-Dying People, and Other Essays*, ed. Benjamin C.I. Ravid (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1986), 60.

4 Batya Ungar-Sargon, “How the Obsession with Jewish Continuity Perverts Our Liberal Values,” *The Forward*, September 14, 2017, <https://forward.com/opinion/382679/how-the-obsession-with-jewish-continuity-perverts-our-liberal-values/>.

5 Franklin Foer, “The Golden Age of American Jews is Ending.”

Covenant with Abraham,” in which God, accompanied by angels, appears before Abraham, who is so overwhelmed that he collapses to the ground, unable to face what he sees. Today, many still associate the notion of a covenant with a theatrical display of divine majesty. In order for the covenant to resonate with American Jews now, in a largely secular age, its drama must be translated into lived experience: it must be active rather than distant, ethical rather than entirely spectacular, and woven into contemporary life so that it is immediate, participatory, and real.

The covenant entails a commitment that, though inherited from our ancestors, is freely chosen by us. Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, writing in the aftermath of the Holocaust, proposed a system in an influential essay from 1982 called the “Voluntary Covenant.” Greenberg was acutely aware of the near impossibility of speaking in religious terms following such devastation. “No statement, theological or otherwise,” he warned, “should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children.”⁶ Greenberg maps the covenant through several chronological stages and arrives at a striking conclusion: the Jewish people overwhelmingly decided to rebuild Jewish life after the Shoah. In the United States, communities were established, families were formed, and Jewish institutions were founded. Greenberg theorizes that the covenant has evolved over time in a direction that places more expectation on human free will. His central insight is that what matters most about the covenant now is not necessarily its devotional demand, but the assertion inherent in what we do, since “every person who steps forward to live as a Jew” in the modern world “can be compared to a convert.”⁷ Yet Greenberg qualifies that the covenant does not end there. In fact, this is precisely where it *begins*, as a convert “must make certain commitments and express certain beliefs.” In Greenberg’s eyes, making these commitments is a “testimony of hope.”⁸

This perspective remains resonant. We must be deeply grateful that the organized Jewish life that has taken shape in the United States has become extraordinarily robust. The Jewish Federations of North America alone distributed \$3 billion in 2024, a substantial increase from previous years.⁹ But it has in turn become much easier to take that abundance for granted, slowly fostering complacency. Let’s recenter ourselves on the novelty of Greenberg’s formulation: we are performing

6 Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, “Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity, and Modernity After the Holocaust,” in *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era?*, ed. Eva Fleischner (Ktav Publishing House, 1977), 23.

7 Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, “Voluntary Covenant,” in *Contemporary Jewish Responses to the Shoah*, ed. Steven L. Jacobs (University Press of America, 1993), 98.

8 Greenberg, “Voluntary Covenant,” 98.

9 “Amid War, Jewish Federation giving rose \$1 Billion in 2024,” Jewish Federations of North America, accessed June 25, 2026, <https://www.jewishfederations.org/blog/all/amid-war-jewish-federation-giving-rose-1-billion-in-2024-504789>.

genuinely hopeful acts. The Jewish experience carries significant meaning whether it is lived under strain or in relative ease. The danger of confining our relationship with Judaism to being solely about the fact that we are still here is that it leaves us exposed to teleological contradictions. By such thinking, moments of tragedy, in fact, bring the whole enterprise into question. Yet the empirical reality is that they do not. The journalist Bret Stephens even coined a new term—"October 8 Jews"—to describe the large number of Jews who have newly reconnected and taken initiative.¹⁰ We must utilize this moment of reset to facilitate a shift towards connection that remains regardless of circumstance. It is true that conditions have changed for Jews in the United States. There's no point in glossing over reality. We have learned far too often that we can never rationalize or stand idly by when new threats to Jewish welfare arise. But the act of living as Jews in the wake of disaster means that there is something deeper that we can capture.

To understand more deeply, it helps to adopt the distinction that the historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi sets forth in his pioneering book, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*. Yerushalmi outlines the implications of these two different ways of relating to the past. The discipline of history, with its clear-cut chronology, fabricates a feeling of distance.¹¹ We must be wary that while living with this illusion can be most appealing, it is impossible to maintain when, as Foer would have it, history begins to feel menacingly tangible. Yet Yerushalmi describes a second concept in sharp contrast to the first. Memory is a visceral force residing constantly within the Jewish psyche that embeds the cognition of what came before into the current moment, rather than making it seem as though we analyze from afar. Yerushalmi's framework, if applied today, can deepen our appreciation for what we bear and refine our intentions as members of that unfinished arc. We must consider the deceptively simple question of what our role is as twenty-first-century Jews in the United States. The Golden Age taught us that the fortitude and comfort of institutional life should not minimize the leap of faith that is, and always has been, being Jewish. This choice is not only something we consume or preserve, but something we achieve. Stressing a deepened appreciation for the resonance of our actions will encourage individuals to see their Judaism as consequential and a manifestation of agency. The covenant can give that agency a shape: it does several things for those who take it up.

10 Bret Stephens, "For America's Jews, Every Day Must Be Oct. 8," *The New York Times*, November 7, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/07/opinion/us-jewish-israel-sept-11.html>.

11 Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (University of Washington Press, 1996), 93-96.

First, the paradigm of covenant fulfills the lofty and nearly insurmountable task of embracing our history despite all of its cruelty. By awakening the force of memory, the covenant draws upon the intensity of hope demonstrated by our forebears and acknowledges our bond with them. The immense promise for us now resides in resolving as a collective to hold tighter to our own tradition, which will prove more challenging than debating what signifies an ominous return to history. Religious observance might seem to be the most obvious application of covenant, but the many other outlets in which American Jews express themselves are equally important and applicable. We need not invent new strategies, yet we need a profound ontological shift. As Emma Lazarus, whose legendary words greeted multitudes of Jews as they arrived from sea to begin new lives, wrote in her 1883 essay, “The Jewish Problem,” the very survival of the Jewish people “evinces the vitality of a singularly well-equipped organization...”¹² We must no longer allow our consciousness of the covenant, that organization, to fall by the wayside.

“The Golden Age taught us that the fortitude and comfort of institutional life should not minimize the leap of faith that is, and always has been, being Jewish. This choice is not only something we consume or preserve, but something we achieve.”

Next, thinking of Jewishness as a process of deliberate commitment rather than a prescribed trajectory can restore the spirit, too swiftly neutralized in the contemporary landscape, that what we do matters. We cannot assume that everyone shares an effortless connection to our heritage. Institutions have done an excellent job focusing on the larger milestones, but setting the precedent that these constitute the extent of Jewish life is tenuous. When individuals feel that their actions have a covenantal stake, that everyday moments are not drained of this first-hand opportunity, the apprehension of burden gives way to a sense of empowerment. Consider the prerogative of choosing to be bound. Professor Mara Benjamin proposes in her book, *The Obligated Self*, that the analogy of motherhood and its concrete responsibilities can elucidate the internal complexity characterizing a relationship of obligation. She explains that “Our freedom consists not in casting off all that binds us, but rather in recognizing that our boundedness and our agency

12 Emma Lazarus, “The Jewish Problem,” *The Century Magazine* 25, issue 4 (1883): 608, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/coo.31924079601062?urlappend=%3Bseq=618>.

are each parts of a greater whole.”¹³ Benjamin poignantly suggests that obligation is not only placed upon us from the outside but comes into view and attains clarity as life unfolds. She describes a process in which “we can be oblivious to the fact of being tied to the world until various experiences open our eyes to it.”¹⁴ Duty becomes part of an earnest affiliation, nurtured by our actions.

In this vein, living with an awareness of the covenant, of inhabiting a continuous strand of memory, can redeem Jewish life from the Sisyphean pragmatism of continuity. Rawidowicz’s layered account of the “ever-dying” attitude concludes with a potent and nearly euphoric pronouncement: “We, the last Jews! [...] let us be the last as our fathers and forefathers were. Let us prepare the ground for the last Jews who will come after us, and for the last Jews who will rise after them, and so on until the end of days.”¹⁵ Perhaps the startling cognizance of our vulnerability can breed the feeling of tremendous opportunity. A covenantal mindset can create a liberatory realization of what we carry, encouraging us not to flee from the dynamism of our Jewish inheritance nor view it as an unshouderable weight, but instead to draw strength from it, immerse ourselves in it, and wrestle with it. Neither the shadow of a long history nor the worry over an uncertain future should impede the urgency of the present moment: the call of our own tradition yearning to be brought forth today.

It is fitting that the Passover Seder is still the most observed ritual among American Jews. Despite all the turmoil, we will buy *matza* at the local grocery store, pull the stained and worn-out Haggadot from the cabinet, and compare the details of *charoset* recipes. We conduct the evening commemorating the Exodus as though we ourselves were physically there. It is precisely occasions like this that will sustain Jewish life. These rituals allow us to live beyond time, not because of any external fortune, but because of our own tradition. When it comes time to sing the Ve-hi Sheamda and recite that small but powerful word, *hi*, we too will be part of that ongoing covenant: a radical testimony of hope to that which stands.

13. Mara Benjamin, *The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought* (Indiana University Press, 2018), 16. A related version of this argument, invoking Benjamin’s paradigm of obligation to articulate a covenantal model, appears in Deborah Barer, “Towards a Covenantal Citizenship,” in *Sources: A Journal of Jewish Ideas*, ed. Claire E. Suftrin (Summer 2026), <https://www.sourcesjournal.org/articles/towards-a-covenantal-citizenship>. The present essay was submitted in March 2026, prior to the publication of Barer’s piece.

14. Benjamin, *The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought*, 16.

15. Rawidowicz, *Israel: The Ever-Dying People, and Other Essays*, 63.

A Jew in China

Maya Rosen

THERE'S a famous joke. A Jewish man walks into a Chinese restaurant and asks the waiter, "Do you have any Chinese Jews?" The waiter goes into the kitchen, comes back out, and says, "No. We have orange, tomato, and apple juice. No Chinese juice."

In America, I grew up with two half-truths about Jews and China. The first was that China loved the Jews. Many in China, I was told, held fond, appreciative attitudes towards Jews thanks to a shared cultural affinity for education and commerce. The second half-truth was embedded in the joke's punchline: Chinese Jews did not exist. I began studying Mandarin in middle school. It did not take long for me to learn that, depending on what we mean by "Chinese," there have been some Chinese Jews, albeit few.¹

"A year in China sharpened my appreciation for the culture of free expression that allows American Jews to contest how they are described and to produce competing accounts."

After graduating from college, I decided to spend a year continuing to study Chinese language, politics, and economics in Beijing. By the time I went into my year, I had heard much about the Holocaust refugees who found safety in the Shanghai ghetto and Chinese "philosemitism." Knowing of these stories of goodwill and how few Jews currently live in China, I did not expect to spend much time thinking about Judaism in contemporary China.

Once I became a Jew in China, I found Jews as often the subjects of scorn and erasure as admiration and praise. I had to examine whether and why a shift in Chinese perceptions of Jews had occurred, and how it manifested.

I discovered that, in the aftermath of October 7th, the war in Gaza, and the Third Gulf War, discussions of Jews, Israel, and Palestine are highly restricted. Over my year, I came to see that what makes the story of Jews in contemporary China distinctive is that discussions of past and present Jewish life are shaped and

1 The main Jewish populations in China consist of the Kaifeng Jewish descendants and the 20th-century Jewish refugees to northern and coastal China. See for more on Kaifeng: Anson H. Laytner and Jordan Paper, eds., *The Chinese Jews of Kaifeng: A Millennium of Adaptation and Endurance* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017).

constrained by the state. A year in China sharpened my appreciation for the culture of free expression that allows American Jews to contest how they are described and produce competing accounts.

Within my first month in China, I had the chance to meet the editor of the English-language edition of an official government newspaper. Despite spending her days writing about global politics in English, she had never been to the United States. To her, I was a rare specimen: a real, living, breathing American. She pounced on the chance to interrogate me about politics. The first thing she wanted to know was: “Why does the U.S. support Israel?”

When I asked what she thought, her theory was simple. People who give money to elect American politicians support Israel, so America supports Israel. She saw Israel’s war as a moral aberration. Then, she attributed U.S. support to “the” Jews who control American politics. It was classically antisemitic—Jews controlling the world through money—and classically Chinese—a narrative of an American democracy rife with corruption.

It was strange to discover someone who believed so matter-of-factly that Jews exercised totalizing control over American politics, not because there is anything novel about this narrative but rather because it shattered my anticipation that Jews in China were the subject of an exuberant and peculiar affinity.

During WWII, Shanghai took in tens of thousands of Jewish refugees from Central and Eastern Europe, and that episode has since anchored a particular account of Chinese tolerance toward Jews.² The intellectual roots of Chinese philosemitism run further back, to the late nineteenth century, when Chinese thinkers began drawing parallels between Chinese and Jewish experiences with European powers.³ Jews who had survived inquisitions, pogroms, and centuries of stateless persecution seemed, to those intellectuals, like natural comrades to a China reeling from the Opium Wars, the Taiping Rebellion, and the Sino-Japanese Wars. Chinese intellectuals identified with Jews as fellow members of a small and subjugated people. Prominent reformers, including Sun Yat-Sen, studied Jewish nationalism as a model for how a dispersed population might reconstitute itself as a nation.⁴ Jewish history and contemporary political organization offered a usable precedent.

2 David Kranzler, *Japanese, Nazis and Jews: The Jewish Refugee Community of Shanghai, 1938–1945* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1976); Edward Vickers, “Celebrating the Humane Superpower: Chinese Nationalism, the Holocaust and Transnational Heritage Politics at Shanghai’s Jewish Refugees Museum,” *Holocaust Studies* 29, no. 4 (2023): 566–587, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17504902.2022.2116543>.

3 Xun Zhou, *Chinese Perceptions of the “Jews” and Judaism: A History of the Youtai*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2001.

4 Xin Xu, “Tracing Judaism in China,” *Social Sciences in China* 31, no. 1 (2010), <https://doi.org/10.1080/02529200903565145>.

In that same era, Chinese diplomats, elites, and students visiting America learned from antisemitic stereotypes and, as Jordyn Haime describes, “flipped them on their heads.”⁵ They heard that Jews had become the most powerful and influential immigrant community in America and wanted the same for the Chinese community.

In much of the Western moral tradition, conspicuous wealth and the pursuit of power carry ambivalence at best. Chinese cultural attitudes toward wealth and power have not always carried the same moral charge. To be prosperous, educated, and well-positioned has more often been a straightforward good. Even if Chinese visitors recognized the negative valence of Jewish stereotypes in the American context, they nonetheless saw Jews as a model of economic and sociopolitical success.

“Whether that image produces admiration or hostility depends less on the image itself than on the political context in which it circulates.”

The intensity of this interest in Jews as a subject of study and emulation has tracked China’s political and economic transformations. The moral status of wealth and the merchant class shifted dramatically across the second half of the 20th century and first decades of the 21st. Mao sent the bourgeoisie to reeducation camps and then Deng Xiaoping declared that “to get rich is glorious.” In 1992, with China’s reform and opening period underway, the PRC and Israel established diplomatic relations, which was followed by the establishment of Jewish studies at various Chinese universities.⁶ Then, in the early 2000s, a genre of popular literature emerged that turned Jewish history and texts into guides for commercial success. Books like *Jewish Wisdom and Family Education: the Cultural Code of the Most Intelligent and Wealthy Nation in the World* (2005) and *Secrets of Jewish Success: The Golden Rule of a Miraculous Nation* (2004) became best-sellers and propagated the myth that Jews learned their supposed business acumen from the Talmud.⁷

Underlying much of this is an imagination of Jews—intelligent, wealthy, and collectively powerful. Whether that image produces admiration or hostility depends less on the image itself than on the political context in which it circulates.

5 Jordyn Haime, “Chinese Philo-Semitism: Why China Admires the Jewish People” (Student Research Project, University of New Hampshire, 2020), https://scholars.unh.edu/student_research/26; Zhou Xun, *Chinese Perceptions of the ‘Jews’ and Judaism: A History of the Youtai* (Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 2001).

6 Song Lihong, “From Enemy Studies to Area Studies: Reflections on Israel Studies in China,” *Journal of Israeli History* 41, no. 2 (2023).

7 James Ross, “China’s Search for the Secrets of Jewish Success,” *Tablet*, January 25, 2016, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/community/articles/china-jews-jewish-success-in-business-tablet-magazine>.

As scholar Mary Ainslie explains, “in contemporary China, these stereotypes provide[d] an important model of imagined modernization during a period of rapid economic and technical advancement.”⁸ The same stereotype that generated bestselling self-help books in the 2000s feeds, today, into something closer to conspiracy. If the 1980s through early 2000s were the golden eras of Chinese philosemitism, the last half decade has seen the same basic assumptions bend in a different direction as the Chinese state’s main anxiety ebbs from economic development to geopolitical competition and war in the Middle East dominates news feeds.⁹

At one of my first Shabbat dinners in China, I met a Jewish woman married to a Chinese celebrity who had quit social media entirely after October 7th. The comments had become intolerable. “The Jews are stealing our actors,” people wrote. She told me to search for the word “Jew” on Chinese social media apps. I typed in “youtai” (Jew) to the Chinese Instagram equivalent (Red Note). The content was mostly conspiracy theories about Jewish power and money. One video explained how the Jews were responsible for the opium trade that had weakened and devastated China’s power and humiliates the nation to this day.¹⁰ Another asked, “how terrifying is the power of the Jews.”¹¹ Others were downright ridiculous, identifying Bill Gates, Pablo Picasso, and Charlie Chaplin as Jews (none of them are).¹²

Conspiracy theories about Jews from Chinese influencers do not only stay in China. In December 2025, a Chinese educator who calls himself Prof. Jiang (despite not having a PhD) filmed a 99-minute lecture on “Pax Judaica,” where he predicts that the world will be controlled from Jerusalem.¹³ It has garnered over 1.1 million views on YouTube.

Sitting in a coffee shop in Beijing, my conversation partner dabbled in classic antisemitic tropes without any sense that I might respond with shock or critique. On Chinese state media, an announcer confidently discussed Jewish control of international capital without fear of consequences.¹⁴ A Beijing high school teacher

8 Mary J. Ainslie, “Chinese Philosemitism and Historical Statecraft: Incorporating Jews and Israel into Contemporary Chinese Civilizationism,” *The China Quarterly*, 245 (March 2021): 208–226.

9 Mary J. Ainslie, “China: Why There Has Been a Sudden ‘Surge’ of Antisemitism in the People’s Republic,” *The Conversation*, November 17, 2023, <https://theconversation.com/china-why-there-has-been-a-sudden-surge-of-antisemitism-in-the-peoples-republic-217116>; Tuvia Gering, “China’s Turn Toward Antisemitism,” *Jerusalem Strategic Tribune*, November 14, 2023, <https://jstribune.com/gering-chinas-turn-toward-antisemitism/>; Jordyn Haimie, “Since Oct. 7, Antisemitism Has Exploded Online in China. Here’s Why,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, November 8, 2023, <https://www.jta.org/2023/11/08/global/since-oct-7-antisemitism-has-exploded-online-in-china-heres-why>.

10 铜豌豆, Xiaohongshu, November 24, 2024, <http://xhslink.com/4xcGFsTC9fO>

11 老福升维人生, Xiaohongshu, May 9, 2025, <http://xhslink.com/o/8oSjMRAwmEC>

12 美丽人生, Xiaohongshu, October 10, 2024, <http://xhslink.com/o/65OzdJrBNaj>

13 Predictive History, “Secret History #fND: Pax Judaica,” YouTube video, December 17, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WFWizN3QuPg>.

14 Gering, “The Great Flip Forward: Understanding China’s Sudden Shift from Philosemitism to Antisemitism,” forthcoming. See also: Carl Zha (@CarlZha), Twitter/X, May 14, 2021, <https://x.com/CarlZha/status/1395280718968725507>.

posturing as a professor employed the discredited Khazar hypothesis to convince his Beijing classroom and netizens everywhere of why “Pax Judaica” would rule.

I had spent so long thinking of the word “antisemitism” as a nuclear bomb—a term so loaded I would only want to use it with total certainty. In America, contemporary talk about antisemitism is often wrapped up in long debates about what criticism of Israel qualified as antisemitism. In China, none of that weight seemed to apply. Thanks to social media, antisemitism was not just easy to find; it was easy to name. It was just explicit, classical antisemitism, the kind you could point to without much argument about interpretation.

I did not know what to make of these discoveries: how had a place known for appreciation and goodwill towards Jews also become one of free-flowing conspiracy theories, ones that were reaching both Chinese citizens and spreading globally online?

In visiting Harbin, a city in Northern China that had once been home to a Jewish community, I began to understand that something had changed more recently—most acutely in the wake of October 7th.

Harbin is the coldest city I have ever visited. The snowfall in -20 degrees Celsius air left me with icicled hair and allowed ice cream bars to be kept lying out in the open on sidewalks. Harbin sits not far from the Russian border. Its Jewish history began in the late nineteenth century when the Qing government permitted Russians to build the Trans-Manchurian railroad. Russians moved East for the construction, and Jewish families joined. Some were fleeing pogroms. Others sought opportunity in a land where they would be guaranteed ownership rights. By 1908, eight thousand Jews lived in Harbin, and, when the Bolsheviks won in 1917, more fled to this eastern city. By the 1920s, the twenty thousand Jews of Harbin had built institutions necessary to sustain a community: two synagogues, a middle school, a hospital, a prominent hotel, and twenty newspapers.¹⁵

Physical infrastructure did little to protect the community. The most immediate threat came from the large population of White Russian emigres, many of whom blamed Jews for the Bolshevik Revolution. Japanese rule, beginning in 1932, left the violent antisemitism of the White Russian community unchecked. The violence reached its most visible point in 1933, when Simon Kaspe, the son of a prominent Jewish merchant, was kidnapped and murdered.¹⁶ When Kaspe was buried, large

15 Boris Bresler, “Harbin’s Jewish Community, 1898–1958: Politics, Prosperity, and Adversity,” in *The Jews of China*, vol. 1, *Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Jonathan Goldstein (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), 200; Dan Ben-Canaan, “Engineering History: The Reconstruction of the Harbin Old Synagogue: A Case Study in Interpreting and Rebuilding a Past,” unpublished manuscript, Sino-Israel Research and Study Center, Heilongjiang University, Harbin, China, May 2018.

16 Scott D. Seligman, *Murder in Manchuria: The True Story of a Jewish Virtuoso, Russian Fascists, a French Diplomat, and a Japanese Spy in Occupied China* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2023).

numbers of Chinese citizens attended the funeral, mourning alongside the Jewish community and demanding that the killers be brought to justice.¹⁷ However, Chinese institutions had their own record of discrimination. In 1911, the Harbin Chamber of Commerce lobbied Beijing to explicitly exclude Jews from trade privileges.¹⁸ In 1922, local authorities banned the use of Yiddish in public spaces and refused to ratify the legal standing of the Jewish community. Jews began leaving the city. By 1939, only five thousand remained. When the USSR took control of Harbin after its victory over Japan in 1945, Soviet authorities sent the community's leaders to the gulag.¹⁹

As I learned the history of Jews in Harbin, I became skeptical of the extent to which it mattered that a quasi-philosemitic view of Jews as economically productive and cognitively talented had ever existed. For much of China's history, there were few Jews, and its rulers were remarkably tolerant. But the early 20th century Jewish community in Harbin had also seen restrictions, dispossession, and murder. This Jewish community had lived in China at a time of immense political tumult: Japanese imperialism, the fall of Republican China, and civil war. Their history, like that of the other Jewish communities (those of Kaifeng and Shanghai predominantly), was much more complex than a simple narrative of unique safety and affinity could account for.²⁰

More importantly, Harbin's Jewish history today is difficult to access, and geopolitics have only made it more so.²¹ When I visited Harbin in December 2025, I was struck by how thoroughly the Jewish past had been preserved in the architecture and how completely it had been erased from public consciousness. At the sites I visited, there seemed to be a reluctance to name their Jewish character openly, and this nervousness had only deepened since October 2023 and the beginning of the Gaza War. The streets bore the same structure as in 1925. I could stop at nearly any building on the main tourist street and, with a map, connect it to Jewish history. But the many neon lights and glass storefronts had replaced whatever historical legibility the buildings might have offered.

17 Marvin Tokayer and Mary Swartz, *The Fugu Plan: The Untold Story of the Japanese and the Jews During World War II* (New York: Paddington Press, 1979).

18 Dan Ben-Canaan, "The Chinese Perception of the Jewish People," lecture series, Heilongjiang University, Harbin, 2022, https://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/harbin/Chinese_Perception_of_Jewish_People.pdf.

19 Alexander Branover, "Twenty Four Hours in Harbin," *The Times of Israel* (blog), June 30, 2024, <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/twenty-four-hours-in-harbin/>.

20 See Mary Ainslie for an account of why the Shanghai Jewish community's history is more complex than an example of pure PRC tolerance. Mary J. Ainslie, "Chinese Philosemitism and Historical Statecraft: Incorporating Jews and Israel into Contemporary Chinese Civilizationism," *The China Quarterly*, 245 (March 2021): 208–226.

21 Shanghai's Jewish museum has not experienced the same vicissitudes. "The museum was renovated in 2019–2020 and has since remained open. "Shanghai's Jewish Refugee Museum Reopens," *Xinhua*, December 9, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-12/09/c_139574033.htm.

The main site that announced itself as a historical and Jewish building was the old synagogue. After the building was gutted and used as a hospital, the local government restored it to something like its original form.²² In the early 2000s, the provincial government invested \$30 million to restore Jewish sites, partly in an attempt to “attract business investments.”²³ They imagined that Jews were wealthy, educated, and global and would come in hordes as tourists and investors allured by the preserved Jewish history.²⁴ These attitudes had led Chinese officials to believe that Jews would contribute to the economic revitalization of a declining Northern Chinese coal-area.

However, when I arrived in Harbin, the area purposely rebuilt remained reluctant to acknowledge that Jews had once used these buildings for religious purposes. If you know what you are looking for, the building reads as Jewish. Inside, there are Stars of David in the window and Ten Commandment plaques hanging over a bimah. However, to a Chinese tourist with little familiarity with Jewish synagogues, I imagined that the building’s design would read primarily as European, especially because there is no explicit mention of the building’s Jewishness.

The process of naming the building revealed deeper anxieties around the renovation’s purpose. Chinese officials had declined to name the complex after Abraham Kaufman, the Jewish community’s long-serving president, and had initially favored calling it the Alexander Konstantinovich Glazunov Concert Hall, after a Russian musician with no Jewish connection and no particular tie to Harbin.²⁵ Neither name prevailed in the end, and it is officially called the Laohuitang Concert Hall. Its name is redundant. Lao Hui Tang (老会堂) means Old Meeting Hall. The name may be a Chinese translation from Hebrew. The Hebrew for synagogue (Beit Knesset) literally means meeting house. But a look at a Chinese-English dictionary shows two options for synagogue (犹太教堂 and 犹太会堂), both of which include the word Jew (犹太/you tai). Neither of these is employed in the Old Synagogue’s new title. It is just an old meeting and concert hall.

The synagogue’s name may mask its past but does not lie about its present use. Attending a concert is the way to gain entry to the restored synagogue. So, on a Friday night, where generations past might have sung *L’Chà Dodi*, I sat through a strange medley of classical Chinese opera and nineteenth-century European music.

22 Dan Ben-Canaan, “Engineering History.”

23 Dara Horn, “Cities of Ice: A Dispatch From Frozen Harbin, Where Jews Once Flourished, and Melted Away,” *Tablet*, April 19, 2019, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/cities-of-ice>.

24 Dan Ben-Canaan, “Engineering History.”

25 Dan Ben-Canaan, “Engineering History.”

My two friends and I were the only foreign tourists and certainly the only Jews in attendance that evening. The government's hopes for mass Jewish tourism seemed far removed. After all, only around 90,000 Israeli tourists come to China every year.²⁶ More importantly, I do not know of many Jews who would think of China, and much less Harbin, as a destination for Jewish tourism.

I also wondered whether the tourists—seemingly mostly Chinese—that did end up in Harbin's refurbished synagogue knew they were participating in Jewish tourism. As I sat listening to an eclectic compilation of modern and classical music, my mind wandered. I imagined life as a Harbin Jew trudging through the snow to attend services. I scanned the room several times. The building had the makings of a synagogue: the Magen David in the window, the tablets above the bimah, and swinging black light fixtures resemblant of those in European great synagogues. But it had all the wrong accoutrements. The seats were too large and too velvety; the stage lights were too bright.

I pondered what my Chinese co-attendees were thinking about. Did it have anything to do with Judaism? Did they know why there was a cabinet behind the performers? They probably had never heard of a Torah, and none of the people around me would learn anything about Judaism from the experience.

A single small placard addressed the synagogue's history and its ties to Harbin's Jewish community. Outside the building was a small plaque with the name of the community's former president, Abraham Kaufman. Inside, a few photographs hung on the second floor, seemingly taken in the 1920s. Nothing identified the subjects or explained why images of Western-looking faces were mounted on the wall outside a bathroom in a concert venue. The space offered very little to someone trying to understand what had happened here.

"I pondered what my Chinese co-attendees were thinking about. Did it have anything to do with Judaism? Did they know why there was a cabinet behind the performers?"

But there was a Jewish museum in Harbin. Harbin's New Synagogue—the one built in 1918 when the community outgrew the first—had been converted into a Jewish museum. I had learned about the museum from past travelers to Harbin. In 2019, Dara Horn visited this ice city, which she documented in *People Love Dead Jews*.²⁷ Horn describes wandering through the new synagogue-turned-museum and

26 It is difficult to access Chinese state government websites for these statistics. As cited in "Tourism in China," Wikipedia, April 24, 2026, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tourism_in_China.

27 Dara Horn, *People Love Dead Jews: Reports from a Haunted Present* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2021).

leaving struck with two observations. First, the museum presented Harbin's Jews exclusively as wealthy, despite the thousands of poor Jews who relied on the Harbin Jewish Free Kitchen. Second, the museum failed to explain why the community no longer existed.

In 2019, the presentation of Harbin's Jewish history did not address the causes of the community's demise: the murders and property seizures. In 2023, Harbin's Jewish history existed only in architecture for a period. The government had closed the Jewish Museum following October 7th without indication of the reason for the closure.²⁸ By 2025, it was reopened for scheduled, private visits. All the while, the concerts would continue playing beneath the Magen David in the so-called Old Concert Hall. I came away with a different eerie feeling from Dara Horn. It was as if the State regretted trying to bring back any evidence that Harbin Jews had existed. The government had created a Jewish Museum and shut it down when war in the Middle East made Jews a "sensitive topic." They had restored the Old Synagogue only to make it a Concert Hall.

The thing about the suppression of Jewish history or the propagation of antisemitic tropes in China is that it is like anything in China: it only happens at the will of the government. A thing quietly ceases, no stir made, nor is anyone publicly responsible. These stealth crackdowns, much like algorithmic social media feeds, bear few explicit traces of government intervention.

But the timing of museum closures or rising antisemitism in online discourse is not coincidental. What Deborah Lipstadt has called a "flip" from philosemitism to antisemitism is geopolitical.²⁹

As scholar of antisemitism in China, Tuvia Gering, has described, China is following the Soviet Union by allowing open animosity towards Jews, not just Israel, to thrive to benefit its geopolitical standing against the US-led West.³⁰ The United States is the primary power that has continued to back Israel since October 7th. For China, American support for Israel is evidence of Washington's moral bankruptcy and an opportunity to win credibility across the Muslim and Arab world. Most people in China will only encounter Judaism as filtered by state censors, whether online or in print, which means it arrives as praise when that serves the government or as silence or conspiracy when that does instead. The Harbin Synagogue was restored and opened to the public during a period when the government was promoting the history of Jewish life in China. It was later closed when that history became politically sensitive.

28 Shalom Salomon Wald, "Chinese Antisemitism 2021–2025," Jewish People Policy Institute, February 19, 2026, <https://jppi.org.il/en/chinese-antisemitism-2021-2025/>.

29 The 92nd Street Y, *Deborah Lipstadt on the State of Global Antisemitism*, September 9, 2024, Video, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_71fCnvhoZU.

30 Gering, forthcoming, "The Great Flip Forward: Understanding China's Sudden Shift from Philosemitism to Antisemitism."

The Chinese case makes visible what American Jews tend to take for granted: the ability to be known on one's own terms. American Jews have spent three centuries writing novels, staging plays, and more recently filling social media with accounts of their own lives. They study and contest their own history. Philip Roth's or Jerry Seinfeld's version of Jewish life exists in the same culture as the antisemitic tropes of Nick Fuentes and Sneako. Americans might well encounter both. Some of this reaches China via VPN; a friend met a Chinese student whose understanding of Jewish life came from watching *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*.

Being known does not guarantee safety. Jews have been known and killed. But being made known and unknown presents its own kind of danger.

The precarity of Jews in China is structural. In authoritarian regimes especially, Jews, dead or alive, can be narrativized following the government's interests. In China, local governments can shut down Jewish museums, government censors can encourage conspiracy theories on social media, and state news can portray Jewish control over geopolitics.

The deeper issue is the absence of recourse. When an authoritarian government wishes to spread narratives about a minority, that minority has no institutional mechanism to fight back. Jews in the United States at least can organize openly, produce culture, contest false narratives, and participate in political life as their own representatives. That capacity is dependent on free society: the political freedoms to express, debate, publish, sue, and organize.

“American Jews have spent three centuries writing novels, staging plays, and more recently filling social media with accounts of their own lives.”

Whether Jewish art, academia, and advocacy produce measurable enough political effects to counteract antisemitism is debatable, but the agency to attempt it exists. There are few Jews living in China (3500, according to a 2024 survey), and they do not have the equivalent opportunity to contest antisemitism.³¹ They are subject to the narratives that the state finds appropriate. This lack is a reminder to all American Jews that they must not take for granted their ability to push back—to write, create culture, organize, and engage in the realm of politics.

31 Sergio DellaPergola, “World Jewish Population, 2024,” in *American Jewish Year Book 2024*, ed. A. Dashefsky and I. Sheskin. Cham: Springer, 2025.

Today, life in China for expat Jews is comparatively safe. Authoritarian states impose a kind of order that suppresses violence from below, so the risk of street-level attacks on Jewish communities in China is low. It is much lower, in fact, than in many open societies. But physical safety in the short term is a poor measure of long-term vulnerability. While the state will not tolerate violence on its streets, it has no issue in demonizing Jews and using its algorithms to do the same across the world. When state-controlled narratives shape a population's knowledge of the Jewish people and there is no free expression to present a different image of Jews, a state could move towards mass hostility against Jews. In the long run, having the world's most populous country cultivate resentment toward Jews and Israel and deploy antisemitic conspiracy theories as instruments of foreign policy is a danger, regardless of whether individual Jews, like me, feel safe on Beijing streets today.

Living in China is a reminder that the conditions enabling Jewish life in America—the ability to organize openly, to produce culture, to contest narratives, to be known interpersonally—are created by and dependent on free society. Antisemitism is rising in the United States, but the ability to organize, publish, litigate, and respond is something we have and must exercise.



The Danger of Jewish Self-Defense

Judah Hain

A COMMUNITY that defines itself primarily by defending Judaism will eventually forget how to cultivate it. American Jews today risk forgetting this. Recently, antisemitism has surged into prominence, amplified by figures such as Tucker Carlson, Nick Fuentes, and Hasan Piker. At the same time, debates over Israel have become increasingly polarized in public life and within the Jewish community. Young conservatives and liberals alike are fed up with AIPAC's influence, while overtly anti-Israel politicians like Zohran Mamdani are seeing unprecedented electoral success. Jewish institutions are understandably devoting enormous energy to combating antisemitism and defending Israel. Although necessary, such efforts carry a hidden danger. When external danger feels acute, Jewish identity risks becoming less a civilization to nurture than a reputation to defend.

Nurturing a civilization means sustaining the habits that have defined Jewish life at its best: intellectual rigor, honest argument, the willingness to sit with difficult questions. Communities under pressure tend to look outward, but civilizations need to be able to look inward and examine themselves as well, answering questions from within, not only accusations from without.

In such a tense environment, the quiet yet essential work of self-examination becomes almost impossible. Defensiveness crowds out reflection. But in the attempt to defend ourselves from external threats, we risk neglecting the more difficult task of defending Judaism from our own complacency. The danger of Jewish self-defense is that it elevates the fighter against antisemitism above the scholar, and it elevates rigid advocacy above intellectual vitality.

One hundred years ago, Elliot E. Cohen warned against precisely this danger. In his 1925 essay "The Age of Brass," published in the *Menorah Journal*, Cohen argued that American Jewish life had become preoccupied with publicity, self-promotion, and the desire to prove Jewish virtue to the surrounding society.¹ He termed this

1 Elliot E. Cohen, "The Age of Brass," *Menorah Journal* 11, no. 5 (1925), 425–447.

phenomenon the “Age of Brass”: a culture of loud declarations and defensive pride in which Jewish leaders constantly proclaimed the greatness of the Jewish people in order to justify their place in American life. “American Jewry must be made to see,” he wrote, “that a life of apology is a shameful apology for a life.” A culture devoted to explaining itself inevitably loses the capacity to create. The two tendencies—loud self-promotion and apologetic self-justification—stem from the same underlying anxiety: the need to prove Jewish worth to Jews themselves and to non-Jews. In both cases, time and energy are spent outward rather than inward. The result is a community so preoccupied with its image that it has little time left for genuine intellectual and creative pursuits.

Cohen was particularly critical of the sweeping claims invoked to justify Jewish importance. Rabbis and communal leaders frequently insisted that Jews were the moral teachers of humanity, that Judaism was the source of Western ethics, or that Jewish dispersion throughout the world had served a providential mission to spread morality.² Cohen regarded such assertions as historically dubious and intellectually unserious. What makes Cohen’s essay unsettling is how familiar these arguments remain. Even today, we hear similar claims from our leadership class: that Judaism introduced morality to the world, or that Jewish values form the foundation of Western civilization. These assertions are usually offered with good intentions—as expressions of pride to shore up communal confidence. But their underlying logic mirrors the apologetics Cohen criticized a century ago.

There is a rather sad irony worth noting. At the very moment Jewish leaders are doubling down on these claims, non-Jews are growing less receptive to them. Jewish leaders who insist on Judaism’s foundational role in Western ethics are making an argument to an increasingly indifferent audience. Putting aside the ideological frailty of this defensive Judaism, it fails to achieve even its own goals. The same tendency appears on both sides of the political divide. On the right, Jewish values and American values are treated as simply interchangeable.³ On the left, the complex tradition of Jewish thought is reduced to a handful of progressive commitments—*Tikkun Olam*, for example—detached from the textual and intellectual tradition that gave them meaning. In both cases, Judaism is hollowed out for the sake of ineffective public relations.

2 A relatively large portion of Cohen’s essay consists of quotes of this sort from rabbis and community leaders. Cohen provides dozens of quotes to highlight how pervasive these attitudes were.

3 As Shabbos Kestenbaum proclaimed during his 2024 Republican National Convention speech: “Jewish values are American values, and American values are Jewish values.”

Cohen feared that such rhetoric would ultimately alienate the very people Jewish culture most needed to attract: intellectually serious Jews. Communal propaganda and overconfidence fail to engage those searching for intellectual depth. Cohen saw this dynamic in his own time. Young Jews exposed only to this thin version of Judaism began to reconsider whether the Jewish tradition was even worth embracing. As Cohen wrote, “if that were all there was to Jewishness, they were not so sure they were proud to be Jews after all.” Many assumed that this defensive culture represented the entirety of Jewish life. “Because it did not occur to them that there was any Judaism beside the prevalent ‘official American Judaism,’” Cohen noted, “they came to regard themselves Jews only by an unavoidable—and unfortunate—accident of birth.”

Thin Judaism is not Judaism that has been attacked from without. It is Judaism that has been thinned out from within. It retains the outward markers—the communal organizations, the advocacy, the pride—but has lost the intellectual substance that once gave those outward markers meaning. It can identify its enemies but has forgotten its own identity. It can defend its reputation but no longer contributes to the exchange of ideas that has long defined Jewish life.

“A healthier Jewish civilization would once again make the scholar its hero.”

For Cohen, the danger was existential. Jewish cultural traditions do not survive through loyalty alone; they survive because they inspire intellectual devotion. If Judaism ceases to challenge the minds of thoughtful Jews, it will slowly lose them. “Judaism cannot survive,” Cohen predicted, “if intelligent Jews come to despise it.” Such alienation rarely takes the form of dramatic rebellion. More often it appears as quiet disengagement. “Jews do not go over to the enemy; seeing no reason to continue the battle, they merely drop out of the ranks. But the effect is the same.” Cohen demonstrated that the antidote was renewal. Through the circle of writers associated with the *Menorah Journal*, he sought to cultivate a serious Jewish intellectual culture in America—one devoted to scholarship, literature, philosophy, and criticism. Their ambition was nothing less than a modern Jewish renaissance grounded in intellectual creativity and the pursuit of truth.

In many respects, this vision represented a return to one of Jewish tradition's deepest instincts. Jewish civilization has long placed extraordinary value on intellectual achievement. In his book *Unheroic Conduct*, the Talmud scholar Daniel Boyarin argues that rabbinic Judaism developed a strikingly countercultural model of virtue.⁴ In the surrounding culture, masculine honor was typically associated with strength and warfare; Jewish culture instead elevated the student immersed in study. The scholar triumphed over the warrior.

The literary critic Lionel Trilling, himself a contributor to the *Menorah Journal* in the 1920s, made a similar observation in his essay "Wordsworth and the Rabbis."⁵ Trilling noted that the rabbis in *Ethics of the Fathers* articulated a conception of masculinity grounded in intellectual discipline and moral refinement.⁶ The rabbinic ideal was the gentle, learned man, whose authority derived from knowledge rather than force.

Seen in this light, Cohen's call for a Jewish intellectual renaissance appears less radical than restorative. He was urging American Jews to reclaim a civilizational instinct that had long since defined us: the belief that intellectual and moral achievement represent the highest forms of human excellence. Today, the most celebrated Jew is often the one who most loudly fights antisemitism. A healthier Jewish civilization would once again make the scholar its hero.

"American Jewry cannot flourish merely by insisting on its own importance. It flourishes by producing ideas, cultivating learning, and striving for truth."

Of course, there is a place for the fighter in Judaism. King David is both warrior and psalmist. The tradition has never been naive about the need for self-defense. But in the classical Jewish imagination, even the warrior aspires to something beyond warfare. David's lasting legacy was not only his military victories but the psalms he composed. The fighter was always meant to serve a cause larger than himself. It is that larger vision that the current moment risks losing entirely. The Jewish community in America must prioritize intellectual engagement above all else.

4 Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

5 Lionel Trilling, "Wordsworth and the Rabbis," in *The Opposing Self: Nine Essays in Criticism* (New York: Viking Press, 1955), 118–150.

6 Trilling argued that Wordsworth's work had fallen out of favor because it emphasized this Jewish vision of virtue. Trilling writes: "The quality in Wordsworth that now makes him unacceptable is a Judaic quality." And later, "This non-militancy of spirit which I conceive Wordsworth and the Rabbis to have in common goes against the tendency of our Western culture, which is committed to an ideal of motion and force."

Cohen's warning has resonated with later thinkers. After Cohen tragically took his own life in 1959, the rabbi and scholar Robert Gordis wrote the following in *Commentary*, the magazine Cohen founded:

The other day I reread his [Cohen's] unforgettable piece, "The Age of Brass," which, after a quarter of a century, still retains its freshness and power. It deserves to be reprinted for our generation as do others of his all too infrequent writings. To be sure, this piece, which is in a sense an *apologia pro vita sua* written at the inception of his career, breathes a confidence in the power of knowledge and a respect for the human intelligence which is no longer fashionable in this day of frenzied faiths. It is all the more necessary and relevant on this account. Writing before Hitler and the spawn of philosophies that have emerged either as a consequence or as a reaction to that holocaust of irrationality, he expressed his conviction that only intellectual and moral integrity has the capacity to save the Jewish community in particular and mankind in general.⁷

Gordis, through Cohen, identified a recurring temptation within American Jewish life: the substitution of intellectual seriousness and the pursuit of truth with apologetics and self-congratulation. Decades later, Gordis's observation seems prophetic. Rising antisemitism and political polarization have created powerful incentives for Jewish communities to define themselves primarily through defense and advocacy. External threats cause the spotlight to shine on the loudest combatants of antisemitism and anti-Zionism. Precisely in such moments, the danger Cohen identified becomes most acute. Nearly seven decades after Gordis called for "The Age of Brass" to be reprinted, I humbly repeat his request.

American Jewry cannot flourish merely by insisting on its own importance. It flourishes by producing ideas, cultivating learning, and striving for truth. Cohen's warning remains as relevant as ever a century later.

Cohen's answer to the Age of Brass was the *Menorah Journal*—a small circle of writers committed to producing an intellectual Jewish culture. We do not need to recreate it. But we need something like its spirit, and the most natural place to look for it is among young Jews themselves. The students who will become the next generation of rabbis, teachers, and communal leaders are still forming their sense of what Jewish culture is and what it can be. If they are shown only a Judaism whose contours are defined by its enemies, that is the Judaism they will inherit and transmit. But Judaism has, and has always had, more to offer than that.

7 Robert Gordis, "Elliot E. Cohen: From Our Readers," *Commentary*, July 1959. <https://www.commentary.org/articles/reader-letters/elliott-e-cohen/>

Young Jews who encounter Judaism's intellectual tradition in its entirety—who discover that there is more to Jewish life than fighting antisemites, practicing public relations, and spewing unserious self-promotion—may find it worth taking seriously. Creating communities of young Jews committed to a Jewish culture that once again celebrates scholarship and intellectual achievement is the single most urgent task facing American Jewish life today. The fighter defends what exists. It is the scholar who ensures there is something worth defending. The question facing American Jews today is not only whether we can defend Judaism from its enemies, but whether we can defend it from becoming thin, reactive, self-congratulatory, and complacent. If we allow the fighter to permanently replace the thinker, we will not need our enemies to diminish Jewish civilization. We will have done it ourselves.

The Laws of Spiritual Thermodynamics

Rabbi Craig Marantz

AS A HARVARD UNDERGRADUATE, J. Robert Oppenheimer first learned about the Second Law of Thermodynamics, the relationship of matter, heat, and the transfer of energy. Oppenheimer's education not only changed the trajectory of his scientific life but became for him a kind of spiritual framework through which he understood the world.¹ As a rabbi, I find the great physicist's perspective inspiring. Put simply, the order of the universe does not sustain itself without energy. Because of entropy—the physical tendency toward disorder—energy disperses such that life creeps toward randomness. What is true of matter may also be true of our souls, our communities, and our moral lives. Fear hardens our hearts. Worthlessness and disrespect fray our dignity. Power often craves domination unless guarded by responsibility and humility. Judaism warns us about this drift and gives us practices for resisting it. Let's call them the laws of spiritual thermodynamics: the sacred disciplines by which we spend energy on behalf of life, the world, kavod,² resilience, and repair.

The First Law: Hevel Turns Urgency Into Holiness

Every step we take in our lives happens on an entropy-bound path. Every moment we live connects us to some form of change—from growth to loss, from life to death. Nothing is truly permanent. And some days it's hard to ever feel settled or grounded. No wonder there are moments in which meaning feels slippery, when life itself seems to echo Qohelet's cry: *Hevel Havalim! Hakol hevel!*³ But there is reason to make life and loss matter despite seeming futility. *Hevel* suggests natural phenomena like mist, vapor, or morning dew—all evanescent but no less real.⁴

1 Civics Professor Kody Cooper writes: "When a friend pressed a young Oppenheimer about his own religious beliefs, specifically, about whether he believed in God, he replied: 'I believe in the second law of thermodynamics, in Hamilton's Principle, in Bertrand Russell . . .'" (<https://www.wordonfire.org/articles/reason-faith-and-oppenheimer-part-i/>).

2 Respect.

3 Utter futility! All is futile! (Qoh. 1:2).

4 Elana Stein Hain in Craig Marantz, "Confronting Chaos: A Midrash on Spiritual Entropy" (unpublished Yom Kippur sermon, September 25, 2023).

The nature of our lives is fleeting, too, but that should quicken our step, not slow it down. Spiritual entropy must not be something that we let happen to us as we stand around. We can understand *hevel* as a commitment to urgency—a summons to exercise *b'tzelem Elohim*, press a foothold into chaos, and act before dignity diminishes.

The Second Law: B'tzelem Elohim Resists Sanctity's Erosion

In such a reality, intrinsic dignity doesn't fix or sustain itself; it requires a catalyst. Judaism provides just such a spark: *b'tzelem Elohim*—a sacred force of anti-entropy. *B'tzelem Elohim* is the image of God in every person. But more than that, it is an active ability we can cultivate, protect, and repair: a practice that insists on dignity over dominance, an energy that combats the exploitation of power, and a communal practice in which infinite worth, equality, and uniqueness can flourish.⁵

The Third Law: Zerizut Quickens and Sustains Sacred Action

If *hevel* names life's evanescence, then *zerizut* calls forth the soul's inner heat to meet this ephemerality in a timely fashion. *Zerizut*, as contemporary Mussar scholar Alan Morinis interprets, entails two forms of motion: the agility to leap into action when an opening for goodness presents itself, and the stamina to see the *mitzvah* through to its completion. Intentions do not suffice by themselves.⁶ In the laws of spiritual thermodynamics, *zerizut* flows from a well of conserved energy: a passion that fuels our refusal to become complacent and drives us to act—at just the right time—with healing and transforming action.

The Fourth Law: Chesed Transfers Energy as Loving-kindness

The prophet Micah says: "Do justice, love loving-kindness, walk humbly with God."⁷ *Chesed*, mixed with some justice and humility, is ultimately an expression of love as kindness, an actionable moral energy. *Chesed*, says Mussar sage Rabbi Chaim Zaitchik, is a way of safeguarding another's honor.⁸ Helping others. Letting our heart abound in loving-kindness. Meeting every person with a smile. In the language of spiritual thermodynamics, *chesed* is energy transferred: the warmth of the soul radiating out as care, friendship, and *tikkun*.⁹

5 Rabbi Irving Greenberg, "Seeking the Religious Roots of Pluralism: In the Image of God and Covenant" in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 34:3, Summer 1997, 397.

6 Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar* (Boston: Trumpeter, 2011), 128.

7 Micah 6:8.

8 Morinis, 183.

9 Repair.

The Fifth Law: Teshuvah Renews the Soul's Sacred Steadiness

Micah's moral clarity won't by itself make us just, kind, or humble people. We need something else, *teshuvah*: a turning, returning, reorienting ourselves toward the best and most faithful versions of ourselves. But here turning isn't just simple motion. *Teshuvah* returns us to our *menuchat ha-nefesh*, the serenity that comes from settling our souls amidst chaos. Rabbi M. M. Lefin describes such equanimity as a "torch that stands guard over the self."¹⁰

These five laws do not suggest we can conquer chaos in our lives. But each, in and of itself and together with the others, serves to strengthen a foothold for us: a sacred steadiness, a bit of light to help us keep choosing life, even while the world is falling apart.

¹⁰ Morinis, 97.



Tzvat by Mikhal Shvartsman

The Messianic Ideal

Nathan Kahana

AERICAN JEWRY is currently in a moment of uncertainty. The country that once offered physical security and material success under the banner of liberty and equality now seems less confident in its founding ideals. This instability has prompted varying reactions from Jewish communities and institutions. Despite their differences, these reactions share a common denominator: the belief that there is “something to be done” that can rectify the situation. But whether this is a trend that will dissipate or a reality that is here to stay, the public’s preoccupation with Jewry calls to mind the fact that our relative safety in America is an exception to a history defined by persecution. This broader reality can prompt us to reflect on a sustaining force throughout those centuries—hope in the coming of the Messiah.

“The Messianic ideal therefore endows the minutiae of our lives with both greater and lesser significance than we might otherwise give them.”

The Messianic era is not clearly defined; different sources have radically different visions of what it might look like. Some suggest that it will spark a change in human nature, where freedom to choose good or evil is replaced by the universal desire to act righteously.¹ Others offer a more rational interpretation, arguing that it will be characterized primarily by a change in the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. Beneath these different interpretations, however, is an assumption of historical coherence. I refer to this axiom as the Messianic ideal. The Messianic ideal presupposes belief in the Messianic era; it allows us to view the events that occur in our time as meaningful by virtue of their ultimate destination, while simultaneously recognizing that the destination is predestined and not subject to change.

The Messianic ideal therefore endows the minutiae of our lives with both greater and lesser significance than we might otherwise give them—greater significance, because each moment in time represents a step on the ladder towards the Messianic era, and lesser significance, because the events themselves cannot change the course of history. While theological, this outlook does not include a specific vision of what

1 “The Messianic Era,” Sefaria, accessed March 15, 2026, <https://www.sefaria.org/topics/the-messianic-era?sort=Relevance&tab=no-table-sources>.

the Messianic era looks like. Instead, it entails belief in a framework that endows the movement of history with meaning it would otherwise lack.

The writing of theorist Walter Benjamin illustrates this commitment to the Messianic ideal. Benjamin, a German Jewish intellectual, lived in the decades prior to World War II. In his work *On the Concept of History*, he describes what he calls “the angel of history.” He writes,

His face is turned towards the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them.²

The angel that Benjamin describes is powerless, at the mercy of forces beyond his control. These forces are not, as one might imagine, the cruelty the angel has suffered through the actions of others. In fact, the angel is merely an observer of this cruelty, the “catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage.” Rather, the forces that affect the angel are historical forces that propel the angel toward “paradise.” The angel’s position as an observer is also unusual. What might seem to us like isolated and distinct actions appear to it as facets of a single disaster. The angel interprets each moment of history within a framework that gives meaning to events that would otherwise seem arbitrary or isolated from one another. This is what Benjamin means when he says, “where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe.” While powerless in the face of history, the angel is endowed with unique insight that enables it to transcend the meaninglessness of the individual moment and contextualize it within a broader framework. The angel’s relationship towards these individual moments is thus characterized by the greater and lesser significance of the Messianic ideal; individual events lose a sense of independent meaning, but gain significance as part of the holistic framework that presents itself as the “single catastrophe.”

The angel Benjamin describes is characterized further by its interest in the past rather than the future. The angel does not see paradise; it has no idea what it might look like. It sees and grasps only the catastrophe. And yet this understanding is intertwined with its final destination. It is only by virtue of the storm that blows from paradise that the angel can view the horrific events of the past as facets of a “single disaster” instead of disconnected individual moments. This prompts the reader to view paradise as a negative phenomenon—the absence of suffering and the opposite of catastrophe, rather than a paradigm of eternal bliss and satisfaction.

2. Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 1940, accessed March 15, 2026, <https://www.sfu.ca/~andrewf/CONCEPT2.html>.

Theodor Adorno, a friend of Benjamin, developed an aphorism that further illustrates the “negative” characterization of the Messianic ideal. He wrote, “the only philosophy that can be responsibly practiced in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique.”³ Adorno’s instructions share with Benjamin the emphasis on redemption as a standpoint from which to look *backwards* at the past unfolding, rather than solely as a goal to be reached. Just as redemption plays a negative role for Benjamin, it plays a negative role for Adorno; in both cases, it is only visible through the light it sheds on the past. Adorno’s emphasis on understanding reveals a second similarity with Benjamin’s description. Adorno uses the “light” of “knowledge” as the reward that redemption bestows upon the witness to the destruction of the past, evoking the use of redemption as the key to the contextualization of suffering. This contextualization is essential to the angel’s alternative view of the past as a single catastrophe.

“Belief in this framework does not allow us to change the course of history; nor does it permit us to see ourselves as above the historical process. Rather, it counsels submission to fate.”

Benjamin’s angel can allow us to develop a sense of faith in the historical process rooted in contextualization of the past, even without a clear vision of its final destination. As paradise affects the angel through the light it sheds on the past, we can grasp the significance of the Messianic era without relying on an explicit vision imported from religious doctrine. Moreover, just as the angel subsumes instances of historical cruelty under a framework that gives them meaning, we can use the Messianic ideal to adopt a contemplative stance towards the events of history by contextualizing them within a broader historical narrative. Through this orientation, each moment, rather than an isolated, meaningless event, becomes a precursor to the Messianic era. Belief in this framework does not allow us to change the course of history; nor does it permit us to see ourselves as above the historical process. Rather, it counsels submission to fate. But this submission is empowering, because it arises from a framework that allows us to grasp the broader significance of individual moments.

³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: New Left Books, 1974), 153.

One might argue that by using Benjamin's angel one can covertly communicate a religious idea under the guise of secular writing, thus presenting it as more convincing or universal than it actually is. By invoking Benjamin's angel, however, I aim to illustrate a religious axiom (the Messianic ideal) stripped of its explicit theological baggage, not to present it as though it were secular. The framework I describe is theological; it requires a commitment to the ideals of Judaism, even where that commitment is paired with skepticism towards any of the explicit visions developed by commentators throughout the centuries. I aim not to prove the existence of something through incontrovertible evidence, but to identify a shared substratum beneath the many differing opinions on the Messianic era—to demonstrate the precondition for such viewpoints.

With that said, some criticism of the Messianic ideal likely derives not from genuine scientific skepticism but from the effects of material prosperity. In times of prosperity, the power of the Messianic ideal diminishes. We have little incentive to grasp for a narrative of historical coherence when the present seems so fruitful. Individual events become not an obstacle to be recontextualized as part of a more optimistic historical whole, but moments to be savored independent of the perceived past or future. But while it may lose its hold in times of prosperity, the Messianic ideal becomes more appealing in moments of historical oppression. In such environments, the present can only be endured by subsuming it under a broader historical framework. Throughout centuries of persecution in Europe, the sense of meaning in the historical process gave purpose to the lives of Jews whose sense of physical agency was far from what it is today.

The shifting influence of the Messianic ideal can illuminate aspects of our current moment in history. Benjamin wrote his description of the angel of history in 1940, a moment when Jews were perhaps at their most powerless. As American Jews, we've enjoyed relative safety throughout the past decades. This longstanding security can facilitate a dismissive outlook towards concerns about rising antisemitism. Such an outlook, however, entails a faith in the stability of our present circumstances: a belief that our status in American society will remain intact in the coming decades. While it may or may not be justified, this belief cannot coexist with genuine commitment to the Messianic ideal, which requires that we recognize the instability of each individual moment of history. To accept this framework, we must acknowledge that our status in American society (and, by extension, our physical security) may change drastically without much warning.

But while this alternative outlook may appear pessimistic, our unease towards the future need not be our only emotion. By recalling the Messianic ideal, we can regain a sense of control over our fate: one which is rooted not in physical agency, but in a capacity to reframe the present. The fact that we, as a people, have endured despite centuries of persecution suggests that our submission to the course of history is not merely a dream without basis in reality. Instead, it is a source of hope that, in the midst of persecution, can propel us towards a brighter future.

The Many Worlds That Make Us: Toward a Renaissance of Jewish Disagreement

Carolyn Bernstein

COMING INTO COLLEGE, I believed I had a strong understanding of what pluralism meant. I attended a high school focused on creating “ethically responsible Jews” who will “create a vibrant Jewish future and build a better world where human dignity will flourish.”¹ Drawn by the same pluralistic ideals, I spent a gap year at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, where I wrestled with questions of Jewish peoplehood, Israel, and communal responsibility in a community dedicated to deepening its “commitment to pluralism,” and helping “rebuild the covenant between Israel and the Jewish world.”² I have since realized that focusing on pluralism is not enough. Instead, we must work to rebuild a culture of disagreement in our contemporary Jewish spaces.

Once, internal Jewish arguments animated Ashkenazi political culture.³ Thinkers like Simon Dubnow scaled the exegetical process—the Jewish practice of interpreting, questioning, and building meaning through layers of commentary—beyond the study hall, imagining Jewish autonomy not as territorial sovereignty but as a form of “social and cultural autonomy” sustained through networks of self-governing communities, culture, and argument. Rejecting the notion that Jews in exile were politically inert, he insisted that “the Jews always had a political life.”⁴

“Instead, we must work to rebuild a culture of disagreement in our contemporary Jewish spaces.”

Our ancestors envisioned pages of Bava Kamma that swirled endlessly with commentary and brought those same instincts into their classrooms and workplaces. For Dubnow, this was political life: the cultivation of a people capable of governing itself through habits of argument, interpretation, and shared responsibility. The habits cultivated in the *beit midrash*—close reading, reverence

1 Gann Academy, “Our Mission & Values,” Gann Academy, accessed June 15, 2026, <https://www.gannacademy.org/our-mission/>.

2 Shalom Hartman Institute, “About the Shalom Hartman Institute,” Accessed June 15, 2026, <https://www.hartman.org.il/about-the-hartman-institute/>

3 *A Leap of Faith*. Directed by Ella Bahaire. BBC Worldwide, 2013. <https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/a-leap-of-faith-2>.

4 Dubnow, Simon. *Nationalism and History: Essays on Old and New Judaism*. Edited by Koppel S. Pinson. New York: Atheneum, 1970.

for justice, the preservation of minority opinions alongside majority rulings—spilled outward into communal life. They became the cultural markers of diaspora life itself.

The Bund insisted Jews could be a nation and stay put, building a Yiddish socialist future in the very places they'd been persecuted. Meanwhile, Herzl and Jabotinsky put their faith in Jewish national self-determination, insisting that only territorial sovereignty could solve Jewish precarity. Both movements, Zionism and Bundism, emerged in 1897, born from the same crisis—the need to emancipate the Jews. The Bund championed *doykeit* (“hereness”), arguing that Jews should fight for equal rights, socialism, and cultural autonomy wherever they already lived rather than seeking a separate homeland. Zionism hinged on the belief that antisemitism made life in the diaspora fundamentally insecure and that Jewish people therefore required a homeland, making nation-statehood—not diaspora autonomy—the path to collective liberation.

“This churning ideological landscape was crucial to the formation of Jewish modernity.”

Ashkenaz had not yet been flattened into a demographic category or a site of catastrophe; it was a civilization where public debate and disagreement were the natural modes of thinking through communal threats and challenges. This churning ideological landscape was crucial to the formation of Jewish modernity.

Long before Zionists and Bundists clashed about land and labor, Moses Mendelssohn—a central architect of the Jewish enlightenment—insisted that Jewish life depended on the ability to disagree without pretense: “Brothers,” he wrote in 1783, “if you care for true piety, let us not feign agreement where diversity is evident.”⁵ Mendelssohn embraced differences as a condition of community. He warned that “a union of faith is not tolerance,” but its opposite. He vouched for true understanding because he knew that enforced agreement weakens a people.⁶ Mendelssohn envisioned something far more durable than polite agreement: a culture in which argument itself safeguards survival. Jewish continuity, in his view, would not be secured by some arbitrary ideal of ideological purity, but by trusting that a people strong enough to contend with itself would be strong enough to fight antisemitism. By treating disagreement as a source of intellectual vitality rather

5 Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem, or, On Religious Power and Judaism*, trans. Allan Arkush, with an introduction and commentary by Alexander Altmann (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1983), pp. 138–39.

6 Sharon Liberman Mintz, “Moses Mendelssohn,” *My Jewish Learning*, accessed June 15, 2026, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/moses-mendelssohn/>. Moses Mendelssohn spent much of his life proving that reality was more complicated than the categories available to describe it. Born into a traditional Jewish family in eighteenth-century Germany, he became one of Europe’s most respected intellectuals at a time when many of his neighbors regarded Jews as incapable of participating in modern society. Rather than abandoning Judaism to gain acceptance, he argued that Jewish tradition and Enlightenment values were not enemies—that reason, tolerance, and religious commitment could coexist. Through his writing, advocacy, and translation of the Torah into German, Mendelssohn helped imagine a future in which Jews could participate fully in the wider world without surrendering themselves to it.

than communal weakness, Jews could remain united by shared responsibility rather than enforced consensus. Mendelssohn saw that society grows wiser by allowing its members the freedom to question, persuade, and revise their beliefs. Two hundred years later, enforced compliance and an insistence on uniformity bring emotional comfort, but agreement for its own sake produces no higher wisdom. As honest arguers, we should stand strong against requiring agreement as the price of belonging.

The Ashkenazi civilization that preceded the Holocaust didn't survive in spite of its debates—its vitality came from intellectual collision. As the Proverb teaches that “iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another,” it describes not just a study method but a civic ethic.⁷ A havruta is not a companion who agrees with you; it is someone who exposes the gaps in your reasoning and forces you to defend what you thought you knew. Through that friction, both parties are refined. The argument becomes sharper, more precise, more worthy of the idea it seeks to illuminate and more worthy of our attention.

Ashkenazi civilization produced not one political vision but many: socialists, capitalists, and anarchists, Yiddishists and Hebraists, all arguing ferociously about how Jews should live and where we belong. Collectively, these arguments were all ways to seek out actionable truth. Our history suggests that solitary contemplation yields little; it is in rigorous, often combative encounters that understanding is made. In the Talmud, we preserve the minority opinion, not because it might be correct, but because understanding the fullness of debate around an issue might lead us to better ideas in the present. Our renaissance will not rest on consensus. Channeling these older styles of disagreement—the willingness to keep arguing when the room becomes tense over Zionism, or the value of halakha in our modern day—will transform our ideological tensions from existential threats into generative opportunities. I have benefitted from institutions that make the brave choice to criticize themselves harshly, invite marginal identities into their communities, and sustain change. Instead of alienating these outsiders, my communities have shaped them into leaders.

To my peers and colleagues everywhere in the Jewish world: now is the moment to embrace your unique intersectionality. Consider your place in the world and speak from it honestly. Refuse the false choice between the many worlds that made you. History moves forward through people willing to speak from the full complexity of their position. Argue viciously with your friends in pursuit of justice and you may find that disagreement creates more than it destroys. To my yeshiva-attending peers: find a labor-organizing Jew to argue with. To my downtown art-scene Jews:

7 Mishlei 27:17

spend an evening with someone who believes halakha places real obligations on their life. To my uptown kiddush-circuit Jews: read someone whose politics make you uncomfortable before dismissing them. To my group-chat warriors: leave the chat and have the argument face-to-face. To my politically homeless bedfellows: stop treating uncertainty as a private burden and turn it into a public practice. May all your *machlokot be l'shem shamayim*.⁸ The best Torah comes not from isolation or echo chambers, but from remaining intertwined, like tangled root systems, with the visible world.

“To my yeshiva-attending peers: find a labor-organizing Jew to argue with. To my downtown art-scene Jews: spend an evening with someone who believes halakha places real obligations on their life. To my uptown kiddush-circuit Jews: read someone whose politics make you uncomfortable before dismissing them. To my group-chat warriors: leave the chat and have the argument face-to-face. To my politically homeless bedfellows: stop treating uncertainty as a private burden and turn it into a public practice.”

This semester, I lived in Prague, in the afterlife of that argumentative world. Under Rudolf II, Jewish and Christian scholars, astronomers, philosophers, and artists inhabited overlapping intellectual circles. It was here that the Maharal insisted that Jewish thought belonged in Europe’s intellectual conversation. Through correspondence and debate, he argued for the validity of Jewish legal and philosophical traditions alongside Europe’s intellectual life. He insisted on testing Jewish thought through sustained engagement with Christian theologians and Renaissance intellectuals, trusting that rigorous debate would reveal the stronger argument. Prague’s Jewish community demonstrates that Jewish continuity has often depended less on isolation than on confidence: the confidence to engage the surrounding world without surrendering distinctiveness.

Walking through Prague today, I feel the striking absence of that confidence. German inflections linger in the streets, familiar to the point of terror but unlocatable in meaning. Brass stumbling stones interrupt the pavement with names I cannot pronounce and histories I can never fully honor. The Holocaust did not simply empty Prague of its Jews; it dismantled an intellectual ecosystem.

⁸ Pirkei Avot 5:17

The conversations that once connected rabbis, scientists, philosophers, and artists disappeared, leaving behind monuments without the living arguments that gave them meaning. I can see what remains, but I no longer inherit the methods that once animated it. I no longer inherit a shared method of knowing what Jewish life requires of us, or how competing obligations should be weighed on a personal or communal level.

In the absence of a shared method for thinking politically as Jews, belonging is increasingly expressed through aesthetics and affiliation rather than argument. I find myself drawn to Jewish pop culture and symbolic gestures, trying to build meaning out of fragments: writing about Jewish media, fixating on characters like Dr. Robby on *The Pitt*... Is Doja Cat Jewish? Should we offer underage students cocktails at Chabad? Is voting for Trump in line with halakha? These questions are not substitutes for political thought. They are attempts to recover culture where our institutions have learned mainly how to manage politics. This is another place where the Jewish culture of argumentation would help revitalize us. Deep conversations about our faith and peoplehood would be good replacements.

A 2020 Pew survey found that American Jews are more likely to describe Jewishness as a matter of culture (55%) or ancestry (52%) rather than religion (36%).⁹ Yet much of Jewish communal discourse continues to treat cultural attachment as secondary to religious or political engagement, rather than recognizing it as one of the primary ways contemporary Jews understand themselves. I meet students who express that identity through media, humor, food, genealogy, social causes, and cultural references.

“We can recognize what camp someone belongs to while losing some of the habits required to understand how they arrived there.”

Increasingly, we learn to recognize one another through signals—a podcast recommendation, a slogan, a style of dress, a social media post, a political aesthetic—before we encounter one another’s reasoning. Every community develops its own signals of belonging. The specific symbols differ, but the dynamic stays the same: we can recognize what camp someone belongs to while losing some of the habits required to understand how they arrived there. The result is a community full of love for Jewishness but unaccustomed to the difficult work of arguing toward meaning.

9 Alper, Becka A., and Alan Cooperman. *Jewish Americans in 2020*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-americans-in-2020/>.

When a culture forgets how to argue, certainty and power destroy the oxygen that interpretation requires. In college, I have learned that extremism erupts out of this vacuum. Unchallenged, fervor appears in political rallies on every side, in slogans shouted in public parks, and in rituals of belonging that demand allegiance without reflection. Yet, if there's another lesson I've learned on campus, it's that, inspiring, anyone will argue with you. *Pirkei Avot* urges: "Appoint for thyself a teacher, and acquire for thyself a companion and judge all men with the scale weighted in his favor."¹⁰ The Mishnah has taught me to recognize the Torah held by others and to continually widen my understanding of where it can be found, discovering time and again: *this, too, is Torah*. I have learned everywhere—new *zemirot* in dorm rooms and at Shabbat dinners; how to show respect for my peers in seminars and student meetings; conflict-resolution skills among Zionists and anti-Zionists; the nature of Jewish peoplehood from both the devout and the militantly secular; and even how to pray at the Kotel from both the ideologically obsessed and the indifferent. None of us arrives at our convictions alone. We carry traces of the teachers who shaped us, the communities that raised us, the books we have read, and the generations that argued before us. Their voices become part of our own, reminding us that we are never truly alone.

"We learn that divine reply is not a verdict but a widening: a world expanded, a mind burst open, another chair pulled up to the table."

And I wish I could tell you it was easy—that genuine engagement did not also expose prejudice, fear, and ugliness where you least expect to find them. Sometimes it means realizing that people you trusted are not who you believed them to be. But I have come to think that ignorance is too high a price to pay for comfort. Mine is a stubborn curiosity, coupled with the conviction that every honest encounter leaves us more capable of understanding the world—and one another—even when it leaves us disappointed.

When war redraws emotional fault lines, when birthrights demand allegiance, when neighbors live wall to wall and worlds apart, when halakhic boundaries are tested, when some Jews locate home in sovereignty while others locate it in diaspora, when iron sharpens iron, the challenge is not whether disagreement will emerge but whether a community can withstand it. Like the Psalmist who cries,

¹⁰ Mishnah, *Pirkei Avot* 1:6

“Min ha-meitzar karati Yah, anani b’merchav Yah”—from a narrow place I called out, and was answered in great expanse—we learn that divine reply is not a verdict but a widening: a world expanded, a mind burst open, another chair pulled up to the table.

Disagreement will not guarantee comfort or uniformity. But it may reveal something even more radical: that Jewish peoplehood can be sturdier than assumed. A tradition that has survived exile, dispersion, censorship, quotas, and catastrophe should be more than capable of surviving its own internal strain.



The Homes We Carry: Diasporism and the Future of Jewish Life

Maeve Korengold

GROWING UP in Northern Virginia, my Jewishness never demanded an explanation; it was simply another thread woven into a larger civic fabric. It was a reality where my public school system closed for Yom Kippur, just as it did for Eid and Christmas, and where local grocery stores stacked matzo boxes into window displays for Passover. In this environment, it was just one element of an identity that felt synchronized with my surroundings.

**“When I spoke, I felt I was speaking not only for myself
but for a civilization thousands of years old.”**

That changed almost immediately. In my first semester of college, I realized that I was often the only Jewish student in the room. The realization hit me over a tray of dining hall food. Someone casually asked what I was doing for the upcoming weekend, and when I mentioned Rosh Hashanah, the table went quiet. What followed wasn't hostility, but rapid-fire questions born of genuine wonder: “Do you guys actually skip bread for a week? What's the difference between Hanukkah and Christmas?” Surrounded by half-eaten pizza and friendly peers, I suddenly felt an invisible spotlight click on. I realized that for them, I was the first and only window into an entire culture.

This experience forced my Jewish identity into the foreground of my life. I could not escape my peers' sincere curiosity, asking me to explain what Jewish people thought about the serious and the mundane: holidays, history, Israel, antisemitism, and theology. Questions flowed toward me as if I were a kind of living footnote. When I spoke, I felt I was speaking not only for myself but for a civilization thousands of years old. When I remained quiet, that same tradition disappeared into the backdrop of secular American life. To live in the diaspora is to be constantly reminded that Jewish tradition exists outside of any single time or place. It forces a sharp awareness of our culture and exactly where we stand within it.

It may seem that Jewish flourishing depends on stability within a single nation, a moment when Jewish difference fades comfortably into the background of majority society. Yet, for most of its existence, Jewish civilization's resilience, creativity, and intellectual life have not been anchored in territory or political sovereignty. The multilingual scholarship of medieval Sephardic communities, the transnational political imagination of Eastern European Jewish radicals, and the civic adaptability of American Jewish life were not products of rooted homogeneity, but of movement, exchange, and multiplicity. Instead, the source of Judaism's vitality has been diaspora. In an era of institutional uncertainty for American Jews, contemporary debates over the future of Jewish life revolve entirely around the State of Israel. This focus forgets that diaspora has been the heart of Jewish tradition for thousands of years.

"The source of Judaism's vitality has been diaspora."

Russian historian and founder of the Jewish People's Party, Simon Dubnow, wrote on this concept as early as 1903. Observing Jewish communities scattered across Eastern Europe, Dubnow argued in his seminal work *Jewish History* that Jewish survival did not depend on territorial sovereignty, but on "historical consciousness." He envisioned a "mighty chain" of schools, texts, and communal organizations keeping Jewish communities "welded together" wherever they settled.¹

History would offer a grim answer to his optimism: in 1941, Dubnow was murdered by the Nazis in the Riga Ghetto.² His fate is a brutal testament to the exact precarity he sought to theorize, proving that existential uncertainty cannot be outrun by geography or intellect. This vulnerability is an ancient, recurring feature of our history, and one that cannot be overcome by theory alone.

Where Dubnow's story highlights the terrifying cost of precarity, modern Jewish thought reframes this vulnerability not only as a tragic reality but as a position of unique strength.

This is the foundational shift engineered by Israeli-American religious scholars Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, who are credited with the development of "Diasporism." Rather than approaching diaspora as a temporary, painful lack of home, the Boyarins celebrate it as a deliberate and powerful mode of Jewish existence.³ In diaspora, where we have been "afford[ed] the possibility of a flexible

1 Simon M. Dubnow, *Jewish History: An Essay in the Philosophy of History*, trans. Henrietta Szold (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1903), n. 5, Project Gutenberg.

2 Kristi A. Groberg, "The Life and Influence of Simon Dubnow (1860-1941): An Appreciation," *Modern Judaism* 13, no. 1 (1993): 71-93, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1396485>.

3 Julie E. Cooper, "A Diasporic Critique of Diasporism: The Question of Jewish Political Agency," *Political Theory* 43, no. 1 (2015): 81, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24571595>.

and nonhermetic critical Jewish identity,” we have learned how to inhabit multiple cultural worlds at once, negotiating belonging without erasing difference.⁴ Diaspora thus ceases to represent a failure of history, emerging instead as one of its most enduring intellectual achievements.

After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, Jewish life reoriented itself from ritual experience centered around the Temple to more portable forms of culture.⁵ This shift was born of deep pain; the burning of the Temple meant the violent fracturing of a people and an agonizing grief for a centralized spiritual life that could never be exactly rebuilt. It was precisely within this profound loss that the best aspects of diaspora emerged.

In response to expulsion, Rabbinic scholars developed a vast body of legal and interpretive literature capable of withstanding dispersion. The most famous of these texts, the Babylonian Talmud, was produced not in Jerusalem but in exile. It is, in many ways, the quintessential diasporic text: sprawling, argumentative, filled with voices separated by centuries and geography, yet bound together in conversation.

“Diaspora thus ceases to represent a failure of history, emerging instead as one of its most enduring intellectual achievements.”

Diaspora did not merely sustain Jewishness; it shaped its intellectual character. Through the interaction with other societies and schools of thought, Judaism in diaspora produced a rich collection of hybrid cultures that would not have been possible within a homogeneous environment. Medieval Sephardic Jews in Al-Andalus, or Muslim Spain, wrote philosophy in Arabic while preserving Hebrew liturgical traditions.⁶ Centuries later, Yiddish-speaking immigrants in New York City transformed Jewish storytelling into modern theater, journalism, and labor politics.⁷ Jewish culture became deeply interpretive and dialogic. Rather than belonging to a single, static author, authority became alive, actively forged in the margins of study, debate, and commentary. Communities separated by thousands of miles participated in the same conversations, citing the same texts and arguing over the same passages.

4 Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, “Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity,” *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 4 (1993): 701, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343903>.

5 Dalia Marx, “The Missing Temple: The Status of the Temple in Jewish Culture Following its Destruction,” *European Judaism* 46, no. 2 (2013): 61–78.

6 Katrin Kogman-Appel, “Hebrew Manuscript Painting in Late Medieval Spain: Signs of a Culture in Transition,” *The Art Bulletin* 84, no. 2 (2002): 246–72. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3177268>.

7 Arthur Hertzberg, *The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter: A History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989): 164.

But this cultural flexibility has always coexisted with deep physical vulnerability. To fully appreciate the resilience of diaspora requires looking squarely at its immense costs. The reality of being scattered has never been a romantic exercise in cultural flexibility; it is often riddled with rupture, isolation, and violence. Across centuries, geographic dispersion fractured a once-shared language, as Hebrew and Aramaic fused with local vernaculars to produce distinct languages like Yiddish, Ladino, and Judeo-Arabic. Far more devastating was the systemic and intentional erasure of identity under forced conversion, most notably during the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions. For the *conversos* who founded communities in places like Nuevo León, Mexico, Jewish existence was reduced to a perilous, hidden architecture.⁸ Crypto-Jewish reality was one in which heritage could only survive through silence and the agonizing abandonment of community.

“It risks reading a rich, two-thousand-year history of global and portable survival into a mere waiting room for sovereignty.”

This existential vulnerability is precisely what political sovereignty promises to cure. In the wake of the Shoah, the creation of the State of Israel offered a vital answer to centuries of persecution. Where diaspora accepts fragmentation as a baseline condition, Zionism and the framework of statehood offer a definitive counter-argument: that real safety can only be guaranteed by hard borders on a map.

In this view, a sovereign territory steps in to resolve the guest-host dynamic entirely, trading conditional tolerance for self-determination. It aims to solve the dual threats of the diaspora by providing a fortress against persecution and a cultural anchor to halt assimilation. The historical importance of this refuge is undeniable. But framing statehood as the only valid expression of Jewish continuity creates a rigid ideological binary. It risks reading a rich, two-thousand-year history of global and portable survival into a mere waiting room for sovereignty. Exploring the power of the diaspora is not the rejection of sovereignty, but the recognition of a parallel truth: that Jewish culture possesses a unique and creative resilience that does not depend on geography, but thrives precisely because it learned to make the world its home.

⁸ Samuel Temkin, Luis de Carvajal and His People, *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 32, no. 1 (2008): 85, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27564328>.

And this reveals diaspora's core dilemma: Jewish communities are perpetually caught between the immediate danger of physical hostility and the slow, systemic threat of cultural assimilation. Living as a perpetual minority means safety is always conditional, forever dependent on the whims of host societies. But the quieter, equally devastating threat is the loss of identity through assimilation. When a culture lacks a sovereign territory to anchor it, keeping tradition from bleeding into the dominant society becomes an uphill battle. For Jewish-Americans, this vulnerability has manifested in a distinct way: during our migration from European persecution through the first half of the twentieth century, we have largely become absorbed into a generalized, "Judeo-Christian"⁹ culture. Our unique historical and cultural experiences have become flattened due to an imagined proximity to Christianity. Ironically, this flattening was driven by our own frantic attempts to locate a sanctuary—a desire to blend in so completely that we might finally find a place free from the relentless threats of violence and expulsion.

“A closer look at this vulnerability reveals something deeper: uncertainty, rather than being dismissed as a byproduct of being scattered through diaspora, is the defining feature of Jewish existence.”

This ideal of a non-sovereign, coexistent identity is precisely what re-contextualizes my own transition in college. When I sat alone lighting Shabbat candles in my freshman dorm room, living as a minority among non-Jewish peers initially felt like a burden of isolation. Under the Boyarin framework, however, that isolation is transfigured. The dorm room ceases to be a site of lonely exclusion and becomes a microcosm of the diasporic condition itself: a deliberate, localized instantiation of a global culture that does not require a sovereign majority to validate its existence. By performing a distinct ritual in a space where I was the visible minority, I was participating in the model that the Boyarins celebrate. My difference did not isolate me from the civic fabric; rather, navigating that difference became the very mechanism that aligned me with a transnational, historical community.

Today, this comes to life in a digital golden age of learning. Online spaces and open-source networks have built a global and interconnected study hall that doesn't rely on a single physical center. Jewish learning, once limited to particular cities or institutions, now circulates instantly across continents. Platforms like Sefaria allow anyone with an internet connection to access centuries of Jewish texts,

9 Arthur Hertzberg, *The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter: A History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989): 273.

commentaries, and interpretations. This digital diaspora allows anyone, anywhere, to instantly drop commentary into a multi-layered conversation stretching back thousands of years.

“The creative adaptations of diaspora were not desperate survival tactics; they were the blueprints of a culture built to endure.”

If this moment feels uncertain, it is worth remembering that uncertainty has often been the root of Jewish creativity. Diaspora has required adaptability, imagination, and resilience in its inherent precarity. It has pushed Jewish communities to reinvent themselves again and again in new cultural landscapes. A closer look at this vulnerability reveals something deeper: uncertainty, rather than being dismissed as a byproduct of being scattered through diaspora, is the defining feature of Jewish existence. From the moment the Second Temple was burned, history proved that safety could never be guaranteed by geography alone. But instead of paralyzing our people, this constant instability became the very soil from which we grew. The creative adaptations of diaspora were not desperate survival tactics; they were the blueprints of a culture built to endure.

The most important question for American Jews to consider is how we can embrace an ancient mentality: dispersion as a possibility and not only as a weakness. Ideas move quickly, communities collaborate across borders, and individuals can participate in traditions that were once geographically bound.

The Jewish world is becoming increasingly decentralized and interconnected, resembling the scattered yet vibrant networks that sustained Jewish civilization for centuries. Yet digital connectivity does not necessarily produce communal cohesion. Online Jewish life is often fragmented across ideological, religious, and political lines, with algorithms reinforcing siloed forms of identity rather than shared conversation. In this sense, twenty-first century Jewish life reproduces the decentralization of diaspora. A historically scattered people can now construct a collective consciousness that functions without a single physical or political center.

The lesson of diasporism is not only one of despair. It is one of remarkable endurance: the knowledge that a people whose civilization fits inside books, conversations, and communities can build a home almost anywhere. In this fractured world, we have mastered the rarest art of inhabiting pluralistic societies without surrendering our difference.

A Judaism Worth Living For

Shilo Sapir

IN MY SENIOR YEAR of high school, a friend pulled me aside and confessed something that had been weighing on him. “I just feel like being Jewish,” he said, “is like being a vegetarian. It’s just one unique lifestyle among many. They don’t eat meat, and I don’t eat anything unkosher.”

I intuitively understood what he meant. The Jewish identity we had inherited had been whittled down to little more than a set of dietary restrictions. It was superficial, more like a set of preferences than a 5,000-year-old tradition. Frequently, it asked nothing more of us than odd cultural habits, representing one option among many in the vast American lifestyle department.

This past January, at twenty-two, I was standing in IDF uniform amidst the rubble of Shuja'iyya, searching for the remains of Ran Gvili, who was the last remaining Israeli hostage in the Gaza Strip. IDF intelligence indicated that Hamas had buried Ran, murdered on October 7, in a mass grave of dead Hamas combatants. My unit’s task was to find him. We compared the teeth of the corpses to Ran’s last dental scans. After more than two hundred bodies, we identified Ran’s corpse and repatriated his remains so that he could receive a Jewish burial.

I was supposed to be taking my finals at Bar Ilan Law School that week.

“Being Jewish in America was a convenient identity I inhabited, not a truth around which I centered my life.”

I sometimes wondered, half-cynically, how I had ended up there, and what seemingly had gone wrong for me along the way. After all, I grew up in Sharon, Massachusetts, in a loving family, in a comfortable house, wanting for nothing. I graduated high school at seventeen with a university scholarship waiting. By every visible measure, I was on track for the kind of life that American Jewish parents dream of for their children.

That Judaism asked that I go to Shul on holidays, feel pride in my heritage, and maintain some connection to culture and community. It never asked, however, that I prioritize it over anything that mattered to me. It never demanded that I give something real up, or that I sacrifice comfort, security, or the future that had always been assumed. Being Jewish in America was a convenient identity I inhabited, not a truth around which I centered my life.

My friend's vegetarian analogy gnawed at me precisely because it was accurate. I realized that my Judaism asked nothing of me, and I gave nothing in return. This history and tradition, often presented with the weight of a civilization, demanded very little in practice. This thing, that was supposed to mean so much to me, felt like something I could just shrug off. The hunger had always been there: an unplaceable feeling that something was missing. Over time, that feeling sharpened into an argument that I could not escape.

“I could not justify participating in customs and traditions that came naturally while ignoring those that were inconvenient.”

So at seventeen, I left. I moved to Israel alone, leaving behind my whole life. I was not running away from anything. Instead, I was running toward a Judaism that I hoped would be different.

If a Jewish lifestyle was true and right, it had to be lived comprehensively, not selectively. I could not justify participating in customs and traditions that came naturally while ignoring those that were inconvenient. It was all or nothing; for years, I had refused to question how my life contradicted both by choosing neither. I wanted to live somewhere that made those beliefs cost and mean something.

Enlisting in the IDF felt less dramatic than leaving America. I had already chosen my path, and the army was simply the next step. I served in combat as a paratrooper during the war, an experience whose weight is difficult to translate into ordinary language.

I spent countless hours posted in the darkness of night, standing guard by the windows of the buildings we were sheltering in. In the stillness of night, there was nothing to do but think. And what I came to understand, slowly, was this: throughout my life, I had not sacrificed because I was already committed. I had become committed because I had sacrificed.

The willingness to search through mud for the remains of someone you never met, yet still call your brother, is not the expression of a pre-existing feeling. It is the feeling itself, generated through the act. Sacrifice does not follow from commitment; sacrifice creates commitment.

This discovery reframed everything. The emptiness I felt growing up within a Judaism that gave nothing back was not a failure of Jewish tradition. Instead, it was a failure of cost. I had never been asked to sacrifice anything for Judaism, so my Judaism never solidified into something that felt weighty.

This deep emptiness is a defining feature of contemporary American Jewish life. We have built a Judaism of sustainability and comfort. We invest in programming, in education, and in experiences designed to make Jewish identity broadly appealing and accessible. We believe that if we just explain our traditions clearly enough, make our rituals resonant enough, connect the idea of Jewish nationhood to people's lives skillfully enough, young Jews will choose to build their lives around Judaism in its fullest sense. However, you cannot only think your way into deep commitment, and you cannot program it into existence. Sacrifice is ultimately required to build commitment, while optionality corrodes it.

“What many American Jews practice today is not really a religion or even a tradition. It is a feeling, a cluster of typically dormant emotions that surface when they light Hanukkah candles, attend a Passover seder, or sing Kol Nidrei on Yom Kippur.”

What many American Jews practice today is not really a religion or even a tradition. It is a feeling, a cluster of typically dormant emotions that surface when they light Hanukkah candles, attend a Passover seder, or sing Kol Nidrei on Yom Kippur. There is nothing wrong with those feelings, but feelings are the fruit of deep commitment, not its root. The foundation of Jewish life is obligation: the sense that being Jewish exacts real costs on how you live, what you prioritize, and what you are willing to give up. When comfort becomes the organizing principle, obligation becomes negotiable. The foundation we have built erodes, and each generation holds the tradition a little more loosely than the last.

Once the foundation is gone, the feelings eventually follow. You can pass down a belief, an obligation, or a way of life. Transmitting an emotion is harder. The feeling that surfaces when you hear the shofar blow is either earned through deep understanding of what stands behind it, or it is felt as an expression of genuine obligation to it. Each generation must arrive at it themselves, through their own sacrifice and their own choosing. Increasingly, they do not. And when critical junctures inevitably occur—meaning a moment when our religion might suddenly demand something of us—decades of opting for comfort may then push people away from Judaism entirely.

For most of Jewish history, this was not a problem, because Judaism was almost never optional the way it is today. Belonging to a Jewish community required adherence. Sometimes that adherence was chosen, but more often it was enforced, either by internal communal pressure or by a world that refused to let Jews assimilate. Obligation was not a virtue cultivated in isolation; it was, for centuries, the given condition of Jewish existence. Only in the open societies of the modern West, and in America most of all, has that pressure vanished. What remains, for many, is sentiment. And a Judaism built on sentiment alone will not survive the generations, because there is nothing concrete enough to pass on.

“Obligation was not a virtue cultivated in isolation; it was, for centuries, the given condition of Jewish existence.”

Despite this, I do not believe that American Judaism is doomed, nor that comfort is incompatible with meaning. What I do believe is that we, American Jews and the institutions we have built in our own image, have lost something essential in our collective effort to make Judaism easy, enjoyable, and reducing it to little more than sentiment. That loss is why so many young Jews feel the same emptiness I felt at seventeen. It is why so many of my peers readily set aside the burden of Jewish identity. Many are drawn instead toward progressive political identities, secular individualism, or the frictionless path of assimilation into broader American culture. Others go the opposite way: making Aliyah or adopting very stringent Haredi Judaism.

Not every American Jew must move to Israel, serve in the army, and intentionally put themselves in harm's way. Although I do believe every Jew should, I know most won't; a demanding Judaism can't hinge on everyone making that choice.

Instead, each of us must contemplate what our Jewish identity demands of us, wherever we are. Aliyah and service are one expression of that demand, not its only form. A demanding Judaism, whichever form it may take, is a worldview and a way of life.

A demanding Judaism means choosing a profession not only for personal gain, but also for what it contributes to the world. It means acquiring wealth not to build a larger house, but to invest in just causes and people in need. It means showing up to synagogue not for nostalgia or community alone, but to genuinely wrestle with the texts we claim to value and build an honest Jewish intellectual life accordingly. Above all, it means letting Judaism pave the path before us, rather than carving Judaism in our own image to fit the life we already desire.

My friend was right: the Judaism of our youth was like vegetarianism. One lifestyle option among many, costing nothing, demanding nothing, and ultimately meaning nothing. The question every American Jew must now answer is what their Jewish identity is demanding of them and whether they are willing to honor that debt. The commitment, the depth, and the sense of being claimed by something larger than yourself... none of these things arrive on their own. They must be earned, and the only currency Judaism accepts is sacrifice.

On Certainty

Alma Bielenberg

IT HAD BEEN ten minutes since he drained their last drops of fresh water. Or maybe an hour. It felt like a year. A man lies flat on the deck with his right knee up, pointing at the sky and its lazy clouds.

As the boat rocks, his head rolls like a glass bottle. The sun stains his face a hearty red. When he opens his mouth, it seems to crack.

"It all looks the same."

His friend draws up his chin, then settles back against the deck.

"Seriously." The man insists. "Identical. All the same."

His head rolls side to side, and nothing changes.

The men drift back into silence. It is stillness, and it is the dizziness of heavy, scintillating sunlight.

That night, not the next night, a few hours later, or more, the man couldn't sleep.

"Did you see the sunset?" he whispers.

His friend couldn't sleep either. Without shifting, he whispers back.

"Yes. I was here. Next to you."

"What did it look like?"

His friend frowns before he remembers how to tell a story.

"Everything was blue. Then everything was golden. Now everything is black."

The moon nor the stars gaze on. It is quite close to black.

"But what did the sunset look like?"

The friend croaks a dry sound of frustration. "I already told you." They fall asleep.

It must have been some days before, more than one and less than four. The sun was setting, and they both found beauty in it. The man steadied his head and pointed his gaze where the sun leaned into the horizon. The two friends sat shoulder to shoulder, and it appeared to one of them to tell a story.

"Have you heard of the King of Swallows?"

"No. Never."

"The world of the Swallows is a world not much like our own. It is full of twists and turns and crimps that cannot be straightened. If you tried to walk in a straight line there, you would be whirled and spun around like dry cotton in the wind."

"How do you get anywhere?"

"Most don't get to choose where they go. Except for the King of Swallows. His steps flatten the whims and the wisps of the atmosphere. Only he can get from here to there when he wishes."

“But how come?”

They looked off at the place where the sun had been.

“Is that what makes him King?”

A minute later, or three, the man’s head drifted back, his eyes drawn like magnets to the stars.

“It used to be that every swallow moved with the whims and the wisp. They darted and swirled. They knew no landing. They had no King.

“Then came a swallow who happened upon a strip of gold. With his beak, he bent it into a ring and wore it on his head. The swallow sat with his ring, waiting to be wisped away. He fidgeted impatiently, fixing his gaze on a patch of berries. Hunger tightened his stomach. The swallow wished to be at the patch, and soon he was.

“From then on, that swallow was King, crowned in gold.”

The men wake up from their sleep while it is still dark. One croaks and cracks and sits himself up. His throat burns and itches with thirst. Slowly, he parts his lips.

“Do you remember my wedding?”

His friend opens his mouth, but no sound escapes.

“I wore a gold ring. You were there. Don’t you remember?”

His friend faces the water. The ocean pulses in its ceaseless motion. All of it. The men watch. The sun, stretching and yawning, begins to rise.

“I got married, and I wore a gold ring. You stood beside me. We danced, remember?”

His bottom lip twitches. His brows tighten as if drawn together by an invisible stitch. The man waits for his friend to turn, head backlit by the sharp and low rays of the rising sun.

“My eyes are watering,” the friend whispers. His speech is small, almost still. “This is the brightest orange I’ve ever seen.”

“But it isn’t gold.” The man leans forward, head heavy over shoulders. “I’m sure of it. Don’t you remember?”

The friend parts his lips. With the last moisture in his throat and the liquid slipping from his eyes, he begins to speak.

“That was a long time ago. You wore a gold ring. I stood beside you. I’m sure of it. It is more true now than it was then. Now it is cast in gold. You and I, we cast it in gold. You were so happy then. You cast something very good. When you stepped, the ground came up to greet you. I stood beside you, and it was the highest point on earth. It was gold. And it twisted around your finger like a ring. The sky was the brightest blue, and then it was like gold.”

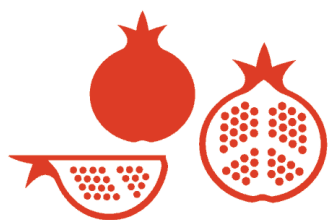
“Yes. That’s what it looked like.”

The men lie flat, suspended between the soft rays of the early morning sun and the slow breath of the ocean. Their heads roll gently side to side.





Shabbat Table by Shayna Rudoren



An Interview with Dr. Rivka Press Schwartz

Miriam Goldberger

FOR THIS INAUGURAL ISSUE OF *The YARID*, Miriam Goldberger, a member of the editorial board, sat down with Dr. Rivka Press Schwartz to hear her perspective on the Jewish future. Dr. Schwartz is the Associate Principal of SAR High School and the Director of Research and Program Development at SAR's Machon Siach. She served as a Fellow at the Kogod Research Center at the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America and earned her PhD from Princeton University in the history of science. Their conversation, below, has been edited for clarity, length, and precision.

MIRIAM: I think you have an interesting perspective given that you work with high school students and are familiar with a younger generation of the Jewish community. I'm wondering what you find the most worrying about the Jewish future? And what do you find the most hopeful?

DR. SCHWARTZ: I think that as a historian by training, I get very frustrated when people say "this is the worst that things have ever been." Things have been worse, and the Jewish people have survived a lot.

I mean, I will say this to you, and you can decide whether to print it or not—but if you think about October 7th, as horrific as it was and as traumatizing as it was, 1,200 Jews massacred is not on the scale of Jewish history. I don't know how far down you'd have to get on the list of massacres in Jewish history until you got to the number 1,200, but you'd have a ways to go.

I'm not minimizing the seriousness of it. I'm not minimizing the trauma. I'm not minimizing the pain. I'm not minimizing a particular way in which people who thought that living in a Jewish state protected by a Jewish army—they were secure and safe—all that is true. The point is not to minimize any of that. It is only that this feels acutely more awful than anything else because it's what we live through, we remember, but it is not by the measures of Jewish history acutely more awful than anything else. So that is, I guess, what we call cold comfort.

MIRIAM: I am curious to hear about the ways in which you think the period we are living in is unique or distinct.

DR. SCHWARTZ: We spent 2,000 years being confronted by the dangers, risks, and threats of powerlessness, and we have really elaborate ways theologically and otherwise to face the problem of powerlessness. Today, we are confronted by the challenges and problems of Jewish power, and I'm not sure that we have the ways we need yet to think about these issues. This is true in the United States even though our community's narrative is one of powerlessness, beleagueredness, and antisemitism. The American Jewish community wields enormous wealth and power in ways that we don't always want to acknowledge and which require us to think with more rigor and moral clarity than we do.

MIRIAM: As a historian, and specifically, a Jewish person who is a historian, do you think that there are certain movements or moments, either in Jewish history or history in general, that you find instructive for this one? Things that they got right that we're missing or forgetting?

DR. SCHWARTZ: One thing that I find instructive, which I've been talking about a lot for the past 10 years, is that we tell stories about social movements pushing for change and we tell neat, tidy narratives. You know: Rosa Parks didn't give up her seat on the bus, and then Martin Luther King had a dream, and then John Lewis walked across a bridge at Selma, and then there was a civil rights movement.

And if you look at the history of Black Americans fighting for their rights, you're talking about a fight that took decades, if not generations.

If we want to make things better, whether it's in our Jewish community or American community or anywhere else, we have to be in this for decades if not generations. One of the things I say to my students who are very frustrated with things they see in specifically the Orthodox community—that's where I both live and work—is I say to my students: you are very frustrated because on your timeline things are very frustrating, but see, I remember the 1990s, so I know how different a place you are in than we were in 30 years ago. That doesn't mean you shouldn't feel frustrated, but I also can see how much change has been made. One of the things I learned about in graduate school is the contingency of history.

Nothing had to turn out the way it did. And when, you know, textbooks say things like, “From the moment the Missouri Compromise was agreed to in 1820, the Civil War was inevitable,” historians will rip their hair out of their heads. The Civil War was not inevitable. Or “From the moment that Adolf Hitler acceded to power in 1933...”—no, it wasn’t. Nothing was inevitable. A lot of different choices could have been made differently along the way. Nothing is foreordained about the course we’re on.

The contingency of history is wild. It’s wild to see it, to live it in real time. It can be incredibly frustrating, but it also means we can do things differently and think about things differently.

MIRIAM: How do you think that we can encourage young Jewish people to be invested in the future, especially when, as you have shared, change often happens over a long period of time, and there are ways in which we’re in a particularly challenging moment?

DR. SCHWARTZ: I don’t know everybody but in the particular little piece of the Jewish community where I spend my time, I think that the biggest challenge to seeing young Jewish people work to make the kind of change that is needed inside and outside the community is that for many of them, the imperatives of what I’m broadly going to term American meritocracy and the socioeconomic class demands of our community don’t make space for the kind of work. She says as she speaks to somebody who is an undergraduate at Harvard College—no shade to undergraduates at Harvard College.

People will attribute it to the high cost of modern Orthodox life, although I pretty much reject that contention. I think that that’s the cost of a certain kind of upper-middle-class or lower-upper-class life that our kids aspire to, that looks pretty much the same whether parents are sending their kids to SAR, or Horace Mann, or Fieldston, or Riverdale Country. I don’t actually think it’s a function of Orthodox life. I think the cost of day school tuition becomes a convenient thing to hang onto, but there are plenty of people who are living the same reality.

The thing that I think our young people don’t have right is what Pharaoh identified in Shemot Perek Hey (Exodus Chapter 5), when he says: increase the workload on the people and they won’t spend all their time on this fanciful nonsense about redemption. And I think we’ve made ourselves Pharaoh. We are increasing the workload on ourselves so that we have no time for thinking about a better future.

I will tell you about someone whom I randomly happen to know about, a journalist, whose name is Garance Franke-Ruta. When she was a high school student, she got involved in the early days of ACT UP, fighting against AIDS at a time when the federal government was ignoring AIDS and the activism was entirely grassroots. They became the biggest experts in the country on what treatments were possible.

She functionally dropped out of school and was doing this work that was life-changing and life-altering. She's now a middle-aged person. She's a journalist. She has a "real" job, but there was a point in her life in which she stopped doing anything else in order to fight to save the lives of a community that was basically treated as disposable by the country.

Young people who could be doing that in our community I think often are not because of the system that we've all bought into, in which the end product of the system is maintaining the lifestyle to which you're accustomed.

I will say—and I think it's important to say—that many young people in our system are demonstrating their idealism and commitment in other ways. They're demonstrating their idealism and serious commitment to Torah learning, and going into the rabbinate, Jewish education, Jewish communal work. So it's not as though no one in our system is doing that; that idealism does get manifested in other ways.

MIRIAM: What is one specific thing that you believe is absent, misunderstood, or underappreciated in Jewish life but holds real promise for the future?

DR. SCHWARTZ: The Orthodox Jewish community does not begin to appreciate the ways in which we benefit so enormously from the social capital, as Robert Putnam would call it, we have accumulated in our community, from the rich web of networks, associations, relationships, connections, and organizations. The community will help you with everything from finding a job to helping you with an interest-free loan, to looking out for you at a time of loss or bereavement, to organizations that are going to help cover the cost of fertility treatments, IVF and other assisted reproductive technologies, if you can't afford them. We are enormous beneficiaries of that incredibly rich web of associations in a way that I'm not sure that we actually always see.

And I think that trying to see it and notice it would let us think about both what we have, what other people might not have, how we think about that in connection to our community, and how we think about that in connection to American society.

There's a guy named Yuval Levin who's a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, which is a right-wing think tank, and he wrote a book called *A Time to Build* about the need for more organizations and associations and connections in American life. He argues we are actually better off when we are not isolated, atomized people moving through space but part of organizations, of which churches, synagogues, religious associations are only one example.

There is real promise in recognizing how enormously valuable, powerful, and wonderful that is.

MIRIAM: How is your vision for a better America related to your vision for a better future for Jews or a better future for the Jewish community?

DR. SCHWARTZ: We are going to build a better America by relating to each other as actual human beings. There's a political scientist at Tufts named Eitan Hersh, who wrote a book called *Politics Is for Power*, which I think is an amazing book about how the purpose of politics is to accumulate power so you can make change, which means that sitting on social media and being mad is not politics. You're not doing politics.

And when you actually do politics—whatever that means—you join your local political party organization; you canvass for a candidate; you knock on doors; you meet other real human beings in real space and do real work together. It is soul-nourishing, it is community-building, it is actually affecting change.

And to the extent that what the Jewish community has is real networks and real connections with people in the world, we should notice that, value it, and maybe think about how to share that with other people.

What's going to help us in America is actually putting down our phones, going to actually meet other Americans, and working with them together on the things that need working on.

So any time that I'm feeling miserable, getting out into connection with other human beings is energizing and sustaining, and sitting alone at home marinating in your anxiety, fear, and anger is depleting and immiserating.



The Honest Fool

Professor Abraham Socher

FOR THE greater part of the twentieth century, the most learned humanist in Cambridge was a jaunty Litvak with a thick accent named Harry Wolfson. He had learned Gemara in Slobodka, studied philosophy with Santayana, and he wrote lucid, witty all-American prose about the attempt by medieval Jews, Christians, and Muslims to reconcile their respective scriptures with Greek philosophy.

He taught generations of Harvard students the history of this “triple philosophy,” which, he held, was inaugurated by one Jew—Philo—and laid to rest by another—Spinoza—some 1,600 years later. But what he taught, above all, was clear, unpretentious thinking.

Toward the end of his career, he walked into the Appleton Chapel of Memorial Church to preach a little sermon on Psalms 14:1, “The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God.”

The fool, who in the Scripture lesson this morning is quoted as saying to himself “There is no God” was not a fool in the ordinary sense of the term . . . People, he knew, believed in God; and by God, he knew, they meant a Being above and beyond the world, the Creator and Governor of the world, a God who revealed Himself to men and told them what to do and what not to do . . . And so honestly and bluntly he said to himself and to others, ‘There is no God’ . . . He did not start to quibble about the meaning of God. He did not offer a substitute God.

Wolfson’s main targets were contemporary theologians (including, perhaps, his new Harvard colleague Paul Tillich), whom he called merely “verbal theists.” He wondered “how many of the things offered as God by the lovers of wisdom of today are not again only polite but empty phrases for the downright denial of God by him who is called fool in the Scripture lesson this morning!”

The great literary journalist Harold Stearns once said that Wolfson taught him “to cast all forms of ‘bluff’ far from me.” This lesson, that neither theology nor scholarship should be a bluff, that one should write and speak clearly about important things and mean it, is still worth taking to heart, even, or especially, for fools like us.

Embracing a Legacy of Apikorsim

Rebecca Voorwinde

“**F**REETHINKERS AND RADICALS will meet at the Yom Kipur [sic] Picnic,” reads an advertisement for an event arranged by the Progressive Library of New York, the circle around the radical Jewish organizer Emma Goldman, in 1907. At the turn of the century in both Europe and America, the Yiddish for “freethinkers” was *apikorsim*, referring to those who embraced radical political views like secularism, socialism, communism, and Zionism.¹ The origins of the term, however, are politically agnostic. The first time the term *apikores* appears, in the Talmud, more than 1500 years ago, is to reference a person who does not believe that the Torah is divinely inspired, a heretic. More generally, the term can be used to refer to a Jew who is willing to question authority and engage critically and thoughtfully with the challenges of their times.

It is time to reclaim the term *apikores* to allow for a new generation to recognize serious, critical thought as a bedrock of Jewish responsibility.

A good *apikores* is both learned and in dialogue with those whose views differ from them. One cannot question something that one knows nothing about and so an *apikores* must devote themselves to deep study.

Study alone is not enough, one must also find learning partners. The Talmud talks of partners who sharpen one another, challenging understanding.² The ninth century biblical scholar Hiwi al-Khorasan was labeled an *apikores* for his book *Two Hundred Questions*. We know of the book’s existence because of the refutations that Jewish scholars like Saadia Gaon and Abraham ibn Ezra wrote. Those who question extend argumentation towards a more robust and complex truth.

¹ Sala Levin, “Calling All Heretics,” *Moment*, 2011.

² Babylonian Talmud, Taanit 7a.

The Forward's “Bintel Brief” is full of stories of apikorsim and religious Jews working and living alongside one another, on the same sweatshop floors and in the same tenement apartments. We would do well to access the visceral sense of proximity and mutual care that past generations understood to be inescapable, even across ideological divides.

In today's atmosphere of atomization and polarization, it's easy to assume that we've never been so divided or to ask ourselves whether our community can hold together amidst questioning and conflicting voices. Let's be brave enough to trust that dissent and critique can be a source of strength. Jewish educators today should inspire learners to interrogate everything but to do so with a sense of love and responsibility.

Imagine if every Jew embraced that little *apikores* inside of himself and also made space for the *apikores* sitting beside him? Imagine if Jews were to, once again, model what it means to be freethinking, taking seriously the challenges of our time and our mutual responsibility to make things better together.

Lishmah

Rabbi Jason Rubenstein

EVERY TIME we ask, “So, can this piece of Torah make us better people?” or say, “Let’s distill the meaning of Yom Kippur”—we attend to something important, and without intending to or even noticing, deprive ourselves of one of Judaism’s most vital gifts.

During my years of playing bassoon we never asked, “How will Beethoven 7 make me, and the other members of the orchestra, better people”; understanding the “meaning” of Mahler 1 (which I don’t) wouldn’t compare to my transcendent, triumphant exhaustion as its last notes faded from the concert hall twenty-six years ago and which remains one of my most distinctive and cherished memories. Nowadays in the fading light of a late-summer evening, when I play catch with my sons or watch them watch the Red Sox attempt another impossibly scrappy comeback in Fenway, enveloped by the smells of cut grass and the lowbrow liturgy of “Yankees suck,” I would never insult those islands of eternity by asking, “What are they for?”

That would be, as Bernard Williams put it, one too many questions. An activity being “for” something else reveals a hierarchy: the something-else is the ground of value, and the activity takes on significance by virtue of its connection to the something-else. But no idea or goal exhausts or even expands the value of Mahler’s heartbreak, Beethoven’s triumphs, or the satisfaction of a baseball caught or a victory tenaciously snatched from the jaws of defeat—they are of transcendent, independent, significance.

The living Torah that our Rabbis of blessed memory gave us isn’t particularly good at creating consensus around the choices the Jewish community faces in navigating history—and if we look to Judaism primarily for politics, we’ll come away disappointed, with little to offer our children. Our tradition, more than anything, is an incredible medium—above even symphonies and baseball—for creating shared experiences of intrinsic, transcendent value.

Lishmah, “sufficient unto itself,” is the Rabbis’ watchword for the how and why of Torah, for whispering in the ear of the One (if real, good; if imagined, perhaps better) who raises the fallen, frees the captive, and resurrects the dead; and of inhabiting

an order of time oriented around the sufficiency of a moment. Life will be, and should be, beset by unending uncertainty and struggle—the question is whether it will be punctuated by portholes that reveal glimpses of the heavens, moments like the ones Maimonides described in the *Guide*, “like a flash of lightning that for a moment illuminates the landscape, which remains slightly different in a person’s mind even after the darkness returns.”

In the most poignant image of what it means to be Jewish, our Rabbis imagine a couple beset by infertility; rather than separate in hopes of future children, the wife says to the husband, “There is nothing in this world I love more than you.” The future is uncertain and our efforts to secure it are divided and divisive (and always have been, and always will be). We are the recipients of a differently-shaped gift, of practices and seasons and gatherings that are sufficient to themselves, *lishmah*. We can and should aim to build Jewish spaces and practices that we love more than anything else in this world. Everything else is at best commentary; at worst a distraction.

Reverence and Responsibility

Ilana Kurshan

TALMUD STUDY is a practice that can shape and enrich a person's religious and intellectual life. The Talmud, composed by the rabbis living in the land of Israel and Babylonia during the early centuries of the Common Era, covers a vast array of Jewish law and lore. As a literary corpus, the Talmud is driven by disagreement—dispute is the engine that propels the Talmud forwards. But the Talmudic sages rarely dismiss an opinion from the outset. Rather, Talmudic reasoning is about trying to come to terms with opinions that differ from one's own. Talmud study demands that we try to make sense of another person's viewpoint as a necessary step in refining our own. As such, the study of Talmud—a practice rendered increasingly accessible in an age of translations, podcasts, online classes, and an impressive array of study aids—cultivates humility, open-mindedness and intellectual growth, teaching us that we cannot know what we think and what we believe until we first encounter other voices.

The Talmud is meant to be studied in havruta, with a study partner serving as interlocutor. But even when studied alone, the Talmud is an inherently dialogical text, unfolding as a series of conversations among rabbis whose statements are juxtaposed even though they may have lived centuries apart. Much of the Talmud is strange and foreign to our modern sensibilities. As such, it highlights the way ideas and practices change over time, insisting that we view our own habits and practices as culturally and historically contingent and make decisions in light of those who came before. It is a reminder that all knowledge is cumulative, comprised of and informed by the understanding of others. Talmud study instills in us both reverence and responsibility: It reminds us that we are indebted to the wisdom of our ancestors, and we are all charged to pave the way forward for our descendants.

Jewish Noise

Dr. Jeremiah Lockwood

IN THINKING about the contemporary Jewish world that *The YARID* hopefully and bravely addresses, I am drawn back into my perennial preoccupation and private obsession with noise—specifically the noises made by Jews, and even more specifically, noise as a category of devotional, liturgical and meditative practice. Noise has long been familiar in the world of Jews, taking the form of the hum of *davenen*, the heterophony of bodies at prayer nearly but not at all in unison, each praying subject creating their own world of sound that invites and deflects precise ensemble.

The noise of Jewish life, spurned by the outsider gaze and at times a source of acute shame and embarrassment, is also one of the identifying features of Jews. Just as much as books, Jews are the people of noise, animating our texts through musical speech that renders words into melodies, initiating a tight dialogue between text and embodied practices that interpolate ghosts into our midst.

The stakes of Jewish community run very high, with an ever-present sense of crisis that threatens to splinter our internal life into fragments, let alone having the courage to venture out into that intimidating marketplace of ideas and debates this publication's name invokes. It is my hope that the venturesome young minds at work in these pages will make room for Jewish Noise, paying heed to its ugly beauty (to quote Thelonious Monk), and will recognize in each companion's voice that the impulse to make yourself heard amidst the structural non-structure of Jewish heterophony is a sacred act.

Political Imagination

Dr. Masua Sagiv

WE ARE stuck in the present: in our troubles, in its constraints. The need to respond constantly to an avalanche of events—a lifetime of events condensed into two and a half years—has consumed nearly all our energy. Across the Jewish world, we have been living in a prolonged state of reaction, of fight or flight. And so, perhaps without even noticing it, we have neglected one of the most important political muscles we have: the ability to imagine a future that does not yet exist, and then begin building toward it.

Thirty-two years ago, Israeli PM Yitzhak Rabin stood in the desert and gave a speech upon the signing of the peace treaty between Israel and Jordan:

“I look around me from this stage to the Arava, and I see a barren desert on the Jordanian side and on the Israeli side. There is almost no life here, no water, no well, only mines.

Such have been the relations between Israel and Jordan for the past forty-seven years: a barren desert. Not a single green leaf. Not a tree, not a flower. A bold decision was needed, sometimes with gritted teeth, to overcome this dryness, the aridity between the two peoples, the mines... The desert was in the hearts of both peoples for almost two generations. Now is the time not only to dream of a better future—but also to make it.”

What Rabin models here is not optimism, and not fantasy. It is political imagination: the capacity to look directly at a landscape of desolation and still insist on the possibility of another future. Not a far-fetched future, but one that can be drawn, spoken about, and slowly brought into being.

For Jews, this is not a luxury. It is part of our inheritance, and our responsibility. In modernity, what transformed Jewish existence was not only our ability to analyze danger or respond to crisis, but our ability to dream politically: in Zionism, in the building of Jewish sovereignty, and in the creation of vibrant Jewish life in North America. If Jewish life today feels trapped in response mode, then we need to recover that capacity deliberately: to practice imagining the future we want to inhabit, and to speak about it even when it feels distant. Without it, we may know how to survive the present, but not how to build beyond it.

Malchut Shel Chesed

Rabbi Chaim Strauchler

FOR MUCH of the modern era, Jewish life rested on an implicit promise: power would be constrained by law, markets by norms, and states by rules that protected the weak without requiring benevolence. Jews, long experienced in minority survival, flourished within this structure. That promise is now fraying. We are entering a world where power feels less obligated to justify itself, rules are optional for the strong, and cruelty no longer hides behind necessity. In such a world, antisemitism is not an anomaly but a recurring feature. Judaism has lived here before, though modern Jewish institutions were not built for it.

R. Moshe Feinstein's description of the United States as a *malkhut shel hesed*—"a kingdom of kindness"—deserves reappraisal. He was not naïve about America's virtue. Rather, he recognized something historically unprecedented: kindness embedded in legal and civic structures. Hesed was not dependent on rulers' moods; it was routinized and reliable. For Jews, this meant contracts enforced despite prejudice, rights upheld despite hostility, and space for Torah to flourish openly. It was a gift, not a covenant.

As that structure weakens, hesed can no longer be assumed. Law becomes selective, enforcement political, sympathy conditional. Antisemitism returns, portraying Jews as symbols of unwanted constraint. The response cannot be nostalgia or faith that institutions will restrain themselves. Judaism has never trusted power to do so voluntarily.

Jewish history outside America offers instruction. In Babylonia and medieval Europe, Jews survived without power by building strong internal systems—halakhic authority, communal courts, mutual aid, disciplined obligation. Powerlessness sharpened coherence rather than dissolving it. Judaism endured not by demanding kindness, but by assuming its absence.

Modern Jewish life internalized the language of rights and inclusion because it fit a rules-based world. As that language weakens, Judaism's older grammar becomes essential again: duty, restraint, fear of Heaven. Halakha was designed not for comfort, but for continuity under pressure.

A world without rules becomes predatory. Judaism has always known this. Its ethics bind the strong to the weak and insist on limits even amid cruelty. The end of a rules-based order is not the end of Jewish purpose; it is a return to familiar terrain. Judaism does not require universal kindness to survive, but it does require moral courage, internal coherence, and fidelity to law when law is unfashionable. The question is not whether Judaism can adapt—but whether we remember how.

The Ever-Singing People

Nessa Rapoport

I AM A woman of Ashkenazi rabbinic descent who has been obsessed since I was a child with the global music of Sephardi/Mizrachi *piyut*, the devotional poems and music of the Jewish people across the centuries, from Andalusia to India.

Piyut [p'YOOT], derived from the Greek word from which “poem” is drawn, is sung in Hebrew, Judeo-Persian, Ladino, Arabic, Judeo-Arabic, and many other languages of the countries where we found ourselves, as well as originating and sung continually in the land of Israel. We have chanted *piyut* on feast days and fast days to celebrate, grieve, yearn, and praise.

Jews are from everywhere, with music that has been porous to the cultures in which we dwell and to which we disproportionately contribute. Among my favorite decidedly non-sacred examples is “White Christmas,” written by Irving Berlin, born Israel Beilin in 1888, who fled as a child with his family from the pogroms of his Russian *shtetl* to create much of the Great American Songbook and offered the world a Christmas “just like the ones I used to know.”

Hardly.

Music cannot be confined within borders or boundaries. It belongs to all of us, to every imagination, transcending any attempt to own or contain it. Countries that have declared themselves our mortal enemies have listeners who love our music and reach out to say so in comments on YouTube. We are, in golden eras and beleaguered times, the people of eternity.

In the words of the virtuoso *paytan*, R. Haim Louk: “All the people of Israel began with a prophecy, the prophecy of our great teacher, Moshe. And there is no prophecy without song.”

Of tens of thousands sung by communities of our people, here are seven that accompany me through my days. (Having inherited plaintive chants and lullabies from Poland and Russia—with a soul to match—I am especially ardent about melodies in a major key.)

It is essential to have an address, to know where you come from, to live in authenticity with cultural confidence, to recognize our responsibility to one another, and to embrace particularity in order to be truly universal.

Piyut is an encounter and an awakening.

*

Link to playlist for the following *piyutim*. For *mah navu alei*, see link below.

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLcfmAD7DzVrI>

Persia/Iran: *ashreichem*, Morin Nehedar

Morocco: *el chai*, The Piyut Ensemble, Yad Ben-Tzvi

Iraq: *mah navu alei*

<https://piyutnorthamerica.org/recordings-by-tradition-1>

[scroll down to “Melodies from Iraq”: *mah navu alei*], Piyut North America

India: *tzur mishelo*, Rahel Musleah

Turkey: *ki eshmera*, The Parvarim

Balkans: *Quien supiese y entendiense*, Yehoram Gaon

Yemen: *im nin'alu*, Ofra Haza

*

© 2026 by Nessa Rapoport

Chosenness and Normality

Professor Derck Penslar

IN THE Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Shabbat* 156a/b, the rabbis indulge in speculation about the effect of astrology on a person's character and fate. R. Hanina goes so far as to say that the Jewish people has a guiding constellation. But that statement is quickly countered by numerous rabbis affirming that "there is no constellation for the Jewish people." More than a millennium later, in the 1500s, Rabbi Judah Low of Prague (known as the Maharal) explained the importance of this debate. He presented astrology as an aspect of natural law, to which all nations are subject save for the Jewish people. The fate of the Jews, according to the Maharal, is determined directly by God. The law of the rise and inevitable fall of nations does not apply to them.

Do Jews believe this today? Some do. So do many non-Jews. And you don't have to be religious to think this way—that everything about the Jews, including both their survival across time and the horrific persecutions they have endured, is distinct. Whether coming from Jews or Gentiles, religious or secular, loving or hostile, this view insists on Jewish uniqueness. The passion that the state of Israel evokes stems largely from people seeing it as unique and not as just another country in a flawed and violent world.

For almost three hundred years, since Jews began to experience emancipation and social integration, they have tried to square these opportunities with traditional ideas about Jewish uniqueness. In our own day this question is more important than ever. What do Jews have in common with other minorities? How is antisemitism similar to racism, and how is it different?

Should we view the state of Israel as a product of the same forces and the same limits that shape other states?

These aren't simple questions. People won't agree about how to answer them or the ramifications of those answers. But they must be asked, and although debating them could be a source of division, they can also bring us together out of common concern and *ahavat Yisrael*.

An Interview with Modi Rosenfeld

Daniel Pesin

TWO YEARS after the pandemic, a synagogue in Scarsdale was still at war with itself. One faction insisted on holding services outside; the other would only pray inside. The issue had deeply divided the congregation, and the schism was bitter and painful. Until someone decided that enough was enough, and paid whatever it cost to bring in Modi Rosenfeld.

“They took the massive ballroom and put chairs everywhere, and I stood in the middle with a microphone,” Modi tells *The YARID* over video call. “And for the first time, the entire congregation laughed together. It was raw. No one was writing letters, there were no committees, nobody hated each other.”

Modi had previously been brought in to repair a similar situation, a “synagogue that was ripped in half between pro- and anti-Trump, to the point where they had two minyanim, one downstairs, one upstairs.” The first time that the community came together was for his comedy show.

At the time, Modi didn’t have a name for what happened in those rooms, but today it is his life’s mission.

Modi Rosenfeld, aged 56, is described as “one of the comedy circuit’s most sought after performers.”¹ Modi has been featured on Jimmy Fallon, HBO, CBS, and ABC, and last October was the subject of a major *New York Times* feature profile. He has hundreds of thousands of followers on social media, and video clips from his shows amass millions of views online. Born in Tel Aviv before moving to the U.S. aged seven, Modi studied at Boston University and began his career as an investment banker before becoming a stand-up performer. *The Hollywood Reporter* has voted him one of New York City’s top 10 comedians, and in 2018, Mayor Bill de Blasio declared June 26th “Mordechi Modi Rosenfeld Day” in the city.

1 <https://www.unitedtalent.com/talent/comedy-touring/modi>

When Isaac and I speak with Modi, he is fresh from a visit to the Yard and the Law School, where he gave a talk—“I had sushi with the kids, but I tell everybody I’ve lectured at Harvard”—and is on holiday with his husband, Leo, in between tour dates. He is very generous with his time, assuring us that he is in no rush: after our interview, “I’ll have another coffee, which might give me more energy to go take another nap.”

This edition of *The YARID* focuses on misunderstood, absent, or undervalued elements that hold real promise for the future of Jewish life. When I ask Modi what he thinks fits this description, he doesn’t need to use words to answer. Modi reaches into his bag, takes out a yarmulke, and lifts it up to the camera. On it, in block capitals, is emblazoned his catchphrase, “Moshiach Energy” (“moshiach” is the Hebrew word for “messiah”). “That’s it, guys,” he says, “that’s where the hope has to be. Living in a Messianic era. It’s not spoken about enough: it gets treated like some far-out philosophy nobody can actually connect to. But imagine living in an era where everyone’s in harmony, everyone’s at peace.”

Modi asks us to picture a world in which leaders channel their energy into health, vaccines, and cures instead of conflict. He emphasizes that the Messianic era is “not just a Jewish idea. Christians, Catholics, Muslims... it’s part of everybody’s goal.” Until we get there, Modi believes in “creating Moshiach Energy”: “Simple, if your friend is sad, your parents miss you, you buy them tickets to come see a show with me. You’ve made them laugh. You’ve created a little Moshiach Energy. Even if you use their own credit card to buy the tickets, it doesn’t matter. You still caused them to get to a place of happiness. A friend of yours is down, you go help him. That’s it. That’s creating Moshiach Energy, and it’s so undervalued and so easy to do.”

To Modi, this must be at the forefront of every conversation, including the political: “When someone says ‘what should be done about Israel—this party should do this, that one should do that’—okay, yes, but just: Moshiach. I know it sounds nuts, but Moshiach thinking should be in the process.”

Modi first made the connection between comedy and Moshiach Energy when the Covid-19 pandemic began to wind down. During lockdown, he had been doing shows online (“like this,” he adds, “in a Zoom box”) but the energy was different when in-person shows resumed. “People were coming in, and they hadn’t seen other people in a long time,” Modi says, gesturing with his arms like a scuba diver navigating unknown depths to show the novelty of the experience. “They’d been in their pods, in their families, in their homes, in whatever, and now they’re in a theater.

And all of a sudden, they're laughing together, and I was like: whoa, what is that?" he says wide-eyed.

"I felt an energy that I'd probably felt before, but never quite like that. That's Moshiaich Energy."

The role of the comedian, in Modi's eyes, is to bring happiness to those who are sad. He feels that "the next step from there is bringing peace where there isn't peace," and then tells us the Scarsdale synagogue story with which this piece begins. Modi's job is therefore one that brings healing, which he sees as a Jewish obligation. "Why, percentage-wise, are Jews so massively overrepresented in comedy, when we're such a small people? It's because it's a form of healing. And when God said we're the chosen people, He didn't say chosen to be the biggest nation, the most powerful, the wealthiest—even though we're not doing badly. He said chosen to bring over healing, to bring over culture, to bring over study, to disseminate. That's why you look at hospitals, universities, museums, and there are Jewish names on all of them. That's what we were meant to do, and comedy is a form of healing. That's why, proportionally, Jewish people are just a lot more involved in it."

Modi's Jewishness is an ever-present source of inspiration for his work. In an interview with the *New York Times*, he declared that "Many comedians are comedians that happen to be Jewish. I'm a Jewish comedian." I ask what this distinction means to him.

When Modi gets on stage, he says, his audience knows within a few sentences that they are listening to a Jewish guy from New York. "I always see the world in a funny spin, in a Jewish spin, too. But it's told in a way anyone can follow. It's a portal into the Jewish world through laughter and pride. Before I was married to my husband, I never really talked about being gay, because it was never a part of me, but being Jewish always was a part of me." Modi sees Jerry Seinfeld's act, on the other hand, as less focused on Jewishness: "it's about his interactions with people, his observations. That's what I mean when I say that."

Modi roots his concept of Moshiaich Energy in Jewish thought, in several ways. "Moshiaich is everywhere" in Jewish liturgy and practice, he believes, and gives the line "Al yedei David Mashiach tsidkecha" as an example. He also draws significant inspiration from the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, and says that the "single biggest burst of that energy I've ever felt" was standing in front of the Rebbe, whose "entire mission, his entire life, was: go help somebody, and you'll receive bracha v'hatzlacha, blessings and success. That's the formula."

Modi refers to the Rebbe's practice of handing out dollar bills and blessings to thousands of visitors, with the intention that they would give the dollar to charity: "When he handed out that dollar, it was: go help somebody with this, and you'll receive blessings and success. However you can help, with whatever you have—even if it's not money, just a smile, a hello—that's you creating Moshiach Energy."

For some years now, Modi's viral short clips have often popped up on my Instagram feed, periodically with some mention of his signature catchphrase. I have long been fascinated by the interaction between Jewish teaching and Modi's "Moshiach Energy". Traditional Jewish thought, as I understand it, emphasizes that to bring the Messiah, people must do acts of goodness and kindness, performing the mitzvot or the Noahide Laws. The call to action, not just thought or feeling, is an important element of the Jewish tradition.

Modi speaks much about bringing Moshiach Energy through laughter and shared connection, across different communities and people. He insists that he comes at it from "the same angle" as Jewish tradition. But is there anything he hopes his audiences will take into or change in their lives after the show ends?

"Absolutely," Modi replies. Firstly, he notes the fact that he is getting his audience members to think about Moshiach Energy and talk about it afterwards. Having people recognize that "it's not just a Jewish thing" also matters. Perhaps most important is the further spreading of positive Moshiach Energy, through bringing somebody else to the show. "I was doing a show on Long Island once, a 2,000-seat theater, and I looked out and saw two or three women wearing hijabs in the audience. I asked someone to invite them to the meet and greet afterwards, even though I could tell from where they were sitting that they didn't have tickets for that. They were three nurses who'd somehow found me, and they brought along their nurse friends who were Jewish to see the show. They had said, 'Have you ever seen this Jewish comedian?' 'No.' 'Come on, let's go together.' That's it. That's it in a nutshell."

In response to those who might question whether his comedic approach is enough at a time of rising antisemitism, Modi asserts that "through laughter, you can do so much more than lecturing and pontificating. My job is to bring laughter to someone who maybe doesn't understand the Jewish world, or has hatred toward us—that's my job. When you land on my page, my Instagram, my Twitter, whatever else we're on, it's laughter. You're going to have a laugh, or find out where I'm going to be, or hear something from my podcast."

"Other people's job is 'Israel has the right to exist, the 1948 mandate, the Balfour

Declaration, the borderline of this, there's a toilet we found from the year 840 with Jewish writing on it—that's their journey. The Noa Tishbys, whatever else, bless their hearts. Mine is through laughter. And when people who aren't Jewish catch onto it, they're like, 'Okay, yes.'"

When asked whether the golden age of American Jewry is ending, as Franklin Foer's *The Atlantic* article puts forward, Modi replies that "it depends on your algorithm. It depends what it's feeding you. If all day long you're getting antisemitic content, finding out what neighborhood somebody spray-painted a swastika in, this guy said this in *The Atlantic*, that guy said that in the Pacific—yeah, the golden age is over. But if you're looking at the fact that Donald Trump's daughter is keeping Shabbos, and her husband's been building unity between Arab countries and Israel, it depends how you look at it. You could write the article either way and back it up either way, plenty of ways, if you know how to write, which I don't."

Modi sees pride as the future for American Jews, including those of the younger generation. "I think there's a shift coming toward the better. And why not think that? I think pride in being Jewish is on the way, and pride in understanding that the goal is Moshiach. Look at you two; you could've gone into whatever you're studying and just done that, but instead you made the—what's it called—*The YARID*? I really wish and hope for pride, and acceptance of other people. That's the main thing."

It seems fitting to close by returning to Modi's beloved Moshiach Energy. "It has to be in our process of thinking, especially in the intellectual circle. Just bring Moshiach into that thought. You have to think that it's a possibility." Modi sees it as "acceptance and love—it's inclusion, not judgment. Do acts of kindness, acts of good, a mitzvah, just help other people—make someone else happy, and it brings happiness back to you. Everybody has the potential to bring Moshiach Energy".



Selected Bibliography

- Adorno, Theodor W. *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*. Translated by E. F. N. Jephcott. London: New Left Books, 1974.
- Ainslie, Mary J. "China: Why There Has Been a Sudden 'Surge' of Antisemitism in the People's Republic." *The Conversation*, November 16, 2023.
- Ainslie, Mary J. "Chinese Philosemitism and Historical Statecraft: Incorporating Jews and Israel into Contemporary Chinese Civilizationism." *The China Quarterly* 245 (March 2021): 208–226.
- Alper, Becka A., and Alan Cooperman. *Jewish Americans in 2020*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2021.
- Bava Kamma. Babylonian Talmud.
- Ben-Canaan, Dan. "The Chinese Perception of the Jewish People." Lecture series, Heilongjiang University, Harbin, 2022.
- Ben-Canaan, Dan. "Engineering History: The Reconstruction of the Harbin Old Synagogue: A Case Study in Interpreting and Rebuilding a Past." Unpublished manuscript, Sino-Israel Research and Study Center, Heilongjiang University, Harbin, May 2018.
- Benjamin, Mara. *The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought*. Indiana University Press, 2018.
- Benjamin, Walter. "On the Concept of History." 1940.
- Boyarin, Daniel. *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.
- Boyarin, Daniel, and Jonathan Boyarin. "Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity." *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 4 (1993): 693–725.
- Brانover, Alexander. "Twenty Four Hours in Harbin." *The Times of Israel* (blog), June 30, 2024.
- Bresler, Boris. "Harbin's Jewish Community, 1898–1958: Politics, Prosperity, and Adversity." In *The Jews of China*, vol. 1, *Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, edited by Jonathan Goldstein. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1999.
- Cohen, Elliot E. "The Age of Brass." *Menorah Journal*, 1925.
- Cooper, Julie E. "A Diasporic Critique of Diasporism: The Question of Jewish Political Agency." *Political Theory* 43, no. 1 (2015): 80–110.

- DellaPergola, Sergio. "World Jewish Population, 2024." In *American Jewish Year Book 2024*, edited by Arnold Dashefsky and Ira Sheskin. Cham: Springer, 2025.
- Dubnow, Simon M. *Jewish History: An Essay in the Philosophy of History*. Translated by Henrietta Szold. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1903.
- Dubnow, Simon. *Nationalism and History: Essays on Old and New Judaism*. Edited by Koppel S. Pinson. New York: Atheneum, 1970.
- Foer, Franklin. "The Golden Age of American Jews Is Ending." *The Atlantic*, March 4, 2024.
- Gann Academy. "Our Mission & Values." Accessed June 15, 2026.
- Gering, Tuvia. "China's Turn Toward Antisemitism." *Jerusalem Strategic Tribune*, November 14, 2023.
- Gering, Tuvia. "The Great Flip Forward: Understanding China's Sudden Shift from Philosemitism to Antisemitism." Forthcoming.
- Gordis, Robert. Tribute to Elliot E. Cohen. *Commentary*, 1959.
- Grayzel, Solomon. *A History of the Jews: From the Babylonian Exile to the End of World War II*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1947.
- Greenberg, Irving (Yitz). "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity, and Modernity After the Holocaust." In *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era?*, edited by Eva Fleischner. Ktav Publishing House, 1977.
- Greenberg, Irving (Yitz). "Voluntary Covenant." In *Contemporary Jewish Responses to the Shoah*, edited by Steven L. Jacobs. University Press of America, 1993.
- Groberg, Kristi A. "The Life and Influence of Simon Dubnov (1860–1941): An Appreciation." *Modern Judaism* 13, no. 1 (1993): 71–93.
- Haime, Jordyn. "Chinese Philo-Semitism: Why China Admires the Jewish People." Student research project, University of New Hampshire, 2020.
- Haime, Jordyn. "Since Oct. 7, Antisemitism Has Exploded Online in China. Here's Why." *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, November 8, 2023.
- Hertzberg, Arthur. *The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter: A History*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989.
- Horn, Dara. *People Love Dead Jews: Reports from a Haunted Present*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2021.

- Jewish Federations of North America. "Amid War, Jewish Federation Giving Rose \$1 Billion in 2024." Accessed June 25, 2026.
- Jewish Wisdom and Family Education: The Cultural Code of the Most Intelligent and Wealthy Nation in the World.* 2005.
- Kogman-Appel, Katrin. "Hebrew Manuscript Painting in Late Medieval Spain: Signs of a Culture in Transition." *The Art Bulletin* 84, no. 2 (2002): 246–72.
- Kraemer, David. "The Great Theorizer of Diaspora: The Maharal of Prague." In *Embracing Exile: The Case for Jewish Diaspora*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2025.
- Kranzler, David. *Japanese, Nazis and Jews: The Jewish Refugee Community of Shanghai, 1938–1945*. New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1976.
- Laytner, Anson H., and Jordan Paper, eds. *The Chinese Jews of Kaifeng: A Millennium of Adaptation and Endurance*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017.
- Lazarus, Emma. "The Jewish Problem." *The Century Magazine* 25, issue 4 (1883): 602–611.
- A Leap of Faith. Directed by Ella Bahaire. BBC Worldwide, 2013.
- The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*. Created by Amy Sherman-Palladino. Amazon Prime Video, 2017–23.
- Marx, Dalia. "The Missing Temple: The Status of the Temple in Jewish Culture Following Its Destruction." *European Judaism* 46, no. 2 (2013): 61–78.
- Mendelssohn, Moses. *Jerusalem, or, On Religious Power and Judaism*. Translated by Allan Arkush. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1983.
- Micah 6:8.
- Mintz, Sharon Liberman. "Moses Mendelssohn." My Jewish Learning. Accessed June 15, 2026.
- Mishnah. Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) 1:6.
- Ninety-Second Street Y. *Deborah Lipstadt on the State of Global Antisemitism*. YouTube video, September 9, 2024.
- Pew Research Center. "A Portrait of Jewish Americans." Accessed June 25, 2026.
- Predictive History. "Secret History #END: Pax Judaica." YouTube video, December 17, 2025.
- Qohelet (Ecclesiastes). "Hevel havalim! Hakol hevel!"
- Rawidowicz, Simon. "Israel: The Ever-Dying People." In *Israel: The Ever-Dying People, and Other Essays*, edited by Benjamin C. I. Ravid. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1986.

Rembrandt van Rijn. *God Making His Covenant with Abraham*.

Ca. 1658. Pen-and-ink on paper, Kupferstich-Kabinett, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden.

Ross, James. "China's Search for the Secrets of Jewish Success." *Tablet*, January 25, 2016.

Secrets of Jewish Success: The Golden Rule of a Miraculous Nation. 2004.

Sefaria. "The Messianic Era." Accessed March 15, 2026.

Seligman, Scott D. *Murder in Manchuria: The True Story of a Jewish Virtuoso, Russian Fascists, a French Diplomat, and a Japanese Spy in Occupied China*. Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2023.

Shalom Hartman Institute. "About the Shalom Hartman Institute." Accessed June 15, 2026.

"Shanghai's Jewish Refugee Museum Reopens." Xinhua, December 9, 2020.

Song Lihong. "From Enemy Studies to Area Studies: Reflections on Israel Studies in China." *Journal of Israeli History* 41, no. 2 (2023).

Stephens, Bret. "For America's Jews, Every Day Must Be Oct. 8." *The New York Times*, November 7, 2023.

Tanakh. Mishlei (Proverbs) 27:17.

Temkin, Samuel. "Luis de Carvajal and His People." *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 32, no. 1 (2008): 79–100.

Trilling, Lionel. "Wordsworth and the Rabbis." In *The Opposing Self: Nine Essays in Criticism*, New York: Viking Press, 1955.

Ungar-Sargon, Batya. "How the Obsession With Jewish Continuity Perverts Our Liberal Values." *The Forward*, September 14, 2017.

Unholy. Instagram Reel featuring Alex Edelman. Accessed June 15, 2026.

Vickers, Edward. "Celebrating the Humane Superpower: Chinese Nationalism, the Holocaust and Transnational Heritage Politics at Shanghai's Jewish Refugees Museum." *Holocaust Studies* 29, no. 4 (2023): 566–587.

Wald, Shalom Salomon. "Chinese Antisemitism 2021–2025." Jewish People Policy Institute, February 19, 2026.

Xu Xin. "Tracing Judaism in China." *Social Sciences in China* 31, no. 1 (2010).

Yerushalmi, Yosef Hayim. *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*. University of Washington Press, 1996.

Zhou Xun. *Chinese Perceptions of the "Jews" and Judaism: A History of the Youtai*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2001.



Art by Lea Grossman



theyarid.org