



The Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry
The Lester and Sally Entin
Faculty of Humanities
Tel Aviv University

Perspectives

2021–2023

Thoughts on Contemporary Jewish Life




**The Center for the Study of
Contemporary European Jewry**
The Lester and Sally Entin
Faculty of Humanities
Tel Aviv University

Perspectives

2021–2023

Thoughts on Contemporary Jewish Life



The Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry at Tel Aviv University supports research on Jewish history, culture, politics, and interfaith relations. It publishes the flagship annual Antisemitism Worldwide Report and the annual For a Righteous Cause Report. Every year, the Center organizes three seminars on Jewish affairs that are open to the public and publishes eight issues of Perspectives – analytic essays on contemporary Jewish life and thought.

You are welcome to visit our website: <https://cst.tau.ac.il>

Cover images: “Bahrain Synagogue,” “Morocco,” “Helsinki Jewish Community Center,” “Estonia-Ukraine,” “Mea Shearim Pashkevil,” and “Sophia Synagogue” – Uriya Shavit; “Stockings” and “Apples and Honey” – Carl Yonker; “Narendra Modi” – Wikimedia Commons; “Malmö Synagogue” – Shutterstock; “Ancient Israel” – Deposit Photos; “Fractured America” – Stock Photos

Graphic Design: Michal Semo Kovetz, TAU Graphic Design Studio

January 2023

Table of Contents

Foreword	5
The Ultra-Orthodox and the Law of Return Uriya Shavit	7
Hindutva and the Jews Shiven Nath	13
Let There Be Light Carl Yonker	17
Is There Anything Else? Uriya Shavit	19
Crying Foul Carl Yonker	23
Man of the Year Uriya Shavit	27
Notes from Helsinki Uriya Shavit	31
Together Again Carl Yonker	35
The Harvard Lazy Uriya Shavit	37
United We Stand Ronen Lubitch	41
On an Optimistic Note Uriya Shavit	45
Putin, Enemy of the People Uriya Shavit	49
The Unthinkable Uriya Shavit	53
Online Hatred Giovanni Quer	57
Antiochus, Santa and My Son Carl Yonker	59
A Stunning Decision Talia Naamat	61
A Royal Message Dina Porat	65
Home Cantor Peter Lebenswerd	67
It's Trivial Hanna Luden	71
An Ice Cream Story Uriya Shavit	73
The Demons of Science Fiction Inna Shtakser	75
Jews and Roots Uriya Shavit	77
Word on Contributors	81

Foreword

Every year, the Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry publishes eight issues of Perspectives, articles featuring ethnographies, commentary, and analysis on Jewish identity and culture. We are pleased to share with you this compilation of twenty-two issues published between 2021 and 2023.

The Ultra-Orthodox and the Law of Return

The big picture is being missed, and it is scary

February 2023

Uriya Shavit

There is a crucial disparity between ultra-Orthodox and secular Jews. The ultra-Orthodox are exposed to mainstream secular media, whereas the secular have no idea what Haredi media writes. Which is why the secular miss the big picture.

The suggested amendment to the so-called grandchild clause in the Law of Return is an example.

If the current erratic coalition would abide by the agreements that bind it together, by Passover, the amendment might be enacted.

In its early years, Israel allowed almost any person self-described as Jewish to become a citizen. This was at a time when the country was eager for population growth, and not many wanted to make it their home.

In 1970, a legal challenge led the Knesset to define more clearly who is a Jew and who has a right to citizenship. Yet the two did not overlap.

Under the law, a Jew was any person born to a Jewish mother (unless the person chose to convert to another religion) or who converted to Judaism. Yet non-Jews who had a spouse, a parent, or even one grandparent who was Jewish were also entitled to become Israeli.

As a result of the Law of Return, hundreds of thousands of non-Jews (from the point of view of Rabbinic law) were naturalized. Their contribution to the prosperity and the defense of the state has been tremendous, and their integration into secular Jewish society has been successful.

Why are ultra-Orthodox politicians so keen on closing the door to more such migrants?

Today, the ultra-Orthodox make up slightly less than two in ten Jews in Israel. Current demographic trends suggest that by 2065, approximately four in ten Jews in Israel will be ultra-Orthodox.

The ultra-Orthodox are the fastest-growing community in the Western world. This is happening for a reason.

Studies suggest the ultra-Orthodox are the happiest group in Israel, which is, in general, a land of happy people.

Haredi happiness has to do with some comforting aspects of their communities, including strong faith, impressive solidarity, leading lives not dominated by materialistic ambitions, and relief from the burden of making individualist choices.

Yet what has made the ultra-Orthodox communities so strong and prosperous is also the exceptional and historically unprecedented privileges they enjoy in Israel. These privileges are sponsored by the majority, which is not ultra-Orthodox, in an incredible display of self-suicide.

State funding enables half of Haredi men to not work and instead dedicate their time to textual religious studies or, in the case of some, to the pretense that they do so.

State concessions exempt Haredi men from military service. The ultra-Orthodox justify these concessions through cumbersome theological excuses, which are, at best, embarrassing. Haredi adulthood is thus sheltered – from physical harm but also from exposure to modern norms.

A huge, and in part gratuitous and nepotistic, religious bureaucracy provides the community with well-paying jobs.

The state welfare system encourages the creation of large families, and state-supported educational institutions groom generations of children who lack the diverse and demanding knowledge required by the current job market.

Haredi communities promote enclave mentalities in the deeper sense of the word, imbuing their children with a sense of superiority by teaching them that the outside world is morally corrupt and transient. Yet they enjoy the full advantages the outside world provides, including a thriving hi-tech economy, a superb health system, and a mighty defense force.

The ultra-Orthodox leadership cannot risk losing the system of privileges that made the Haredi way of life flourish.

To maintain its privileges, it needs king-making political power.

Currently, the Haredi vote accounts for almost one-third of the seats needed to form a coalition, and their leaders do not eye the top job. This is an excellent starting position.

Still, to maintain king-making political power under the present demographics, ultra-Orthodox parties need two things to happen: for the Arab minority to be considered an illegitimate political partner and for the secular center-left not to join a coalition with the non-ultra-Orthodox elements on the right.

This is why the ultra-Orthodox parties so aggressively campaigned against the first government that relied on the support of an Arab party, which was also the first government in the nation's history led by a religious Jew. This is why they aligned so uncompromisingly with Prime Minister Netanyahu, who – from the moment he was vetoed by the center-left due to the corruption charges against him – has become a gift unable to stop giving.

Ultra-Orthodox politicians are correct in arguing that the centrist parties would have given them everything the right gives them and more. That they declined the offers reveals their ability to differentiate between long-term and short-term interests.

The long-term interest of ultra-Orthodox parties is not to be in government at any cost. Rather, it is to fortify a political structure where a stable coalition cannot be formed without them – until the day comes when it would be demographically impossible to do so anyway.

Contrary to recent conventional wisdom, demographics in Israel still favor the secular. Together with the secular-traditionalist, and the secular who came to the country through the Law of Return but are not Jewish, the secular Zionist group comprises more than six out of ten Israeli Jews.

For now, that is.

Hence a partial explanation for the desire to see the doors shut before most of the prospective migrants currently eligible to become citizens under the Law of Return. These potential arrivals,

none of whom is ultra-Orthodox, may contribute to the economy and to the nation's defense, but they risk demographically balancing the more than triple-fold higher ultra-Orthodox birthrate.

Why wait for 2065 if demographic processes can be hastened?

Yes – changing the Law of Return would, among other things, stir resentment in Jewish communities across the world, where only a minority is ultra-Orthodox. But that is no price to pay from the point of view of the ultra-Orthodox leadership, which has an existential interest in seeing the secular majority erode.

Few debate that Israel would economically collapse and socially disintegrate if current demographic trends persist and the ultra-Orthodox do not radically change their ways.

I often hear the opinion that ultra-Orthodox society is indeed changing and will change more as it grows.

There is little evidence for that, except on the fringes. The reality is that communities of all sorts and kinds are reluctant to voluntarily give up the privileges they have. Rather, they concoct explanations for why they deserve those privileges.

There is a human tendency to confuse alarming data with false data. The facts are that Israel is racing to catastrophe.

The assumption that shifting demographics would force transformations in the Haredi society is based on the assumption that their leaders care about the same things the secular majority cares about. A thriving, high-tech, scientifically based economy, for example.

Read the Haredi press, please. Listen to Rabbinic sermons. Pay attention to the contempt and the animosity towards human-made laws, Judaism that is not Rabbinical, values that are not medieval.

What we have are two publics with almost nothing in common and with entirely different priorities.

Minorities usually rely on supreme courts to protect their rights. Yet the ultra-Orthodox think of themselves as a moral majority at present, and know they will become a demographic majority in the near future.

The absence of a sense of urgency facilitates the secular self-suicide. While the priority of Haredi politics is to preserve the privileges system that allows the endurance and thriving of their communities, ending this system does not top the secularist agenda.

It helps that ultra-Orthodox leaders have been very clever in picking their fights and advancing their interests.

By and large, the Israeli public sphere dramatically secularized over the past four decades. You know what I mean if you tried to buy milk or watch television on a Saturday morning in the 1980s.

So, rest assured: even under the current government, minimarkets will remain open on Saturday across the country, although the legal premise of their operation is questionable. Even under the new government, some so-called premier-league matches will still take place on Saturday, although this tradition infringes on the religious convictions of at least a significant minority of the Jewish players.

There will be much smoke, screening the real important developments.

What the new government *will* do is massively protect and expand ultra-Orthodox privileges, including by budgeting Haredi autonomous education and by shielding Haredi communities from

external influences. The silent majority will not care because this has no immediate bearing on its current way of life.

Secular Israelis are a unique kind of frog. Their pot is getting steadily hotter, but only their tadpoles will burn.

There is another nuance to the secularist self-sponsored suicide, and it adds to the understanding of Haredi obsession with the Law of Return.

The ultra-Orthodox idea of Judaism is clearly defined. The secular notion of Judaism is not.

The great revolution of Zionism was to consider Jews a nation, one entitled to a nation-state. Ultra-Orthodox theology rejected this concept.

Yet Zionism never systematically and coherently defined what makes a person part of the Jewish nation (See Perspectives 19: Is There Anything Else?).

Israeli society established de-facto orientations and practices that make for a minimalist yet effective framework that binds the majority as a nation. This identity framework involves the Hebrew language and Hebrew culture, ceremonial routines rooted in Rabbinic Judaism, and a blending of attitudes and practices that reflect the many diasporas and influences from which Israeli society is composed.

Non-Jews who came to the country through the Law of Return integrate into this identity framework even if they don't convert.

Around half of secular Israelis are believers. For them, the practices of Jewish-Israeli secular identity are also a means of connecting to the divine, even though they do not believe in revelation as such.

Much of this majority identity grew bottom-up, without structure or coherence. And much of it – from kosher certificates to giving children a bit of Yiddishkeit to Jewish burials – relies today on the ultra-Orthodox establishment.

This puts the secular in a needy position. Their obscure Jewish identity is frail and seeks Haredi affirmations and orchestrations.

There is a good reason why Rabbi Gilad Kariv of the Labor Party freaks ultra-Orthodox politicians more than anyone else. If reformed Judaism was to gain ground in Israel, Israeli secularists – still the majority – may become just slightly less dependent on the ultra-Orthodox establishment.

By rejecting the notion that a non-Jew can become a citizen by joining the secular Jewish framework of identity without becoming a Jew in accordance with Rabbinic law, the ultra-Orthodox leadership shrewdly seeks to delegitimize the very existence of that identity.

I recently heard from two liberal Israeli politicians that the problem with their political side is that it is too elitist and intellectually inclined.

This old rhyme is self-congratulatory nonsense.

On the contrary, the problem of the Israeli left is that it has been intellectually insipid and devoid of new and exciting ideas for decades. For its electoral revival, it must address the Big Questions it has avoided, starting with: who are we and what do we believe in?

Secular Zionism cannot be defended unless people know what it means and what it stands for.

There are good reasons not to be optimistic.

The current leadership of secular Zionists reflects and aggravates its intellectual crisis.

The President, a former member of the Labor party, is an exceptionally nice man, but he appears to be afraid of his own shadow. And it is not the shadow of a giant.

The self-indulged leader of the opposition, a former television anchor and bank presenter, is a terrible speaker for the democratic, liberal, pro-rational and pro-equality camp, given that he runs what is arguably the most despotic major political party in the West, is not a high school graduate, his military record is made of urban legends, and he has a life-long habit of inspiring through fortune-cookie slogans and getting basic facts wrong.

The Supreme Court is under threat, but, regardless, it was under its so-called activism that the immoral system of Haredi privileges prospered. Justices cannot do for the polity what the polity fails to do for itself.

If secular Zionism and a liberal State of the Jews are to survive, it is only through the serious reckoning of the secular majority with the harsh realities, and it cannot be expected to start at the top.

Jewish communities worldwide have a role, too. They must make it clear that their unconditional support for Israel would be withdrawn if it becomes a medieval society where their Judaism is considered second rate.

This is the third sovereign Jewish state we are talking about, and with strike three, you are usually out.

Hindutva and the Jews

A welcomed alliance, and a warning

January 2023

Shiven Nath

In 1947, India gained independence; shortly thereafter, in 1948, the State of the Jews was born. Since its independence from the British, India has remained a secular nation. Though predominately Hindu, it is home to the world's third-largest Muslim population.

Today much has changed.

India seeks to become a Hindu nation like Nepal. Its efforts to do so drive it closer to Israel.

As with Israel, India, too, had a very tumultuous beginning as the subcontinent was divided into two nations.

During the partition, 4.75 million Hindus were massacred and displaced, the memory of which haunts the minds of many Hindus.

Concurrently, in 1947, India faced a war with its new neighbor, Pakistan, and the Pakistani Army occupied parts of Kashmir. The territorial dispute over Kashmir with Pakistan remains a bone of contention.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian People's Party), the dominant political force in India today, has long admired the Zionist state.

In his book, *Hindutva*, first published in 1923, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966), a revered nationalist figure, called for the creation of a Hindu state and looked forward to the fulfillment of the "Zionist Dream" of Palestine becoming a Jewish state.

Like Zionism, *Hindutva* – the ideology Savarkar formulated – fuses national and religious identities. Indian politicians such as the economist Subramaniam Swamy, one of the current leaders of the BJP and a member of the upper house of parliament, have stressed the close bonds between *Hindutva* and Zionism and the need for India to be a strong state as hostile neighbors like Pakistan surround it in their speeches.

In India, many find Swamy's reasoning unassailable – India has been colonized, looted, and plundered for centuries, first by the Mughals and then by the British. Hence, it is imperative for the country to be inviolable when it has a rogue neighbor like Pakistan.

To support his arguments, Swamy used the terrorist attacks on Bombay as an example. According to Swamy, both Jewish and Hindu societies were targeted in the 26/11 attacks, aided and abetted by Pakistan.

Calls for "Zionist Israel" and "Hindu India" to curb Islamic extremism have become common in Indian political discourse.

India and Israel share a much deeper bond than defense or tackling terrorism. Politically, land has become a focal point in the politics of Hindutva, as in Zionism. Hindutva leaders have widely praised the controversial West Bank Jewish settlement model for solving the conflict in Kashmir.

Emulating such a model can be onerous but not impossible, as Hindus and Kashmiri Pandits historically inhabited the valley. Moreover, Kashmir prospered economically and culturally when it was ruled and administered by the Hindus.

Israel has always been unequivocal and consistent in its support towards India over the insurgency-wracked region of Jammu and Kashmir, even when the government decided to repeal the special status given to Kashmir in 2019. The move revoked the constitutionally granted autonomous status that it had in India for many years.

Following in Israel's footsteps, India passed a law known as the Citizenship Amendment Act in 2019, which gives citizenship to Hindus from neighboring countries while denying this right to Muslims.

The law bears a striking resemblance to Israel's Law of Return, under which Jewish people from across the globe can gain citizenship. Israel even provided India with robust support when the citizenship law was passed, despite facing international criticism.

Violent demonstrations broke out, with protestors decrying the law as "discriminatory towards minority groups." This is erroneous – India has long welcomed different religions, including Jews, who have faced little persecution throughout their long history in the subcontinent.

Propagators of Hindutva have championed Israel's ideals of being a strong Jewish Nation. Political leaders and Hindutva activists like Mohan Bhagwat, the head of the right-wing extremist organization Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS), have often sung Israel's praises, using the symbolism of strength and might.

In a 2015 speech, Bhagwat expressed his concern over India's "weak" military preparedness and argued India should learn from Israel's example of "tit-for-tat" as hostile neighbors surround it.

Indubitably, he mentioned that Israel overcame its adversaries and prospered in the field of technology and agriculture. So much so that he stated that India is "a backward country" compared to Israel.

The RSS's views toward Israel run deeper. They consider Israel an ancient civilization and culture that is to be appreciated and admired, but also a modern nation that successfully established a democratic state in a hostile environment.

A growing ideological convergence about the image of a "strong state" in terms of a militaristic and security-oriented approach has appealed also to the BJP leadership. In its vision, the BJP wants India to be identified as a nation with strong military might like Israel.

An example encapsulating this image is when India successfully conducted surgical strikes in Pakistan in 2016. In a speech, Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated, "Our army's might is being discussed across the country. We used to hear earlier that Israel has done this. The nation has seen that the Indian Army is no less than anybody."

During the Gaza War in May 2021, Tejasvi Surya, a BJP parliamentarian and RSS supporter, tweeted, "We are with you. Stay strong, Israel," while the BJP spokesman in Chandigarh, Gaurav Goel, wrote, "Dear Israelis, you are not alone, we Indians stand strongly with you."

India has every right to continue its quest to be a Hindu nation and inculcate the values of Hindutva, just as Israel has the right to protect its existence as the State of the Jews. However, there are reasons for concern.

In its bid to be a Hindu nation, India appears to be losing its bearings. The democratic foundations of the country are being harmed and weakened.

Since Prime Minister Modi's landslide victory in 2014 and 2019, activists and journalists have found it increasingly difficult to criticize the government and its policies. Attacks on freedom of speech and freedom of the press have shattered the democratic pillars on which India has prided itself for many years. So, too, has the rise of the partisan press and the concentration of media ownership.

The Modi government has successfully curtailed the media's ambition and criticism through intimidation and legislation. According to Freedom House, Modi's government has advanced security, defamation, sedition, and hate speech laws to silence media critics, including the Information Technology Act and IT Rules of 2021 addressing content critical of authorities. In 2022, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) ranked India 150 out of 180 in its annual Press Freedom Index, down from 142 in 2021 and just ahead of Russia.

Hindu nationalists have also campaigned to discourage expressions and speech deemed "antinational," which has contributed to increasing self-censorship.

India must safeguard the liberal pillars upon which it was established, first and foremost, freedom of speech. So must Israel do. They must also assure the independence and strength of their judiciaries. The bond between the countries is welcomed; it must remain a bond between democracies.

Let There Be Light

This is the season of warmth and joy. So why does my family feel under attack?

December 2022

Carl Yonker

It's the most wonderful time of the year again – Hannukah and Christmas in our interfaith home.

Last week, we hosted a small group of kids from my son's first-grade class to make *levivot* (latkes) and *hannukiyot*. Yet, he mostly wanted to talk about Christmas, his Lego Star Wars Advent calendar, and what he had asked Santa to bring him.

Some of his friends don't understand why he keeps talking endlessly about Santa.

As his parents, we indulge him since it brings him such joy.

We take some comfort in the famous Friends episode, where Ross Geller tried and failed to make his son care about the Maccabim instead of Santa.

Between the two holidays, there is no contest for kids.

Christmas holds an unmatched place in his imagination, and his anticipation has been building for months – he wrote his letter to Santa in June and mailed it in October.

As I wrote last year (Perspectives No. 8), we are a family with a shared identity. We raise our boys with affection and respect for two traditions, Jewish and Christian.

To negate one of the religions would be unfair. It would deprive our boys of a heritage that gives them meaning and connects them to loved ones.

As they mature, my sons will begin to shape their own identities.

Israel is our home, and as their father, I increasingly worry as I consider the challenges they may encounter doing so in the coming years as debates over Jewish identity intensify.

The resolution of these debates – centered on the question of “who is a Jew” – will have profound and far-reaching consequences.

Current social and political trends don't leave me with much optimism.

Fears that Israel is losing its Jewish identity helped propel the Israeli right to victory in last month's election and are at the core of ongoing coalition negotiations.

These fears are unfounded.

The country's Jewish identity and character are enshrined in legislation, most recently bolstered by the Nation-State Law stipulating Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people, among other things. The country's Jewish majority is solid.

Yet, the voters and leaderships of each would-be coalition partner – Shas, United Torah Judaism, Religious Zionism, and Otzma Yehudit – believe otherwise. Their rhetoric and demands made in coalition negotiations reflect that they have a problem with my family.

MK Avi Maoz of the far-right Noam party (part of Religious Zionism), who is anything but gentle, secured the position of deputy minister and oversight over the education curriculum.

In the spirit of the season, he accused pluralistic education of “harming Judaism” by “spreading darkness” – darkness being secular progressive and liberal ideas. He vowed to “expel the darkness.”

Maoz also managed to secure the creation of a Jewish Identity bureau within the Prime Minister’s Office. What the bureau will actually do is anyone’s guess, but its very creation reveals the centrality of the issue and the depth of (apparent) concern.

The most egregious demand made by Netanyahu’s would-be partners is to revoke the “grandchild clause” in the Law of Return and restrict the immigration of people with a Jewish grandparent, or who have converted to Judaism in ways that displease them.

Abolishing the “grandchild clause” would significantly impact immigration from the former Soviet Union – from Russia, Ukraine, and elsewhere.

According to the most recent Survey on Religion and State conducted by The Israel Democracy Institute, 98% of ultra-Orthodox and 95% of National Religious do not consider someone with a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother to be Jewish, compared to 50% of secular Jews.

The religious political parties are attempting to set a rigid definition of what is Judaism and who is a Jew. Who and what belong here, who and what do not.

For them, there needs to be a clear separation of spaces between Jewish (as they define it) and non-Jewish identities. The two cannot coexist.

My family feels under attack.

We feel that in the new Israel that is emerging, there will be no space for shared identity.

We fear there will be no place for interfaith families like ours. No place for bad Jews like my sons, who celebrate Christmas and Hannukah.

Is There Anything Else?

*Herzl failed to answer one question.
It still haunts us*

December 2022

Uriya Shavit

The Sofia Synagogue seats almost 1,200 visitors and is one of the most beautiful in the world. Beauty has all sorts of expressions; the most compelling is that which does not require explanation.

No more than several dozen Jews attend this Sephardic temple regularly, but many tourists do. On a sunny winter day, there is a long, patient line at the gates. As in other large and small Western synagogues today, you must pass tight security checks to enter. Security regulations have become particularly strict here since the Burgas terror attack a decade ago.

The equally enchanting Church of St. Paraskeva and the impressive Banya Bashi Mosque are within short walking distance. Few cities in the world bring together the three monotheistic religions in such glory and proximity. There are no security checks at the church and at the mosque.

I was in Sofia to attend a conference on combating antisemitism and preserving Jewish heritage, organized meticulously by the Bulgarian Diplomatic Institute. It was just a day before the elections in Israel revealed to the blind, silent majority of the country that a religious civil war is raging.

I told the Israeli ambassador, Yoram Elrom, how surprised I was to learn that Sofia has so much to offer, historically and culturally. He said this was often the comment of first-time Israeli visitors.

Flying back home to vote, I could not help but think about Herzl's lacuna.

Sofia was a crucial stop for Herzl on his way to and from Istanbul, where, tilting between greatness and ridiculousness, he offered the Ottoman Empire an offer it could refuse.

It was here, on a summer day, at the train station, that hundreds of Jews enthusiastically welcomed the author of the State of the Jews (*Der Judenstaat*). They cheered the Zionist leader, calling him their savior, crying "Next year in Jerusalem," "Long live Herzl," and "Long Live the Jewish People."

It was here that the young, ambitious author of *Der Judenstaat* found out how eagerly awaited his mission was. Here, the intellectual became a leader of people.

The State of the Jews – the erroneous translation of the book's title into English is more than a misfortune – described Jews as a people, one people.

Yet Herzl did not systematically explain what makes a person part of that people and what makes the Jews a nation in the modern sense of the word.

The answers are scattered in the book. One is that nothing but the faith of the forefathers unites the Jews, making them an odd people.

Another is that antisemites are what brings Jews together, whether they want to or not.

Perspectives 2021-2023 – Thoughts on Contemporary Jewish Life

In historical perspective, the first answer is not convincing. If it were true, Herzl would not have become the leader of Zionism, and atheists and secularists would not have pioneered the movement to triumph and continue to dominate it today.

Sadly, there is more truth in the second answer Herzl offered.

It is a fact that Herzl's prophetic sense of urgency developed in direct response to the rise of antisemitism. Several decades into the establishment of political Zionism, antisemitism (and the closure of the gates of America) played a significant role in encouraging the more massive waves of migration to mandatory Palestine that made Zionist ambitions plausible.

More than 120 years have passed, and Herzl's question and answers remain relevant: Is there anything that makes the Jews one nation other than antisemitism?

Speakers at the Sofia conference presented an inspiring depth of activities taking place in Bulgaria and other European countries. Fighting antisemitism decidedly on the legal and educational fronts. Advancing the remembrance of the Holocaust and sharing its universal moral lessons, including through creative, even if controversial, usages of social media. Preserving Jewish heritage sites and bringing back life to Jewish presences.

Indeed, as our Center's soon-to-be-released annual For a Righteous Cause report will show, across the world, Holocaust remembrance and the fight against antisemitism are more intensive than ever before.

None of this would have been possible had it not been for the efforts of Jewish organizations and Israeli ministries and agencies, and most of it is laudable.

Yet, as I was reflecting on the proceedings of the Sofia conference – and other similar events – I could not help but think that the passion demonstrated in recent years by Israel and by Jewish organizations in fighting antisemitism has another and more profound motivation.

There is nothing else.

Nothing else that, currently, Jews from different orientations can passionately unite about. Nothing else that, currently, Jews from different orientations feel deeply just about.

Nothing else that brings Jews together as a nation.

So, synagogues are renovated and cemeteries are restored as part of the fight against antisemitism, family histories are narrated in response to antisemitic propaganda, addressing antisemitism is the main sphere through which Jewish organizations interact with other organizations, whether Jewish or not, and antisemitism is what forges moral and political alliances and breaks them.

All sorts of vicious cycles are opened in the process and reduce Jewish identity to no more than a rejection of bigots.

With synagogues becoming fortresses because of security threats, there is a greater chance that a young European will visit Auschwitz than see the inside of a temple. The implication is that non-Jews see Jewish history as no more than a tragedy.

At the same time, the fight against antisemitism becomes an excuse for cooperating with all sorts of fascists or keeping silent about their doings, as if such a choice is morally justifiable or strategically sane (It is not: fascists, being fascists, are never reliable allies).

Now that former President Donald Trump hosted a Holocaust denier and refused to apologize, will his (former?) Jewish allies renounce him? In what kind of self-righteous bubble have these

people been living to not have understood earlier that politics that thrive on conspiracy theories and prejudices would, at some point, turn dangerous also for Jews?

The kind that exists when people only see themselves.

The fight against antisemitism is a matter of security and honor. It should not be allowed to be the sun around which Jewish existence orbits in the 21st century.

The teaching of Jewish and Zionist history in Israeli high schools has disturbingly largely narrowed down to the teaching of the Holocaust. Hundreds of years of intellectual and social richness have been reduced to a precursor to the Holocaust. Everything that happened after the Holocaust has been reduced to a belated response (Remarkably, pupils remain ignorant even about the Holocaust, but that's another issue).

Some on the Israeli left say the reason for the focus on Holocaust studies is that the system wants to cultivate a “the whole world is against us” mentality.

They are wrong.

The real reason is that the Holocaust is the one and only topic on which there is still consensus among Israelis. Any other aspect of Jewish and Zionist history imposes questions that teachers seek to avoid: What makes someone a Jew in this day and age? What are the origins and what are the moral objectives of Zionism?

Herzl sought to relieve Jews from the specter of antisemitism. The specter is still with us, and in more than one way.

Crying Foul

Were double standards applied to Kyrie Irving? Yes, but not in the way his fans think

November 2022

Carl Yonker

For several weeks, the talk of American sports media has focused on the saga of Kyrie Irving, a seven-time NBA all-star guard who has played for the Brooklyn Nets since 2019.

Irving shared a link to “Hebrews to Negroes: Wake Up Black America,” a three-and-a-half-hour documentary based on a book of the same name by Ronald Dalton.

Dalton promotes a Black Hebrew Israelite (Black Israelism) belief that African-Americans are the true descendants of biblical Israel.

This belief is not inherently antisemitic.

Yet Dalton embraces a more extreme interpretation than do other groups within the Black Hebrew Israelite community. He suggests modern Jews are imposters who have usurped Black people of their religious heritage by promoting the “lies” that Jesus was a Jew and that six million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust. His film includes several antisemitic notions about Jewish power and greed, antisemitic quotes by Henry Ford, and fake quotes by Hitler.

Centered in Israel’s southern town of Dimona, the 5,000-member Black Hebrew community originates in a group that migrated to Israel in the 1960s from Chicago. Dalton is not connected to the Dimona community.

The question remains open whether Irving actually watched Dalton’s film and, if he did, what parts of the film he agrees with and what he does not.

One way or another, a hitherto little-known antisemitic book and film are now bestsellers on Amazon, Apple Books, and Barnes & Noble.

Were it not for Irving, Dalton’s work would have remained in obscurity, his boxes of DVDs and books collecting dust.

That ship has sailed.

We should always keep in mind that management, sponsors, and fans do not own athletes, who reserve the right to speak up their minds, just like anyone else. Yet, with great fame, and great income, comes great responsibility.

At the very least, Irving neglected his.

He initially refused multiple opportunities to apologize for posting the link and doubled down and defended his conduct.

As a result, the Brooklyn Nets organization suspended him, initially, for no less than five games and demanded he satisfy “a series [of six] remedial measures that address the harmful impact of his conduct” before he is allowed to take the court again.

To date, Irving has missed eight games. Regardless of his decision to ultimately apologize, he already caused damage.

Some former players and commentators criticized Irving. They also criticized the hesitant responses of the NBA and Brooklyn Nets, the overwhelming silence of NBA players, and Amazon and other online retailers for offering the anti-Jewish book and film for sale and rent.

However, after Irving was suspended, a new discourse and narrative emerged that, while not absolving Irving of responsibility for his actions, deemed the punishment he received excessive and connected to the color of his skin.

It is possible and indeed legitimate to condemn actions and, at the same time, criticize the punishment meted out.

Lebron James, the greatest active NBA star, did just that. He criticized his former teammate for “[causing] harm to a lot of people,” yet argued that since Kyrie apologized, he should be able to play and called what Irving was asked to do in order to get back on the floor “excessive.”

James’ comments were echoed by other players throughout the league and the National Basketball Players Association (NBPA).

Respected sports commentators like Stephen A. Smith and Shannon Sharpe argued Irving’s punishment revealed a double standard when it comes to what is required of black men to make amends versus others.

Yet, while the double standard they speak of is real, it is not in play in this case, at least not in the way they think.

If they want an example of double standards, they need not look further than Meyers Leonard.

Leonard was a journeyman center for the Miami Heat who, in the spring of 2021, used an antisemitic slur while playing a video game during a livestream on Twitch. Recordings of the incident were widely shared on social media.

The NBA and Miami Heat responded swiftly and in an uncompromising manner, Leonard was suspended, fined \$50,000, and traded from the Heat to the Oklahoma City Thunder, which ultimately severed his contract and released him.

Leonard has been out of the league since.

Not only did the NBA and Heat organization swiftly respond to Leonard’s antisemitic slur, Leonard, too, issued a quick apology that demonstrated contrition, remorse, and sincerity.

He took the initiative in meeting with the ADL and the local Jewish community, held basketball camps for Jewish kids, and spoke at a Chabad gathering at the University of Illinois, his alma mater.

So, on the issue of double standards and using the most salient example for comparison, how does Irving’s treatment compare?

Leonard, whose prominence does not compare to Irving’s, was swiftly punished, and essentially kicked out of the league. Irving, considered one of the best players in league history, would likely have avoided any punishment save for mild rebuke had he not tripled down on defending his tweet.

Irving also maintained his job; the team hasn't traded him or tried to run him out of the league. He will likely soon return.

So yes, there are different standards, just as there are different standards for different players when it comes to officiating on the court.

In this case, the calls went Irving's way, not Leonard's.

Had Irving just apologized, not for his (assumed) embrace of the belief that Black people are the true descendants of Israel, but for promoting views that amount to Holocaust denial, the news cycle would have moved on.

He didn't. What a shame: his actions, and inactions, made an antisemitic publication a bestseller, undermined American Jews' sense of security, unjustly stained a small black community in Israel, and, least importantly but still regrettably, got a sports legend benched.

Man of the Year

How a young Jew saved civilization

October 2022

Uriya Shavit

Thanks to Philip Roth and his alternative history, Charles Lindbergh is remembered today as the would-be fascist president of the United States as much as for being the first pilot to cross the Atlantic in a non-stop solo flight.

Lindbergh was also the first person to be picked as Time Magazine's Man of the Year, and the reason why this journalistic tradition began.

In December 1927, the editors found no worthy news story to put on the cover. They remembered that they failed to have a Lindbergh-related cover story throughout the year. To remedy two embarrassments, they made Lindbergh Man of the Year without investing much thought or effort in the project.

As the decades went by, Man of the Year picks – or Person of the Year, as of 1999 – became more commercialized and peculiar. I doubt even enthused sports fans still remember Peter Ueberroth, Man of the Year 1984. The person who shaped 2001 was, no doubt, Osama Bin Laden, but the editors feared his face on the cover would be too bitter a pill for the readers and chose Rudy Giuliani instead.

This year, the task of Time Magazine editors could not have been easier. Giving King Charles III yet another reason to be grumpy, they will choose Volodymyr Zelensky as Person of the Year 2022.

And what a year, and what a man, will that decision mark.

History is a science, if it is a science, that does not allow repeating an experiment. Yet to truly appreciate the dramatic role the president of Ukraine has played in defending civilization against barbarism, a “what if” is essential.

Had Putin's plan to take over Ukraine prevailed, we would have lived in a very different and dangerous world. The whole of Europe would have come under the bullying domination of a fascist regime, NATO and American leadership of the West would have crumbled, and liberal democracy would have become an ideology in deep retreat, as in the 1930s.

Zelensky's resolve and courage prevented these frightening scenarios from happening. And they did more. The young Ukrainian president, a husband and a father, taught a self-indulged generation of Westerners that freedom is priceless yet does not always come for free. He demonstrated that media-savvy liberals can be tough fighters when liberty is at stake. He showed that being cool – to use a pre-millennial word – can be a means rather than an end.

Zelensky is a historical figure comparable to Churchill, and is, in some ways, more impressive.

Churchill came to power with life-long military and political experience; Zelensky was a comedian and producer before being elected president in a remarkable turn of events that saw a television series anticipate and create reality. Churchill made some fatal mistakes as a commander; Zelensky's record, for now, is almost impeccable. Churchill resisted fascism against all odds; the same goes for Zelensky, yet he faces a much superior nuclear power.

Perspectives 2021-2023 – Thoughts on Contemporary Jewish Life

The man who transformed 2022 from a catastrophe to a promise is Jewish. This is not the defining aspect of his identity, but it is part of it, giving Jews, wherever they are, a reason for pride.

The pride is compromised by the shameful neutral position taken by Israel and by some Jewish organizations from the outset of the war.

The moral and strategically wise thing to do would have been to unequivocally align with the forces of good and recognize the new rise of fascism in Europe for what it is. It is late, but perhaps not too late, to still do so unequivocally and wholeheartedly, or Jews will have a hard time in years to come criticizing the silence and neutrality shown by others in dark days.

As did the Israeli-Arab wars, the humiliation of Putin in Ukraine is demonstrating the superiority of Western weapons systems and intelligence to that of Russia.

To a large extent, Israel is the strong country it is because it has been an integral part of the liberal West. It must remain so and must not leave a single American or European with doubts as to where it belongs.

Urgent, even if discreet, efforts should have been invested in encouraging Russian Jewry to emigrate long ago. Nothing good awaits Jews in Russia. That's one of the reasons why the State of the Jews was established in the first place: so that a safe home will always await the diaspora in hours of need. Where fascism rules, religious minorities can never be truly safe.

The war in Ukraine revealed the ugly faces of some in the West. They should all be held accountable.

These include the wise, the evil, the naïve and the ignorant.

The wise: Journalists and professors who dedicated their entire careers to explaining how clever Putin is. Throughout 2022, they kept offering sophisticated excuses for each of the miscalculations committed by this Nasser-like despot of big-talk and battlefield incompetence. If Putin had committed suicide, they would have explained he was planning a resurrection.

The evil: Disguised as anti-progressives, they could not conceal the pleasure they take in seeing liberal institutions and values at peril. It was discouraging to see throughout the year that not a small number of such Putin-admirers live in Israel.

The naïve: People who thought they can maintain, at the same time, good relations with a fascist regime while enjoying the protection of the liberal systems it seeks to destroy. They will most likely end up with neither.

The ignorant: Good-hearted appeasers, who learned history, but have not learned from history. They proved incapable of understanding what is at stake and how the minds of despots work (a few months ago, I read an essay by a well-known Israeli historian who suggested, though not in so many words, that the West give in to Russia. My spontaneous reaction was: Thank heavens we did not have him negotiate with the Palestinians! Then I remembered that we actually did).

Putin wanted to be remembered as a Peter the Great II. With his messianic zeal for the unification of an imagined volk, anti-liberal conspiracy-tormented mind, disconnect from the limitations of his strength, and total disregard for human life and dignity, he will end up somewhere between Bin Laden and Hitler, depending on how long he will survive and how much more damage he will be allowed to inflict on his people.

It has been said time and again during 2022 that Russia is on the wrong side of history. But history does not have sides. People do.

Perspectives 2021-2023 – Thoughts on Contemporary Jewish Life

From Chechnya to Syria and then Ukraine, the scope of crimes against humanity Putin committed and enabled makes him the worst war criminal the world has known since World War II.

The sad reality is that the only immediate way out of the crisis is for a few good people from Putin's inner circle to do the right thing, then pretend the invasion was entirely his doing. Any other scenario will result, at best, with tens of thousands of additional innocent victims.

The evil that men do lives after them. No good will be interred with Putin's bones.

Notes from Helsinki

Forests, books, and interfaith encounters, a combination that gets you thinking

October 2022

Uriya Shavit

Many years ago, so many that I can't remember the name of the channel or the program, I watched a documentary about Finland. The camera jumped between dozens of faces on the streets of Helsinki and the anchor asked what they had in common. Then came his answer: No one is smiling.

Which is why I was surprised to learn in March that Finland was ranked for the fifth consecutive time as the happiest nation on earth in the annual UN-sponsored index. The index surveys subjective accounts of well-being as well as more objectively comparable data such as GDP, personal freedoms, and levels of corruption. Israel was ranked ninth, the United States sixteenth.

Not a small achievement for an icy country that in the sixties and seventies was struggling to maintain its independence under the threat of Soviet aggression and witnessed massive waves of emigration to Sweden, and, in the late 1980s, suffered a devastating economic meltdown.

I am here for several weeks, teaching a class on the sociology of religious law at Helsinki University.

At some point, I dare and ask my students if they are indeed the happiest.

One says a better definition would be that they are the "most not not-happy nation on earth," implying that Finns mastered the art of being satisfied with what they have and are realistic in their expectations.

Another says that "privileged" is a better definition: They are part of a welfare society like no other in the world that affords them a strong sense of solidarity and security.

I haven't figured out if Finns are the happiest. But they certainly have good reasons to feel relaxed.

I arrived in this land of innumerable lakes and forests from what was the hottest, noisiest, and most crowded summer in the history of Tel Aviv, a city turned construction site, and am cherishing the ability to hike for over an hour in the woods, in the heart of the capital city, without hearing a human voice.

Within four decades, the population of Israel approximately tripled while the territories under its control shrunk by more than two-thirds. Experiencing the vastness of space in the Finnish capital, one can't help but wonder whether the real existential threat Zionism faces is, in fact, ecological.

At the residence of the energetic Israeli ambassador, Hagit Ben-Yaakov, I meet with local Jewish and Muslim leaders to discuss with them their understandings of antisemitism and anti-Muslim articulations. The Moroccan ambassador is also present.

One great irony of our times is that the fate of Jewish freedoms in Europe has become intertwined with that of Muslim freedoms.

The Jewish and the Muslim leaders expressed grave concerns regarding soon-to-pass legislation that would ban Kosher and Halal butchering, and about the possibility that circumcisions would be next.

They do not think racism as such is the motivation for the prospective bans; rather, they argue that the bans are driven by a patronizing pretense to educate minorities about progress and the gross hypocrisy of keen hunters.

I may add that before targeting Kosher and Halal butchering, Finns would be well advised to delegatize the torture of doves, roasters, and horses (let alone of adults) in the circus.

There is no better time to read than on sojourns. At the shore of the Helsinki harbor, I have with me a recently published and elegantly written book by Israeli journalist and author Igal Sarna, “A House in Portugal.”

It documents Sarna’s relocation and retirement in a small, tranquil Portuguese town, where an Israeli can buy and renovate a spacious, picturesque house for a sum that covers several years of rent in Tel Aviv. Just.

The phenomenon is likely to grow. The hi-tech industry made Israel the economic success it is but also made it one of the most expensive countries on earth. For some Israelis, those not in hi-tech, it became too expensive.

With cheap flights and advanced media helping obliterate the meaning of distance, more retirees are bound to reduce Israel to their emotional and cultural homeland while finding a home someplace else, living off their Israeli-earned pensions.

At a beautiful lake resort in the suburbs of Helsinki, I speak to young activists from Nordic Christian Democratic parties. The topic of their retreat: Sustainable Migration.

I ask them what it means to be a Christian Democrat in the 21st century. Is Christian creed their reference and guide for politics? Can there be Christian Democracy without Christianity?

A veteran member of parliament joins, and a generational gap is revealed. What seems obvious to him seems far less certain to the younger activists.

The trees in Finnish Lapland change their color this time of year to majestic gold, red, and yellow, as if crowning the lakes which they surround. It is a long train ride from Helsinki, as many as 12 hours.

Coincidentally, I have with me only two things to read. One is Haim Be’er’s novel, “The Time of Trimming,” which, already in the mid-1980s, pondered whether Israeli Orthodoxy can still chart a religious alternative to messianism and anti-Zionism.

The other is the supplement of *Hamodia*, the daily newspaper of Hassidic Jews (don’t ask, long story). There, the enraged columnist M. Eliraz explains in length why human-made laws lack moral authority and why the Israeli judiciary is a big lie.

Soon Israelis will go to the polls, once again. Voters are in conflict about many issues.

Yet one alarming fact is conveniently overlooked. At this point in time, the best predictor of how an Israeli Jew will vote is not country of origin, profession, education, or income, but the level of religiosity.

Is a religious war in progress and we fool ourselves that the divide is about an individual?

Helsinki is home to some 2,000 Jews, several dozens of them Israeli. The community is rooted mainly in the settlement of veteran imperial Russian soldiers. It operates a synagogue, a cultural center, and an elementary school (up to the eighth grade), attended by around eighty pupils. The language of instruction is Finnish.

The synagogue has a small library that includes hundreds of books in Hebrew. Some fifteen community members use its services. On the wall, a framed picture of Eliezer Ben Yehuda overlooks the richness his project made possible. He would have been pleased.

I once saw Amos Oz, aging and having won almost every literary prize possible, return to the authors' table in Rabin Square at the annual book fair, proclaiming, beamingly and proudly, that he had just autographed some forty copies. The ego of writers.

If my memory doesn't fail me, it is in "Tale of Love and Darkness" that Oz wrote about the comfort authors take in knowing that even if all would be lost, one copy of their works would somehow survive.

Shamelessly I search whether any of my own made it to the abundant Helsinki synagogue library. I locate my first novel, "The Dead Man," on one of the shelves. I feel alive.

It has become common knowledge that education in Finland is the best in the world. Why is it, then, that Israel, not Finland, is Start-Up Nation?

After a few weeks of teaching here, I start to wonder whether some of the core flaws of Israeli education – the chaos, the every-child-is-a-king and scandal or festival mentalities, the cruciality of extra-curricular programs – are more advantageous for innovation than a culture of moderation, egalitarianism and guarantees.

But perhaps this is not so; perhaps the proper question to ask is what could have become of Israel if it had a functioning, modern education system, compulsory for all.

At the Helsinki "Museum for Contemporary Art," overlooking the parliament building, it comes back to me: I have already been here, twenty years ago, trying to kill time before an interview with a member of parliament, and almost stepped on cans of Coke which turned out to be an installation.

Two decades have passed, and the museum is still largely a collection of uninspiring and pretentious political statements.

One hall features the inscription "No War" on a white wall, which can also be seen from the outside. It is explained that the hall was to exhibit an installation by Russian artist Evgeny Antufiev, who withdrew it once the war in Ukraine began. Instead, an anti-war message was installed.

It is not for me to judge Antufiev, but there is no courage in "opposing wars." No more than there is virtue in being against poverty and deprivation. Evil always has a name. Call it by its name, or else you support it.

There are Ukraine flags everywhere in Helsinki, including on the iconic building of the main train station. A century of Russian occupation and half a century of Russian intimidation left no sympathy for Russia among Finns.

The majority of men are conscripted for up to one year of service. There is pride in serving. Soon the European country with the longest border with Russia, and a very capable fighting force, will join NATO. Perhaps, the most embarrassing of Putin's many miscalculations.

The journey to Tallinn by ferry takes two hours. Grey clouds almost fuse with the blue Baltic water.

Perspectives 2021-2023 – Thoughts on Contemporary Jewish Life

The Estonian capital's "Museum of Occupations and Freedom" tells of persecutions, tortures, and deportations, a lost generation under Soviet rule. And then liberty, at last. An inscription on one of the walls reads in big letters: "Whoever saves one life, saves the world entire."

On a beach shore in Tel Aviv, where people leave books that they no longer desire, I found one recent summer day a forgotten novel by Dan Tsalka from 1982, "Gloves." Tsalka was born in Warsaw in 1936 and made Aliyah in 1957.

The book describes the boxing scene of Tel Aviv in the 1930s and the Polish olim who dominated it. I saved it for the right occasion and am reading it on the ferry back to Helsinki.

The young boxers depicted by Tsalka seem to care only about sports and the opposite sex. They are blind to the catastrophes that await them and their families.

I can't help thinking what the late Tsalka would have thought had he seen his fictitious 1930s olim punching above their weight in the autumn of 2022, here, in Baltic waters, somewhere between Estonia and Finland.

Books wander in wondrous ways. As do people.

Together Again

The enduring importance of physical gathering

September 2022

Carl Yonker

Had it really been almost three years, I kept asking myself several weeks ago while visiting family in London. Indeed, it had. The last time we visited was December 2019, when the three of us (me, my wife, and our then-only son) went for Hannukah and Christmas vacation.

We stayed at my sister-in-law's house and spent a day with them before they left for a ski trip, while my parents and brother arrived from Colorado and Oregon to spend the holidays with us. One family, scattered between three continents, coming together.

And then came Covid-19. Among other things, it disrupted what had hitherto been regular, frequent visits with family to celebrate holidays and birthdays or just have a vacation and spend time together in Israel, the US, and the UK. No big, wild family gatherings for Friday night Shabbat dinners, no visits around Pesach, Christmas, Shavuot, or the high holidays.

My parents, as non-Israeli citizens, were not allowed to come to Israel when our second son was born in the middle of the pandemic. They missed the birth. Only after two months of rejected travel exemptions were they able to visit. My sister-in-law, an Israeli citizen, could visit us with my nephew, a minor without Israeli citizenship, but my 20-year-old niece, who is not an Israeli citizen, could not.

Not a few *olim* and their relatives abroad had similar experiences, their families impacted by the very same travel restrictions. Israel's entry and exit policy cut the country off from Jewish communities abroad and was decided upon by representatives from the Health Ministry, Foreign Ministry, and Interior Ministry. Notably absent from the list – the Diaspora Ministry.

The oversight wasn't intentional, nor was there any malice behind it. However, in its efforts to protect and safeguard the health of Israeli citizens, the government overlooked that Israel is not an island and is a nation of immigrants, some of whom are deeply, intimately, actively, and inseparably connected to their families abroad. In closing the borders, families were cut off from each other and the bureaucracy to secure exemptions offered little reprieve.

Some *olim* were angry, frustrated, and deeply saddened. One who gave birth observed it took the Knesset quite some time to realize that births are an important reason for grandparents to travel to Israel – not only to meet their grandchildren, but to help.

Others expressed shock. We live in a global, interconnected world where we have grown used to the idea that we can freely move from place to place to see each other when we want. Diaspora Jews, in particular, had grown accustomed to the ability to move back and forth between Israel and their homelands freely; the sudden inability to do so delivered a stinging blow to what had become habit.

Technology gave us the means to compensate for these restrictions. As they had before the pandemic, Facebook, Instagram, and other social media platforms enabled us to maintain our connections with family and friends. WhatsApp enabled us to exchange messages, share photos and videos, and

Perspectives 2021-2023 – Thoughts on Contemporary Jewish Life

make phone or video calls to family and friends at no cost frequently. Zoom enabled us to share holidays together as we celebrated in our own homes when physical gathering was impossible.

These technologies are important and valuable; however, they are not a replacement for being together at the same time and in the same place. The emotional connections we make through physical gathering are critical in building and sustaining family, friendships, and community.

Seeing pictures and watching videos of young grandchildren laughing and playing, or having a video call with them, is good for the soul, but it is not the same as being with them in the flesh.

As much as online interactions and communities help us bridge gaps of time and place, they cannot entirely replicate the feelings and energy of physical gathering.

The experiences of going to see Lin-Manuel Miranda's musical Hamilton with my wife, taking my eldest son to see C.S. Lewis's classic *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, and going to see Flogging Molly, one of my favorite punk bands, with my nephew in-person were not the same as experiencing those events online would be.

The feeling of singing at the top of your lungs together with more than a thousand others just can't be replicated online, nor can the adventure of getting stuck on the tube with your wife and racing to grab a cab to make it to a musical on time.

It is not just the physicality of attending those events together that is significant and meaningful. It is the "in-between" times – what we experience together around the main event – that provide us with connection and meaning that cannot be recreated or captured in the virtual world. The conversations, the traveling to and from the venue, sharing a meal together – mundane interactions that infuse life with substance and meaning.

Gathering is essential to life. The approaching High Holiday season is the first with the fewest restrictions on travel and gathering since the onset of the pandemic.

Families and communities can come together again to celebrate the holidays not while sitting in front of a computer or a propped-up cellphone, but in person, in real-time, face-to-face.

Sure, for some, these holiday gatherings can be crazy, stressful, or filled with drama, but they are essential to nurturing relationships and promoting a sense of belonging and community.

"No man is an island," wrote the poet John Donne; we need each other, and gathering allows us a togetherness that no technology will ever replace.

I cannot wait to be in London once more in a few short weeks to celebrate Sukkot and my nephew's 18th birthday. Together, again.

Shanah Tovah u'Metukah!

The Harvard Lazy

An editorial and the closure of the American mind

July 2022
Uriya Shavit

Two months ago, The Harvard Crimson, the daily student newspaper of the Ivy League university, published an editorial endorsing the BDS movement.

The pompous text, busting with sophomoric self-importance and self-entitlement, did not send the shock waves its anonymous authors may have wished for.

It is still worthy of treatment. Reading it made me gravely concerned about the future of a great nation, and it is not Israel.

The pro-BDS students graciously noted outright that they opposed antisemitism because the “Jewish people – like every people, including Palestinians – deserve nothing but life, peace, and security.”

It is always wise to doubt the sincerity of anyone hastening to proclaim that he is *not* something.

But I tend to believe the young editors.

I don't think they are antisemites.

It is more likely that they suffer from another incurable defect.

They are intellectually lazy.

Every paragraph of their tired, cumbersome editorial cries that they side with BDS not out of deep and elaborate ideological conviction but because this movement allows them to join as one a simplistic choir without risking anything while pretending they are avant-garde.

The editorial made the point that the BDS movement is the best means to liberate Palestine. It remained, however, ambiguous as to what precisely that means, as if the question could be avoided.

Perhaps the editors believe, as some in the BDS movement do, that Zionism is a usurping colonialist enterprise that must be eliminated in favor of a one-state solution.

If so, they should have said so clearly.

They should have then engaged seriously with an uneasy question that the BDS movement repeatedly tends to avoid: Why should the Zionists – who migrated to an ancestral homeland where Jewish presence never ceased to exist, where they purchased lands in accordance with the laws of the land, and where they were ultimately given the right for a state by the United Nations General Assembly – be considered illegitimate colonizers, while Americans, including those in Boston, should not?

It may also be the case (and there is some indication of that in the article) that the editors seek only an imposed unilateral Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank.

If so, they should have stated that unequivocally.

They should have then discussed with some measure of depth the danger that, given the Gaza precedent and the current positions of the Palestinian leaderships, such a unilateral move would lead the region to bloodshed of unprecedented scale.

They should have also aimed to make some effort to explain how their commitment to liberty and freedom fits with despotism, state corruption, oppression of women, torturing of journalists, summary executions, and throwing of homosexuals off balconies – all likely features of everyday life in a unilaterally liberated West Bank, if Gaza is any guide.

Instead of dialectic substance that can move the debate forward, the pro-BDS students offered empty jargon. Not only was their editorial devoid of nuance, but it also took pride in its one-sidedness and superficiality.

Rather than deal with actual Palestinians and their deeply fragmented politics and priorities, the editorial was concerned mainly with the agonies of the authors and the situation on their campus. The Palestinians, just as the Israelis, remained faceless and abstract.

Unfortunately, intellectual laziness has become the prevailing spirit on present-day liberal American campuses. It is manifested in the self-indulged parroting of shallow slogans; the privileging of slogans that seem courageous and provocative but are, in fact, the voice of a cheering habitus; and the total de-legitimization of alternative views that just might force doubt and require contemplation (hence the fondness of boycotts).

This is worrying because liberal democracies need inquisitive intellectual liberal elites who are able to think beyond peer pressure. They need aspiring students – not to mention professors – with the capacity for self-reflection, irony, and originality. They cannot survive without committed humanists.

Several years ago, I offered a manuscript about modern Muslim thought to an American university press of some repute (not Harvard's).

The young and enthused acquisitions editor asked me to name potential reviewers and made sure to emphasize that she could not have only Jews as readers of a manuscript on Islam written by a Jew.

I filed an official complaint, urging her and her managers to ask themselves what would have been the fate of an editor making the point that she cannot have only Muslims review a book written by a Muslim, or women only review a book written by a woman.

They dismissed the case.

I am confident none of them is an antisemite. They are all, however, intellectually insipid, unable to recognize the difference between moral values and virtue signaling.

They are not repulsed by racism or prejudice; they are repulsed by whatever their peers tell them is racism and prejudice at a given time. They do not cherish diversity; they cherish self-serving diversity. They believe they stand for intellectual provocations, but what they are really after is asserting their predispositions.

This is not about the liberal/conservative divide. The ever-growing closure of the American mind, the damaging spirit of intellectual indolence, is all-encompassing. It has become so dominant that those involved can no longer recognize their own absurdity.

In May, the class president of a Florida High school, Zander Moricz, was barred by his headmaster, Stephen Covert, from speaking in his graduation speech against the so-called "Don't Say Gay" law.

Instead, Moricz spoke about how he came to terms with his curly hair and how important it is for students with curly hair to do the same.

At the end of the speech, the headmaster hugged Moricz and took pride in the “incredible diversity” of his school. Moricz said the controversy was terrible but that he nevertheless held no grudges against his headmaster.

The shameful incident was celebrated in the American national media as a demonstration of sophistication and bravery.

So, this is where we have come to: You cannot make a thought-provoking liberal comment in a graduation speech in America because it will offend conservatives, and you cannot make a thought-provoking conservative comment because it will offend liberals.

The options left are binary: to say nothing meaningful or to speak only to those who think exactly like you. Dialogue is not an option because it might – God forbid – force people to think independently.

This is why young Moricz had to resort to metaphors, as was the habit of Soviet dissidents.

The case of this class president brought back memories, and at the risk of sounding self-congratulatory, I'll share them with you.

I was also a high school class president asked by the headmaster to give a graduation speech.

Three decades have passed, and I don't remember all the details. I only remember that my text was political and that the headmaster was unhappy that it did not celebrate his achievements.

Unlike Moricz, I did not agree to change my speech. Instead, I left the event. I ended up organizing an alternative graduation ceremony, where participants said whatever they wanted to say.

Class President Moricz made a different choice in the spirit of his times and society. According to a CNN report, he will begin his undergraduate studies in government this fall. You guessed right: at Harvard.

United We Stand

Jewish Orthodoxy must start cooperating with the Reform

June 2022

Ronen Lubitch

The question of how to respond to liberal movements in Judaism preoccupied Orthodox Jews in Europe throughout the nineteenth century. The conundrum continued to be a topic of lively debate through the twentieth century in the United States, and then migrated to Israel.

There were two main trends in Orthodox Judaism's attitude toward other Jewish religious denominations through both centuries.

According to one, the boundaries of Orthodoxy are the boundaries of Judaism, and such liberal movements are a distortion of Judaism. Hence Orthodox Jews should stay away from other streams and totally segregate from them.

According to the other, non-Orthodox movements have strayed from the path of authentic Judaism, but their existence is a fact, and one must inescapably collaborate with them over specific concerns that affect the entire Jewish community.

The decisive response to the Reform movement began taking shape in Europe as early as 1818, with the opening of the first Reform synagogue, the Temple, in Hamburg, Germany.

Rabbi Moshe Sofer (the *Hatam Sofer*) voiced firm opposition to the Reform movement, coining the slogan: "The new is forbidden from the Torah." He established that it is forbidden to alter any traditional rulings or customs.

A year later, forty *responsa* from rabbis and rabbinic courts across Europe were published in Hamburg, opposing the Reform Synagogue and categorizing its founders as both wicked and heretical. This position became accepted in ultra-Orthodox Judaism, continuing within it to this very day.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the leader of Neo-Orthodoxy in Germany, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, also demanded that the Orthodox community detach itself from the broader Jewish community there, most of which had already identified with the liberal movements of Judaism.

In contrast, a more measured approach also began to emerge at that time, as Rabbi Yitzchak Dov Bamberger and other rabbis took a stand against detaching from the liberal movements. Controversy over this issue effectively continued until the liquidation of German Jewry in the Holocaust.

For twentieth-century American Jewry, the question of how to relate to Reform or Conservative Jews expressed itself in an array of concrete halakhic issues.

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein was very uncompromising in his approach to Reform and Conservative Judaism, generally drawing no distinction between them.

He maintained that Jewish law required distancing yourself as far as possible from the two movements, which, in his approach, denied the basic tenets of the Jewish religion and many of the Torah's commandments.

He ruled that conversions, as well as marriages and betrothals, conducted by a Reform or a Conservative rabbi were not valid because they did not strictly apply Jewish law.

He also ruled that a Reform rabbi should not be accorded any honors in a synagogue, nor recite any of the seven blessings under the bridal canopy (the *huppah*), because their blessings are null and void since they do not believe in the Giver of the Torah.

He prohibited renting a room in a Conservative synagogue to pray in, banned the burial of any Orthodox Jew in a Conservative cemetery, and ruled that whoever served as a cantor, ritual slaughterer, or teacher for the Conservative community could not thereafter be appointed to a similar role in an Orthodox community.

Rabbi Feinstein's principled stand and his Halachic rulings on this issue were accepted almost without question by most rabbis not only in the United States but also in Israel and around the world, among them rabbis who were not ultra-Orthodox, such as Rabbi Shlomo Aviner or the Zionist rabbis of Eretz Hemda Institute.

A representative of the conciliatory approach was Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (1903-1993), the leader of Modern Orthodoxy in the United States.

He refrained from joining the 1956 ban by yeshiva leaders on ties and meetings among Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform rabbis.

For many years, he took part in the Jewish Synagogues Organization in the United States, which included the three movements.

He even reached agreements with Rabbi Professor Saul Lieberman of the Jewish Theological Seminary on issues pertaining to the problem of "chained wives" (*agunot*).

Rabbi Soloveitchik established the principle that one should cooperate with the liberal movements in activities regarding the non-Jewish world but that it was forbidden to come together over spiritual-ideological matters.

He warned that too much harmony might be confusing and blur the boundaries between Orthodoxy and other movements.

Contrary to Rabbi Feinstein, who stated that Jewish law required keeping the same distance from non-Orthodox movements as from idol worship, Rabbi Soloveitchik reasoned that the approach towards these movements was a matter of public leadership and that one had to exercise judgment according to the time and the place.

Both Rabbi Feinstein's uncompromising attitude and Rabbi Soloveitchik's qualified approach were formulated, as I understand it, against the background of the balance of power prevailing in American Jewry at the time.

Throughout the twentieth century, Orthodox Judaism in the United States felt existentially threatened by other Jewish religious movements.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Conservative movement more than doubled its size, while the Reform movement doubled its membership.

Sociologists analyzing the state of play in the Jewish movements in the 1970s concluded that Orthodox Jewry would decline to a fraction of one percent of the United States' Jewish population.

This situation created a sense of existential threat among Orthodox Jewry and increased the need for segregation from the other movements.

The segregationist trend increased in response to changes to Jewish legal norms in the Conservative movement and in light of the growing acceptance of non-Jews in Reform communities.

In our era, circumstances have changed dramatically. Orthodox Jewry today is stable, strong, and confident of its ability to survive and even prosper both in the United States and, of course, in Israel.

In contrast, the proportion of mixed marriages between Jews and members of other religious groups has grown significantly in the United States over the past fifty years.

In 1970 it was 17%, but since 2000 it has grown to 60%. The problem is most grave among Jews who do not belong to any Jewish religious movement: more than two-thirds of them are intermarried.

I hold that Orthodox Jewry should today take a third approach.

Essentially: despite our disapproval of the ideology and practices of the liberal movements, it should be recognized that they make an important contribution to the preservation of Jewish identity, and it is necessary to cooperate with them to strengthen the unity and continuity of the Jewish people.

In my view, it is possible to derive calls for this approach from the words of the great thinker Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook, who advocated pulling together all forces of the people of Israel and preventing factionalism.

This approach was reflected in Rabbi Kook's relations with secular Jews in Israel, as well as in his firm opposition to the separation between Orthodox and Reform communities in Europe. His son and disciple, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, followed in his father's footsteps, objecting to separate public organization by the Orthodox.

Rabbi Kook recognized the benefits and vital importance of each movement and denomination.

He wrote about three factions dominant among the people of Israel in his time: "The Orthodox ... who carry the banner of sanctity, Torah and commandments; the nationalist ... who fight for the renewal of national life ... and the liberal who demand education, culture, and ethics." He claimed that these were three forces of equal value that should cooperate harmoniously.

The words of Rabbi Kook about the main constituents of the Jewish community in the Land of Israel may also inspire collaboration between the three major movements of contemporary Judaism.

These collaborations should be expressed in activities for the sake of Diaspora Jewry. Representatives of the Orthodox community in Israel should work hand in hand with their brethren from the other movements.

There is also room for cooperation in Israel. For example, joint study evenings that will draw a diverse audience. It is possible for rabbis from all streams to meet to discuss contemporary issues (a topic that has recently been the center of considerable controversy among Orthodox rabbis).

It is fitting to promote the operation of joint learning centers for prospective converts in the format once proposed by the Ne'eman Committee (1998), as well as to involve representatives of all the movements in the appointment of conversion judges, as proposed by the Nissim Committee (2018).

Perspectives 2021-2023 – Thoughts on Contemporary Jewish Life

The vast challenges facing the Jewish people today require close collaboration between the various movements and organizations to strengthen Jewish identity in Israel and around the world and promote unity among all factions of the Jewish people.

On an Optimistic Note

*Some good news for a change.
But what are we to make of it?*

May 2022

Uriya Shavit

Last month I attended a “Prayer for Peace” at “Our Lady of Arabia” Cathedral near Manama, Bahrain. The event was held under the patronage of King Hamad. A majority of the hundreds present were migrant workers from the subcontinent.

Suddenly, it all seemed so normal: taking a direct flight from Ben Gurion to Manama, being invited to a religious ceremony there, complaining about the weather in the Arab Gulf.

One by one, local spiritual leaders representing different religions conveyed messages of coexistence. When the imam spoke about Islam as a religion of peace, the smartphone broke the news about a terror attack in the heart of Tel Aviv.

The Jewish speaker at the event was Abraham Nonoo, a sixty-two-year-old businessman and a former member of the upper house of the Bahraini Parliament, where one seat is reserved for a Jew.

Nonoo turned out to be an exceptionally kind man. Two days later, visiting the small synagogue he leads in the heart of the capital, “The House of the Ten Commandments,” I learned that the local Jewish community numbers only around 50 members.

On a Saturday morning, there were two Jews present at the synagogue – Nonoo and his wife. Also present was a young Bahraini who wants to major in Jewish studies.

The few Bahraini Jews from the younger generation are moving to Europe, so the community, which mainly originated from Iraq and Iran, may cease to exist in a few decades.

Nonoo explained that keeping the synagogue alive, no matter what, was a promise he made to his father. As long as the candle is burning.

In recent months, the Bahraini regime has gone out of its way to show that Israel is a true friend and that the small Kingdom will not tolerate violence or hostility toward Jews. Bahrain even adopted the IHRA definition of antisemitism, meaning that denying the right of Israel to exist is unacceptable.

I was expecting warmth. I did not expect Bahrainis to speak about Iran as an enemy, Israel as an ally, and the Palestinians as the all-but-forgotten.

Bahraini officials insist that their Emirate turned Kingdom has always been a beacon of moderation.

This is not entirely true – especially not regarding Israel.

There were hundreds of Jews in the country in 1947. Most of them were forced to flee following violent attacks during Israel’s War of Independence. There was little effort to encourage them to return.

The café at the National Museum has some old books. One of them, published just a decade ago, is filled with hate poems against the Zionist entity.

So, we learn once again that conflicting voices speak for Islam.

Which represents its true nature?

The question is almost meaningless.

Read the new book by Dr. Ofir Winter of the Institute for National Security Studies, who also contributes to our Center, *Peace in the Name of Allah: Islamic Discourses on Treaties with Israel*.

There is only one Quran and only one al-Azhar University, and yet the book shows how some graduates of al-Azhar read in the Quran justifications for peace with Israel, and some read in it why the war with Zionism must go on.

People have the remarkable capacity to locate in texts, and in their realities, whatever affirms their long-held convictions.

Last week, dozens of leading media platforms across the world reported on our Center's Antisemitism Worldwide Report, which presented alarming data and analysis for 2021.

Hundreds of comments were published on websites with explanations as to why antisemitism is on the rise. And all of those who wrote them were convinced that the data proved they were right all along.

Hawks blamed the bad news on doves, while doves blamed it on hawks. The religious on secularists, the secularists on the religious. Anti-vax activists on governments, advocates of the vaccines (or science and commonsense) on anti-vax activists.

So there is no point in asking what true Islam is (or Christianity or Judaism). It is what people make of it.

The more useful question is: what can we learn from the Bahraini experience about the conditions that allow for transformations?

What can encourage other Arab societies to interpret Islam in a way that facilitates adopting a realistic and friendly approach to Israel and committing to combating poisonous anti-Jewish propaganda?

The answer is encouraging – and frustrating.

Encouraging, because Bahrain demonstrates this can happen. Frustrating, because it also demonstrates this is not really in our hands and requires patience

Bahrain had strong incentives to join the Abraham Accords wholeheartedly.

Understanding the gravity of the Iranian threat, the regime needed to strengthen its alliance with the United States. Seeing the decline of American power in the region, it needed new strong friends.

There was fatigue with Palestinian corruption and endless illusionary naysaying. With the discrediting of the Muslim Brothers following the Arab Spring, the regime could pay less attention to the fiercest rival of Zionism. A benevolent autocracy that relies on Saudi patronage, it did not need to pay too much attention to public opinion. The public, which had limited exposure to Palestinian refugees and was never in direct conflict with Israel, had other priorities anyhow.

This brings me to the other enabler, the less evident one.

The most impressive aspect of identifying as an Israeli on Bahraini streets today is not that people warm up to you – but that the response would not have been different if they thought you were Dutch or Argentinian.

There is one crucial difference between the peace treaties of the Abraham Accords and those signed with Egypt and Jordan. The latter were between governments, and abrupt. Following their signing, there was a short honeymoon also in terms of tourism and culture, but it was hesitant, contested, and soon ended.

The late and great Bernard Lewis told me once that the tragedy of the conflict is that it involves the most polite and impolite nations on earth. After the peace treaty was signed in 1994, he visited Jordan, and vendors told him Israeli tourists acted arrogantly and triumphantly. Lewis tried to convince them that this is how Israeli tourists treat everyone, not just Arabs.

The case of the Abraham Accords is different. Already some years before they were signed, Israeli professionals, businesspersons, and officials were welcomed in the Gulf, even if not openly. They spoke Hebrew. They signed deals. They made friends and contacts. They were not just tourists.

You are less likely to maintain the notion that Jews have horns when you have them as business partners, or as instructors.

The Abraham Accords made formal a reality that was built bottom-up, gradually, patiently, and in relative secrecy. That is part of the reason why Israelis are not regarded as party crashers or hostile aliens in Bahrain and the Emirates. That is why their presence there projects such normalcy.

On the 74th birthday of their state, Israelis yearn for more of that normalcy.

Putin, Enemy of the People

Why the Jewish world must unite against the Russian dictator

April 2022

Uriya Shavit

If only I had a dime for every time I recently came across the line, “contrary to what Francis Fukuyama wrote in 1989....”

The Japanese-American Fukuyama prophesied the “end of history” in an article in the neo-conservative *National Interest* at a time when the absolute disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the Soviet Bloc, was still far from certain.

The article became world-renowned. As is the fate of many famous texts, few people actually read it. Thus, many misinterpret Fukuyama to have suggested that, in the post-Soviet world, there would be no wars or conflicts.

But that is not what Fukuyama suggested.

His main argument was that history is a competition between universally applicable structures of government and that the competition had ended with the bankruptcy of communism.

At least for the time being, history proved Fukuyama right.

While he was euphoric in some of his predictions, including that post-Soviet Russia would not aggressively revert to imperialist expansionism, he intuitively captured the limitations of the threat.

For the past two decades, Russia has challenged the American-led world order, as did China. Yet they have not done so in the name of a universal ideology such as communism. On the contrary, the two regimes have championed the idea that nations have unique characters and are the product of unique circumstances and should develop politically accordingly.

Save for ISIS-styled Islamism, liberal democracy has remained the only ideological force with universal appeal. And the Islamic State no longer exists as a state.

Here lies the reason for the Russian fiasco in Ukraine.

In the bad old days of communism, the Soviets could find allies in subjugated countries who shared, or pretended to share, their belief in Marxist utopias.

Those allies were Soviet puppets but governed in the name of a universal ideal. Thus, it took their people time to realize that Moscow enslaved them. Some actually never did.

In an “End of History” reality, Russia has nothing but Russian nationalism to offer the neighbors it seeks to subjugate.

But Ukrainians – as we have learned in recent weeks – are not Russian nationalists. They are Ukrainian patriots. Just as Poles are Polish patriots, Romanians are Romanian patriots, and Hungarians are

Hungarian patriots. Thus, they have united in vigorously standing against Russian nationalist imperialism.

That is why Putin is doomed to face disaster one way or another.

If he somehow wins the war, Ukraine would become his Afghanistan, and his state would remain a pariah. If he fails to take over Ukraine, it would become his Falklands. In either case, he would have to answer to thousands of grieving mothers at some point.

It is essential to see Putin for what he is, and for what would most likely become of him. We have reached the point where the moral dimension cannot be separated from the cynically strategic one.

Putin is the enemy of humanity. That is the title you get for cowardly committing war crimes, displacing millions of women and children, and forcing a global crisis on a world in dire need of recovery from the Covid-19 days.

Putin is the enemy of Russia. He turned a nation with great potential into a failed kleptocracy, with him as the chief thief. He turned the Russian military into a laughing stock whose failures will be studied in academies for decades to come.

Communist Russia was an oppressive state based on deception but, for several decades, a scientific powerhouse and a mighty global military power. Putin's Russia is just an oppressive state based on deception.

Don't believe the Western Kremlin-experts, who always predict crises after they happen. They insist the dictator and his war remain popular. If this were the case, Putin would not aggressively destroy the free press and imprison, torture, and murder credible challengers. If this were the case, he would allow for genuine, transparent elections.

Putin, the Holocaust distorter, is the enemy of the Jews.

There is a tendency to forget this, but the troubles of European Jews did not end with the defeat of Nazism.

For four decades, Jewish life was suffocated across the Soviet bloc. Jews faced widespread, inherent antisemitism, veiled and not-so-veiled. Like others, they were denied freedom of movement.

That fundamentally changed with the fall of the Soviet dictatorship.

As a minority in all countries but Israel, a liberal democratic-led world order is the only long-term guarantee for the safety and prosperity of Jewish diasporas. That is the world order which Putin now consciously seeks to destroy.

Putin is the enemy of Israel.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, Iranian nuclear weapons are not, per se, the existential threat Israel faces.

An Iranian nuclear attack on Israel would result in mutually assured destruction, and the Iranians know that.

But with a nuclear umbrella, Iran could more freely use Syria and Lebanon as bases for massive and ongoing missile attacks against Israel.

Israel's real existential threat is the Iranian- and Russian-backed Assad regime. Through his presence in Syria, Putin has been blackmailing Israel.

If it weren't for war criminal Putin, the war criminal Assad would not have survived in power, and Iran would have lost much of its clout in the region. Birds of a feather flock together.

The war in Ukraine is not between angels and demons. There are no angels in politics. It is, however, a war between a decent emerging liberal democracy led by an energetic, inspiring young Jew and a dangerous, messianic tyrant.

So it's time to more vocally take a side and do away with the hesitations and the calculations.

Enough with neutrality. Enough with the yes, but. Enough with ambiguous phrasings. Enough with seemingly sophisticated relativizing. The moral injury these cause is embarrassing and is becoming dangerous.

Ibsen taught us that the strongest man in the world is he who stands most alone.

The fear of doing the right thing is often the fear of loneliness.

Which is why, at this historic moment, as we approach the holiday of liberty, Jewish leaders, organizations, communities, and intellectuals across the world should join as one in unequivocally demanding that Putin be brought down – and brought to justice.

The Unthinkable

It's time to discuss a scenario that was once pure fiction

March 2022
Uriya Shavit

According to an opinion poll conducted in June 2021 by YouGov and Bright Line Watch, a think tank of political scientists who fear for the future of American democracy, no less than 37% of Americans would support their state's secession for a smaller union more aligned with their "Red" or "Blue" orientation. Support among southern Republicans for the breakup of the United States was the highest at 66%.

Surveys that pose hypothetical questions should always be taken with a grain of salt. This one adds to alarming evidence.

If there is one lesson to learn from the recent Russian aggression that shocked the world, it is the strategic importance of distinguishing between the unlikely, the undesired, the unthinkable – and the impossible.

A breakup of the United States is still not a likely scenario, but it has become a possibility.

Dr. Yoav Fromer, a scholar of American politics at Tel Aviv University, suggested in January that only a war against an external enemy could restore a sense of unity among Americans.

Perhaps if Russia had attacked Pearl Harbor this would have been the case. The Ukraine conflict shows the great, universal appeal the liberal ideals of freedom and sovereignty have. It also showed just how dangerously divisive American public life has become.

In 2022, some Americans cannot recognize an enemy unless that enemy is Republican or Democrat.

Former President Trump, who, according to most recent opinion polls, will be reelected in 2024, praised Putin's brutal, fascist-styled policies. His admiration for a ruthless despot was unequivocal.

In the 1980s, such words would have immediately been labeled un-American, and the politician uttering them would be shunned.

Not anymore. Republican officials, fearing Trump's wrath, did their best to avoid condemning him. Some went as far as to praise Putin for defending Christian values, whatever that means for them.

It is a terrible thought, what would have become of human civilization if Trump had been president in 1941.

In January, New York Times columnist David Brooks offered evidence that Americans are becoming increasingly anti-social towards one another.

One example is a seven percent rise in deadly traffic accidents during 2020, when the number of miles Americans drove fell 13 percent. Another is a sharp increase in hate crimes during the same period. Yet another is a drastic decline over the past two decades in the number of households that give charitable donations of any sort.

Brooks confessed that he could not explain why Americans act this way.

Whether politics are the cause for rising animosities, their reflection, or both, clearly, the house is divided against itself. American democracy is no longer a competition between adversaries who champion competing points of view. It has become a vicious tribal fight.

The reason is not that ideological differences are sharper than ever before. Today, Americans are not at odds over core cultural and social issues more than in 1925 or 1968.

Unlike then, however, today, differences are absorbed and nurtured in the echo chambers of social media and cable news networks. The internet revolution has had an ironic effect. The more American media became pluralistic, the more Americans became impatient with any opinion but theirs.

The echo chamber culture encourages the thriving of intellectually oppressive hypocrites on the left and conspiracy-obsessed lovers-of-loathing on the right. The diminishing mainstream, those still able to think in bipartisan terms, cling to empty, anachronistic clichés of unity.

There is another reason why two distinct American nations are emerging. In the broadest sense of the word, the system – health care, education, public safety, a just judiciary, merit-based mobilization – does not deliver compared to those of other Western states. The American story used to be synonymous with optimism and innovation. It is now characterized by rage and fear.

Instead of recognizing this reality, the mainstream insists on praising the American way of life, fueling the anger of many who are not doing well and have realized their children will not either.

The political showdown will possibly come sooner rather than later.

A republic cannot survive unless a solid majority of its public agrees about the rules and narratives that regulate its politics.

According to various opinion polls, around one in three Americans, and a majority of Republicans, still believe in the baseless notion that the 2020 election was rigged. On January 6, hundreds of rioters violently attacked Congress with the aim of intimidating lawmakers into overturning the people's will.

The man who encouraged this subversive act consistently claims he won an election he lost by seven million votes and is now promising to pardon the January 6 culprits.

Is there anything that would appease his millions of supporters if he ends up losing again in three years? Is there anything that would convince the millions who detest him that he is a legitimate national leader?

To make matters worse, some of the genius balances introduced in the Constitution to safeguard the Union and its democratic system have become helplessly partisan.

The Constitution requires the president to be chosen by electors rather than by popular vote, in part as a check against authoritarianism. States were allocated an equal representation of two seats in the Senate as a check against the marginalization of less populous states.

These balances worked fine for over a century, creating a remarkably stable and relatively efficient political system.

They do not anymore. Because of demographic changes, for the past thirty years, the American electorate has leaned Democrat, though by small and fluctuating margins. Since 1992, Republicans have only once won the popular vote in presidential elections. However, Republican presidents served in office for 12 years, and Republican lawmakers have dominated Congress.

The recurring disparity between the popular vote and the electoral outcome came close to repeating itself in 2020. It may well do so in 2024.

The Supreme Court serves, among other roles, as the ultimate arbiter between political actors about the rules of the game. Because of pure coincidences, the Court, now a highly politicized panel, is destined to be dominated by conservative justices for the next generation, maybe more.

The Constitution cannot be amended, practically, without the consent of both major political parties. The Republicans will not agree to change rules that favor them. How long will the people of California and New York accept a Union in which their votes are worth less?

If someone has an idea for a happy end, kindly inform.

Following the Russian invasion, there is much talk about the decline of America. The reality is more complicated. The Ukraine War has provided another demonstration that the United States has significantly weakened since the 1990s as a world power. Yet it also proved the United States' indispensability as the protector of the liberal democracies that are formally allied with it.

The prospect of an end to the United States should alarm anyone who cares about world peace and democracy. Just think how the people of Germany, Taiwan, Poland, Japan, or Australia would have felt amidst the most recent news from Europe if there were no United States – divided but still a liberal democracy that is the strongest military, technological, and economic force on earth – by far.

The fate of the Jewish people, and the Zionist project, has been particularly closely intertwined with the existence of a strong United States.

The American Jewish community has been the richest, safest, and most influential Jewish community in history. Israel has relied on the support of American Jews since its inception and, since the 1970s, has been heavily dependent diplomatically and militarily on American support.

An end of the Union will not be good news for either.

However, from a Zionist point of view, a breakup may not necessarily be *only* bad news.

The Union may dissolve either violently or peacefully, with radically different implications.

A second civil war, with the human tragedies and financial wreckage it will involve, will be a great encouragement for the anti-liberal forces across the world, including Iran and other Islamist actors. This is the bad news.

Still, other than Britain and France, Israel is the only American ally that can ensure, in a worst-case scenario, the mutual destruction of any of its enemies. In a Middle East after the breakup of the Union, moderate Sunni states just might have to rely more openly on the strongest regional power and further enhance their alliance with Israel. It is entirely possible that this prospect did not escape the Arab signatories of the Abraham Accords and their Saudi backers.

In a post-American world, Israel will be forced to diversify its alliances. It may do away with a "client state mentality" and become truly independent on the world stage.

A violent end of the Union may encourage hundreds of thousands of American Jews to make Aliyah. Israel will be enriched with a highly educated population and secure its Jewish majority. The Zionist state will become the unchallenged primary center of Jewish existence.

From the 1960s to the late 1980s, nothing threatened Israel's existence as the migration of its citizens to the United States. Israel was the place of ideology, community, and family. America was the place to realize one's ambitions and individual dreams.

This changed. Israel has become a better place to live today in most aspects of life. It's not just the quality of life; it's life itself. Just consider that despite the security threats, the pollution, and the way Israelis drive, the life expectancy of Israeli males is six years more than that of American males.

The transformation of Israel into a better place to live has not led thus far to a Jewish exodus from America in part because American Jews are doing, on average, much better than the average American. If the Union comes to a bloody end, with the inevitable economic and social consequences, many will make use of their birthright.

Israeli Jews and American Jews have very different cultures. This is why Aliyah is often a tough hill to climb for the latter. Still, there is much in Israel to make Americans, in particular, feel at home – and the creation of a massive community would further minimize the adjustments new migrants would have to make, as was the case with the migration from the former USSR.

With the difference between unlikely and impossible in mind, Israelis should seriously consider whether their economy is prepared for a scenario of hundreds of thousands of immigrants. Israel's urban centers have a lot to offer, but not housing.

It is also possible that the United States comes to a peaceful or almost peaceful end. The Reds and the Blues will manage to agree at least on parting. They will somehow figure out how to divide Florida, Pennsylvania, and other contested states, as well as who gets the seat on the Security Council and how to divide the US \$30 trillion national debt.

Two Americas will not be as strong on the world stage as one. Still, even as separate states, a Red America and a Blue America would rank among the most powerful nations on earth technologically, militarily, and economically. Each would be a formidable ally for other countries.

In both, pro-Zionist voters will remain crucial, suggesting the pro-Israeli lobby will remain strong. In Red America, it will not be possible to win elections without the evangelical vote. In Blue America, it will be impossible without the Jewish vote.

In a "two-Americas" reality, Israel would negotiate with each separately. Instead of fearing the far-reaching implications of the potential rise of a hostile administration – an isolationist Republican or anti-Zionist Democrat – Israel would have its chips divided between two administrations.

If at this moment you shrug your shoulders and wonder why you wasted the last ten minutes reading nonsense, ask yourself what you thought in 1988 of the possibility that by 1992 there would be no USSR.

Online Hatred

The need for new strategies

February 2022

Giovanni Quer

Antisemitism propagates on the internet because the unrestrained flow of information provides easy access to sites, discussion groups, or even individual posts that spread hatred.

In a world where the boundaries between the digital space and real life are blurred, this form of “meta-hatred” has direct consequences in daily life.

The perpetrator of the December 2019 attack in Monsey, New York, who invaded the home of a rabbi hosting a Hanukkah party while wielding a machete, had access to antisemitic materials through online sources. His mental health condition has rendered him unfit to stand trial, but the fact remains that the unrestrained circulation of information influenced his views on Jews.

Several months earlier, in October 2019, the perpetrator of the Halle attack in Germany, who planned to target the local synagogue, also engaged in online extremism. He did not show apparent signs of radicalization.

The perpetrators came from different backgrounds and had different motivations. Yet, in both cases, they decided to attack Jews because of antisemitic convictions formed or reinforced online.

If extremists once held secret meetings and clandestinely printed and distributed materials, social media platforms now maximize the distribution of hateful content and the ability of groups to recruit new adherents.

The result is that any internet user may be radicalized and inspired to commit a hostile act, including passive users.

Moreover, the publicity hate groups generate and receive through numerous media channels makes it easier for them to hijack the narrative of any event.

The reactions to the January 2022 attack on the Colleyville synagogue in Texas are an example of how different hate groups use events to reinforce their narratives.

A recent study published by the ADL (Anti-Defamation League), “Extremists Respond to Colleyville Hostage Crisis with Antisemitism, Islamophobia,” demonstrated how hate groups exploited the Colleyville attack to promote narratives that denied the Holocaust or described the attack as a Jewish plot.

Another example is the conspiracy theories that emerged as a major component of hate narratives during the Covid-19 pandemic, where classic antisemitic tropes spread on the internet together with other forms of intolerance and xenophobia.

Social media companies have developed guidelines that define what content is unacceptable on their platform, in addition to what national legislation characterizes and prohibits as hate speech.

Yet, their guidelines remain largely unapplied, while subcultures of hatred rapidly evolve in a context of loose and uneven compliance. Apparently corporal enforcement is not enough. The pervasiveness of social media requires state-guided measures to ensure safety, and quasi-judicial, transparent procedures for penalizing violations.

To better address the phenomenon of online antisemitism, we also need to understand the actual scope of hate groups and how they operate, emerge, and connect – and the contexts and subtexts of their speech. Research on online hate speech is only in its earliest stages and is already faced with considerable data collection and analysis challenges.

Beyond the affordability of advanced digital collection and analysis programs and systems capable of tracking and analyzing a phenomenon across the platforms, one needs to agree on the premises of what constitutes hate speech.

A keyword search is not always enough since the meaning of a word can change according to the context in which it is used; additionally, hate groups use code words for identifying targets. For example, “Hollywood” often means “Jews.”

Deeper cooperation between researchers and practitioners of the humanities and computer sciences can help develop suitable methodologies that focus on diverse cultural and historical frameworks.

A societal response is also indispensable in the fight against online hate speech. It is encouraging to see that grassroots activism to counter hate speech is also developing. For example, the Fight Online Antisemitism (FOA) organization gathers volunteers from various countries worldwide to monitor and report hate speech and incitement.

The efforts of FOA inform that online antisemitism needs not just to be tracked and removed – but that this must be done very, very fast. From its work on different platforms, FOA project manager Maya Hadar observed the danger caused by hateful content remains even after a specific post is removed or an account is closed.

In an interview with UNESCO in March 2021, Prof. Jonathan Bright of the Oxford Internet Institute explained: “One really big problem with online harms is that we are largely operating in a reactive way – we remove things only after they have become really widespread and potentially already done some damage.”

The process of radicalization is elusive, and any user “out there,” even without showing visible or apparent signs, can be inspired to commit the next violent act.

Antiochus, Santa and My Son

December reflections from an interfaith home

December 2021

Carl Yonker

Driving through Tel Aviv on a cool December day in 2018, my then almost-three-year-old son gave us his take on Hanukkah and Christmas.

Asked about Antiochus, he replied that Antiochus killed the Jews and hated them. Shifting gears, my wife asked our son whose birthday was coming up? He replied, “Santa’s!” And what do we sing to Santa? “Happy Christmas, Santa!”

Such is life in an interfaith home where Hannukah and Christmas decorations share space, and making *levivot* (latkes) and eating *sufganiyot* take place alongside baking gingerbread cookies and building gingerbread houses. A conversation about the Maccabees with my son quickly turns to questions about Santa and expressions of concern over whether Santa will still deliver his gifts if we are away on vacation for Christmas.

The two holidays are not blended into “Chrismukkah” but coexist side by side, reflecting our shared respect and affection for the religious and cultural traditions in which my wife and I were raised: her’s as an Israeli Jew and mine as an American Christian. Moreover, it recognizes our shared identity as a family and the existence of these two identities in our boys.

Growing up in a Colorado town with a small Jewish community, I was largely unaware of Hanukkah as it was not common for a menorah to be publicly displayed alongside a Christmas tree.

This changed in the last two decades as the local Jewish community grew and Christmas displays transformed into shared winter displays of the religious symbols of both holidays.

This sharing of the public space reflects a broader cultural transformation in America that aims to better acknowledge and honor the diverse religious traditions of Americans.

For American Jews, in particular, Hannukah is no longer a minor holiday but one that holds greater significance than it is typically accorded within Judaism. As scholar Jonathan Sarna observed, this was primarily a result of Christmas gaining greater significance in American life in the 19th century, eventually becoming a national holiday.

It was hoped that Hanukkah would compete with Christmas by providing an attractive alternative or at least provide Jewish children a feeling that they were not left behind as their Christian friends received gifts.

Indeed, Hannukah is a marker of Jewish identity and life in the United States and reflects the efforts of American Jews to navigate living as a religious minority.

In Israel, this situation is reversed. For Israeli Jews, a majority, Hannukah remains a minor holiday largely devoid of religious meaning. It is, instead, a national one that does not even seek to compete with Christmas, the holiday of only a small minority of the state’s citizens.

Perspectives 2021-2023 – Thoughts on Contemporary Jewish Life

The extent to which Hanukkah has been commercialized has little to do with exchanging and giving gifts and more with the promotion of activities for children to fill up a weeklong vacation from school and eating tasty desserts.

While Christmas has become more visible in the Israeli public, it is largely stripped of its religious meaning, and there is no effort to make it a national holiday on par with Hannukah.

As an American Christian in Israel, my role is reversed as well. I am forced to confront the reality of living as a religious minority in the Jewish state, a fact that transforms the meaning of Christmas for me: it serves as a marker of identity – religiously and culturally – in a way it previously did not.

Regardless of the holiday's religious significance or my own level of religious observance, Christmas holds a special place in my heart, connecting me to my family and our holiday traditions, many of which originated in Denmark and Germany.

I will always fondly remember receiving and opening my Advent calendar, baking traditional cookies like gingerbread and springerle, enjoying dinner on Christmas Eve, and unwrapping presents at my grandparents' house.

And nothing brings me greater joy than seeing the same excitement in my son as he rushes every morning to open his Lego Star Wars Advent calendar, bakes gingerbread cookies with my parents, builds his first gingerbread house, and writes letters to Santa for him and his baby brother.

While Christmas holds a special place in my family, I recognize it does not for all. Moreover, I would be remiss if I failed to acknowledge the long, painful history of Christian antisemitism and Christmas serving as a date for perpetrating heinous, hateful acts against Jews.

My wife and I are well-aware of the weight of this history and, in time, our children will be made aware of it as well. Doing so will be complicated as they figure out how to navigate the different aspects of their identity.

Moreover, it is important that Hanukkah and Christmas remain distinct from each other. They are, after all, different holidays with separate messages regardless of what a Fox News host might claim.

The irony, of course, is that the message of Hannukah is one of anti-assimilation. The Maccabees would undoubtedly disapprove of our family's observance of both holidays (to say nothing about our marriage). However, to negate either of these aspects of our family's identity would not only be unfair, but deprive us of traditions that give us meaning and connect us to our loved ones.

A Stunning Decision

Did the European Court of Justice signal the end of Kosher butchering across the Continent?

November 2021

Talia Naamat

In late October this year, Greece's supreme court decided to ban kosher (and *halal*) butchering. The decision, criticized by Jewish organizations in harsh language, relied on a much anticipated ruling given by the European Court of Justice in December 2020, which declared that the proposed Belgian ban on Kosher slaughter was an "appropriate" measure in relation to protecting animal welfare and the infringement this posed on religious minorities' freedom to manifest their religion.

What is the legal framework behind this decision, and does the ruling represent a significant change from the status quo in Europe regarding religious ritual slaughter?

Since the 1970s, protecting animal welfare has been a concern for the European Union (then the European Community). The EU's first directive – the "Council Directive on Stunning Animals Before Slaughter" – was enacted in 1974 and required member states (and members of the European Economic Area) to stun animals so that they are unconscious before they are slaughtered.

The directive also exempted religious ritual slaughter, stating that it did "not affect national provisions related to special methods of slaughter which are required for particular religious rites" (Article 4).

In 1993, a broader directive on the protection of animals during slaughter added additional minimum standards. It specified permissible stunning methods, including electronarcosis (i.e., electrical volts to the animal's head), captive bolt pistol (i.e., striking the animal with a bolt to the head), and carbon dioxide exposure. The 1993 directive also included the religious exemption.

In 2009, new regulations were introduced (effective beginning in 2013), maintaining the stunning requirement for all member states. The regulations exempted religious ritual slaughter. However, they also allowed member states to enact "stricter national rules" to ensure "more extensive protection of animals at the time of killing" (Article 26).

These regulations have arguably opened the door to some of the changes witnessed over the past decade. Indeed, since 2010 there has been a marked shift across Europe regarding the right to perform religious ritual slaughter (i.e., *shechita* and *halal*). Several European states have enacted so-called "bans" on ritual slaughter, which are, in fact, legal requirements to pre-stun or post-stun animals intended for slaughter.

Prior to the enactment of these bans, a certain status quo had existed across Europe in which most states adhered to the EU directives, mandating stunning for all slaughterhouses but exempting ritual slaughter.

Yet, even then, a handful of states still did not allow ritual slaughter, some of them non-EU states but within the European Economic Area. Switzerland has maintained a ban on ritual slaughter since 1893, Norway since 1930, and Sweden since 1936. Poland outlawed ritual slaughter in 2002, but its law was overturned in 2014. Austria has required post-cut stunning since 2004, essentially

banning *shechita* and most *halal* slaughter (post-cut stunning is only allowed by some conservative rabbis but has been growing in acceptance among Islamic religious authorities).

Despite these relatively few exceptions, there still existed, until a decade ago, a certain broad agreement in Europe on allowing religious ritual slaughter as part of religious minorities' right to manifest their religion freely. That broad agreement has undoubtedly shifted during the past decade.

In 2013, Iceland, Slovenia, and Estonia banned ritual slaughter. Denmark did so in 2014. The Netherlands temporarily banned ritual slaughter in 2011, and now limits the production of kosher meat to local consumption only and also requires post-cut stunning.

In 2017, the Flemish and Wallonia Regions in Belgium enacted decrees requiring the reversible stunning of animals intended for religious ritual slaughter (which is the subject of the European Court of Justice ruling presented next), in effect banning the practice. Most recently, in late October 2021, Greece's courts banned ritual slaughter. Poland is still attempting to ban exporting kosher and *halal* meat; these efforts are still pending.

Within the above context, the Flemish decree and European Court of Justice ruling is better understood.

In 2017, the Flemish Region enacted a decree requiring stunning be administered to animals in all slaughterhouses, except for those undergoing religious ritual slaughter – for which a “reversible stunning” be applied. To be clear, reversible stunning is not permitted under *shechita* precepts or generally under *halal* slaughter (although some Islamic religious authorities have come to accept the method).

The decree, in essence, canceled the former exemption given to ritual slaughter and created a ban on all religious ritual slaughter. Jewish and Muslim groups subsequently filed lawsuits before the Belgian Constitutional Court in 2018, alleging violations of their right to freedom of religion.

The Constitutional Court (*Grondwettelijk Hof*) asked the European Court of Justice for a preliminary ruling on whether the reversible stunning requirement was permissible per EU regulations given the alleged infringement of the right to freely manifest one's religion.

The European Court of Justice delivered its ruling in December 2020 and declared that:

“The application of reversible, non-lethal stunning during the practice of ritual slaughter constitutes a proportionate measure which respects the spirit of ritual slaughter in the framework of freedom of religion and takes maximum account of the welfare of the animals concerned.”

How did the court arrive at this conclusion? First, the main question concerned the limitation posed by the Flemish decree on the right to manifest one's religion freely. As is the case with other human rights (e.g., freedom of expression, freedom of assembly), there is no such thing as an “absolute” right that cannot be limited or infringed upon under certain conditions.

The question is whether such conditions exist and whether any limitations are enacted in a “proportionate manner”; that is, if they are deemed necessary and genuinely meet objectives of general interest (in this case, objectives recognized by the EU) or enacted to protect the rights and freedoms of others.

This is always the balancing act when considering a situation of infringement of rights. The restriction imposed must be shown to have been enacted in a way that, at the very least, regarded the freedom to manifest religion.

Indeed, most of the ruling by the European Court of Justice focused on this very point of whether the reversible stunning requirement was proportionate and done to meet a general interest of the EU and whether the Flemish Parliament considered the right to freedom of religion when it formulated the decree.

To answer these questions, the court considered the scientific research relied upon by the Flemish Parliament that had demonstrated, in the eyes of the court, that:

“Scientific consensus has emerged that prior stunning is the optimal means of reducing the animal’s suffering at the time of killing.”

The court argued that the limitation was necessary in order to uphold the EU value of animal welfare. Moreover, it appeared the Flemish Parliament had attempted to mitigate the limitation on the right to freedom of religion by not banning ritual slaughter outright but rather offering the “solution” of reversible stunning, which did not cause the animal’s death. This was deemed to prove that the restriction was made in a manner that considered the right to freedom of religion.

However, it appears that the court went a step further than concluding the reversible stunning requirement had been necessary to uphold a value of interest and had been done in a proportionate manner. The ruling appeared to interpret whether reversible slaughter should affect the kosher or *halal* status of the meat by suggesting that “the fear that stunning would adversely affect bleeding out is unfounded.”

It also suggested that stunning, or electronarcosis, “is a non-lethal, reversible method of stunning, with the result that if the animal’s throat is cut immediately after stunning, its death will be solely due to bleeding,” which is one of the requirements of both kosher and *halal* slaughter. That is to say, stunning does not result in the animal’s death, and, therefore, religious authorities could accept it within their religious rituals.

In this sense, it seems the judges waded into waters reserved for religious authorities, interpreting religious rather than secular law, and suggesting whether a new method could (or should) be congruent with age-old religious precepts. However, bleeding out and cause of death are not the only requirements of *shechita* or *halal* slaughter.

In deciding on the proportionality of the limitation to freedom of religion, the court could have merely ruled that the limitation was necessary since it met one of the EU’s declared objective values – animal welfare.

Moreover, the court could have emphasized, instead of only noted, that the Flemish Decree made this requirement in a manner that ostensibly minimized the infringement on freedom of religion by requiring the reverse stunning option rather than an outright ban (although that is also problematic since the decree does essentially produce that same result).

Would not religious authorities be the appropriate arbiters to answer such questions? This overstepping into religious interpretation could be viewed as hubris or bias, the subtext of which clear: “We can easily navigate and interpret these relatively simple religious precepts and then be able to implement the latest science on them. Problem solved.”

This is not to say that religious establishments should not also change in order to reduce animal suffering. However, it is unlikely that any change will come from a ruling handed down by secular judges opining on religious laws beyond their purview.

A Royal Message

A conference on fighting antisemitism gives reasons for optimism

November 2021

Dina Porat

On October 13 of this year, a well-attended conference was held in Malmö, Sweden, entitled “The Malmö International Forum on Holocaust Remembrance and Combating Antisemitism – Remember-ReAct.”

The first question that comes to mind is why such a conference was held in Malmö, a city known of late as a place from which Jews flee. The rise of radical Islam in the city led to a steady increase in antisemitic incidents. The Jewish community numbers today about 500 people; just a few years ago, there were 2,000.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the conference was postponed for a year. However, the Swedish government remained adamant that Malmö was the right location, a position taken in no small part due to the opinion of Malmö’s young and energetic mayor, Katrin Stjernfeldt Jammeh, that her city was the right place.

Indeed, the selection of Malmö as the host city sent a message that one should not avoid action and confrontation in a most difficult place.

The Swedish government invested considerable efforts, human resources, and a substantial budget: the streets near the hotels where participants stayed and the venue where the conference was held were closed to traffic, a helicopter hovered in the sky above most of the day, and security personnel checked those entering each building.

There were many dignitaries to secure: King Carl Gustaf and Queen Silvia sat in the front row during the entire conference. Distinguished participants came from around the world, including dozens of heads of state, presidents, ministers, heads of organizations and institutes, and several academics.

A group of twelve experts (myself included) worked many hours via Zoom, offering advice to the organizers. However, the organizers decided to emphasize the participation of influential political personalities rather than a substantive academic discussion. There was a clear reason for that: the conference’s purpose was to secure the commitment and pledge of the leaders in attendance to preserve the Shoah’s memory and combat antisemitism.

Commitments have been made by a long list of governments and organizations. French President Emmanuel Macron, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, UN Secretary General António Guterres, UNESCO, the European Union (which presented a comprehensive strategic plan), and many others promised to dedicate budgets, enlist human resources, educate, and legislate to identify incidents and expressions according to the Working Definition of Antisemitism.

Indeed, a sort of competition developed – who will do and give more. The UN’s Special Envoy, Miguel Moratinos, suggested adding a word to the title of the conference: Remember-React-Pledge.

Perspectives 2021-2023 – Thoughts on Contemporary Jewish Life

What will the actual result of this conference and its commitments be? In January 2020, on International Holocaust Memorial Day, Yad Vashem hosted a similar conference with many participants, including heads of state and members of royal families who headed large delegations. They also gave their written commitments, which subsequently were compiled into an impressive book.

In February 2020, the world was besieged by the Coronavirus, and antisemitism increased and became more toxic and violent. Thus, it was difficult to make good on some of the promises made.

Next year, Sweden will chair the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) founded 21 years ago in Stockholm on the initiative of then-Swedish President Goran Persson. Today, 34 member nations participate in meetings, as well as observers from central international bodies.

Sweden's current prime minister, Stefan Löfven, announced during the Malmö conference that IHRA would be an opportunity to monitor the fulfillment of the commitments, using the mechanism that IHRA presents. This is an encouraging sign.

And there were others. A short ceremony, an hour in length, took place in Malmö's beautiful synagogue before the opening discussions. The conference's participants, especially the Jews, filled the place for a "Celebration of Jewish life in Sweden," as the invitation said.

Those gathered listened to thrilling Yiddish singing and to short lectures that pierced their hearts. The chairperson of the Swedish Jewish Communities, Aron Verständig, did not leave a dry eye when he related that during the height of the 1945 Yom Kippur prayers at the end of the War, someone entered and announced that refugees arrived at the port. The congregants ran out to greet them, and upon seeing their anguished and sorrowful condition, asked them, what is the thing they most need right now. They replied: "It is Yom Kippur, correct? Please take us to a Synagogue."

During the ceremony, the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) projected antisemitic expressions and denials of the Holocaust on the outside walls of the synagogue. All of us who were huddled in the synagogue at the time listening to the speakers had no idea. And even if we knew, it would not have stopped us.

Two weeks after the conference took place, we can surmise that indeed, in Malmö, the commitments to combat antisemitism will pay off.

The achievement first and foremost belongs to the Prime Minister of Sweden. Löfven opened the conference with a candid statement that there is antisemitism in sections of Swedish society and that Holocaust remembrance means a special commitment towards the Jewish people. He closed it with the promise that Sweden will follow through with the commitments. Löfven also shared that more than once, he was asked why he was making such great efforts to realize the conference. His reply, he said, was always the same: this was the essence of being human.

The Prime Minister reminded us that when Raoul Wallenberg was asked why he was willing to sacrifice his life for Jews that he did not even know, he answered: "As far as I am concerned, there is no other choice."

Home Cantor

Reflections of a Chazan in a Swedish community recovering from Covid-19

October 2021

Peter Lebenswerd

As a young boy, I used to gaze at the Stars of David that adorn the ceiling of the synagogue. I can still smell the same scent of the room and can almost imagine holding my grandfather's hand, a hand I haven't held for almost thirty years, full of expectations as the cantor is to begin the service.

Suddenly I am back in the present and realize that I am in the same location, but now the cantor is me: I am the "chazan."

It feels a bit surreal; who am I to stand here in the white "Kittel" garb and lead all these people in prayer, and will I live up to the expectations?

I occasionally get to act as a "chazan," a Jewish cantor, both in Israel and abroad, but once every year, I have the privilege to do so in a very special place for me. A few days before the "High Holidays" of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, I get on a plane from Israel to lead the prayer service of the High Holidays in the Minyan where I "grew up," in the Jewish community of Stockholm, Sweden.

It is an emotional trip not only because it is where I was raised and where most of my family still lives, but also since I was once deeply involved in the different activities of the community as a Jewish educator before making Aliyah to Israel.

The Stockholm Jewish community dates to the late 1700s when King Gustav III made it legal for Jews to come and live in Sweden without having to convert to Christianity. Most active community members nowadays, however, are descendants of Jews who arrived at a later stage, including Holocaust survivors.

The community has a quite unusual setup referred to by the German word Einheitsgemeinde, or "unified community," in which the different streams of Judaism all work under one roof.

Thus, for example, the same Community organization employs both Orthodox and non-Orthodox rabbis who respond to the needs of their respective adherents. All in all, there are about 4,500 members of the Community and an estimated additional 4,000 Jews who are not members.

Stockholm has three main synagogues, each with its own fascinating history. Among them are the beautiful Great Synagogue, which was built already in 1870 and replaced the synagogue in the Stockholm Old Town that had served the community since the late 1700s. Another is the synagogue of "Adat Jeshurun," the only synagogue saved from the fires of the November Pogrom (Kristallnacht) in Hamburg as its more than 200-year-old furniture and Aron Kodesh (the ark where the Torah scrolls are kept) were secretly transported to Sweden.

The synagogues represent different religious streams, but most members would probably not state they belong to any specific Jewish religious movement but instead attend the service where they feel "at home."

The Minyan I serve in is one of a few that exist only on the High Holidays. It has hundreds of visitors and was founded in 1929 and is located in the beautiful community building from around the same time. The Minyan is called “Sessionssalen minyan” in Swedish, named after the beautiful “Sessions Hall” where the service has taken place since it began almost a hundred years ago.

The style and order of prayer are Orthodox, but, again, people from all walks of life and synagogues make up the congregation on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Many families, like my own, have prayed there for generations. Since 1998 I have also served them as a cantor.

This year was more emotional than usual. Some might have heard of what has sometimes been called the “Swedish model” in terms of its Corona strategy. It meant fewer restrictions than perhaps most other countries; facemasks are rare. Unfortunately, many thousands of people have lost their lives to the virus in Sweden, and the Jewish community had a very tragic situation during 2020 in this respect.

As a result, the community chose to halt most of its public activities until recently. During this year’s High Holidays, community members could finally meet again. I was moved by the energy and happiness of finally being together in this particular place, and it made me reflect on my role as a cantor, not only this year but every year.

There is, of course, nothing unique about a cantor being hired by a synagogue for the Holidays. The humorous Yiddish song “Hozzonim Oif Probe” (Auditioning Cantors) with a melody by Shalom Secunda declares:

As the High Holidays draw near,

A job market opens up for cantors.

They scan the ads placed by synagogues and minyanim:

“Cantor Wanted. Must have a wonderful voice...”

In the United States alone, for example, an estimated 250 communities hire someone externally to lead their High Holiday services; at least 100 of them are flown in from Israel. Many are not fully trained cantors but lay-cantors, a category to which I probably belong.

One of the reasons for searching for a cantor specifically around the High Holidays is, of course, the idea within Jewish tradition that those are the Days of Judgement. Hence, the choice of the person leading the prayers is significant for spiritual reasons. But there is also a general yearly peak in religious, cultural, musical, and perhaps even social expectations and demands connected to these services, including in the community I serve.

Perhaps because of these expectations, things get a little complicated since the role of the cantor is not and has never been defined in one singular way. It is not a static function. Is the role of the cantor to ensure that the prayers sound beautiful? Or is it to inspire the congregation to pray? In Jewish sources, various aspects are described. The very word “chazan” is not even the only term used. In the religious texts and vocabulary, the person leading the service is mainly called a “Shaliach Tzibbur,” an emissary of the congregation.

Just by looking at these two ways of describing the cantor, one can discern two different kinds of expectations involved. In the word “chazan” (often translated as “cantor”), one can imagine someone singing prayers in a musically pleasant way, someone enjoyable to listen to, and hopefully, someone to be inspired by. Regarding the second term, “Shaliach Tzibbur,” the person is seen simply as a shaliach, meaning an emissary or a representative of the community. According to Maimonides,

based on the Talmud, this person is sometimes even preferably an “ordinary” person sharing the burdens of everyday life with the community.

Although Jewish law has established some ideal criteria for the role, the same sources state that under certain circumstances, almost any person is fit for leading the prayers provided that the congregation accepts them.

And that is perhaps the point – since the service is not a concert and I, as a cantor, am not performing for an audience but rather representing a congregation, the only fundamental criterion is that the congregation accepts you. Which again leads us back to the expectations.

One of the most significant changes to the cantorate in modern and post-modern times has been the increased focus on the active participation of the congregants. In his essay, “The vocation of a cantor” from 1966, the rabbi and philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote:

“One must realize the difficulties of the cantor. The call to prayer often falls against an iron wall. The congregation is not always open and ready to worship. The cantor has to pierce the armor of indifference. He has to fight for a response. He has to conquer them in order to speak for them. Often, he must first be one who awakens those who slumber, before he can claim to be a Shaliach Tzibbur. And yet we must not forget that there is a heritage of spiritual responsiveness in the souls of our people.”

Maybe that situation was one of the reasons the revolution of increased participation took place. Participation was, of course, always a part of the Jewish worship service.

Still, nowadays, active participation in terms of singing along and the introduction of popular tunes to accompany the words of the prayer book is the rule in many places, almost regardless of denomination.

This phenomenon occasionally leads to a tension that I have myself witnessed between, on the one hand, the desire to maintain the traditional “nusach” liturgical style and, on the other hand, the desire to incorporate more accessible melodies to increase the participation of the congregants and those who prefer a little bit of both.

This tension is not merely a question of style or subjective taste. For many, it touches the core of their Jewish identity and experience and carries with it a world of cultural and spiritual associations.

If in the past the challenge was finding a chazan that was righteous, liked, and had a pleasant voice, the contemporary challenge would include finding someone who also meets the expectations as to the style or combination of styles preferred.

Today that could be anything from classic European Cantorial style to the style inspired by late rabbi and singer Shlomo Carlebach where the prayer leader also takes on the function of a spiritual song leader.

(As a brief aside, it can be said that while the classical cantorial style might be subject to heavy competition within the synagogue, it has become more popular beyond the doors of the synagogue in the form of “chazanut concerts” accompanied by music.)

In Israel, the “problem” of this tension and other matters of preference can be easily solved due to the wide variety of synagogues and styles to choose from. Nobody will have to be disappointed. Moreover, in Israel, an implication of the sharper division between how “secular” and “religious” Israelis spend their High Holidays is that most synagogue visitors during the Holidays are the same people who frequently visit prayer services also throughout the year.

Perspectives 2021-2023 – Thoughts on Contemporary Jewish Life

In many diaspora communities, however, and especially smaller ones, the situation is very different. In “my” Minyan during the High Holidays, many congregants do not regularly visit synagogues during the rest of the year. This is, for them, possibly one of the most significant Jewish “events” of the year.

In such a place with only a few synagogues to choose from, the question of “style” becomes essential, and the role of the chazan becomes very serious business, possibly even in a disproportionate way.

In addition, the synagogue is seen by many as the place where one can feel “at home” as Jews and where one may reflect on one’s Jewishness while living in a predominantly non-Jewish society. The days on which people show up to do just that more than any other time of the year are the High Holidays regardless of where they are on the secular-religious spectrum.

In this context, the expectations of the prayer service, and thus of the cantor, become much more than a matter of preference or even of religious experience.

I remember an emotional encounter with an elderly lady telling me how she loved one of the melodies I sang during the service because it reminded her of her childhood in pre-Holocaust Poland.

Another person asked me to do more “chazanut” (classic cantorial style singing) because that is what he admires the most about Jewish music, and a young student told me she wants more of the “Israeli modern style” singing that I partly introduced because that made her feel connected to Israel.

And then, of course, there are the people who don’t want to change anything when it comes to the melodies and style; after all, when they come to service, it is supposed to sound as it always did, because: “is that not the whole point”?

In a way, all these various expectations of the cantor make a fascinating mirror of the different expressions of Jewish identity that are all gathered in that same space for a couple of hours. That is indeed a heavy responsibility. So, what is my role, I ask myself while standing there one minute before the prayer service starts? Is it possible to make them all feel represented? I don’t have a choice, I tell myself, I must try my best not to exclude anyone, for is that not what this task has been about for thousands of years – to try your best to be a Shaliach of the Tzibbur, an emissary of the community. Every community in its own way.

It's Trivial

Why comparing corona-curfew's with the Nazi-era endangers freedom

September 2021

Hanna Luden

After the traumatic First World War ended, the international community took steps to ensure such atrocities would never happen again. Yet, little more than a decade passed before Hitler rose to power and brought humanity to its lowest point. The world failed to recognize the danger, with devastating consequences.

This colossal failure is still an open wound in the collective memory of Western societies. As a result, the period before and during the Second World War has become a perpetual warning ever since, accompanied by the sacred pledge 'Never Again.' It is constantly present in the back of our liberal democratic minds, reminding us Westerners to stay on guard for any indication that the principles and foundations of our democracies are being undermined.

We make sure to address populism, xenophobia, and fascist tendencies when we see them. We don't take risks.

But sometimes, we lose our way and draw faulty comparisons. All too often, those flawed comparisons make it impossible to engage in open discussions or express differences of opinion.

Comparing current events to the Second World War, or to the developments that led to Hitler's rise to power, must be done with the utmost caution. Some of those comparisons are not just incorrect, they are dangerous.

Already in May 2020, demonstrators in Germany compared Covid-19 lockdowns with the Nazi persecution of Jews. Abuse of other Holocaust-related images followed. For example, images circulated in social media changed the infamous inscription at the entrance to Auschwitz to "vaccination sets you free".

The abuse of Holocaust imagery and language did not only serve to portray vaccine rejectionists as victims, but also policy-makers as criminals. In the Netherlands, Prime Minister Mark Rutte and Health Minister Hugo de Jonge were shown in photomontages as Nazi officers, accompanied by the term "vaccinazi's." The hashtag #vaccinazis on Twitter is associated with posts against anti-pandemic policies. Police forces are often associated with the Gestapo.

The measures Western and other governments have taken in the fight against the Corona virus have stirred strong emotions. That is understandable. However, equating curfews intended to protect lives with curfews during the Nazi occupation, or lockdowns with Anne Frank's hiding conditions, are misguided and unacceptable forms of protest.

These comparisons, which are painful for those who still have living memories of the Second World War, distort our understanding of history and erode our knowledge of this particular period; our moral benchmark. They lead to a trivialization of the events and the suffering of that time. One

wonders whether those who draw such comparisons have any idea of the horrors of those days; about the raids, hunger, fear, deprivation of freedom of movement, and mass murders.

The Israeli writer Amos Oz aptly put it: “the difficult part of moral work is to distinguish between degrees of evil [...] For he or she who cannot distinguish between different degrees of evil, might unwillingly become a servant of evil. This is my own moral imperative: pay attention to the differences between bad, worse, and worst.”

The trivialization of the Nazi regime’s horrors is a growing phenomenon. Our societies must appreciate the difference between inconvenience and horror, between controversial medical measures and the worst atrocities committed in human history. Otherwise, we will gradually lose our ability to recognize evil, if that wolf ever appears in our backyard again.

An Ice Cream Story

How an Auschwitz survivor shaped Israeli – and German – youth cultures

September 2021

Uriya Shavit

Last month, Yeshayahu Lichtenstein died, aged 93. He was survived by a wife, five children, seventeen grandchildren, and eight great-grandchildren. In a beautiful obituary, Haaretz described him as “the most optimistic man in Tel Aviv.” Few people encapsulated the drama of Jewish existence in our times as he did.

Born in Poland, Lichtenstein survived two and a half years in Auschwitz and a death march, and in 1946 made Aliyah onboard the Enzo Sereni. He was imprisoned by the British in Atlit.

After Israel gained its independence, he settled in Tel Aviv and tried his luck in all sorts of professions, including opening a kiosk in the city’s central bus station where he sold sandwiches and newspapers, including a Polish-language daily.

Then, together with two partners, he began running a cafe in the northern part of the city, close to the Tel Aviv Port – “Montana Ice Cream.” You could find real, imported American ice cream, soft drinks, a coin-operated music machine, and video games there. The walls were covered with posters of James Dean and Marilyn Monroe.

Tel Aviv of the early 1960s was anything but the city that Quentin Tarantino thinks of as cool, especially if you happened to be a teenager. Montana Ice Cream became the place where the young would hang out. The location for first dates. A piece of Americana in a socialist land with no television. And soon enough, a myth.

In 1978, a youth movie depicting the innocence (and lack thereof) of three high school students in Tel Aviv of the early days of Montana Ice Cream was released – Eskimo Limon (Lemon Popsicle). Many scenes were filmed in Lichtenstein’s kingdom. The movie became an immediate hit as about one-third of the Israeli population bought a ticket.

Given the limitations of the genre, it was well-made. In the Tel Aviv it depicted, sixteen-year-olds were not anxious to become brave soldiers. They were anxious to lose their virginity. They did not sing Kibbutz songs. They rode their bicycles to the sounds of Elvis. With the movie’s unprecedented success, the myth of Montana Ice Cream grew at a time when the actual place began to decline.

Then, a twist. Eskimo Limon turned out to be a blockbuster in West Germany as well. After a good run in movie theaters there (dubbed, of course), the movie and its sequels were shown as reruns on German television late at night. Eis am Stiel, as it was called there, became an integral part of growing up in Germany. Every teenager watched it, though not all of them admitted to doing so in retrospect.

It’s actually not difficult to explain the success. The film described the universal agonies of teenagers from European families, with chart-topping American oldies as the soundtrack. Writing about Eis am Stiel’s “curious success” in Germany in the 1980s, Astrid Winterfeld of the Jüdische Rundschau

noted that while Germans who reflect on their youth relate to the movie differently, few of them realize that it was originally Israeli.

There was only one country, other than Israel and West Germany, where Eskimo Limon was that successful – Japan.

In the early 2000s, Montana Ice Cream was all but deserted. Times change. The sensation became nostalgia, and nostalgia can only make so much money. Lichtenstein and the partner who remained with him insisted on not closing down. It was sad to follow the legal dispute. It could only end one way.

An Auschwitz survivor begins a new life in Israel, has a large family, brings America to Tel Aviv, takes part in shaping the youth culture of a generation of Israelis, and, through an iconic movie, ends up indirectly leaving a mark on German youth culture as well, only to see his life's work fade slowly away.

What are we to make of this unusual tale? Perhaps it's about Jewish vitality. Perhaps about the great ironies of history. Perhaps about globalization. Perhaps a reminder that, from the point of view of eternity, we are all failures. Yet in this season of the High Holy Days, as I pass through the famous ice cream venue that became a baby store, I'd like to think that the appropriate conclusion is the most beautiful of Jewish teachings: "Whoever saves one life, saves the world entire."

The Demons of Science Fiction

When future worlds bring back old threats

August 2021

Inna Shtakser

Science fiction is a wonderful genre. I am a big fan of books describing possible futures for humanity. The best science fiction, such as works by Ursula Le Guin and Kim Stanley Robinson, address futures as developing out of combinations of human decisions on the one hand and resource scarcity and technological advances on the other.

Aleksandr Gromov is one of the best known post-Soviet science fiction writers. While I often disagree with his worldview, I always find his books both intellectually stimulating and a pleasure to read. There are quite a few other excellent Russian writers in this genre. Evgenii Lukin, Vadim Shefner and Yulii Burkin combine, for example, combine science fiction and fantasy in imaginative depictions of how human societies might develop.

Yet, some late Soviet and post-Soviet works of fantasy or sci-fi fantasy make me uncomfortable. In addressing the resurgence of nationalism that accompanied the ideological and political collapse of the Soviet Union, they fall back on antisemitic stereotypes. For example, in the works of Yuri Nikitin, Vadim Panov, and Vasili Golovachev, the protagonists are depicted as honest, hardworking, albeit somewhat naïve Slavs, whereas the villains are portrayed as devious money-obsessed individuals intent on destroying society.

As Viktor Shnirelman, historian and ethnologist specializing in the myths and ideologies of the far-right, noted in his 2018 study *Three Myths of a Conspiracy: Antisemitic Propaganda in Contemporary Russia*, this association of villainy with Judaism in late-Soviet and post-Soviet sci-fi fantasy represents a disturbing trend: the use of non-traditional platforms to transmit antisemitic ideas to a new generation of Russians.

According to Shnirelman, fiction, especially the genres of science fiction and fantasy, has become a convenient way of circumventing Russian laws against public expressions of racist views. After all, the idea of prosecuting someone for creating an imaginary world populated by a greedy humanoid species with hooked noses or for using racial epithets to describe the long extinct Khazars seems excessive, even absurd.

The popularity of these genres, especially among Slavic youth, is troubling. It suggests that pervasive stereotypes about Jews are being communicated in disguised forms to the leaders of tomorrow.

Shnirelman gives particular attention to the archetypal character of the outsiders in Russian science fiction; they are depicted as either well-known enemies of the ancient Slavic community, such as the Khazars, or as disingenuous persons belonging to a future society who are intent on causing destruction.

These representations, he contends, derive from deeply ingrained antisemitic perceptions that are based on three interrelated myths about the relationship between Slavs and outsiders.

First, there is the myth of the Antichrist who threatens humanity's existence. He is assisted by those who do not belong to the Slavic Orthodox spiritual community. These outsiders, who include

all Jews, hate Christians and want to destroy them. The second myth depicts Slavs as a superior race that is engaged in an eternal life-or-death struggle against the inferior Jewish race. The third myth concerns the Khazars, a Turkic people, whose ruling elite in the eighth century converted to Rabbinic Judaism and who were conquered by the Kievan Rus' circa 965-969 CE. It suggests that the Khazars have not been vanquished; they pose as ordinary Russians, and their goal is revenge on the Russian people.

Science fiction and fantasy based on these myths describe contemporary Russians as noble warriors engaged in an ancient and ongoing battle for the salvation of the human race against an evil ethnic outsider. Shnirelman notes that the war between Slavs and some spiritually dark and racially foreign force is a common theme in the works of Yuri Nikitin (for example, *The Holy Graal* and *One from Hyperborea*), Alexander Baygushev (*Lament for the Unwise Khazars*) and other Russian fantasy writers.

Although the ethnic villain in present-day Russian science fiction is almost never explicitly identified as Jewish, the depiction corresponds either with antisemitic stereotypes or utilizes Jewish surnames to make the connection. Occasionally, the association is made more explicit. For example, in his 2009 novel *The Non-Russians are Coming, or The Bringers of Death*, Vasilii Glovachev indicates the Jewish identity of the villains by having their names, as read from right to left, sound recognizably Jewish.

Certainly, not all Russian sci-fi fantasy authors utilize antisemitic tropes, nor is implicit or explicit antisemitism peculiar to Russian science fiction. As Paul Sturtevant noted in a 2018 article for the *Washington Post*, the goblins in *Harry Potter*, the dwarves in *The Hobbit*, and Watto in the *Star Wars* series, also perpetuate antisemitic stereotypes. Sturtevant showed how these villains draw on the stereotype of the “greedy Jew”.

However, unlike in Russian sci-fi fantasy, this association of greed with evil is not accompanied in Western science fiction by a parallel emphasis on evil as a foreign force invading a homogenous homeland. It is the combination of antisemitic stereotypes and the othering of foreigners in Russian sci-fi fantasy that Shnirelman finds disturbing because it points to the ever-present danger of Russian nationalism turning towards racism and xenophobia.

Almost one-fifth of Russian Jews express concerns about a rising threat of antisemitism, as indicated by a poll conducted three years ago by the Russian think-tank, The Levada Center. A close look at Russian science fiction suggests that they are not necessarily fantasizing.

Jews and Roots

What football teaches us about Israeli-German relations

July 2021
Uriya Shavit

Ask any sports fan: a football match is worth watching only if you root for one of the teams. Whether it is the World Cup, the Malaysian third division, or kids playing in the backyard, you cannot avoid picking your favorite based on one made-up reason or another.

A satirical Hebrew-language Israeli Facebook page, “The Jews Root”, established in April 2016, has attempted to make the choice of Israeli soccer fans easier. During international competitions, it offers short historical analyses of the crimes committed by different nations against the Jewish people, concluding with a calculated selection between two teams.

In the 2020 Euro that ended this month, “The Jews Root” reached almost 20,000 followers. Whether it was Spain against Switzerland, England against Ukraine, or Denmark against the Czech Republic, the page cynically informed its readers which nations saved Jews, which did not, and which persecuted and murdered them, offering a bottom line as to which national team deserves Jewish support.

The page features a picture from an iconic comical act by the Kameri Quintet, a popular Israeli television show from the 1990s. That act introduced a Herzl-like Jewish sports politico who tries to convince the referee to allow a short, fragile Israeli track runner to start the race a few meters ahead of his tall gentile competitors in order to “lessen the humiliation” of the Jews. When his request is declined, the Herzl-like figure declares what has since become a catchphrase: “Haven’t the Jewish people suffered enough?”

There’s a truth in any joke; the truth in “The Jews Root” is that Jewish history no longer guides most Israelis when picking their favorites in Europe – and that is why they are comfortable joking about it.

Not long ago, but long after “valid to all countries except Germany” was omitted from Israeli passports, it was obvious which national team Israelis despise most and hope fails in the World Cup or the Euro. It was Germany. The Mannschaft had fans in Israel, including a Holocaust survivor who is one of its most influential public figures. Yet, these fans remained closeted. To publicly endorse the German team, or even to do so among friends, was almost a taboo.

That approach has radically changed in recent years. Already in 2010, a survey conducted by a leading Israeli polling company, Dahaf, found that no less than 25.1 percent of Israelis (and 30.5 among the men surveyed) would like to see Germany win the World Cup out of four finalists.

The Netherlands used to be the obvious European favorite for Israelis, in part because of the good reputation the Dutch falsely acquired for their conduct in the Holocaust, in part because of their attractive playing style. The survey gave the Dutch team the slimmest of margins over Germany, with only 27.7 percent of Israelis (31.1 among the men surveyed) hoping to see them win the cup.

More shocking was the finding that almost ten percent of Israelis (and 13.5 of the men surveyed) rooted for Germany from the start of the tournament – that is, when Brazil, Argentina, and good old England were still playing.

Ever since, displays of support for the German national team and German teams have been quite common in Israel. These include, for example, a Bayern Munich Fan Club with thousands of members. During a public screening of the Germany–Portugal match during the last Euro at the Azrieli Towers, a young Israeli man, wearing the official Germany jersey, sitting in the front row, went out of his way to make sure everyone noticed precisely where his heart belongs.

One reason for the shift is that since 2006, German football is no longer associated with the mechanicalness, aggressiveness, and win-by-any-means-necessary it was famous for (rather unjustifiably) in the 1970s and the 1980s. It was reborn as creative, bold, multicultural – and somewhat less efficient. More football fans across the globe grew fond of it, and Israelis were no exception.

On a broader level, the changing approach to German football owes to a rapid transformation in Israeli attitudes toward German society and the German state at large. Over the past three decades, Germany has gradually become an Israeli favorite. A study by the German Bertelsmann Foundation found that whereas in 1991, only 48 percent of Israelis had a favorable view of Germany, by 2007, 57 percent did. By 2015, already 70 percent of Israelis had a favorable opinion of Germany, according to another study conducted by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. Pariah Germany of the 1950s has become, for many Israelis of the 2000s, Germany, the best friend.

The historical transformation was encouraged by three interrelated processes. One, sad yet unavoidable, was that younger generations of Israelis were less emotional about the land in which the annihilation of their nation was masterminded. Another was that Germany shined as Israel's most trusted and powerful diplomatic ally in Europe.

Most importantly, Israeli-German relations deepened and matured following several decades of bottom-up enterprises, including high-school delegations, academic exchanges, and trade partnerships. The foundation of these diverse and cautiously construed efforts was a German recognition of the historical responsibility of their nation (albeit not always of Germans as individuals) for the most atrocious of crimes, and the understanding that the past could never be forgiven – or forgotten.

Opposing prejudice should mean opposing it for all. Three years ago, on a train in Norway, I argued with an old man who wanted to keep the window shut. At some point, he barked at me that I must be a German because only Germans are so impolite. The glorious irony of the moment was too good to miss, so I cautioned him that racial bigotry is an offense in his country. His behavior reminded me of a story a German banker once told me. When he worked in London, an English colleague, who watched one too many *Fawlty Towers* episodes, greeted him every morning with a Hitlergruss. When the German had enough and explained to his colleague why this isn't funny, his colleague replied: "I knew you Germans have no sense of humor!"

Germans and the Germany of today should be judged by who they are, rather than by whom their grandparents were. Opinions polls and social media that suggest that Israelis are becoming increasingly comfortable doing just that mark a positive development.

However, the change of heart also carries the risk of unintentionally relativizing and obscuring the past. "The Jews Root," a funny commentary against the politicizing of football, conceals a real danger. Given the state of Jewish history instruction in Israeli high schools, it is actually far from obvious that all its readers appreciate the joke. If they accept the misconception that Jewish history is nothing more than a tale of suffering and persecutions, they will do their heritage injustice. If

they'd be convinced that Germans are just one link in a long chain of European nations who did the Jews horrible things at some point in the past, they would do their history injustice.

Germany bears a unique responsibility for a unique crime, and Israelis, whomever they chose to root for today, should always have that in mind.

Word on Contributors

Peter Lebenswerd is an independent researcher and licensed tour guide in Israel

Rabbi Dr. Ronen Lubitch is the President of Ne'emani Torah Va'Avodah and spiritual leader of Nir Etzion

Hanna Luden is the former director of CIDI, the antisemitism watchdog in the Netherlands

Adv. Talia Naamat is a practicing attorney in Israel

Shiven Nath is a masters student in Tel Aviv University's Security and Diplomacy Program

Prof. Dina Porat is the Founding Head of the Center and Chief Historian of Yad Vashem

Dr. Giovanni Quer is the former project manager of the Center

Prof. Uriya Shavit is Head of the Center

Dr. Inna Shtakser is a researcher at the Center

Dr. Carl Yonker is Project Manager and Senior Researcher at the Center



**The Center for the Study of
Contemporary European Jewry**
The Lester and Sally Entin
Faculty of Humanities
Tel Aviv University

**The Center for the Study of
Contemporary European Jewry**

Head, Prof. Uriya Shavit

Founding Head, Prof. Dina Porat

Project Manager and Senior Researcher, Dr. Carl Yonker