“When Is Now, Now?”
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“Redemptive Violence”
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Symposium: Jewish Communities on the Margins
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“Why Is This Other Different from All Other Others?”
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“Bernard Malamud’s *The Fixer*”
*Dory Fox*

“You’re an Anti-Dentite!”
*Eric Thurm*

“Sticky Hands”
*Danya Lagos*
Mission Statement
Makom aims to provide undergraduates from the University of Chicago and elsewhere with a forum for serious intellectual engagement with Jewish topics. Targeted specifically at undergraduates and drawing upon the Chicago Center for Jewish Studies, Makom seeks to create a space that is serious enough to stimulate genuine and fulfilling discourse while comfortable enough to encourage undergraduates to take risks in their thinking and writing about Jewish issues. Of particular relevance are Jewish students who want to engage with their Jewishness in a more intellectual way, and students of all backgrounds who are interested in Jewish studies but whose primary academic focus is in a different area. For the former, Makom offers a space in which the intellectual life that is characteristic of the University can be applied specifically to exploring Jewish identity, and for the latter, a space in which they can safely investigate their academic interests in Jewish studies. Ultimately, Makom strives to cultivate a rich undergraduate discourse on Jewish topics, to connect undergraduates with the Center for Jewish Studies, and to contribute to both the academic and Jewish communities of the University of Chicago.

Editorial Policy
Makom encourages submissions from undergraduate students interested in Jewish studies in the form of essays, articles, reviews, works of art, opinion pieces, and letters to the editor. Submissions will be accepted and published on the basis of their relevance to Makom’s mission statement, space available, and on their intellectual and creative merit. However, Makom reserves the right to decline to publish submissions based on the discretion of the editors, and to edit any material submitted for publication for spelling, grammar, length, and both legal and professional standards of journalistic integrity. No anonymous submissions will be published.

Commitment to Intellectual Diversity
Makom is dedicated to appropriately representing undergraduates’ diversity of views on Jewish issues. Our commitment is to serious intellectual engagement with Judaism and Jewishness, not to any specific stances that such engagement may take. As such, the opinions articulated herein are to be understood as solely those of the authors, and not necessarily reflective of the Makom editorial board or the Chicago Center for Jewish Studies.

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The University of Chicago’s Undergraduate Journal of Jewish Thought  
June 2012 / Sivan 5772, Issue No. 2

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The arrangement of words and images on a surface plays a crucial role in the reader’s encounter with the ideas they convey. Throughout life, one acquires a grasp of the conventions by which text is manipulated on a plane to indicate the context in which the words are meaningful. The words, “Caution: Read No Further,” command a different reaction within the visual context of a conventionally arranged sentence than they would if they were arranged as

CAUTION: READ NO FURTHER.

(Please disregard the above message and continue reading.) My guess is that when you turned to this page, your eyes were drawn to this command before you even began to read the paragraph in which it appears. The point is that we all read text according to accepted rules about where and how it is supposed to appear on surfaces. More importantly, we respond to both familiar and unfamiliar textual arrangements by giving them certain meanings independent of the “content” of their particular words or symbols.

In the creation of any publication, the layout editor’s task is to facilitate communication in accordance with both textual familiarity and unfamiliarity. Sometimes, I aim to convey messages in a way that readers will recognize immediately, through the preconceived conventions they have at hand. Other times, I seek to challenge readers by presenting them with unconventional arrangements that, by their very nature, better convey messages that themselves are unconventional or outside of the norm. As a student-produced journal of Jewish thought, Makom has found itself in between these two goals of design. On the one hand, we wish to provide our readers with a design that conforms enough to the standard of academic journals in order to provide a familiar format that reflects our writers’ intent as closely as possible, with minimal distraction from any pedantic forms of stylistic “innovation” (except for the highly pedantic one in this paragraph). However, as Ethan Schwartz, Makom’s editor-in-chief, conveys in his introductory letter to the previous (and inaugural) issue, we on the editorial staff set out on this venture with the intention to create a makom, or space, that is specifically designed for undergraduates. Catering to young intellectuals who wish to explore important issues surrounding Judaism and Jewishness, we have found ourselves obliged to break from our journalistic model practically as much as we have drawn upon it.

The only aspect in which I disagree with Ethan’s letter is his claim that the Jewish tradition does not concern itself with “any inherent quality of … space itself,”1 and
that it is characterized by a “profound disregard for the inherent profanity of [any given] place.” As the layout editor, I must protest that much attention and intention go into the quality of the space we have created here. I can also bear witness to the fact that Ethan, too, has labored long hours going over the aesthetic and grammatical dimensions of this journal in order to craft it into not just any space, but rather one that captures people’s attention and imagination from the moment they hold it in their hands. We have spent day after day in the basement of the Regenstein Library, consumed in discussions over our use of Hebrew script, particular fonts, sizes of margins, color schemes, images, and other design elements, because we wanted to present an aesthetic that was reflective of and conducive to the goals and values of a publication that is both Jewish and intellectual.

Just as traditional layout relies upon a consistent and skillful application of sizing and weighting, an effective Jewish journal requires its editors to reflect on the visual language of the Jewish tradition in all of its various aesthetic manifestations—ancient, modern, postmodern, etc.—and to both reflect and innovate within these frameworks. In some ways, Makom’s look and feel reflect the influence of modern Israeli aesthetics, and in others, it retains certain patterns of the Diaspora. In some ways, the journal is designed to serve as a kind of mobile yeshiva, and in others, it aspires to conjure something of the secular Jewish salons of nineteenth-century Berlin. Our intention is to create a versatile, multifaceted journal that visually and philosophically reflects how we, as students, also dwell along the borders of multiple spheres of Jewish thought, culture, and practice.

In pursuit of this goal, it was important for us to remember that we were designing within an artistic and spiritual tradition that pays close attention to details, particularly those that would otherwise be considered unassuming. The Jewish tradition, quite literally, does not cut corners. In fact, it goes to many lengths to identify and consecrate every “edge” of day-to-day life. It instructs us to attach tassels to the four corners of our garments, and suddenly a mundane object is transformed into a reminder to reflect upon the order and beauty of the commandments that frame Jewish life (Num. 15:38-9). It not only affixes the quintessential affirmation of God’s oneness on one’s doorposts, but also binds it around the top of one’s head, as well as around the limb that borders the heart (Deut. 6:6-9). It prescribes that one not destroy the corners of one’s facial hair, in order that the hair may grow as a visual and tactile form of identification with one’s people (Lev. 19:27). It reserves the corners and gleanings of our fields for the use of the stranger, the orphan, and the widow, in order to establish a system of redistributive economic justice (Lev. 19:20). It enjoins us to bookend our holy days by enjoying the light of candles and the taste of wine (Lev. 10:10). These are just a sample of the many places in which the Jewish tradition encourages a mindful attention to the margins of life.
In light of a tradition that places such emphasis on beautifying and setting apart space through visual cues, it is clear that the visual design and layout team on the Makom editorial staff must pay close attention to every detail—even the margins of the page—in order to construct a compelling space for open Jewish discourse to take place. Furthermore, in that same spirit, Makom seeks out and pays close attention to the voices and perspectives that lay on the margins of both our university’s Jewish community and the broader Jewish world as a whole. Part of the reason why this journal was founded is that college students who are interested in exploring Jewish topics—but do not, for whatever reason, pursue the traditional institutions and avenues of academic departments or yeshivot—identified their own marginality in relation to the steady stream of publications written from the perspectives of people who are, in general, older, more academically experienced, and better-connected than we are.

Having sketched out the vision for Makom with Ethan, I was surprised and excited to learn—during my research in the summer of 2011 at the Haddassah-Brandeis Institute in Waltham, Massachusetts—that our goal was in fact part of an inspiring history of publications with similar origins. My research led me to discover a rich world of student-led Jewish publications from the sixties and seventies, usually related to students who also found themselves on the margins of the Jewish publishing world: journals, compilations, and newsletters such as Brooklyn Bridge, Lilith’s Rib, and Sh'ma, in which young people addressed the many issues affecting them, such as the effects of the “Jewish American Princess” on Jewish women’s self-esteem, the role of the Six-Day War in producing a new American-Jewish identity, and a growing sense of alienation from the student Left due to problems of anti-Semitism. It is doubtful that other mainstream Jewish publications at the time could have covered those issues outside of the perspective of the young people who were most actively engaged with them.

Makom, therefore, should presently be considered a marginal publication. Indeed, I hope that it always remains a marginal publication, in order that it might also remain a fertile ground for the innovation, expression, and experience that is not available in other, more mainstream journals and publications. As a campus journal, Makom offers easy access to the editors and an intimate intellectual community—both of which, I think, allow for freer expression of ideas than if we were a larger Jewish publication such as The Forward or The Jewish Week, which are read and commented upon by thousands on the Internet. My vision for Makom is that students in the College of the University of Chicago and elsewhere will come to see it as nothing short of a movement that seeks to pursue conversations not only with the mainstream publications and institutions that address Jewish thought, but also with communities such as the one in which Makom was born—communities that fall outside of the mainstream. We hope to make this a movement that students can eas-
ily join and participate in by adding to the conversations and design, and that it will provoke important questions and conversations surrounding the Jewish tradition—between people who otherwise would not be discussing them with their friends and colleagues. Furthermore, I hope that students on other campuses who feel a need for a new Jewish and intellectual *makom* will create versions of this journal to suit the character, interests, and challenges of their own communities. Perhaps eventually, this small journal will grow into a network of locally based student journals that seek to elevate college students from the margins to reclaim their role as a widespread and significant force in Jewish intellectual life.

**Notes**


Introduction

Martin Buber was one of the twentieth century’s leading philosophers and religious thinkers. He earned a reputation as a significant Zionist, advocating for a bi-national Jewish-Arab state. He is also held in high regard as a proponent of Jewish cultural renewal, having dedicated years to the study and revival of Chassidic tales and a German translation of the Hebrew Bible. The scope of his thought is such that his legacy is ambiguously defined by his work in education theory, utopian Zionism, and literary studies. Yet Martin Buber’s foundational question, I would argue, concerns time: is the present moment but a single point linking the infinitely vaster past and future—or does the present exist in a separate realm entirely, disassociated from any other time period?

This article consists of three parts. The first part outlines two fundamental distinctions that Buber draws: (1) with respect to Judaism, he distinguishes religion from religiosity, and (2) with respect to a subject’s encounter with an Other, he distinguishes I-You (Ich-Du) relations from I-It (Ich-Es) relations. Within each of these binaries, Buber privileges one term over the other. The second part examines the influence of time and memory in shaping the religion/religiosity and I-You/I-It pairings. I will associate religiosity with I-You and religion with I-It. Buber’s understanding of time links the two terms he privileges, I-You and religiosity, as well as the two he disparages, I-It and religion. In the third part, I will look at how Buber’s glorification of the I-You/religiosity association challenges our assumptions about the nature of time. The customary conception of time posits a linear model composed of three distinct periods: past, present, and future. I will argue that for Buber, time is linear only so long as one is engaged in religion/I-It encounters. In this state, one is inextricably influenced by time—specifically, the past and future; one has no presence. The occurrence of the present moment is conditional and dependent upon wonder. The wonder-stricken person, acting creatively, has the opportunity to mold the form time takes by encountering unconditioned communions in the form of I-You relations. Lastly, I will look at Immanuel Kant’s conception of time as a transcendental condition for understanding our experiences. I will argue against the notion that Buber merely inherited Kant’s position. What we will be left with, and what is at stake, is not only an innovative understanding of Buber’s thought, but a new conception of time itself—and how it supports Buber’s Judaism and philosophy of relation.
Buber’s Two Fundamental Distinctions

In his essay, “Jewish Religiosity,” Buber presents religiosity as the path for Jewish renewal. Religiosity is characterized by three things: a sense of wonder, the discovery of the unconditioned, and a desire to enact living communions. Respectively, these three characteristics amount to religiosity’s source, intent, and means. Religiosity’s genesis is a person’s wonder at their place in and relation to the cosmos. As Buber writes, “Religiosity starts anew with every young person, shaken to his very core by the mystery.” In other words, religiosity’s inspiration is a questioning of things as they are. For Buber, the “mystery” is a function of time. It is the wonder-filled person’s discontent with the views she inherits from previous generations. It is the questioning person calling out: “How do I relate to the world in a unique way?” This is demonstrated through Buber’s invocation of the spiritual pursuits of Abraham and Moses, who are exemplars of religiosity.

The intent of religiosity is integral. Religiosity is centered on the realization of the unconditioned. Consider:

Nothing already realized can ever suffice, but only the act that starts anew with every human being: realization. This is the intent of the teaching of return: that everyone, alone and from his own depth, must strive for divine freedom and unconditionality; no mediator can help him, nothing already accomplished by another can facilitate his own deed.

One might read this as a rejection of worship through Jesus. I hear a conception of religiosity that is intended to cultivate a consciousness demanding creativity and unmediated spirituality. It is uninformed, or uncorrupted, by any sort of external systemization. Connection through any indirect means is illegitimate. In other words, every relationship must be its own end. One cannot go through the rabbi or priest to connect to the divine; rather, all the means one utilizes must be synonymous with the ends toward which they are directed. This brings to mind the second formulation of Kant’s Categorical Imperative, wherein he forbids acting in a way that relegates another person to the status of a means. Kant prescribes that we treat people as ends in and of themselves—but we will hold off on Kant’s influence on Buber for now.

Regarding the creativity and “unconditionality” Buber demands, we are not charged merely to take the road less travelled but rather to forge a new path entirely. Already we can see time’s influence on Buber’s prescriptions. In our own pursuits, nothing prior to us can inform our religiosity; we may neither rely on nor draw inspiration from any historical precedents. How are we to do this? The means of religiosity are living communions, that is, relationships. It is apparent that these communions could involve God: “In the unconditionality of his deed man experiences his communion with God.” While communions don’t necessarily involve God, they do require an I entering into relation with a You, independent of any forced conditions.
The other form of Judaism is religion. Buber defines religion as the sum total of the customs and teachings articulated and formulated by the religiosity of a certain epoch in a people’s life; its prescriptions and dogmas are rigidly determined and handed down as unalterably binding to all future generations, without regard for their newly developed religiosity, which seeks new forms.

Religion must be contrasted with religiosity. One might presume that religion differs from religiosity primarily in its form, the way it is practiced. However, nothing necessarily differentiates the outward manifestations of the two. In other words, Buber does not say that religiosity appears ecstatic while religion is staid and ritualistic. It is possible for the two to look alike to the outside observer because the sharp contrast between the two is not external. The central point distinguishing religiosity from religion concerns time. For Buber, religion is nothing but the anachronistic practice of a religiosity inherited from a previous generation. It seems as if religiosity has an “expiration date” of any time after the present moment: what was meaningful yesterday, no matter how precisely you imitate it or how strictly you circumscribe it, will fail to evoke the same meaningfulness today.

Religion emerges from the rabbinic effort to preserve the unique creativity of religiosity through laws and doctrine. This codification, however, necessarily stultifies the desired religiosity. Recalling the words and sentiments of the prophets, Buber writes, “Religiosity induces sons, who want to find their own God, to rebel against their fathers; religion induces fathers to reject their sons, who will not let their fathers’ God be forced upon them.” It seems that for Buber, religion is what happens when religiosity’s original motivation and intent are replaced with goals such as continuity and preservation. Both of these goals are centered on time, specifically the past and the future—but not the present. “Inertia and indecisiveness are called the root of all evil; sin is basically nothing more than inertia.” Inertia is the triumph of the routine of the past over the creativity of the present. It is the unconditioned giving in to the comfort of the well worn path. In contrast, religiosity has no interest in the future and does not rely on the past.

Buber’s division of Judaism into two modes is an echo harkening back to his magnum opus, I and Thou. There, Buber affirms the twofold nature of relation. He proposes two basic word-pairs that represent the two ways in which one may address existence. The I always represents the subject. Within I-It, the I either uses or experiences an Other, the It. I-It is functional and characterized by utility and experience. The other basic word-pair is I-You. I-You indicates an encounter of relation, a connection between two whole subjects. The You is the unqualified Other with which the I enters into relation. The I cannot exist independently from either basic word subject. In other words, every individual is always in a relation with either an It or a
You. Still, within I-You there is the I and there is the You, and the singular activity of the I merits consideration. For an I-You to occur, the I’s preparedness is a necessary but insufficient factor. In other words, while “the basic word I-You can only be spoken with one’s whole being,” an I preparing herself for relation by taking into account her own being is not an adequate condition for an I-You to occur.

The I-You is a relation that happens to someone. Buber describes being drawn into an I-You: “It can also happen, if will and grace are joined, that as I contemplate the tree I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an It. The power of exclusiveness has seized me.” In Buber’s description of his own I-You encounter with a tree, we see four things about the nature of the I-You. First, I-You relations are not restricted to human relations; rather, they can occur between a person and an animal, an inanimate object, or even God. Second, a transition occurs which transforms the tree from being an It to a You. At least part of the transformation from I-It to I-You requires the I to have in mind her own wholeness. An I-You relation also necessitates viewing the Other, the You, in their wholeness: “You has no borders.” In other words, the You cannot be categorized or classified. Third, the transformation is affected by the mysterious power of the joining of “will and grace.” The externality of this force that draws Buber into an I-You (in this instance with a tree) attests to the passivity of the I in the face of I-You. As such, I-You is not about empowerment, activity, or freedom. If it were, why should the I’s capacity to bring on an I-You be so circumscribed and sporadic? At best, any I’s activity is exactly half of what it takes to bring on an I-You. As Buber writes later, “The You encounters me by grace—it cannot be found by seeking[.] The You encounters me. But I enter into a direct relationship to it.” There is a balance between the I’s investment with the You’s openness, all in the hands of will and grace. Fourth, to establish the relation, no one needs to speak. While Buber is being drawn into relation, he takes care not to mention any utterances which introduce the relation. Rather, it seems as though the chief catalyst for the occurrence of an I-You is a perspective shift. The I and You must both undergo a change in how they account themselves and the Other.

Whereas more mystical conceptions of relation result in the realization of shared being or unified existence, the partners in an I-You relation remain distinct. Still, the borders within which the I would customarily view this Other are ruptured. “Nothing conceptual intervenes between I and You, no prior knowledge and no imagination; and memory itself is changed as it plunges from particularity into wholeness. No purpose intervenes between I and You, no greed and no anticipation.” In an I-You, relation is uninformed by any categorizations of memory. The I-You is present-centric, taking into account neither memory nor anticipation of the future. In contrast, I-It is spoken for utilitarian purposes. This does not mean that such relations are bad; in fact, they are necessary for the world to function. “One cannot live life,” explains Buber, “in the pure present: it would consume us if care were not taken that
it is overcome quickly and thoroughly. But in pure past one can live; in fact, only there can a life be arranged.” In addition to dismissing the prospect of an entire life in “the pure present” of I-You relations, Buber says that only in the time occupied by I-It can life be organized. The prospect of a person functioning solely in the realm of I-You is unrealistic. Further, Buber employs the same reasoning for almost accepting (but not quite lauding) religion when he writes, “Thus religiosity is the creative, religion the organizing principle.” We need religion and I-Its, functions of the past, to arrange ourselves and our ambitions going into the future. A person orientated solely towards I-You relations does not experience this world.

However, experience of the world is not the same as participation therein. Buber explains, “The world as experience belongs to the basic word I-It,” and “those who experience do not participate in the world. For the experience is ‘in them’ and not between them and the world.” I-It allows the I to access what the I wants or needs. But relation is not a product of I-It. Before the tree becomes Buber’s You, it necessarily must be an It. While it is still in that state, “I can dissolve it into a number, into a pure relation between numbers, eternalize it. Throughout all of this the tree remains my object and has its place and its time span, its kind of condition.” Though Buber can contemplate the tree, and even meditate on it as a form or worship or a vehicle for the divine, he cannot force or fake a relation with it. Remarkably, in the I-It state, without entering into a pure I-You relation, Buber is still able to “eternalize it.” That is, Buber can study the tree in eternal terms, such as numbers. But focusing on the tree this way, numbers intermediate and Buber fails to be wholly present before it. As his object, the tree remains conditioned and experiential rather than relational.

**The Roles of Time and Memory**

Within I-You, no memory or anticipation interferes with the relationship. Conversely, within I-It, memory and anticipation are readily utilized. Memory is a function, effect, and tool of the past, and anticipation relates similarly to the future; both are functions of time. Excluding the present moment, time’s influence on relation is detrimental because of how it transmutes relation into experience. “The I of the basic word I-It, the I that is not bodily confronted by a You but surrounded by a multitude of ‘contents,’ has only a past and no present. In other words: insofar as a human being makes do with the things that he experiences and uses, he lives in the past, and his moment has no presence.” I-It is motivated by the I’s desires and informed by the I’s memories of the past. The I may experience what surrounds her, but she does not relate to the Its because they are “contents” of the past and not the present. She has no presence because she is not present. Memory serves as a tool for the I to recall an earlier Other, turning the You into an It. Or, memory can stratify the You, again relegating it to an It. From the perspective of the I, memory conditions the Other, guaranteeing its status as an It.
In Buber’s terms, religion is marred because of the same two issues of time which disempower I-It: the past and the future. Religion is spoiled because its intent and method are similarly focused on the wrong sort of time. The intent of religion is preservation of a staid structure of laws so that it may exist in the future. While Buber clearly disdains this notion, his contemporary, Franz Rosenzweig, seems to accept the tradeoff: “The eternal people purchases its eternity at the price of temporal life. For it, time is not its time, not a field it cultivates and a share in its inheritance. For it, the moment is solidified and remains fixed between an augmentable past and motionless future.” While much can be said about Rosenzweig vis-à-vis Buber, from this passage alone it seems that Rosenzweig does not entirely disagree with Buber’s assessment of the situation. Rosenzweig recognizes Buber’s estimation of the cost of eternal preservation: the sacrifice of the present. But for Rosenzweig, eternity and a guaranteed future (albeit a static one, in the eyes of Buber) are worth the price of the present moment. Rosenzweig advocates spiritual suffocation, sacrificing dynamism for the staid survival of religion. For Buber, religion never had a chance because after the biblical era it was historically focused on the past. Rabbinism chose to obfuscate the spirituality of prior generations by conditioning it. Thus, even the form of Judaism that the rabbis discounted by looking towards the future was already ruined in virtue of having been inherited from a previous generation. Religion takes the religiosity of a previous generation and dogmatizes it.

The dominant forces that shape the I-It—memory and anticipation—have no place in the I-You. As we just explained, memory is the function of the past and anticipation of the future. Their interference is absent from I-You. Thus, I-You is affected by neither the past nor the future. Taking this one step further, one could argue that the I-You must then be located in the only remaining time period: the present. In addition, religiosity must at the same time be present-centric, for it is neither affected nor marred by the forces of the past and future. But arriving at the place in time of I-You or religiosity through negative reasoning and process of elimination is not enough. “The present—not that which is like a point and merely designates whatever our thoughts may posit as the end of ‘elapsed’ time, the fiction of the fixed lapse, but the actual and fulfilled present—exists only insofar as presentness, encounter, and relation exist. Only as the You becomes present does presence come into being.” Here is a positive description of the temporal qualities of I-You. Remarkably, the existence of presence is an unguaranteed state. If by presence one means a single point on a linear scale of time that balances the past and future, then presence is not simply always in existence; it is all that exists. Yet there is also presence in the sense of relation: the state of a subject opening herself up entirely before an Other. Presence is to the present as I-You is to I-It. Presence is the extraordinary sense of present, “the actual and fulfilled” phenomenon where I-You lives. Its only existence is a coexistence with encounter and relation. Only within the I-You does presence occur. It is impossible
to anticipate presence since the I-You is neither past nor future.

While it is clear that the forces of time—the past and the future—do not have their hands in religiosity, religiosity’s presence is longer than that of relation, which calls for an important clarification. For Buber, presence need not be limited to a single moment. I-You relations, undoubtedly only possible in the midst of presence, last longer than a single moment. It takes the entire I-You to “run its course,” before the You must go back to being an It. Religiosity’s presence is longer and more expansive than a single moment or the presence of an I-You. Religion’s fault, after all, is mandating the “sum total of the customs and teachings articulated and formulated by the religiosity of a certain epoch” for future generations. As such, religiosity, in its right and only time, can last longer than a single moment. For example, it may have been the case that Abraham’s practice of praying every morning was an I-You encounter that invoked presence his entire life. For Buber, the rabbinic codification of that practice is an example of religion’s stultification. Presence is therefore not an objective time-based quality in the sense of past, present, and future, but a psychological perspective on time’s role.

**Toward Buber’s Conception of Time**

Although we have demonstrated the impact of time in Buber’s philosophies of religion and relation, we remain in need of a clear articulation of Buber’s conception of time—detached from its application to religiosity or I-You. What might our original, unchallenged assumptions about time be? We would posit three time periods: past, present, and future. There is the notion of the eternal—of that which occurs in all three time periods. Similarly, the idea of “never” indicates that which cannot be placed in any of them. Buber wants to challenge these basic assumptions about time. The very kernel of the I-You relation is its timelessness—which is not the same as eternity. For Buber, eternity is an exaggeration of the woes of the future. The future may be solely the following moment, but eternity bespeaks the perennial danger of never having any single present. Eternity—the past, present, and future—might as well be never.

It will be helpful to situate Buber in his broader historical context. We might point to the way in which he was influenced by Kant, who believed that time is not a substance naturally found in the universe; rather, he conceives of it as a human device. Time is one of Kant’s transcendental conditions for understanding sensory experience and ourselves. If Buber were to follow Kant in dismissing the metaphysical existence of time, then he would have to dismiss time-bound I-It and religion altogether. Does Buber take up this reasoning? Consider the following:

And even as prayer is not in time but time in prayer, the sacrifices not in space but space in the sacrifice—and whoever reverses the relation annuls the
When Is Now, Now?

I do not find the human being to whom I say You in any Sometime and Somewhere. I can place him there and have to do this again and again, but immediately he becomes a He or a She, an It, and no longer remains my You.25

We would probably assume that prayer and sacrifice are located within time and space—extended cosmic forces larger than the actions and events they contain. However, for Buber, such a location corresponds to the weaker forms of these actions. When a person “place[s] things in a spatio-temporal-causal context,”26 they become conditioned—relegated from You to It. Buber’s claim that prayer and sacrifice in time and space are an annulment of reality is, it seems, hyperbole. Rather, he views them as unfulfilled reality; they are not illusions but imperfections. Buber clearly rejects the credibility of religion and, less adamantly, the I-It, but he does not deny their existence or, by extension, the force of time that shapes them. If anything, I-It relations hold the world together, and religion is real enough to threaten the person who wants to connect with the divine.

Still, something larger is behind Buber’s glorification of I-You/religiosity—something that leads him to reject religion/I-It. While Buber does not dismiss the existence of time, it is clear that he advocates a non-traditional understanding of it. “The You appears in time, but in that of a process that is fulfilled in itself—a process lived through not as a piece that is a part of a constant and organized sequence but in a ‘duration’ whose purely intensive dimension can be determined only by starting from the You.”27 Buber conceives of a reality in which time plays a different role than we normally assign to it. “Time is not a mere void but a ‘reality,’”28 says Joseph B. Soloveitchik. “The seasons of the year or the astronomic phenomena of sunrise and sunset do not, in the least, determine the character of time.”29 In other words, thinking of time as a regulated, predisposed cycle is wrong. Customarily, the present is the only time period of which we can be sure. It links the past and future, which are by definition uninhabitable. Yet for Buber, the past and future are simultaneously our default states. This is not to say that we are time-travelling in two directions at once. Rather, since the psychological-spiritual influences of the past and our aspirations for the future ground us, we are by default oriented to I-It relations and the practice of religion. Time is not so much linear as moldable, in the hands of the wonder-stricken person—that is, the I who opens herself to the concrete Other. Through encountering unconditioned communions in I-You relations, she inhabits presence in time’s place. Presence is conditional: it occurs only if the I encounters the unconditioned.

Just as in presence the relation between I and You is reciprocal, so too, the relation between I-You and presence is reciprocal: presence exists only in I-You and I-You is found only in presence. “The present—not that which is like a point and merely designates whatever our thoughts may posit as the end of ‘elapsed’ time, the
fiction of the fixed lapse, but the actual and fulfilled present—exists only insofar as presentness, encounter, and relation exist. Only as the You becomes present does presence come into being.”\(^3\) In these rare moments when we enter into relation and encounter presence, time’s linearity is interrupted. As we open ourselves up to meet the Other with no conditions or expectations, we inhabit a different realm of time. In the customary present—that is, Buber’s past and future—fulfillment is unattainable. Presence, however, necessarily entails self-fulfillment. The duration of presence is irreconcilable with the past and future; presence cannot be measured in time or any dimension. After the conclusion of presence, once the You has returned to being an It, that encounter takes its place in the I’s memory. She may draw on it when searching out other Yous, but it no longer is—though it once was—presence. I-Yous and religiosity truly take place in a different way from that which is oriented toward either the past or the future. In response to Hillel’s timeless cry, “If not now, when?” Buber responds, “Never.”

Notes

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid., 82-3
4 Ibid., 86
5 Ibid., 80
6 Cf. Mal. 3:7, 3:24
7 Buber, “Jewish Religiosity,” 80.
8 Ibid., 82
9 I translate “Ich-Du” as “I-You,” avoiding the more honorific and anachronistic “I-Thou.” “Thou” misleadingly points toward a uniquely divine encounter. The more colloquial “I-You” better represents the capacity for immanent encounters between persons.
11 Ibid., 58
12 Ibid., 55
13 Ibid., 62
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., 85
16 Buber, “Jewish Religiosity,” 80.
17 Buber, I and Thou, 56.
18 Ibid., 58
19 Ibid., 62
20 Ibid., 63-4

Notes continue on 26
Redemptive Violence:  
Meir Kahane and the Reworking of Identity  
Max Budovitch

Introduction: Meir Kahane

Rabbi Meir Kahane was born in Brooklyn in 1932, to a family rich in rabbinic history. He became a leader of the radical right of Religious Zionism, founding the Jewish Defense League in the United States in 1968 and the Kach Party in Israel in the early 1970s. He was elected as a Kach representative to the Israeli Knesset in 1984, but his party was banned as “racist” in 1988, and deemed a terrorist organization by the United States after a Kach supporter’s violent 1994 attack at the Cave of the Patriarchs. Kahane’s ideology, embodied in his political and social organizations as well as the actions of his followers, is known as “Kahanism” and is grounded in a kind of redemptive violence. Kahane’s idea of Jewish identity is based on a revival of the redemptive values of ancient Jewish figures, which gives meaning to the establishment of the state of Israel in its juridical, military, and religious personalities and also addresses the difficult memory of the Holocaust.

The ideological building blocks of Kahane’s redemptive violence have many parallels in modern Jewish society, most evidently in the settler movement in Israel—which has an increasing grip on military and state policy as well as influence on Israeli identity. The influence of Kahane and the rest of the religious right on the very foundations of Jewish and Israeli identity and, in turn, their influence on secular institutions like the military, makes it philosophically and practically difficult to address conflicts in Israeli policies without an understanding of these movements and what motivates their members. By investigating the roots and consequences of these movements, this paper will reveal the inherent dilemmas in national, political, and religious reconciliation between different Jewish factions due to basic post-Holocaust ideologies most radically apparent in Kahane’s thought. In the first section, I will outline Kahane’s idea of redemptive violence and modern Jewish identity. In the second section, I will demonstrate how Kahane applies his ideology to the state of Israel and its territorial, military, and religious functions. In the third section, I will draw Kahane’s ideology into dialogue with other movements and individuals on the religious right and demonstrate the influence of the ideology of redemptive violence on Jewish and Israeli identity.

Meir Kahane’s Ideology of Redemptive Violence

Kahane’s writings consistently endow historical Jewish figures with the imagined authenticity of redemptive violence, which he reclaims for contemporary Jews as a response to the horror of life in exile (as exemplified by the Holocaust) and the in-
gathering of the Jews in Israel. According to Kahane, Jews are morally compelled to seek spiritual salvation through violent physical self-defense. Kahane uses historical Jewish figures as vessels for modern sentiments, thereby creating a completely new identity while claiming the mantle of historical authenticity. He sees the exile as a place of Jewish spiritual degradation, in which the “Jew … understand[s] nothing [and] reject[s] both holy, separate destiny and holy Jewish homeland.” The state of exile spiritually confuses the Jew, making impossible a true “understanding” of what being Jewish means. Spiritual and physical degradation are closely linked in the dissolution of what Kahane holds to be the Jewish values of pride and strength: “Where did the vitally needed Jewish pride in liberation movements come to the young Jewish boy … whose only knowledge of modern Jewish history consisted of six million Jews going to their deaths like lambs? … They need pride, they need self-assurance, they need knowledge of their bravery and strength.”

For Kahane, this Jewish weakness creates the impression that God himself is weak: “The Exile is the personification of Jewish weakness, defeat, flight, persecution, torture, humiliation, genocide, holocaust, degradation. And because of this, it must … personify the weakness, so to speak, of the G-d of the Jews.” Kahane thus sees a direct correlation between the physical strength of the Jews and the legitimacy of their faith, for the power of the G-d of Israel and His very existence are weighed and proven to the nations by the strength and victory of His people, Israel, or “disproven” by their weakness and defeat. The humiliation of the Jew is seen as the weakness and indeed, non-existence of the G-d of the Jew. Jewish power and victory, on the other hand, are seen as proof that there is a G-d in Israel.

These words present kiddush Hashem in a radically new light based on the memory of the Holocaust, relating it directly to the physical strength of the nation and its implied statist functions: “Kiddush Hashem is the national sanctification of the Name of the L-rd” (emphasis added).

Kahane’s call to violence is a clear call for a radical change in the approach to life in the exile. For Kahane, the exile threatens the Jew’s physical and spiritual safety. He proposes a radical break from this way of life, for no more can the Jew live in “fear of the gentile,” which “is the Law that comes out of the Exile.” The exile itself has changed the rules of the game, so to speak. Kahane believes that rationalism, gentilism, and politicism “died in the flames of Auschwitz and the mockery of Stalinist trials and the madness of an irrational mob.” The appropriate response to the degradation and humiliation in exile must transcend the insanity of Diasporic existence through the principles of violence and defiance. The Jews can thus achieve both physical and spiritual redemption and restore their reclaimed, historical Jewish identity of strength and power. The Jew must “[cast] off fear of the nations[.] Jewish lips
attached to Jewish fists of steel [must] repay … the hater of the Jew sevenfold for his [desecrations].”9 This violence is the key to restoring order to a world destroyed and desolated by the horrors of pogroms and the Holocaust. “For a moment,” writes Kahane, “sanity will shine through and a strong Jewish hand will smash our enemies.”10 The moment of Jewish violence and power is a moment of authenticity. The world becomes spiritually clear as Jewish violence revives “sanity” out of the confusion and destruction of exile.

Central to Kahane’s idea of Jewish violence is Jewish particularism. The uniqueness of the Jewish people provides the moral impetus for undertaking a program of redemptive violence, justifying the recourse to lethal force in self-preservation. Kahane first establishes the uniqueness of the Jews in order to argue this point: “To embrace the Jewish people and fight for the Jewish land has meaning only if both are special. That uniqueness comes only through G-d and His law.”11 He then concludes, “The Jew is morally allowed—nay, compelled—to turn to violence as a last resort [in defense of a fellow Jew].”12 The idea of particularity is also tied to an idea of moral certainty. Kahane asks us whether “ethics—the kind that we approve of—is truth[,] Given no revelation and no certainty … given perhaps, no G-d, man is free to decide the truth for himself. Therefore, who gives anyone the right to hang Adolf Eichmann?”13 Eichmann should be hanged because the Jew, in his uniqueness, is vested with the absolute, moral justification for his own defense—even through the use of lethal, state-sanctioned violence.

Kahane rests his idea of redemptive violence and Jewish particularism in a reclaimed and reinvented historical Judaism: he revives ancient figures such as Bar Kokhba and King David in the law-breaking ethic of the pre-state pioneers and, finally, in contemporary Jewish redemptive violence. However, the obvious differences in historical circumstance reveal that Kahane’s claims to historical authenticity are really innovations based on particular post-Holocaust circumstances. Kahane begins by describing the ancient figures of the land of Israel who laid the foundations of a supposed three-thousand-year tradition of violence. He claims, “Joshua and Gideon, Deborah and Samson, Saul and David hardly turned the other cheek,” going on to hope, “When we climb Masada and swell with pride[,] we are not assuming that those who died on that mountain top were followers of Ghandi.”14 He then demonstrates the intimate link not only between an active Judaism and violence, but also between the traditions of Jewish intellectual and practical wisdom, claiming, “It is rather important for us to remember that Moses, our teacher, used violence to aid a Jew.”15 Kahane sees a direct correlation between the redemptive virtues of these ancient figures and the defiant violence that “the Irgun and Lechi (Sternists) and Hagana” used against the British.16

Finally, Kahane speaks to contemporary Jewish youth who, he believes, must claim the seeds of redemption and put these ancient ideas into violent action. Speak-
ing of the youth, he imagines that a Jewish boy “likes what he hears[.] The terms ‘Jew-
ish hooligan’ and ‘militant’ have a sweet ring to them,” and pointedly adds that “[h]e
wonders what might have been had there been more such [‘hooligans’ and ‘militants’]
around [during the Holocaust].”17 Stressing the radically redemptive nature of his call
to violence and defiance, he says, “This is the choice, the choice of life and death. For
the Jew, there is no other.”18 We will see that, for Kahane, this symbolic “life” is the
embodiment of his redemptive ideals in the state of Israel.

**The State of Israel**

For Kahane, the state of Israel is the strong and morally compelling alternative to
exile. Israel’s particularism, like that of the Jewish people, gives the state’s territorial,
military, and religious personalities the flavor of Kahane’s reinvented historical Juda-
ism. Kahane bases the idea of the Jewish state on the Jewish nation, which espouses a
particular purpose that would be corrupted in the exile if not embodied in statehood. The
land “exists to serve the people as a vessel to hold them and to allow them to live
their unique way of life, to achieve their national purpose and heritage.”19 Kahane
thus endows the state of Israel with a justified, redemptive recourse to violence. He
claims, “Jewish existence is the highest moral imperative and rejects the outrageous
concept that steel and violence are unacceptable methods in the struggle for Jewish
survival.”20 He then returns to the idea of *kiddush Hashem* by bringing in the related
(but opposite) concept of *hillul Hashem*,21 writing, “Exile, with all its horrors and
humiliations and defeats for the Jew, was the very essence of *Hillul Hashem*[,] while
a return to the Land of Israel … is … *Kiddush Hashem*.”22 The radical idea of violent
means to sanctifying God’s name will be examined in the next section in terms of its
influence on Israeli military conduct.

Kahane’s idea of particularism and the justified recourse to state-sanctioned vio-
ence on behalf of the Jewish people fits harmoniously with his notion of the purity
and absoluteness of the state of Israel. He claims that Israel must be purely Jewish by
drawing on the universal maxim that “differing national, religious, or cultural groups
do not live in peace with each other.”23 Purity, however, is tied with Jewish particular-
ism: “G-d labeled Israel a ‘people’ and ‘nation’ to emphasize that no Jew has any tie
to state, nationality or society linking him to any non-Jew. All of Israel constitutes a
single unit, a nation set apart.”24 His notion of religious particularism and the purity
of Israel are most manifest in his political work, *They Must Go*, in which he outlines
the incompatibility of the Jewish state and a Palestinian-Arab minority. He begins by
stressing the general incompatibility of different races and ethnicities, asserting, “The
Arab differs from us in every possible way—ethnically, religiously, culturally, linguis-
tically.”25 He then draws connections with the political state, emphasizing what he
sees as a struggle between two official entities: “Being told that there is no basic dif-
ference between Jews and Arabs is the surest way to convince the Jew that if he can be
given peace, there is no difference between an ‘Israel’ and a ‘Palestine.’”26 Kahane’s political diagnosis of the state of Israel mirrors the particular, absolute, and transcendental nature of his ideology on religion, nationhood, and redemption, respectively. His absolutist standpoint leads to the conclusion, “There can be peace and security if only we do not compromise.”27 A compromise would be a direct affront to the uniqueness of the Jewish nation; only through the national purity of the state of Israel can the spiritual and physical greatness of the Jewish nation be secured. In a reference to the law-breaking ethic of the pre-state militias and pioneers, Kahane concludes with the claim, “There is nothing for which the Jew need apologize. A people that has suffered … owes no one an explanation.”28

The Reworking of Jewish and Israeli Identity

The radical nature of Kahane’s ideology and his notion of redemptive violence is shared by many elements of the religious settler movement in Israel, which has had an increasing influence on military and state policy as well as Israeli identity. From the foundation of Gush Emunim29 to the increasing influence of military preparatory schools for the religious, a reshaping of Israeli and Jewish identity parallels the writings outlined in the first two sections of this paper. This reinvented identity’s effect on military and state policy reveals the inherent dilemmas in national, political, and religious reconciliation between different Jewish factions that have all been deeply influenced by the same hardships of the Diaspora in the twentieth century.

The birth of the idea of the state was the beginning of the Jewish people’s self-assertion and formation of a new identity that would be pinned to imagined and reclaimed historical personalities and events of Jewish power. Max Weber wrote years earlier, “If no social institutions existed which knew the use of violence, then the concept of the ‘state’ would be eliminated.”30 Indeed, the formation of Israel as a Jewish state implied the idea of specifically Jewish violence, according to Weber’s principle. The result was that the violent functions of the state of Israel came to occupy a redemptive role in modern Jewish identity. Even the most banal contrast between the past of Jewish victimhood and the present Jewish redemption implies a nugget of Weber’s principle. This underlying universality is, in part, what gives meaning to my argument and sets Kahane’s extreme ideology in the spectrum even of lay Jewish thought. Gush Emunim claimed that radical action was “the only appropriate response to the spirit dwindling within Israel[,] a response to its series of defeats in the international arena, from the UN resolution on the racist character of Zionism to the Harold Saunders documents from November 1975.”31 This redemption in many ways echoes Kahane’s idea of redeeming Jewish faith from physical threat and defeat.

Gush Emunim reclaimed the tenets of traditional Zionism and remolded them to their own *modus operandi*. This demonstrates that, like Kahane and despite the radical character of the group, Gush Emunim employed established and widespread
conceptions of modern Jewish identity to lend itself validity: “It was not by chance that the Gush people stressed that they were ‘the real Zionists.’ … They were ‘ascending in the rich-in-deed road of the fathers and the realizers of the Zionist movement, whose devotion, determination, and persistence had ignited the torch of settlement in the Land of Israel.”’ The analogy between religious settlers in the Occupied Territories and the founding settlers of the state is widespread and compelling due to the basis of both movements on pioneerism and the illegality of the pre-state years. Like Kahane, Gush Emunim was aiming at nothing other than the basis of people’s identities: “The Gush was not a small and fanatical group that had suddenly been ‘stricken’ with a messianic vision, but … was the tip of a large social and cultural body that struck roots and grew up quietly over many years within Israeli society.” Kahane’s project, therefore, is not unique. The post-Holocaust Jew was being independently constructed elsewhere while Kahane was writing as a young rabbi in Brooklyn. Both Kahane and his analogues would eventually see their efforts bloom into reality.

Gush Emunim and its followers espoused the same disrespect for authority that Kahane championed in his writings. The Gush was comprised of “a group of radical youngsters, imbued with religious-messianic faith, shepherded by a charismatic leadership that trampled the law and the decisions of elected state institutions for the sake of their own absolute convictions.” Eldar and Zertal state explicitly, “This group blended a mystical and irrational worldview with a modern, rational, and effective perception of the balance of forces[,] all within a comprehensive ideology of illegality.” That said, the contradiction in this rule-breaking ethic is clear: Kahane and groups like Gush Emunim could only affect change within the system they so despised. Eldar and Zertal explain that there was a “recoiling from party politics … derived from Rabbi Kook’s view of the wholeness of … their ‘pan-Israeliness.’ In every Jew, he said, ‘there is a spark of holiness, which even if it is hidden must be awakened, developed and brought close.’” Despite this, Kahane—like other religious-nationalist leaders—served as a member of the Knesset. His Kach party was banned from elections by other conservative parties in 1988 partly because they had similar platforms and were vying for votes, confirming Kahane’s accusations of the government’s politicism and disregard for upholding concrete principles.

The remolding of Jewish identity has had noticeable effects on Israeli military and political policy, leading to unfortunate realizations of Kahane’s absolutist ideology. “Many [soldiers] come to the army directly from religious institutions whose rabbis teach that both military service and the Whole Land of Israel are pillars of Judaism.” Israeli civil religion, which was created and upheld by the military through unanimous conscription, is now being increasingly displaced by religious Zionist pre-military institutions located in the Occupied Territories. Once the basis for molding young citizens into Israelis, the military has, for some, become the integral aspect of a reclaimed Israeli identity that relies on the recourse to violence as a religious basis.
The trend is clear: “Only one hesder yeshivah existed before the Six-Day War. Afterward, amid the messianic fervor that merged nationalism and religious revival, more Orthodox men wanted to combine combat service and religious study.” A new pre-military academy established in 1987 “served up large portions of ‘faith studies,’ inspirational lessons intended to fortify students’ belief and imbue in them the sacred significance of being a Jewish soldier. The program included physical conditioning to help graduates qualify for top combat units.”

The mixture of religious and physical training, as well as the zeal for military victory which spurred the growth of these institutions following the Six-Day War, exemplify Kahane’s idea of redemptive violence. There are apparent commonalities between, on the one hand, an institutionalized, reworked, and implicitly violent Jewish identity in contemporary Israel, and, on the other, Kahane’s writings more than two decades ago: “The utterly different reality of the Holocaust was transferred onto the inner Israeli conflict over the occupied territories. … From this perspective any withdrawal, any threat of withdrawal, could be perceived and depicted as a new holocaust, which legitimized any means in order to avert it.”

Israeli sociologists and historians have critically documented the violent undertones of this reformulated identity: “Culturally[,] the combination of the Holocaust and the victory of 1948 reversed the traditional Jewish reticence toward the use of force. The Holocaust justified military power as morally necessary; the 1948 war showed that Jewish arms were effective. Henceforth, one’s Israeliness ‘was measured by one’s ability to fight’” (emphasis added). To this reconstruction of Israeliness, Kahane adds a reclaimed historical depth: “the tough, free, young [Israeli] is … the resurrection of the ‘Old Jew,’ the one who first strode the land more than three thousand years ago and who fought and used violence to protect it and his people.” Kahane himself describes what Gorenberg approaches sociologically, writing, “The same Jewish leaders in Palestine who had castigated violence and the Jewish gun now bowed to it and became both its practitioner and supporter.”

Kahane added religious tones to this new Jewish identity of redemptive violence, which has had an effect on the conduct of the Israeli military and direction of military policy. Shlomo Aviner, a spiritual leader of the Religious Zionist movement, espouses many of Kahane’s concepts: “During Operation Cast Lead[,] the rabbinate issued a booklet for soldiers, containing selections from the teachings of Shlomo Aviner. In it, Aviner wrote that the Torah forbade ‘giving up a millimeter’ of the Land of Israel to gentiles[,] Jews were commanded to go to war to conquer the land, Aviner said.” Aviner infused Kahane’s interpretation of kiddush Hashem into the military through these influential official publications; echoing Kahane, he writes that “any time the Jewish nation is humiliated, ‘it is a desecration of God’s name,’ which a Jew should give up his life to prevent.” Aviner’s military writings also conclude that “God’s reputation in the world rest[s] on whether Jews look … strong or weak.”
Conclusion: Kahane and Gaza

Although most Israeli soldiers do not support religiously motivated violence, it is clear that manifestations of this new Jewish identity in officialdom have led to offensive and aggressively violent military action. At the outset of Operation Cast Lead—Israel’s controversial 2008-2009 strike on Gaza—military officials explicitly referred to the operation as a redemptive moment for the IDF. The fusion of religious undertones from the Rabbinate in the conduct of the operation, combined with the strategic use of overwhelming force due to recent defeats and the concern for a militantly defensive foreign policy, all point to the fact that the Israeli state and Jewish identity were engaged in a moment of authentic dialogue.

Breaking the Silence, an Israeli group of former combat soldiers, collected testimonies from the Gaza war. One soldier said, “When your company commander and battalion commander tell you, ‘Go on, fire!’ the soldiers will not hold back. They are waiting for this day, the fun of shooting and feeling all that power in your hands.” While the soldiers themselves may not be aware of the historical themes in which they play a role, the general atmosphere of the operation and its conduct point directly to a redemptive interpretation of state violence based on a reworked Jewish and Israeli identity.

Most individuals do not subscribe to Kahane’s ideology. However, a new Jewish and Israeli identity that sprung from the ashes of the Holocaust, the memories of defying British authorities during the Mandate years, and the emotions following independence and the Six-Day War—all of which relate to the rabbi’s religious and political outlook—inspired and continues to define the position of the national-religious right. The influence of this reformed Jewish and Israeli identity reveals the inherent dilemmas in national, political, and religious reconciliation between different Jewish factions. Despite fundamental philosophical differences, these factions are mutually influenced by the same basic concepts most clearly expressed by the radical right.

Notes

3 Kahane, Forty Years, 37-8.
4 Ibid., 3
5 A religious term meaning “sanctification of God’s Name.” It is often linked to religious martyrdom.
6 Kahane, Forty Years, 102.
7 Ibid., 95
9 Kahane, Forty Years, 26.
10 Ibid., 85
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11 Ibid., 91
12 Kahane, *Never Again*, 145.
14 Kahane, *Never Again*, 152.
15 Ibid., 148
16 Ibid., 118
17 Ibid., 132
18 Kahane, *Forty Years*, 98.
20 Kahane, *Never Again*, 212.

21 A religious term meaning “desecration of God’s Name.”

22 Kahane, *Forty Years*, 3.
23 Kahane, *They Must Go*, 145.
25 Kahane, *They Must Go*, 256.
26 Ibid., 223
27 Kahane, *Forty Years*, 22.
28 Kahane, *They Must Go*, 117.

29 Gush Emunim (“Bloc of the Faithful”) was a grassroots organization dedicated to the establishment of Jewish settlements in the lands occupied during the Six-Day War.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 209
34 Ibid., 184
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 206

38 David Ben-Gurion emphasized the importance of this concept at the state’s founding.
39 Gorenberg, *The Unmaking of Israel*, 140. In a hesder yeshiva, students engage in intensive study of Jewish texts for three-and-a-half years before serving on active military duty for one-and-a-half years. This is instead of the standard three years of active duty.

40 Ibid., 141
42 Ibid., 138
43 Kahane, *Never Again*, 151.
44 Ibid., 157
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid., 155
48 Interview with director of Breaking the Silence, Yehudah Shaul, 2011.
For its entire history, Israel has relied on a foreign policy of deterrence due to its many hostile neighbors.


Interview with director of Breaking the Silence, Yehudah Shaul, 2011.

Notes continued from “When Is Now, Now?”


Buber, “Jewish Religiosity,” 81.


*Ibid.*, 80

*Ibid.*, 59

*Ibid.*, 70

*Ibid.*, 81


*Ibid.*, 48

There are many Jewish communities (defined by ethnicity, ideology, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) that do not fit into the normative framework of mainstream Judaism. In what ways do these communities challenge the norm? Why do they do so? What can they teach us about today’s Jewish world?
Jeremy Rozansky  Republicans in the Reform Movement

I have been eyed suspiciously for refusing to applaud a Yom Kippur sermon calling for the impeachment of President Bush and Vice-President Cheney. I have been badgered to avow opinions I did not hold during a lobbying trip I took with my confirmation class. I have been lectured about the incompatibility of my ancestral people’s creed with my views on health-care reform and marginal tax rates. I am neglected and brushed-aside, demeaned and ridiculed, regarded as a walking contradiction. I am a Republican Reform Jew.

America’s largest Jewish movement embraces almost all ostensibly marginalized communities with real vigor: Jews-by-choice, intermarried families, homosexuals, bisexuals, transsexuals, Sephardim, atheists, pantheists, and nudists—to name a few—are all welcome. The blind spot is reserved for Republicans. It is better to exclude on the basis of belief than on the basis of, say, national origin. But Reform Jews exclude Republicans on the basis of a myth of the incompatibility of Judaism and American conservatism. In making Reform Judaism so partisan, the Reform Movement diminishes Judaism to little more than Democratic Party clubs with organ music (or, for more progressive types, guitar).

Consider the Reform Movement’s lobbying organization in Washington, called, “The Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism” (RAC). The RAC lobbies not solely on issues of particular Jewish concern—such as the state of Israel, the maintenance of the Establishment Clause and the Free-Exercise Clause, or parsonage—but all issues. After all, as a Reform rabbi once told me, “all issues are Jewish issues” because Jews as Jews are concerned about creating a good society. On all issues except Israel, the RAC acts with the left wing of the Democratic Party (on Israel it lobbies as a mainstream Democrat). The RAC takes its political stances from rabbinic and trustee referenda, and those rabbis and trustees claim to derive their positions from Jewish texts. It is fairly obvious, however, that these citations are an edifice. Jewish texts say nothing about whether the minimum wage should be increased by five cents or fifty cents.

Take, for example, the issue of affirmative action—one of the few issues in which American Jews across denominational boundaries tend to favor the Republican position. The RAC quotes Jewish texts to justify its support for affirmative action, but these textual justifications are flimsy at best. One such passage is from the Babylonian Talmud: “If one sees a great crowd, one should thank God for not having made them all of one mind. For just as each person’s face is different from another, so is each person’s mind different from any other mind.” However, this praise of diversity refers specifically to intellectual diversity; it says nothing about race. As such, it might in fact be better read as an argument against affirmative action, for it affirms the primacy of ideas and character. The point is that textual support is found after a position is taken. It is poor scholarship, but effective rhetoric.
The Reform establishment would have us believe that Judaism and American conservatism are incompatible. Reform Judaism, a child of the Enlightenment, may well be incompatible with the European conservatism that developed in opposition to the Enlightenment. American conservatism, however, conserves an Enlightenment revolution. This is not to say that all Jews should be political conservatives. Rather, I am criticizing the gross politicization of the Reform establishment. I find it nothing short of absurd that a Yom Kippur sermon should focus on impeaching the president rather than living the next year with goodliness and Godliness. Finding holiness in the modern world while still being of the modern world is a challenge both humbling and elevating, but Reform Judaism has shrugged it off. Politics has won out as its creed because it is the easiest solution to the practical problem of attracting an American Jewry that may or may not believe in Judaism but believes dogmatically in progressivism. Make Judaism into progressivism, and they will keep coming to High Holiday services, keep sending their kids to Hebrew school, and keep making donations. Meanwhile, those of us in the Reform community who reject central planning as the solution to all maladies are left to wander, still looking for what we thought we would have found in a Reform temple: liberal (small “L”) Judaism.

*Eliza Brown*  *The Independent Movement Away from Movements*

Today’s cohort of young adults—Jewish and non-Jewish alike—is probably most notable for its constituents’ failures to establish themselves and settle down; they have proven more likely to move back home, to be unemployed, and to delay starting a family. For the Jewish members of a group that has thus become used to relative homelessness, finding a Jewish home can seem impossible. Many of these young Jews, who remain on the margins of formal Jewish communities, have begun to gravitate toward a burgeoning new movement: independent minyanim.

An independent minyan is a lay-led Jewish community that stands outside of the denominational spectrum and apart from established synagogues. Currently growing in every urban area in the United States, these minyanim welcome the twenty-somethings (and, increasingly, thirty-somethings) who are between college and family life, between being students and holding more permanent careers, and between Hillels and synagogues. Elie Kaunfer’s 2010 book, *Empowered Judaism: What Independent Minyanim Can Teach Us About Building Vibrant Jewish Communities*, chronicles his own process of Jewish-community building through Kehilat Hadar, an independent minyan in New York. While he admits that independent minyanim cannot support Hebrew schools or full-time clergy, he explains that they do serve the specific needs of a membership looking for Jewish meaning outside of established community structures. Unrestricted by the ideological frameworks of the major denominations, the minyanim strive to harmonize egalitarianism and tradition while modeling a Judaism in which the members of the prayer community are also its leaders.
Although independent minyan-goers are not necessarily interested in actively demolishing existing Jewish structures, they represent an inherent challenge to those structures. In moving away from denominational identity, independent minyanim call into question American Judaism’s precious labels: Conservative, Orthodox, Conservadox, Traditional, etc. In moving away from full-time clergy, they call into question the role of seminaries and institutional structure. Accordingly, the dominant forces in American Judaism have been critical of the independent minyanim, claiming that the movement is unnecessarily subversive, not really independent, or a passing fad. Questioning its stability and significance, Margot Lurie writes in a review of Empowered Judaism, “As a generation grows up in the minyan, some who get married and have kids will move out of the community—but some won’t. Pretty soon, those who stay will need Hebrew school, they will need bar/bat mitzvah training, and before you can say egalitarianism, bang, they’re a shul.”1 Critiquing its claim to denominational independence, she writes, “Conservative synagogues would like nothing more than to welcome independent minyanim, and their young members, into the fold. But the minyan movement has taken on a life of its own, abandoning rather than revitalizing the Conservative world.”2 If Lurie’s criticisms are representative of a broader institutional response—and I believe they are—then independent minyanim are not only made up of Jews who feel marginalized; they are also marginalized as communities themselves.

Those in positions of power so easily forget that just as we construct certain social structures around particular tenets, we can dismantle them and build anew. The current system of denominational divides and structural control is not in any way essential to Judaism. It is important to note that although they seem to represent a new social form, independent minyanim in many ways hearken back to earlier forms of Judaism: small, intimate, autonomous communities, focused on prayer and meaning rather than social opportunities and institutional politics. Kaunfer writes, “Instead of focusing on new ideas, the Jewish community would be better served by connecting to the original ‘big ideas’ of our heritage: Torah, avodah, and gemilut hasadim. … There is no new ‘big idea’; there is just investment in the old, but in a serious, meaningful, and thoughtful way.”3 Hence, we must look at the independent minyan movement as both modern and traditional, progressive and conservative, marginal and powerful.

Kayla Higgins \ The Birthright Bias

The most crucial advice a friend of mine, who is a seasoned feminist blogger, gave me when I wrote my first article for a new blog on queer issues was to make sure I took at least one paragraph to “own my privilege.” What she meant was for me to be aware that, due to unjust criteria, society treats me—let’s just say it—a whole lot better than it treats certain others, and that this treatment can color the way I interpret
life experiences. I must own up to the fact that I am white, cisgendered, middle class, and able-bodied—among other indicators of privilege. Of course, privilege changes based upon one’s social context, and I believe that one more privilege I must own as a member of the Jewish community is my status of having been born to a Jewish mother. In other words, my “Jewishness” is pretty rock-solid by almost any metric because I am considered Jewish by all movements of Judaism. I can wear pants to the grocery store, forget to light Shabbat candles, and even eat non-kosher food, and my innate Jewishness will almost never be questioned.

However, this is not at all the case for people who are converting to Judaism, or who have recently converted. Indeed, there are many painful accounts of Jewish converts who feel like they’re constantly being watched by fellow Jews, and especially by fellow Jewish converts, who are waiting for them to slip up and somehow prove that they are not, in fact, “genuine” Jews. The injustice of this double standard for Jews-by-birth as opposed to Jews-by-choice was made especially clear in a Jewcy.com article about how ultra-Orthodox rabbis have “reversed” many conversions for trivial reasons. Indeed, the article claims that about a year after Leib Tropper, the ultra-Orthodox founder and director of Eternal Jewish Family, supervised a conversion by a woman called “Sarah” in the article, her conversion “was reversed because Tropper heard that she had worn pants, and occasionally—only when shopping outside the Jewish neighborhood—she had left her hair uncovered.” In another Jewcy.com article, a convert named Kylie Jane Wakefield puts her feelings of injustice quite frankly when she writes, “I’m bitter that people are born Jewish and forsake it or doesn’t even care when I’m trying so hard and facing roadblocks at every turn.”

The comment thread that follows Wakefield’s post provides some insight into how some Jews explain the particular strictness with which converts are treated. Some Jewish commenters try to explain to Wakefield that once she is converted, the expectations of her are much higher than that of a “good gentile” because every violation of halakha is a heavenly “demerit,” so really the strictness of the ultra-Orthodox around conversions is out of concern for the souls of the converted. A different commenter says that the concern revolves around the communal consequences and possible negative repercussions for the entire Jewish people if converts fail to keep the Covenant that they are said to have agreed to follow. Upon closer examination, though, these responses do not actually address the heightened anxiety surrounding the behavior of Jewish converts as opposed to people who are born Jewish. Why is there no equivalent sense of urgency to save the souls of Jews-by-birth who get heavenly demerits every time they eat non-kosher cheese, or about what misfortune will fall upon those born-Jews become Buddhist monks (or JewBu’s, as they’re sometimes called)?

This inconsistency between the treatment of converts and born-Jews raises important questions for today’s Jewish community to ask itself. What does it say about this community that converts are treated with such suspicion? Is the privilege afforded
born-Jews unfair? I think that any examination of Jewish texts show that Jews value merit over birthright privilege. And given the long history of the marginalization of Jews around the world, this value makes sense: working and studying extremely hard was the only way for many Jews to achieve any kind of prosperity in the societies in which they lived. So it definitely seems un-Jewish to treat Jews who are simply born to Jewish parents with more trust and leniency than people who have studied very hard to convert to Judaism. I believe that the root cause of the poor treatment of converts is quite simple: fear of the Other—fear of infiltration. But I think it’s our duty as a people who value morality as the cornerstone of our tradition to put aside fear in the face of injustice.

Elli Cohn The Masorti Community of Prague

“...who has given us the Torah of truth and set everlasting life in our midst. Blessed are You, LORD, Giver of the Torah.” With these sacred words, two Czech women completed a conversion process of many years and officially began their lives as Jews. Yet to refer to these women as “converted” seems incorrect, or at least incomplete. More appropriately, they are being “re-welcomed” as members of the Jewish people. After all, they are descendants of Holocaust-surviving Czech Jews who abandoned their Judaism after the war. As adults, they discovered their Jewish roots and sought out a place to further explore their Jewish identities and heritage. The place that they would find was the same place in which I found myself for several Shabbatot during my recent four-month stay in Prague: the city’s Masorti—literally, “traditional”—Jewish community. In this way, I came to witness these two women’s return to the Jewish people.

The term “Masorti” denotes Jewish communities outside of North America that occupy a similar religious niche to the Conservative Movement. In the United States, the Conservative Jewish community could hardly be termed marginal: despite the movement’s obvious struggles, a significant number of American Jews identify as Conservative, or are products of the movement’s day schools, summer camps, and seminaries. Such is not the case, however, for the corresponding community in Prague, which is small and composed almost entirely of converts whose stories echo those of the women I have described. Fearful that history might repeat itself, many Czech Holocaust survivors thought it best that their children should grow up ignorant of Judaism. However, these now-grown children are beginning to reclaim their heritage through the efforts of Masorti Rabbi Ron Hoffberg, a native not of Prague but New Jersey. Grasping the importance of these Jews’ desire to return to Judaism, he moved to Prague and dedicated his life to building and educating a Masorti community. Over the past decade, Rabbi Hoffberg has performed more than forty conversions and held weekly Shabbat services and Torah classes.

Because of its size, its composition, and its non-native leader, this community
faces a great deal of internal challenge. Communication lies at the core of the difficulties. In an effort to stay true to Masorti Judaism’s commitment to tradition, Rabbi Hoffberg conducts services in Hebrew. I recall sitting in his synagogue on Erev Yom Kippur, the holiest night of the Jewish calendar, as a sanctuary full of Czech Jews eagerly followed along in the siddur while the rabbi announced the page numbers in both Czech and English. Still, I couldn’t help but wonder how actively the congregants were really able to participate, since their Hebrew knowledge is limited and many of them are relatively new to Jewish prayer. These barriers make services difficult—but they do not deter the congregants, who feel unwaveringly obligated to attend. Their dedication in spite of their limited knowledge is inspiring—especially in contrast to apathetic American synagogue-goers who often blame their disinterest on similar limitations.

Adding to this internal adversity, the Masorti community is marginalized by an Orthodox establishment that is unenthusiastic, to say the least, about making room for an alternative Jewish community. Testifying to the solidarity of Prague’s Orthodox community even in the face of European Jewry’s perilous history, they still meet for services in Europe’s oldest active synagogue, the historic Old New Synagogue—in which women cannot even set foot, let alone undertake religious obligations. In contrast, the Masorti community prides itself on egalitarianism: equal participation and education for men and women is encouraged. Yet they pay a steep price for their commitment to this and other Masorti values: because Jewish communal finances are allocated through the Orthodox rabbinate, Rabbi Hoffberg is forced to raise his own funds from a young community with limited resources.

I do not mean to indict Orthodoxy as the antagonist; indeed, Rabbi Hoffberg himself says, “We cooperate where we can with the Orthodox rabbinate.” I simply mean to recognize an inspiring effort to build a Jewish community in spite of marginality. The two women whose conversions I happened upon chose to begin their Jewish lives in the Masorti community because of its opportunities for education and identity formation. Offering a harmonization of traditional religion and modern life, it is ideal for individuals who were raised without Judaism and need to be eased delicately into committed Jewish lives. Even in the face of its many challenges, the Masorti community of Prague welcomes a new generation of Czech Jews into the chain of Jewish tradition. Situated in the former ghetto, it has emerged as a way by which Jews might continue to deny Hitler “yet another, posthumous victory.”

Ethan Schwartz  Conservadox

The word “conservadox” is a portmanteau of fairly obvious construction: “conservative,” as in North American Judaism’s Conservative Movement, and “orthodox,” as in Jewish Orthodoxy. The term’s suggestion of an ideological median is fraught with tension and politics; to identify as conservadox, it seems, is intentionally to place
oneself on the margins of two of American Jewry’s largest—and increasingly dis-
tant—denominations. In a time when denominational sectarianism has emerged as a
counterproductive force that Jews must treat with utmost seriousness, this apparent
self-marginalization deserves attention. It is all too easy to believe that by continuing
to identify in quasi-denominational terms, conservadox Jews perpetuate the sectarian
problem. I would like to propose that they play an important role in solving it.

One of the few substantive results of an Internet query under “conservadox” is
an article from the New Jersey Jewish News, entitled, “‘Conservadox’ Minyan Attracts
a Diverse Crowd.” The article concerns the now-two-year-old Minyan Tiferet, an
independent minyan that “features traditional all-Hebrew services laced with spirited
singing and a staunch commitment to equal roles for men and women.”1 As with
many of the independent minyanim that have appeared across the country, there is a
sense amongst Minyan Tiferet’s members that the minyan is a kind of religious haven
for those who, in one way or another, feel marginalized by established synagogues. “I
don’t want to be told I can’t do anything,” insists one (female) founder. “I want to be
in an environment where, coming from the Orthodox world, I feel comfortable, yet
at the same time, there is justice for women.”2

I find it intriguing that the author of this article should have labeled the minyan
“conservadox.” To be sure, one member himself says that Minyan Tiferet offers what
“might accurately be called a ‘Conservadox’ prayer service, [as it] strives to accom-
modate the needs of both denominations.”3 Yet reading the article in full, one gets the
sense that the term is essentially inadequate. Consider the words of a different mem-
ber, who describes Minyan Tiferet as “a vision for the Jewish present and future with
the highest demand for humanity, justice, and compassion.”4 In short, this minyan is
not a reluctant compromise at all. It is a constructive, innovative attempt to build a
new kind of Jewish community that does not draw on denominational identities. In
attempting to bring the minyan into institutional language, the term “conservadox”
misses the very purpose for which the minyan was created. I would submit that this
is true of independent minyanim more broadly. Conservadoxy is simply inapplicable
to their post-denominational, halakhic-egalitarian vision—yes, vision—of Judaism.

Yet for all the (well-deserved) popularity of this post-denominational vision,
traditional Jewish America is still dominated by Conservative and Orthodox syn-
agogues. What happens when these are the only options available to the ostensibly
post-denominational Jew? I believe that Jay Michaelson suggests an answer when,
writing about the concept of “flexidoxy”—a neologism that he contrasts with conser-
vadoxy because of its rejection of denominational terminology altogether—he says,
“Flexidox Jews can be found at a wide range of independent minyanim, which, like
flexidoxy itself, generally shun traditional labels and affiliations. Or they may daven
Orthodox one day, Conservative the next.”5 This latter option strikes me as the de-
fining characteristic of a very real Jewish conservadoxy—an invisible, unorganized
“community” of individuals who feel neither at home nor out of place in both the Conservative Movement and institutional Orthodoxy. If the term is reductive when applied to communities that eschew denominational labels, it suggests flexibility and openness with reference to individuals.

The conservadox Jew chooses to compromise rather than to be marginalized. She is comfortable davening in an Orthodox shul, even though she is angered by gender discrimination. She is comfortable davening in a Conservative shul, even though she is more observant than most of its members. She is “conservadox” not because she stands on the margins of institutional Orthodoxy and the Conservative Movement, but because she moves fluidly between them—ever conscious that they offer different opportunities for religious growth, and ever undeterred by ideological walls. In refusing to be marginalized by different kinds of traditional Jewish communities, conservadox Jews challenge the reality of the boundaries between them. I believe that this invisible conservadox is the true vanguard in the fight against denominational sectarianism.

Notes

Jeremy Rozansky  Republicans in the Reform Movement
4 B.T. Berakhot 58a. For the RAC’s use of this passage, see “Affirmative Action and Jewish Values,” Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, accessed May 1, 2012, http://rac.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=2160&pge_pr pg_id=16350&pge_id=2382

Eliza Brown  The Independent Movement Away from Movements
2 Ibid.
Kayla Higgins  *The Birthright Bias*


Elli Cohn  *The Masorti Community of Prague*


2 I am deeply grateful to CET Academic Programs for offering me this incredible opportunity to study in Prague for a semester.

3 Traditionally seen as a middle ground between the Reform Movement and Orthodoxy, the Conservative Movement has faced a kind of identity crisis in recent years, with many of its leaders at odds about egalitarianism, the role of halakha, and other fundamental issues.

4 Rubin, “Masorti Rabbi Builds a Czech Community.”


Ethan Schwartz  *Conservadoxy*


2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

Esther and Action: Beyond a Narrative of Development

Faith Laken

Introduction

One of the few biblical books with a female protagonist, and the only one without the word “God” in it, the book of Esther holds a unique and, at times, precarious position in the biblical canon. Written during the diaspora of the late Persian or early Hellenistic period (the fourth century BCE), the book is, according to Esther Fuchs, “little more than fairy-tale, though it presents itself as a piece of political history.”\(^1\) Esther, the book’s namesake, is a beautiful, young Jewish woman living in exile in the Persian capital. She enters the story as a virgin who is collected for King Ahasuerus’s harem after his queen, Vashti, is banished for refusing to appear before the court. On the instruction of her cousin and adoptive father, Mordecai, Esther keeps her Jewish identity secret during her early interactions with the court. Eventually, she wins the king’s favor and is made queen.

Shortly thereafter, Mordecai refuses to bow to Haman, one of the king’s closest advisors. Haman then resolves not only to kill Mordecai, but all of the Jews—thereby establishing the animating conflict of the book. Haman gets permission to carry out his plot by appealing to the king’s coffers, while Mordecai appeals to Esther to save the Jews. After devising an elaborate plan, Esther commits to go before the king unsummoned—an action potentially punishable by death. Fortunately, the king accepts her appearance, and she proceeds to request his and Haman’s presence at a banquet that she will host. At the first banquet, she invites them to attend a second. Finally, at the second banquet, she reveals both her Jewish identity and Haman’s plan to kill her people. Furious, the king orders the execution of Haman and his sons and, eventually, gives Haman’s power and property to Esther. She is further granted permission to announce that the Jews may defend themselves, which they do quite successfully throughout the land.

While readers can generally agree on this basic plot structure, it is less clear which character is the active agent propelling it. Many would say that it is Mordecai, who, in addition to his famous refusal to bow to Haman, also powerfully demonstrates his loyalty by snuffing out an assassination plot against the king; indeed, he often seems to be the one orchestrating Esther’s activities. However, it seems to me that Esther herself, more than any other character, actively accomplishes liberation. She should be viewed, therefore, as the central figure throughout the book—a liberator of herself, of women, and of her people. What makes Esther successful, as we will see, is the strategic use first of her sexuality and then of her rational abilities. I will argue that this development is reflective of her changing context; her action is dictated by
her position. It seems to me that she does not undergo a massive internal transformation of character so much as she simply responds to the transforming circumstances around her. Esther moves intelligently through the system in which she finds herself. Through the example of Esther’s own behavior, then, readers—and female readers, in particular—are provided a model of strategic responsiveness to a changing environment. By describing action that responds to one’s position—where power and prosperity stem from careful navigation of hostile surroundings—Esther can be seen as a contemporary model for people under any form of exploitation, oppression, or marginalization.

**Esther and Mordecai**

The relationship between Esther and Mordecai is controversial across scholarly interpretations of the book. Many have argued that Esther only accomplishes what she does because Mordecai tells her what, how, and when to act. Some of these accounts even challenge the reading of Esther as the protagonist of the book, denying the amount of influence Esther has on her own outcome, the outcome of her people, and the outcome of the story as a whole. Other readings appear to emphasize the role of Esther over Mordecai, making such claims as, “Mordecai ... of course ... finishes the story at a very high rank, this is basically because of his relationship to, and through the efforts of, Esther.” This argument, however, attempts to reclaim Esther as the active agent only by arguing that she transforms in character, matures, and develops dramatically over the course of the story—from something like “sex object to sage.”

I would like to propose a different reading: Esther’s action throughout the book, from beginning to end, reflects the way in which she uses her sexuality and rationality to accomplish her goals in various, changing circumstances. This reading rounds out those supportive of Esther as the story’s primary agent, allowing them to appreciate all of Esther’s action rather than shying away from her use of her sexuality. It will be important to flesh out the relationship between Esther and Mordecai to see in which way each contributes to the outcome of the plot. In doing so, I will show that this is not a patriarchal relationship between an adoptive father and daughter, in which he tells her exactly what to do and she obeys. Rather, the relationship emphasizes the actions of Esther.

Our first encounters with Esther in the text superficially present her as “shapely and beautiful” (Esther 2:7), as well as obedient—both to Mordecai, who tells her not to reveal her Jewishness (Esther 2:10), and Hegai, who advises her on how to interact with the king (Esther 2:15). Later, she is characterized as undemanding (Esther 2:13-5), passive (Esther 2:8), and “afraid and unwilling to go against protocol.” Yet it is not difficult to redeem these descriptions: Esther chooses to listen to the advice of Hegai and Mordecai, and it is unwarranted to say she does so blindly; obedience,
after all, is often necessary in order to be successful. In fact, not listening to their advice would be ill advised and, indeed, more reprehensible than following it. Hegai, for instance, is clearly familiar with court proceedings and knowledgeable about how to win the king’s favor, since he is the guardian of the king’s women and spends his days with the royal harem. We are also told that Esther “obeyed Mordecai’s bidding,” “as she had done when she was under his tutelage” before entering the palace (Esther 2:20). Again, she had no reason not to listen to Mordecai. In fact, although

previous commentators … have maintained that Mordecai, not Esther, is the character presented for emulation[,] Mordecai proves inflexible and incurs the wrath of Haman, thus imperiling all the Jews under Persian rule[]. Esther bends and negotiates, and by working within the system succeeds in making the system work for her.5

Esther’s alleged passivity is, rather, better read as a model or productive obedience and patience. Acting differently might have pleased later feminist interpreters, but it would have stymied the ascendance through which she ultimately saves her people.

Furthermore, it is not as if Mordercai supervises Esther at every moment. During some of the most pivotal moments of the story—while Esther is preparing to be summoned by the king, for example, or when she is actually in his presence—she is without Mordecai’s immediate influence. It is true that Mordecai continues to be involved, as in the crucial scene in which he tells Esther of the assassination plot he has overheard. While the text is ambiguous in this instance as to whose idea it was to inform the king (and further, to do so in Mordecai’s name),6 it is nevertheless Esther alone who actually carries out the action in the public realm, navigating the politics of the court from the inside while Mordecai remains unable to act influentially outside the palace. On all of these occasions, she easily could have turned away entirely from Mordecai’s authority; she could have chosen to hide her identity forever, living a life without further ties to her adoptive father. But she does not do this.

In fact, we see Esther actively reaching out to Mordecai from within her insider position. Because of her connections and appointment in the court, she is able to correspond with him through a messenger. It is in this context that Mordecai appeals to her to plead with the king on behalf of her people (Esther 4:8). Esther’s response is a command, indicating an active exercise of influence that will only become more prominent as the story works towards its resolution. She says to Mordecai, “Go, assemble all the Jews ... and fast in my behalf[]. I and my maidsens will observe the same fast. Then I shall go to the king, though it is contrary to the law; and if I am to perish, I shall perish!” (Esther 4:16, my emphasis). Suddenly, we have a reversal: Mordecai is now carrying out Esther’s bidding! He does “just as Esther had commanded him” (Esther 4:17). He fasts and leaves his very existence in her hands; he has relinquished the realm of influence to Esther. Later, when Esther approaches the king to request
his and Haman’s presence at the first banquet, he accepts, saying, “Tell Haman to hurry and do Esther’s bidding” (Esther 5:5). In addition to Mordecai, Esther now has the two most powerful men in the kingdom doing as she requests. At the well-timed second banquet, she indicts Haman and reveals herself to be a Jew, implicated in the destruction called for by Haman’s plotting. Recognizing the vast amount of power that Esther wields, the desperate Haman pleads with her, not the king, for his life (Esther 7:7). Esther has “orchestrate[d] what amounts to a palace coup, replacing the King’s chief advisor with her cousin and herself.”

It is tempting to read all of this as a dramatic process of transformation in which “the pliant and obedient Esther has become a woman of action.” However, we have seen that her obedience is better understood as an active, conscious pursuit of her best interest. Each of the times she speaks to the king, she does so carefully and intelligently; she is well aware that by presenting her case apologetically and from a position of submission, it gives her the best chance of success. Furthermore, we know just how much she has had to do on her own while in the court, questioning a characterization as “pliant and obedient.” Her relationship with Mordecai is clearly more complex than simple passivity. Esther must be seen as Mordecai’s connection to political life and to the king—that is, to the realm in which the Jews of Persia might be saved.

**Esther Reclaimed**

Having decided that Esther’s actions are the primary motor of the story, it remains to decide how we should view these actions. Should they be seen as a “[re-sort] to feminine and sexual charms, wine and merriment in order to make the king change his mind and to trap Haman?” Or are they rather a process of becoming “victorious through accurate, intelligent, politic assessment?” I reject this binary scenario. In the reading I have proposed, it is acceptable and necessary for Esther to use both her feminine charms and her intelligence, depending on the circumstances.

Again, this is not to suggest that Esther’s use of both qualities reflects a drastic character development. André LaCocque, for instance, has harsh words for Esther before the crisis and highly appraising ones during and after: he says she undergoes a transformation from a “consenting sex object” and “narcissistic pageant competitor” to a “strong-willed head of state.” “From a scatterbrained pinup to a fifth-century B.C.E. Golda Meir, the evolution of Esther is amazing.” Catchy phrases aside, such a reading fails to appreciate Esther’s role over the course of the entire book. Half of her influence in the story is overlooked for fear of seeing her sexuality as something positive or rational; further ignored is the fact that her feminine charms are still very much at work in her speeches to the king in the second half of the story. It is easy to conflate a recognition of both sexuality and rationality with an argument of dramatic transformation. Shemaryahu Talmon, for instance, argues that
in the course of events she ascends from the role of Mordecai’s protégée to become her mentor’s guardian. In fact she completely overshadows her uncle and outclasses his adversary Haman in the art of crafty planning and successful execution. In the end it is Esther’s superior cleverness which saves the day[.] It is clearly Esther who plays the decisive role in the development of events.13

While I certainly agree that “it is clearly Esther who plays the decisive role in the development of events,” it seems to me that readings in which she develops from protégée to guardian are not significantly different from those in which she develops from sex object to political leader.

We must see Esther as active and rational throughout the story. She does what is necessary to save herself and her people given the means she has available at different times. Recognizing this allows us to embrace Esther as a model without disregarding her actions in the first half of the book as either inessential, simply obedient, or overly reliant on sexuality. My reading attempts to preserve the entirety of her person. I believe that such a reading might get us closer to transcending the associations of femininity with passivity.

Notes

6 All the text says of the matter is, “Mordecai learned of [the plot] and told it to Queen Esther, and Esther reported it to the king in Mordecai’s name” (Esther 2:22).
7 Bronner, “Reclaiming Esther from Sex Object to Sage,” 8.
8 Athalya Brenner, The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative (Sheffield: JSOT, 1994).
9 Bronner, “Reclaiming Esther from Sex Object to Sage,” 7.
10 Crawford, “Esther: Bible.”
11 André LaCocque, Esther Regina: A Bakhtinian Reading (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 117.
12 Ibid., 120
Why Is This Other Different from All Other Others?
Love in the Time of Passover

Eric M Gurevitch

There is an odd book in the Hebrew Bible. Well, there are many odd books in the Hebrew Bible, but there is only one that concerns itself with a highly eroticized conception of love: the Song of Songs—that delightfully dreamlike poem that opens by declaring, “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your love is more delightful than wine” (Song 1:2). This poem has been read for years by rabbinic authorities as an allegorical confession of love between God and Israel, but relegating the poem to that paradigm alone is an act of violence toward what should be the obvious content of the poem. More precisely, before we can ascribe to the poem any “higher” theological significance, we need first to understand it as the yearning of an erotic cry between two lovers.

Sephardic Jews get the opportunity to hear the Song of Songs in the synagogue every Friday night during the Kabbalat Shabbat service, but we repressed Ashkenazic Jews only read it as a community once a year, on the Shabbat that falls during Passover. But oh, is it worth the wait! There is an important connection between the Song and the religious experience of Passover, concerning the concept of divine and human love. Using Passover as my starting point, I will discuss the type of love that the Song portrays, and the implications that this love has for human relationships. I will also argue that the theological conception of love does not exclusively belong in the realm of Christian theologians such as C. S. Lewis and Anders Nygren, where it is most often discussed.

At the Passover seder, we recite the Four Questions, which is really one question followed by four supporting clauses. While the text of the Four Questions is simple, there is much confusion as to what we are actually asking and answering. We say (emphasis and additions mine), “Why is this night (so) different from all other nights that we need to (1) eat matzah, (2) eat maror, (3) dip vegetables, and (4) recline?”

My reading is slightly, but importantly, different from the way that most contemporary American Jews view the question. The four clauses after the initial question are examples of why the Passover night is different from other nights, but they do not touch upon the ontological question of difference. (It is obvious that it is different, but the original question remains unanswered.) The question is not answered once the youngest child descends from his chair; instead, the question leads into maggid (and importantly, hallel and nirtzah later), the section of the seder where we tell the story of the exodus from Egypt. In fact, the entire seder is necessary just to answer this initial question. The implications are clear: this night is clearly different (“as you can see, we do all of these silly things”), but the answer of why it is different is not so
simple. It is not different merely because of the differences that we can see between it and other days; rather, the difference is built up out of greater things.

So too is the question of difference and importance addressed in the Song of Songs. The interlocutors of the female speaker ask her, “How is your beloved better than others, most beautiful of women? How is your beloved better than others, that you charge us so?” (Song 5:9). Aside from being similar to the question we ask at Passover, this is the question that every lover naturally asks themselves at a certain point in each relationship: “What is special about this person? Why is this Other different from all other Others?” In the Song, the male lover gives a list of physical attributes of his beloved, but these—much like the answers given in the Four Questions—seem artificial and insufficient:

Your eyes behind your veil are doves.
Your hair is like a flock of goats
descending from the hills of Gilead.
Your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn,
coming up from the washing.
Each has its twin;
not one of them is alone.
Your lips are like a scarlet ribbon;
your mouth is lovely.
Your temples behind your veil
are like the halves of a pomegranate.
Your neck is like the tower of David,
built with courses of stone;
on it hang a thousand shields,
all of them shields of warriors.
Your breasts are like two fawns,
like twin fawns of a gazelle
that browse among the lilies.

(Song 4:1-5)

These descriptions fail to define the relationship between the lover and his beloved. Ironically, they only serve to emphasize the Other’s otherness, her alterity. They do not dissolve the question, and the lover ends by saying simply, “This is my beloved, this is my friend” (Song 5:16). Again and again, we are confronted with that eternal and simple refrain: “I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine” (Song 6:3). Any description based on time and space fails; the relationship, the longing, is all that is left. There is a part of the seder in which the leader holds up a piece of matzah and declares, “This is the bread of affliction!” Since everyone is aware of the ontological
status of the matzah, this statement seems unnecessary. In reality, it is the most necessary. The moment when we are commanded to behold the matzah qua matzah is the first time we can experience it and understand it. Only once we behold the alterity can we dissolve it and truly understand the Other.

In accordance with the otherness in the male’s description of his beloved, there is a sense of unreality about the inverse: the feminine speaker only sees her beloved in a series of dream-visions, and at the climax of the poem, she is separated from him by night-watchmen who beat her into submission. But the relationship’s lack of “reality” does not mean that it lacks truth. The love-relationship is not based on any reality. What a lover pledges to her beloved is a promise rooted in absurdity—the promise that the specific moment of their love’s embrace will last forever. They will be each other’s forever...for now. This is clearly an illusion; no lover can truly promise their partner eternity.

Still, the lovers—ever resilient—try. The speaker proclaims, “Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave” (Song 8:16). This is clearly an absurd statement; love does not, in fact, conquer death—it only seems to do so in the moment of embrace. Just in this way, the lover can have no fault when she is in fact loved. The man says, “You are altogether beautiful, my darling; there is no flaw in you” (Song 4:7). The same connection blinds the lover to both death and ugliness. Of course, this is an illusion that could easily fall apart; it is founded on nothing but a tenuous connection between two Others, and if one end does not completely reciprocate, it collapses in on itself. We can see an example of this in the Confessions of Jean Jacques Rousseau when he visits a Venetian whore. He writes,

I entered the chamber of a woman of easy virtue, as the sanctuary of love and beauty: and in her person, I thought I saw the divinity. I should have been inclined to think that without respect and esteem it was impossible to feel anything like that which she made me experience...

But, at the moment in which I was ready to faint upon a bosom, which for the first time seemed to suffer the impression of the hand and lips of a man, I perceived she had a withered nipple. I struck my forehead: I examined, and thought I perceived this nipple was not formed like the other. I immediately began to consider how it was possible to have such a defect, and persuaded of its proceeding from some great natural vice, I was clearly convinced, that, instead of the most charming person of whom I could form to myself an idea, I had in my arms a species of a monster, the refuse of nature, of men and of love.
Here, we see the utter and complete failure of love: the Other is no longer integrated into the subject but is wholly other, reduced to its physical form. This physical form, despite what the writer of the Song of Songs proposes, is touched by death. The only real release is in the illusion maintained between the two others. Physical separation or even exaltation cannot bring love to a conquest of death. Rather, death only appears to be conquered when both Others are lost in each other—when they base their existence not on any corporeality but rather on the very much nonexistent space between them. Love has to replace the alterity present in the vacuum between lovers.

This is reflected in the song Dayeinu (“enough for us”), which, sung as part of the maggid section of the seder, is separated only slightly from the Four Questions. The song lists fifteen causally linked actions God performed on behalf of Israel, after each of which the chorus repeats, “It would have been enough!” The naïve—and most common—reading of Dayeinu would have it that the song is absurd and insincere because, in reality, any one of these interrelated actions would not in fact have been “enough.” This reading misses the erotic nature of the song; the song is certainly absurd, but it is also utterly sincere. As long as love existed between God and the people of Israel, each of the actions listed in Dayeinu would indeed have been enough! The absurdity is that in the end we should be left unsatisfied, but love blinds us to this reality. Love blinds the viewer to the faults of the object he views. In fact, it removes all faults. This is the absurdity of love. Clearly the beloved in the Song of Songs does not objectively have all the physical attributes that are ascribed to her. But as long as love exists, those physical attributes that she does have are enough to seem perfect.

Christian apologists have reduced (or perhaps expanded) the English word of “love” to four distinct Greek forms: storge, agape, phileo, and eros (or, as in the case of Nygren, only eros and agape). I would suggest that both the Song of Songs and the holiday on which it is read, Passover, present a purely erotic form of love. That is, unlike the agape and storge that can apply in any situation to any Other (as long as the lover is loving), the Jewish conception is based on a deeply wrought two-sided individual relationship. In some ways, this relationship is difficult to maintain (as we find out at Sinai/Horeb), but it is only through the passion and absurdity of connection that God redeemed us from Egypt and can continue to redeem us. A universal or fraternal sense of obligatory love fails, because it is only upheld by one side. Only the erotic offers us some release from the existential fear of death and the beyond.

Notes

1 Cf. Song 2:16, 7:10
Bernard Malamud’s *The Fixer*: Violent Accusations and Accusations of Violence

*Dory Fox*

Literary critics often argue that Bernard Malamud’s *The Fixer*, a novel based on the Mendel Beilis case of the 1910s, more significantly addresses universal suffering than the specific historical event. While this is a credible approach, a universalist reading fails to address the novel’s potential ability to contribute a unique historical analysis through its protagonist Yakov Bok, a Jew living in a Christian world. When examining the novel as a document of historical commentary, we must remember that Malamud himself lives and writes in a context that is dominated by Christianity and Christian symbols. The protagonist’s thoughts, as well as the narrative Malamud constructs, reflect Jewish adoption of this Christian symbolic economy. The novel’s plot portrays the mode of projective inversion that typified Christian blood-accusations against Jews since the Middle Ages. However, by writing a polemic against the Christians of Europe, Malamud participates in the same accusatory mode of projective inversion.

*The Fixer* opens with the words, “From the small crossed window of his room above the stable in the brickyard, Yakov Bok saw people in their long overcoats running somewhere.” Already, from the fourth word of the novel, Malamud mentions the central Christian symbol. It does not say “from his room,” or even “from the small window in his room.” Before the reader even learns that the protagonist is Jewish, it is clear that he is looking at the world through a “crossed window.” The cross of the window obstructs his vision, preventing a pure, clear image of what goes on. The way that he sees, approaches, and understands the world around him is always mediated by Christianity. Even the novel’s symbolic network reflects this phenomenon. Yakov stands as a Christ figure. Like Jesus, Yakov suffers torture as an unfair case is made against him and the group he represents. Some of the particularities of his suffering even mimic the Christ story. For instance, the nails in Yakov’s shoes that irritate his feet bring to mind the crucifix. Ostensibly, Yakov does not think of himself as a Jewish martyr; rather, all he can do is not make things worse. He’s half a Jew himself, yet enough one to protect them. After all, he knows the people; and believes in their right to be Jews and live as Jews and live in the world as men. He is against those who are against them. He will protect them to the extent that he can. This is his covenant to himself. If God’s not a man he has to be.

Yakov does not understand himself to be suffering for the sake of his religion. He calls himself “half a Jew” because he does not believe in Judaism, instead taking his Jewish
identity to be an accident of history. He does not seek to actively improve the station of Jews, but does want to avoid making their lives worse. The suffering of Yakov Bok looks a lot like that of Jesus, but he lacks an intention to be a martyr.

Furthermore, there is a significant difference in perspective between the New Testament’s representation of the attributes of suffering and the representation found in The Fixer. In the article, “Malamud and the Jews,” Edward A. Abramson acknowledges the similarities between Yakov and Christ, but writes, “However, it is notable that Bok does not share Jesus’ idea of accepting suffering, though Jesus feared it as would any man. Bok does not accept God’s will but blames Him for his own suffering and that of humanity, suffering that God could stop but chooses not to.”

Abramson’s characterization of Yakov’s feelings about God seems true to the text. Yakov reveals this disillusionment with the potential for meaningful suffering toward the end of the novel when he says, “What suffering has taught me is the uselessness of suffering.” And yet, despite this fundamental gap between Jesus’ and Yakov’s beliefs, the comparison still remains somehow resonant with contemporary readers and critics.

The mere fact that scholars, engaged in a discussion of this “Jewish novel,” feel compelled to raise the question of Christian symbolism is worth noting in its own right. Conceiving of Yakov as a Christ figure is not a perfect comparison, but it is certainly a significant trope that reverberates throughout the book. When constructing an American novel, even a Jewish writer who wishes to represent a Jewish protagonist inevitably makes use of a system of Christian imagery; just as Yakov sees the world through a “crossed window,” so too does Malamud write the novel through the “crossed window.” Christian symbols have become so embedded within the consciousness of Jews in the Christian world that even artistic and literary representations appropriate Christian imagery and symbolism. This situation is not necessarily as negative as Malamud suggests through Yakov’s case. At the very least, this influence is to be expected. Nevertheless, it is all-important for readers and critics of such works to be aware of this double consciousness; without this awareness, much of the nuance of Malamud’s polemic in The Fixer is lost.

From this approach, understanding the Mendel Beilis case in the context of blood-accusations in Europe is essential for understanding what kind of commentary The Fixer makes on Jewish-Christian relations. The Christian accusation—that Jews kill Christian children in order to re-enact the crucifixion and to drain the children of their blood—has recurred in various iterations since the twelfth century. While the myth makes accusations about Jewish ritual practices, it has no foundation in the Jewish religion. Mendel Beilis was accused of ritual murder in 1911 and tried in 1913. Though the entire case was fraudulent, he was a vulnerable target for the accusation because he was a Jew living in a Christian section of Kiev. Although this may seem like a medieval phenomenon, the Mendel Beilis case testifies to the lasting power of such myths.
Alan Dundes suggests that the blood-accusations in Europe were in fact a psychological response to changes in Christian rituals. Applying psychoanalytic concepts to aid our historical understanding of blood-accusations, he argues that blood-accusations are kind of projective inversion: they reflect Christians’ discomfort with their own practice of the Eucharist. Dundes draws our attention to the temporal proximity of the emergence of blood-accusations and the Church’s establishment of transubstantiation of the host. If the Eucharist wafer turns into the body of Christ and the wine into his blood, then taking the host essentially becomes ritual cannibalism. Dundes writes, “By means of projective inversion, it is not we Christians who are guilty of murdering an individual in order to use his or her blood for ritual religious purposes (the Eucharist), but rather it is you Jews who are guilty of murdering an individual in order to use his or her blood for ritual religious purposes, making matzoh.”

Dundes also points out that viewing Jesus as a Jew strengthens the inverted nature of the accusation: the ritual murder myth tells of Jews eating a Christian, rather than Christians eating a Jew.

Applying psychoanalytic theories to the study of history, as Dundes does, can be a tenuous enterprise. However, in the analysis of a literary work, psychological and psychoanalytic theories are an accepted and appropriate conceptual lens. Therefore, Dundes’ theory is relevant to the examination of The Fixer, and it is especially helpful for the very type of historical commentary that literature is capable of making. In fact, in the novel, Yakov himself suggests that his accusation is a case of projective inversion—though, of course, he does not use these words. After reading through the New Testament, Yakov says,

“In the Old Testament we are not allowed to eat blood. It’s forbidden[..] But what about these words: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink His blood, you have no life in you; He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood, abides in Me, and I in him.”

“Ah, that’s a different load of fish altogether,” said Kogin. “It means the bread and wine and not the real flesh and blood.”

Yakov points out the contrast between the essential impossibility of ritual murder within Jewish law and the fundamental place that consuming flesh and blood holds in Christian scripture. He refers to the passage in the Gospel of John that has led to the idea of transubstantiation. The response of Kogin, the guard, is telling from both a psychoanalytic and from a historical perspective. According to Freud’s theories of repression, the most basic psychological coping mechanism is repression or denial: individuals deny the truth of what they do not wish to hear or to know. Therefore, by simply denying the literal meaning of John’s call to consume human blood and flesh, Kogin reinforces the argument that Christians wish to distance themselves from their ritual cannibalism. However, by referring to the Eucharist as “bread and wine
and not the real flesh and blood,” Kogin also illuminates some of the changes in religion that have occurred with the advent of modernity. As a citizen of the nineteenth century, he knows and feels comfortable stating that taking communion is simply eating bread and wine. Yet despite his modernity, Kogin still believes that a Jew would commit ritual murder. This illuminates the strength of the ritual murder legend. Even though Kogin has stripped himself of some illusions about religion and the supernatural, the psychological mechanism of projective inversion remains.

Malamud’s choice to write a novel about a blood-accusation affirms a continuation of this tense, accusatory relationship between Christians and Jews. According to Dundes’ definition, the novel fits the most basic form of projective inversion. He writes, “We know that in standard projective inversion, ‘I hate you’ becomes ‘you hate me.’ By transporting subject and object, the initial party is left free to hate his or her enemy and furthermore absolved of his feelings of guilt therefore.”11 Hence, a story about how much Group B hates Group A actually tells how much Group A hates Group B. Following this reasoning, by writing a novel about how much the Christians hate the Jews and how much they have hurt the Jews in the past, Malamud projects his own hatred toward Christians and reveals that he would like to cause equivalent suffering for them.

Is there, then, no difference between the accusation that Jews killed a Christian child and the accusation that Christians torturously and unjustly held a Jew in prison? The emotional effect of narrative makes projective inversion in both cases a powerful rhetorical tool. Of course, contemporary readers can easily point out that ritual murder is an invented myth, while the inspiration for Yakov Bok’s story really did happen to one Mendel Beiliss. However, the effects that these stories have on listeners and readers are one and the same. The readers of a novel are bound to become emotionally invested in whatever manner the author lays out for them. If a novel such as The Fixer presents a certain group as coarse, cruel, prejudiced, and violent, then they are positioned as the natural antagonists. In The Fixer, with every blow that a guard delivers to Yakov, Malamud delivers the same to the guard and to Christianity. In effect, the violence committed by Christians in the novel becomes, on the battleground of readers’ sympathies, moral violence committed by Malamud toward Christians. If we understand The Fixer, like Christian blood-accusations, as a narrative of projective inversion, then the novel stands as a potentially dangerous expression of animosity toward Christians.

Although Malamud’s The Fixer certainly provides unique insight into Jewish history, it more interestingly raises the question of how contemporary American Jews ought to engage with the very history it describes—a history of pain and maltreatment. Dealing with a modern case of the medieval phenomenon of blood-accusations, Malamud presents an analysis of Jewish history: he shows how prejudices and ideologies remain even amidst great change. Alas, these prejudices do not belong only
to Christians, but to Jews as well. The Mendel Beiliss case stands as an apparently
anachronistic, frightening step in the lineage of Christian anti-Judaism. So too, per-
haps, by writing *The Fixer* in such an accusatory fashion, Malamud creates a frighten-
ing expression of anti-Christian sentiments. The question that surfaces is whether it
is fair to categorize such an expression as out of place. Should Jews, once they are in
the United States and have fully adopted an American identity, forgive and forget the
heinous treatment of their ancestors in Christian Europe?

**Notes**

1 “A accuses B of carrying out an action which A really wishes to carry out.” Alan Dundes,
Projective Inversion,” in *The Blood Libel Legend*, ed. Alan Dundes (Madison: University of
Wisconsin Press, 1992), 353.
3 *Ibid.*, 274
4 Edward A. Abramson, “Bernard Malamud and the Jews: An Ambiguous Relationship,” *The
6 Abramson cites several books that deal with this comparison, including
Iska Alter’s *The Good Man’s Dilemma: Social Criticism in the Fiction of Bernard Malamud* (New
York: AMS Press, 1981) and Robert Ducharme’s *Art and Idea in the Novels of Bernard Mal-
7 Gavin I. Langmuir, “Thomas of Monmouth: Detector of Ritual Murder,” in *Toward a Defini-
1966).
“You’re an Anti-Dentite!”1
The Representation of Jews on Television since the Nineties

Eric Thurm

Television has always been both a uniquely American and a uniquely timely medium, capable of capturing the cultural moment in a way film and literature generally cannot. It is even possible to trace societal attitudes in almost real time (if you allow some wiggle room) through the way they’re treated on television. Consider the recent influx of series focused on our cultural conflict between the so-called “one percent” and the working class: Revenge is about a trail of vengeance wreaked on the über-rich; House of Lies focuses on a group of management consultants who work for megacorporations; and Two Broke Girls is (at least nominally) about two girls who are in fact broke, one of whom lost everything in the financial crisis. In a similar fashion, television can reflect changes in the way different groups are perceived in American society. With that in mind, I would like to explore the recent representation of Jewish characters on television in order to get a sense of how both Jewish culture and the public perception of that culture has evolved.

The starting point for any examination of the change in representation of Jews in television today, as compared to even fifteen years ago, is that there simply aren’t as many “obvious” Jews onscreen these days. In the nineties, members of the tribe abounded on the small screen, from Grace of Will and Grace to Krusty the Clown of The Simpsons to Agent Mulder of The X-Files. That’s not including many other prominent characters, like John Munch of Homicide: Life on the Street, Mark Greene of ER, and Fran Fine of The Nanny. Perhaps most important are the Jewish juggernaut ensembles of two of the most influential shows of the decade: Friends and Seinfeld. Friends, for instance, gave America some of the most stealthily Jewish characters on television. Rachel Green was the classic Jewish American Princess. At the beginning of the series, she had no idea how to make a living for herself beyond relying on her father (a doctor), called her grandmother “bubbe,” and was even implied to have had plastic surgery to reduce the size of her apparently once-large nose. And the Gellers were, of course, the exceedingly neurotic children of a Jewish patriarch played by Elliott Gould. Monica’s controlling nature and Ross’ more nebbishy qualities are directly traceable to their Jewish heritage, both genealogically and comedically.

However, while the characters were noticeably Jewish if you looked, their Judaism was, at best, auxiliary. None of the various weddings of the Jewish characters were Jewish weddings; instead they were tailored to the gentle that the Jewish character was marrying (or Vegas, in the case of Ross and Rachel’s drunken wedding). The most famous episode focusing on Jewish themes, “The One With The Holiday Armadillo” (2000), came late in the show’s run and forced Ross to jump through hoops
to teach his son Ben about Hanukkah as something he should celebrate alongside Christmas. Ross eventually gets Ben excited about Hanukkah, but he has to keep Chandler (who is dressed as Santa) away from Ben to make sure that the boy isn’t swayed immediately back to Christmas. The series kept the Jewish aspects of its main characters hidden in plain sight, rarely calling explicit attention to them yet leaving them apparent for any Jewish viewers inclined to hunt for even the slightest signs of their own culture in the show.

*Seinfeld*, though more Jewish than *Friends* in its sensibilities, has an even more ambiguously Jewish character. Jerry is, of course, Jewish, and Elaine and Kramer are not.² But George, though perhaps the most outwardly and excessively Jewish television character of all time,³ is difficult to pin down one way or the other: despite his mannerisms and personality, his last name is clearly Italian Catholic—and what good Jewish family names their son George, anyway? Various statements from producers have suggested that George was, in fact, half Jewish on the side that counts: Estelle Costanza was an absolute terror of a Jewish mother. More than half of the ensemble may have been gentile, but *Seinfeld* tackled many Jewish subjects in ways *Friends*, or really any other popular series of the nineties, never did. Elaine consults a Rabbi for advice on her love life, and the group attends a *bris* that goes horribly wrong. Poking fun at Judaism is encouraged—the *mohel* hates children!—but seriously attacking it is not. Tim Whatley, Jerry’s dentist, becomes one of the most villainous characters in the series when he converts to Judaism solely in order to tell Jew-jokes.

It seems to me that George, despite the ambiguity, represents the quintessential televised Jew of the nineties. He is short, balding, rotund, and bespectacled (modeled on his creator, Larry David—Jewish, of course). He is extremely neurotic, simultaneously self-obsessed and self-loathing, and a pathological liar. Despite being a genius, his crippling obsession with sex (to the point where he is practically unable to read!) is almost always the downfall of his many schemes and lies. Carla Johnson links George to the Yiddish archetype of the existential fool, the *shlemiel*. He is a constantly put-upon victim—the dumping ground of the world who is incapable of controlling anything in his life.⁴ George would agree with this assessment: he constantly rails at the universe for hating him and laments that he is incapable of changing his fate. He is the character who returns to work after quitting and pretends as if nothing had happened, and the one who is so obsessed with clean public bathrooms that in the *Seinfeld* reunion episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, he is shown to have invented an iPhone app—the “iT oilet”—that will direct you to the nearest acceptable public restroom. Representing so many stereotypically Jewish traits and behaviors, George is surely the epitome of the nineties Jewish television character.

Larry David, the model for George, is, coincidentally, the best entrée to the representation of Jews on television today. His eponymous character (who I’ll refer to as “Larry,” rather than “Larry David,”) to differentiate the character from his cre-
ator) in *Curb Your Enthusiasm* might well be the most popular Jew on contemporary television. But it’s telling that *Curb* has far fewer viewers than *Seinfeld* ever did in its heyday. *Curb* is the Larry David ethos taken to its full extreme. The awkwardness is more awkward: in “Beloved Aunt” (2000), Larry writes an obituary for his wife’s aunt that accidentally ends up with the “a” in aunt replaced with a “c.” The social minutiae is more minute: “The Lefty Call” (2007) revolves around which hand someone uses to make a phone call. Everything is amped up to the point where many devoted *Seinfeld* fans just can’t stand *Curb*.

It is interesting that alongside this, the Jewishness of the show has also been turned up to eleven. *Curb* has undeniably delved into far more Jewish issues than *Seinfeld*: incidents include Larry trying to scalp tickets for the High Holy Days, inviting a sex offender to his Passover *seder*, and pretending to be Orthodox. However, it is hard to get a sense of any real reverence for or connection with Judaism in *Curb*. Though Larry enjoys and prefers being around other Jews, he treats Judaism itself primarily as an annoyance, something that prevents him from getting what he wants. Larry pretends to be Orthodox in order to get a kidney for his friend, Richard Lewis (to whom he does not want to give his own kidney). In the process, Larry illustrates his total inability to understand Yiddish and forces an Orthodox woman to leap off a ski lift to avoid being with him alone after sunset. During the now-infamous “Palestinian Chicken” episode (2011), Larry intentionally drinks his wine before saying the Kiddush to thumb his nose at his observant friend Marty Funkhauser, forcibly removes Funkhauser’s *yarmulke* before entering a Palestinian restaurant, begins dating a Palestinian woman for the sex (during which she loudly insults Jews), and is left torn between the Palestinian woman and the Jewish community at the end of the episode.

What differentiates the Jews of *Seinfeld* from the Jews of *Curb*? Part of the answer is that while the characters on *Seinfeld* certainly weren’t poor, they weren’t rich either. The stakes on *Seinfeld* were never actually high, but there were often storylines that revolved around George’s money problems that would have been high stakes on a more serious comedy or drama. Larry, on the other hand, is extremely wealthy after the success of *Seinfeld* and has to be nagged into working by his (gentile) wife Cheryl, who wants him out of the house. Though he gets upset over losing small sums of money for principled reasons, nothing he does is ever financially motivated, and it’s clear that Larry is, for all intents and purposes, on top of the world. This is a critical part of why Larry can get away with being such a jerk: while George has to snivel and beg to get jobs, Larry can throw away opportunities to make enormous sums of money simply because he enjoys being obnoxious. Interestingly enough, the success of *Seinfeld* is precisely what allows Larry to have the money that lets him get away with his behavior. In that sense, the assimilation of Jewish sensibilities and culture into the mainstream, exemplified by the runaway success of *Seinfeld*, is what has allowed Judaism itself to be so disregarded in the portrayal of Jewish television characters.
This material success has, to some extent, marked the portrayal of this generation of Jews. The world has been remade in the image of the last generation of Jews, whose presence in the highest levels of almost every profession is unremarkable. Where once a series about thirty-somethings living in New York and getting upset about things was verboten, it’s now difficult to find something new to do with the genre at all, and each new attempt at doing it over comes with its own round of criticism for unoriginality. It is undeniable that the current generation of young Jews is the most assimilated yet, fully part of a white ethnicity that has developed over time to include Irish, Italians, and other groups that it did originally include. While there are some remnants of the original American-Jewish culture and (especially) parenting, there is no longer a conflict between Jewish culture and broader American culture; in many respects, the two are the same. As such, the assimilation of American Jews has become the dominating trait that goes into the characters who represent them on television.

Consider Annie Edison—a Jewish character on Community, the cult NBC comedy that’s mostly about a small, insular group of friends hanging out with each other. But the comparisons to the Jewish characters of Seinfeld and Friends end there. The reason Annie attends Greendale (the community college at the heart of the show) in the first place smacks of Jewish stereotypes: she developed an addiction to Adderall in order to maintain her 4.0 GPA in high school. But nothing the character has done since has drawn attention to her Judaism beyond agitating for Hanukkah candles during the gang’s holiday celebrations. She’s simply intelligent, enthusiastic, and a little naïve. Even her last name—Edison, rather than, say, Green or Geller—is sneaky. The most stereotypically Jewish aspect of Annie’s character—her tendency to become neurotic and obsessive—isn’t even played as a Jewish trait. A Jewish character having a meltdown is a time-honored tradition on television; think of George in almost any episode of Seinfeld, or Monica’s control-freak tendencies on Friends. The actors would become increasingly uptight and vocally shrill in a way that was recognizably Jewish. However, Annie’s similarly neurotic incidents are treated as entirely normal and without anything to mark them as particularly Jewish. In the episode “Cooperative Calligraphy” (2010), an extremely distraught Annie forces the group to remain in their study room until her lost pen is found. But the actress portrays these moments as someone who is simply upset and principled, and the writing treats Annie’s reaction as reasonable rather than “shrill.” Even though it is funny, we’re not laughing because we recognize therein something of the reality of stereotypically Jewish neuroses.

In an interesting commentary on the aforementioned assimilation, Jewish humor has taken over comedy and, in the process, lost some of its distinctiveness. Saul Bellow famously said, “Oppressed people tend to be witty”—and, indeed, Jewish humor was originally a product of “outsiderism.” But today, the defining characteristics of Jewish humor—neuroticism, constant self-examination, preoccupation with Jewishness as a mark of pariah status, and the self-effacing wordplay made famous
“You’re an Anti-Dentite!”

by Woody Allen—have become the defining characteristics of mainstream humor.

As assimilation becomes the norm for the representation of Jews in television, Jewish characters have begun to display atypically Jewish traits. This trend finds its clearest example in the most prominent Jewish character on television today: the Israeli Ziva David of *NCIS*, by far television’s most popular scripted show. Ziva is a former Mossad agent who joined the NCIS team. Although Jewish, she is not overtly religious, and her Israeli nationality tends to be treated as more important than her religion. Ziva’s foreignness, characterized by an unrelenting stream of malapropisms and misunderstandings about American culture, is the cause of most of the humor she brings to the show. But these jokes are not really directed at Ziva because she’s Israeli, and certainly not because she’s Jewish. They’re directed at her simply because she isn’t American. This successful portrayal of a Jewish character whose Judaism is almost entirely incidental would have been rare even twenty years ago.

When Estelle Harris (the actress who played George’s mother on *Seinfeld*) asked Larry David whether or not her character was Jewish, he replied by asking, “What do you care?” Though he said this in a time when Jewishness was very important to Jewish television characters, he was unwittingly anticipating the trend for the next two decades. The way Jews are represented on television has mimicked the increasing assimilation and prominence of Jews in American society and culture. For a way forward, we can look to Saul Berenson of *Homeland*, who is an identified Jew despite growing up in Indiana—three hours away from the closest synagogue. When a suspected terrorist commits suicide under interrogation, Saul says the Mourner’s Kaddish, framing the episode-ending montage in a way that places the beauty of prayer and Saul’s own Judaism front and center. Saul is not only the moral compass of the show, reining in the destructive impulses of the manic-depressive Carrie Matheson; he also unflinchingly acts out of duty to his country and his paternal love for Carrie. This character presents direct and thematically relevant engagement with Judaism as a religion and as something that makes Jews unique. The way Jews and Judaism will continue to be represented on television is important for understanding not only the way Jewish culture has developed in America, but also the attitudes of gentiles toward Jews—based on the characters they see on their television screens.

Notes


8 Cohn, “To be or not to be...Jewish.”
Sticky Hands
Danya Lagos

At many seders, there is a tradition as part of the storytelling process...

During which most people dip a finger into their wine glass and subsequently dash a small drop of wine onto their plate. The explanation I first heard is that each drop represents the amount of sadness we have over the lives that were sacrificed to bring us our freedom.
THIS CAN BE UNSETTLING FOR ME, AT TIMES...

NOT BECAUSE OF THE POSSIBLE HYGIENE CONCERNS...

(ALL)

םַד (BLOOD!)
תַּמָּרֶשׁ (FROGS!)
קַדְמָה (LICE!)
שָׁדָא (SWARMS!)
נְבָר (PESTILENCE!)
עֵבֶר (BOILS!)
טָעָה (HAIL!)
אִדָּמָה (LOCUSTS!)
יֶשֶׁת (DARKNESS!)
נָבּוֹת (DEATH OF THE FIRSTBORN!)
...but because when you fingerpaint with the outstretched arm of a wrathful & ever-imaginative God...

(especially while using Manischewitz...)
EXPECT STICKY HANDS.

χάνι Ḥay

יווֹרָב

וַיְרַב

יַפֵּרֵד

כָּנָה

פַּכְתָּ בְּדוּרָה
About the Editors

Ethan Schwartz – Editor-in-Chief, Co-Founder (ethanschwartz@uchicago.edu)
Ethan is a fourth-year in the College of the University of Chicago, double-majoring in philosophy and Jewish studies. He recently completed his honors thesis, entitled, “Repetition and Remembrance: Deuteronomy’s Covenantal Conception of Education,” under the guidance of Prof. Michael Fishbane. Next year, he will be participating in the Tikvah Fellowship in New York. He hopes eventually to pursue graduate study in Jewish philosophy.

Gabe Shapiro – Managing Editor (gshap@uchicago.edu)
Gabe is a second-year in the College of the University of Chicago, majoring in the College’s “Fundamentals: Issues and Texts” program, in which students use close readings of classic texts to answer a fundamental question of their choosing. In its most recent form, his question is, “What are the roles of philosophy and religion in human happiness?” Gabe is also considering a minor in math, and enjoys philosophy of art, Jewish political thought, and squash. He attended the 2011 Tikvah Israel Seminar on Israeli political theory, and serves as intern for both the Newberger Hillel Center’s “Big Questions” project and the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Danya Lagos – Layout Editor, Co-Founder (danya@uchicago.edu)
Danya is a fourth-year in the College of the University of Chicago, majoring in philosophy. This past summer, she interned at the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute, where she conducted archival research for Dr. Joyce Antler’s forthcoming book-length project on Jewish women involved in radical feminism, and wrote a paper on “Conversa Women and Counter-Conduct During the Inquisition.” She has completed her thesis on Seneca’s Epistulae Morales, advised by Prof. Jean-Luc Marion. Danya’s other interests include the history of religious mysticism, Leftist politics, independent zines and comics, and contemporary Israeli studies. Next year, Danya will teach at a bilingual elementary school in Dallas, Texas through Teach For America.

Doni Bloomfield – Academic Editor (dbloomfield@uchicago.edu)
Doni is a second-year in the College at the University of Chicago, majoring in history. His interests include research into free banking in the American West, the economics and halakhot of kidney donation, and Hillel conflict management. In addition, he edits for The Triple Helix and works on various projects with University Theater and Fire Escape Films. This summer, he will be working in New York at Epstein & Weil, a law firm specializing in criminal defense and business law.
Zachary Conn – Current Affairs Editor (zconn@uchicago.edu)
Zachary is a fourth-year in the College of the University of Chicago, majoring in history with a focus on the United States. He is particularly interested in the role of nostalgia in political history, especially with respect to our ideas about the American Revolution. In his free time, he is a rock-and-roll guitarist, short-fiction writer, political junkie, and frat boy.

Michael Lipkowitz – Creative Editor (mlipkowitz@uchicago.edu)
Michael is a fourth-year in the College of the University of Chicago, majoring in English with an honors concentration in creative writing. Throughout the 2011-2012 school year, he has worked as a preschool teacher at the Jewish Enrichment Center. Next year, he will be a Blue Engine Teaching Assistant in Manhattan.

Michelle Bentsman – Arts Editor (mbentsman@uchicago.edu)
Michelle is a fourth-year in the College of the University of Chicago, majoring in the College’s “Fundamentals: Issues and Texts” program, in which students use close readings of classic texts to answer a fundamental human question of their choosing. Her course of study considers how aesthetic experience informs ethical practice, especially within the context of Russian literature. She is also minoring in visual arts, through which she explores surrealist approaches to painting and installation. Michelle will be spending her summer as a Visual Arts Intern with BIMA at Brandeis University, after which she will begin a year of study as an Arts Fellow at the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education in New York.
About the Contributors

Eliza Brown (ecbrown@uchicago.edu)
Eliza is a third-year in the College at the University of Chicago, majoring in sociology and minoring in French. In 2010, she founded Chicago Independent Minyan, a prayer group at the University of Chicago focused on forming a welcoming community, encouraging new leadership, and maintaining traditional-egalitarian Shabbat services. Her main interests include psychoanalysis, yoga, and art history, all of which she sees as quintessentially Jewish pursuits. This summer, she plans to work as a research assistant at the National Opinion Research Center and as a senior interviewer for the University of Chicago’s undergraduate admissions office.

Max Budovitch (max.budovitch@yale.edu)
Max is a senior at Yale University, majoring in philosophy. His main academic interests are Jewish religious radicalism and the sociology of Jewish languages, though he is also interested in the philosophy of time and remembrance in the context of Judaism and its holidays. Max will be traveling to Qatar this summer to write creative non-fiction on the country’s small fishing communities, after which he will go to Jerusalem to write similar pieces on the city’s various orthodox communities.

Elli Cohn (ec238581@muhlenberg.edu)
Elli is a junior at Muhlenberg College, majoring in religion studies with a minor in Jewish studies. She has spent her junior year away from Muhlenberg, participating in a Jewish studies program in Prague during the fall semester and studying at the Jewish Theological Seminary’s List College during the spring semester. Her interests, which span the Jewish canon, include Hebrew Bible, rabbinic texts, and Jewish philosophy.

Dory Fox (dory@uchicago.edu)
Dory is a third-year in the College of the University Chicago, double-majoring in English and Jewish studies. She is interested in twentieth-century American-Jewish literature, as well as the Jewish literatures of Europe. This summer, she will study Yiddish language and culture as a Steiner Summer Fellow at the National Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Massachusetts. She will also work as a literary intern at The New Republic in Washington, D.C.
**Eric M Gurevitch (gurevitch@uchicago.edu)**

Eric is a third-year in the College of the University of Chicago, majoring in religious studies. He enjoys thinking about deconsecration and Sanskrit literature. In his spare time and for his B.A. thesis, he is trying to figure out how to perform a Vedic horse sacrifice. If anyone has any easier ways either to achieve immortality or to get a degree from the University of Chicago, they should feel free to contact him.

**Kayla Higgins (kaylahiggins@uchicago.edu)**

Kayla graduated in 2011 from the College of the University of Chicago, where she majored in the “Law, Letters, and Society” program with a minor in philosophy. In college, she was actively involved with interfaith work, spending her senior year as a Fellow for the Jewish Council on Urban Affair’s Jewish-Muslim Community Building Initiative and serving as a Campus Ambassador for the Interfaith Youth Core. Since graduating, she has divided her time between working as a research assistant to a marketing professor at the Kellogg School of Management, volunteering as a law clerk at the Cook County Public Defender’s Office, and acting in a sketch comedy show at the Gorilla Tango Theater. She has also enjoyed spending the year living in Bowers (one of the Qumbya Cooperative houses in Hyde Park) and eating delicious vegan meals with her adoptive family of twenty-four. Before starting law school in the fall of 2013, she plans to spend the year studying in Israel.

**Faith Laken (faithlaken@uchicago.edu)**

Faith is a third year in the College of the University of Chicago, majoring in political science with a minor in human rights. She is particularly interested in the rights of women in diverse historical, political, and social contexts. She will be spending the summer working at the Sexual Violence Justice Institute in St. Paul, Minnesota, as part of a Human Rights Internship. In the fall, Faith will return to the College for her final year and begin work on her B.A. thesis, which will investigate sexual assault in the United States military.

**Jeremy Rozansky (rozansky@uchicago.edu)**

Jeremy is a fourth-year in the College of the University of Chicago, double-majoring in political science and the College’s “Fundamentals: Issues and Texts” program, in which students use close readings of classic texts to answer a fundamental human question of their choosing. His Fundamentals question is, “How should a society stand toward its traditions?” which he is investigating by reading Jewish texts and Anglo-American political philosophy. He is the co-editor-in-chief of *Counterpoint*, the University of Chicago’s conservative quarterly. Next year, he will be Assistant Editor at *National Affairs* in Washington, DC.
**Michael Snow (msnow1@binghamton.edu)**
Michael is a junior at Binghamton University, double-majoring in philosophy and English with a minor in Judaic studies. Before starting at Binghamton, he studied Jewish philosophy and mysticism for a year at Yeshivat Orayta in Jerusalem. Michael currently serves as the education chair of Chabad and the vice president of the Binghamton University Zionist Organization. He also writes a biweekly column for the opinion section of the school newspaper. This coming summer, he will be interning through the CLIP program at the Academy for Jewish Religion, a pluralistic rabbinical school. Michael spends his free time perfecting his award-winning cholent recipe, writing short-fiction, and discussing the intersections of spirituality and halakha in the college setting.

**Eric Thurm (ethurm@uchicago.edu)**
Eric is a second-year in the College of the University of Chicago, majoring in philosophy. Though his primary academic interests are moral philosophy and creative writing, he is also interested in the study of television and the evolving role of Jewish humor in American culture. He hopes to create a forum for serious discussion of television at the University of Chicago in the near future.
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