“Jahzeiah”  
Leo Mercer

“A Wittgenstinian Reading of “The Golden Calf””  
Doni Bloomfield

Symposium: Jewish Aesthetics  
Jonathan Nathan  
Michael Francus  
Eric Gurevitch  
Jonathan Katz  
Dory Fox

“Communion of the “I, thou, and He””  
Libbi Williams

“Rabbis, Politics, and Dissent”  
Ben Silver

“A Review of the Film “The Flat””  
Eliza Brown
**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.
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Matan Torah: Celebrating 25 Years of Struggle by Women of the Wall to Expand Jewish Women’s Participation at the Kotel
Letter from the Layout Editor: 
*Marking Time and Timelessness*

*Makom* IV marks the completion of the journal’s second year in print. As its name suggests (*makom* means space in Hebrew), the journal was founded to create space for discussion, engagement, and exploration of Jewish thought for undergraduates inside and outside of the University of Chicago. Now, as the journal’s second year and fourth publication cycle come to a close, I feel satisfied to know that such a space has been created and that such an intellectual community has been cultivated. I take *Makom*’s very existence as a given; for better or for worse the reality of the journal as an institution no longer instills me with surprised gratitude or disbelief. In a sense, because it has become a constant, it has also become a stable way to mark the passage of time.

Publishing articles that reflect their temporal context performs a necessary function for an intellectual community. (Not to mention the fact that it is impossible for a piece of writing *not* to reflect its time in some way.) This issue’s Symposium question, whether or not there exists a Jewish aesthetic, seems a rather timeless one. After all, our respondents have written answers inspired by Ancient Israelite religion, early 20th century poetry, and 1970s films. The variety of responses raises questions about the possibility of appreciating and understanding art inspired by the aesthetic rules of a different time. Moreover, this question is itself temporally specific. It is inspired by a time when Jewish arts and “general” or secular arts are difficult to distinguish. I don’t believe this would have been a likely question in seventeenth-century Europe—a place and time in which the language, subject matter, artist, audience, and maybe even an artwork’s location on one side of a ghetto wall would all emphatically mark a work’s identity as Jewish or not Jewish. So while this question’s responses reach for constancy across time, we cannot pretend that the question itself is not a product of our own context, of this fleeting political and intellectual moment.

And yet, as does any similar publication, we hope that there is a certain grandiosity within each piece that we publish and thereby a timelessness to every edition of our journal. The ideas expressed and the issues grappled with are large enough to remain relevant for much longer than an academic quarter or a year. The thoughts and arguments proposed by our writers are fortified with reason and sincere insight enough to touch and inspire readers far into the future. I believe that rather than creating a newer version of *Makom* to replace the last one, each issue of *Makom* adds onto the previous ones to create a compounded totality.

I would like to mention one particularly timely work featured in this issue of *Makom*. Our cover art by Danya Lagos is titled, “*Matan Torah*: Celebrating 25 Years of Struggle by Women of the Wall to Expand Jewish Women’s Participation at
the Kotel.” Lagos’s title reminds us of a quarter-century long movement, but it also commemorates recent events. In April of this year the Israeli Judge Sharon Larry-Bavly dismissed the case against women recently arrested for their participation in the Women of the Wall Rosh Chodesh services. This cover marks for us a specific historical moment and with it a political, religious, and moral question that appears to us differently today than it will in a year or in a decade from now. While women’s participation in prayer and the role of religious authority at the Western Wall are apparently issues of the ephemeral present, by placing recent events in the context of matan torah Lagos reminds us that there is never a question in Judaism that relates only to the present. Within our tradition every contemporary struggle necessarily touches upon broader, lasting commitments. The idea of matan torah, the giving of the Torah, stands in the Jewish tradition as the ultimate transformative event in the nation’s consciousness; receiving the laws of the Torah shaped the character of the Israelites and has since fed the eager minds of many generations. Revelation continues throughout these generations through study and moral engagement. In my mind, this paradox of matan torah defines Jewish thought and study: it was a single moment and yet is always ongoing.

Dory Fox
Layout Editor
Jahzeiah
Leo Mercer

You shall teach them diligently to your children. Jahzeiah the son of Tikvah opposed this. Deuteronomy 6:6-7

But where can wisdom be found? Ben Bag Bag would say:
Where does understanding dwell? Delve and delve into it, for all is in it.
Job: 28:12 Ethics of the Fathers, 5:6

There was once a Jew whose name was Jahzeiah; a man who was proud and passionate, loving his people and probing his heritage. He had three daughters and two sons. With many enterprises to his name, significant shareholdings, and a massive Manhattan lodging, he was a wealthy, Western man.

His children were sent to the finest educational establishments, even Hebrew school on Sunday mornings. As they grew older, they would spend time socially rather than in study. They would find their way to parties in place of evening prayers, and lie in bed in place of the morning ones. The festivals they kept were not with their family at home, but with the multitudes in the middle of nowhere in the presence of manic music.

except when Pesach came, and Jahzeiah would summon them home, and they would come. Thus, year in, year out.

1

The community center decided to hold its irregular board meeting. The deputies sat around a long table. Rabbi Cohen strode in and sat at the top on the tall swivel chair with sophisticated auburn leather and adjustable arms. “Like this chair, I have a passion for movement,” the rabbi loved to emphasize. “Judaism is dynamic. It is, and always has been, a willow in the wind.”

The meeting was coming to an end, and the Gabbai came in. “I’ve told you what the rabbis say about people who are late, haven’t I? You should—”

“You should take note, he might be the messiah.’ Yes, I know. I’m sorry to disappoint, but this time I was representing you at the AJRS council, not at God’s.”

“The AJRST council, you mean? Right, right. Tell me, did you see Jahzeiah there? We’ve been discussing his latest donation. He’s giving an unprecedented figure to the Fund for the Future of Jewish Community and Continuity. A truly impressive man, you know, a donor worth keeping in our books. Proud and passionate about his Judaism, deeply loving his people, probing his tradition
profundely—"

“I wonder why,” the gabbai sneered to the rabbi.

“Aх, to honor his father, who passed away last year. He’s naming the fund after him.”

“No, I mean, the man’s a millionaire,” he retorted bitterly. “He’s got a family so big you’d think he’s a hassidic rebbe, an apartment the size of my neighborhood, and his company’s effectively a light unto the corporations. He just wants to flaunt his money to someone who’ll honor him for it and recognize him. If things weren’t so good for him, Judaism’s the first thing he’d throw into the pit. He’d be nothing, do nothing, care about nothing. You might beg him for a donation but he’s spit in your face. He’d never think about being Jewish again, take my word for it.”

The rabbi ruffled her hair and furrowed her brow as if in thought, muddled her mind, and swiveled three times. “Gentleman,” she announced, addressing the board, “the Gabbai is, in fact, right. The rabbis might say mitokh sh’lo lishma b’ah lishma, that out of the ill-intended comes the well-intended. But we can’t follow them in everything they say, people might start thinking we’re Orthodox. What I want to know is why in— on earth, is he giving this money? For himself or for us? We must arrange to find out. We must put all we have into this. Agreed?”

“Ну?”

The board shuffled in monophonic silence.

“Excellent!” she exclaimed, “The rabbis themselves say, shtikah k’hoda’ah dami, silence is to be taken as agreement! Gabbai, go.”

2

Jahzeiah drives back from a conference in New Jersey. The air brushes his hair as he shoots down the motorway in his Mercedes. He switches on the radio—

“…to withdraw from the area 46 years after first capturing it. After years of discussions between both sides, and mounting international pressure, the Israeli government’s decision is being welcomed by all parties. Experts say we can look forward to peace in the Middle East by the time the year is out.” He smiles.

There’s a billboard on the right. On it, in big blue writing in between two horizontal blue strips, is written “One Truth.” Ten seconds further along, another declares, “One God.” Five seconds along, “One People.” He has barely passed it, and “One Land” is being placed on the next billboard.

He returns home, and finds six hundred thousand people are in the “ONE TRUTH!!” Facebook group that was opened that morning. “One God 4 One people 4 One land 4 One Truth” is re-tweeted several and a half thousand times.

Political analysts are questioning the security of a state without the West Bank. In the case of an attack, they warn, the army may not have enough time to mobilize. Skeptics are challenging whether this will be enough for peace; the neigh-
boring nations, they claim, want more…

He turns on the TV. A bearded man with a knitted yarmulke covering his head persisting, “I am religious national because Judaism is national religion. You have to understand, Judaism believes in one simple truth: one people in one land under one God, hashem ehad. That means in our land, there be no other peoples and no other gods. It means that in other lands, there can be not our god nor our people.”

He opens the New York Times next morning. A full-page ad on the opening page and, in small print, the signatures of 400 rabbis:

Listen, Israel  שמע ישראל
The Lord is our God,  אלוקינו
The Lord is One!  הוא אחד
The People is One!  עם אחד
The Land is One!  ארץ אחת!

Major public sites and Palestinian buildings are being graffitied: “there can be no land for peace”; “eretz zeh shelanu - this is our land”; “shalom, shalom, v’ein shalom -” peace, peace, but there is no peace.”

Religious leaders are decrying the government for betraying their people. Articles are written explaining and divrei Torah are delivered proclaiming: the Palestinians are the descendants of Amalek… Jews such as these who hand betray fellow Jews are mosrim… the biblical law of rodef may even apply to such people…

A hundred thousand religious Israelis are protesting outside the Knesset. Half a million people worldwide, mainly Jews, sign a petition opposing the withdrawal.

YouTube video goes viral: a group of hassidic men dance around a big billboard, Shalom Ahsban, “Peace Now!” A group of religious Zionist youth come by and shout, “Kofrim! God has given us this land!” “God wants us out!” the Hassidim respond. “God wants us here!” the boys scream back. “He wants us to leave!” “No, God chose us for this land!” and on with spits and on with screams and on and on…

The tension between both sides grows as the days pass by. Discussion decreases. The blogosphere buzzes and bubbles, political commentators prophesy. The government stands fast.

And the Minister for Peace is shot on the motorway from Jerusalem.

Friday night, and Jahzeiah reclines in his red leather armchair, perusing the pages of Telushkin’s new book. He basks in the contentment of a dimmed light’s
Leo Mercer

*shabbes* radiance. He has found the silence of a world at rest. He feels the meditative calm pulsing within him, living a deep truth in ancient wisdom and—

the phone rings.

He picks it up. It’s Dee, his first daughter. He listens for several moments, and explodes, “Mazal Tov! I was wondering when, dear, but I’ll admit this is a surprise. Eight months ago? And you never told me? What’s his name? Sa - One more time? Saleem?” he stutters. “Saleem? No. No, I don’t care what he is, he’s not – Listen. No, you’re not listening to me…”

Friday night, and Jahzeiah sits, red in his leather armchair, leafing through Kushner’s new book. The Shabbat has come, and returned him from a tense week to a world of tranquility.

The phone rings. He picks it up. It’s Joe, his first son. “Mazal Tov, but tell me, is she Jewish? Yes? Mazal Tov, Mazal Tov indeed! What’s her name? Ashley. And where’s she from? What’s that?” he cries. “She’s a man?”

Thursday night, it’s eight o’ clock, and he’s returning early from the wedding of a friend’s child. It’s been a hard week; he has been uneasy. What will Becca, his second daughter, tell him the next day? For an hour and a half, he’s wandering up and down the corridor as if he’s on a treadmill outside his study, he’s muttering to himself—

the phone rings. He picks it up, and it’s Becca—a day too soon. “Mazal Tov, but tell me, dear, is it a man? Is he Jewish? Yes? Mazal Tov, Mazal Tov indeed! What’s his name? Pinny?” he scoffs. “As in Pinchas?!”

Friday night, Friday night. The Shabbat candles are flickering, just off-center on his table. Jahzeiah rises to move to his armchair, to read Prager’s new work


Friday night, and there is silence everywhere except in Jahzeiah’s head. He sits on the edge of his armchair. Prager’s book is unread in his hand, and he is staring vaguely at the white between the black, waiting for the sound to shriek amidst the silence. The hours pass by, and nothing.

He picks up the phone and explodes, “Are you not going to call me, Jer-rica? Who are you getting married to? An ape? Your dog? You’ll call me a speciesist
for thinking that’s wrong, but—"

“Dad, listen, I’m not getting married. I’m happy without it. Get with the real world.”

4

Three days passed. He couldn’t work, and he wouldn’t eat. He tried to call his brother twice, but there was no response. His sleep was disturbed in the middle of the night. He counted sheep, and then tried counting people for a mega-minyan, but he reached a hundred and twenty seven and was still more awake than he’d ever been in shul. Not even the Book of Chronicles could get him to sleep. Jahzeiah went up to the community center, which was falling down. On the first day, the security fence had descended. On the second, the entrance doors were carried out. On the third, they knocked down the walls. The next day, they took out the cherubim. They removed the Torah scrolls on the fifth, and on the sixth all the pews and furniture.

On the seventh day, while Rabbi Cohen rested in her open office at the center of the site, Jahzeiah came. As he entered the site, Matt the non-Jew was driving past, and slowed down and called to him, “May the good news continue, Jezzie. ‘Mazal Tov’, as they say!” and drove on with an American grin on his face. He passed Joe, who stood at what was the entrance, surveying the lost site. He saw Jahzeiah, and gruffed, “Bad luck Jehzeiah, I hope it all works out for you.” He passed Shecah, who was collecting her tallis and tefillin bag from amidst the misty rubble, and nodded blankly when she softly said, “I’m sorry to hear the, eh, news, Jazz. Listen, let me know if I can help at all.” Ben was taking photos again from the other side of the rubble, but called to him, ‘Jehzeiah, congratulations! I hear the winds have been blowing in your favor! Send some my way will you…”

He entered the rabbi’s office. Her desk remained alone. A few dim flowers remained in a pot beside it, and a candle lay flickering beside a few books lying neatly in the corner. He glanced at them with half an eye. The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Yiddish, Penguin’s Essential Selections from the Zohar, and things like that.

“What happened to the shul, rabbi?”

“Well, no one wanted to come, not even to take it apart. We got some of the Arabs to do it for us, the local ones.”

“What happened? You seemed to be doing pretty well to me.”

“Oh, well, the shul invested in an, eh, important project. Confidential.”

“It didn’t work?”

“Well, we’re not sure yet. We’re still hopeful though, well, for now, the shul funds have been exhausted.”

“Me too.”

“Eh?”

“I’m exhausted. Rabbi, I’ve spent my life trying to care about Israel, to give to Jewish causes, to learn about Judaism, to make my children proud Jews,
but I’m no longer sure. Why should I be disappointed in my children for following their hearts and seeking their happiness? How can I be proud of Judaism when it produces so many bad things, when the people who really care about it don’t stand up for what I believe in at all? I’m trying to work out, what’s it all for? And ever since my wife passed on, I’ve been lonely, in more senses than one. My children are now moving on, and I’m starting to wonder, why shouldn’t I also? What more has Judaism to offer me? Why should I continue to care for it? Why does the world even need it? Why should I put my money into it?”

Jahzeiah, Jahzeiah, you ask good questions. You know, I have no real answers. The questions, I know, I often find it myself, are better than all the responses in the world, but why should that bother us? After all, every answer is a form of death. That’s why Judaism has no dogmas. It believes only in questions. The rabbis weren’t right when they said, *bari vishema bari adif,* that certainty is preferable to uncertainty. May we all live until 120 doing nothing but asking so many questions that even the Talmudists gets tired.

“I appreciate that, rabbi, but there must be something, some reason to care about being Jewish.”

I can only tell you that I have devoted all my years to the study of Judaism. I have tried my best to show how Judaism can fit with the most forward-thinking trends. I’ve taken out the parts of the Torah that no longer speak to us moderns, I’ve instituted the translated reading on Sunday as well as Saturdays to fit into our timetables. I’ve tried to update the Sabbath laws so it fits with our work patterns today. When I was a man, I studied in a *chareidi* Yeshiva in New Jersey. When I was going through my struggle, they would say, “Ezra, you have to accept the will of the rabbis.” But you know, I knew something that they didn’t. Judaism really is a willow in the wind. It’s trunk stays and sways like nothing I know of in the world, nothing I’ve ever studied, you can trust me on that.

“Have you answered my question?”

Do you hear it? There—coming in on the wind, do you hear it? It’s the sound of all your ancestors calling you, beckoning to you as best as they can.

“I hear nothing. Feel nothing. Are you sure that you do?”

Read the Bible. That is them writing a letter for you, for us, for all of history, pleading with us in the only way that people three thousand years ago could, with enduring power and profundity, to *join us, be our continuation, never let us die.*

“I’ve read that letter. It’s definitely got some highlights, though the editor might have cut a bit off the end and in the middle too. But why should I see myself as an heir to that letter, and not the letter of the Greeks telling me how to build a society or the pagans telling me how to worship the gods or any other letter? Why not see myself as an heir to all letters? Isn’t that the great opportunity of modern times?”

Because this is *yours,* Jahzeiah. I can trace my ancestors back thousands of
years until the very first Cohen. If we all asked who our ancestors were, we would appreciate ourselves much better. Every generation since has listened to their call, and proudly taken up their purpose. Are you going to be the person to end their dream, Jahzeiah? Especially after the holocaust? Would you let Hitler win?

“Hitler would win if anything that he did made us do the wrong thing. We should only be Jewish if it’s right to be, not just to spite a dead man. It’s only mine if I make it mine, and at the moment – at the moment, I’m not sure. And I can trace my ancestors back further than the first Cohen. Mine go back to the first men. Further, maybe.”

Jahzeiah, Jahzeiah, I appreciate you’re troubled, that this is a difficult time. It is for us all. But this is an important moment. You know, I think that it’s for this very moment that the world has become as it is, just for the sake of your choice. What will you decide? We’re all waiting to find out.

Friday night, and Jahzeiah feels empty. He descends to the lounge. It is empty; there are no people there.

He sits for a while on the armchair at the entrance. It nears midnight, it is dark. He raises his eyes, a man and his wife enter gently from the front. They’re wearing their shabbes best, red dress, yellow tie, green handbag, brown shoes. She is perfume, he is whiskey. They were at a wedding. No, it’s shabbes. They ate out somewhere. They enter the elevator and disappear. A minute passes, it opens again. The man comes back, he approaches Jahzeiah. “Oh, you’ll excuse me, I’ve seen you around here before. I don’t think we’ve had the pleasure of meeting yet. Shabtai, floor seven.”

“Jahzeiah. Eighth floor.”

“Splendid. Well, I’m glad to have met you. It doesn’t do to live in a place and not know who’s on the other side of the ceiling. Ha, ha! And, well, you know, sometimes we’re just in the mood to get out, to go greet and meet the world.” “I’ve just come back from my son and daughter-in-law’s apartment. We had our first granddaughter this week, so they’ve been celebrating with us, you see. Jessica’s the name. But I probably shouldn’t have told you that, they’re naming her tomorrow in Temple. Ha, ha! I just can’t help kvelling over them, you know.” “How about you, Jahzeiah? Grandchildren? Or are we already onto great grandchildren? Ha, ha!”

“Children, still.”

“Oh, well. No harm in that. Got to start somewhere! Ha!”

“Four of them got engaged over the last year. Only one left now.”

“What a year! Mazal Tov for each!”

“One to a black hat, another to a Muslim. One man to another, one to two girls.”

“Oh my. Better luck with the last.”

“She’s too modern for marriage.”
“I say, that’s a forward-thinking family you’ve got there. Well, if it makes you feel any better, whatever malarkey’s going on in this country with gay marriage, polygamy doesn’t stand a chance, not in a thousand years, not here.”

“I don’t think it does. I haven’t decided what I think yet.”

Well, if you ask me, intermarriage is fine, as long as she converts. My wife—

“So intermarriage isn’t fine?”

What? Oh, ha, ha! So, my wife’s a Christian, and she converted. We live in the modern world, don’t we, after all. It’s all about choice. We should be choosing what we want to be. If she wants to live with me, she can, and if she wants my God as well, let it be hers.

“So, it’s all about choice, then? So what’s wrong with gay marriage? And polygamy, for that matter?”

Well, it’s not all about choice. You have to have moral values as well. That’s the problem with modern life, if you ask me. It’s all about autonomy, and not about ideology. (Though he paused here for a moment, his hand was raised to make it clear that he had more to say.) Autonomy, not ideology, that’s the problem. You have to be moral as well. After all, there are wrong choices and right choices, and you should choose the right choice, the good choice. Gay marriage is something entirely new and, at least on a large scale, I just can’t see it working to help build a good society.

“I’m not sure. If it’s done responsibly, if there’s good education, I don’t think it’s so unreal. Humans adapt well. But let’s take it your way. So it’s about a moral choice. So why didn’t you convert to Christianity. What’s wrong with them, at least nowadays?”

You’re putting words into my mouth. I didn’t say it was just about moral choices, did I? It’s also about finding the most meaning and I find more meaning in my Judaism than in anything else.

“Great, good for you. I’m happy for you. But if I think that I’ll find more meaning elsewhere, why shouldn’t I go there to seek it? Look at the world around us: can you seriously think that humans find more meaning in Judaism than in any of the other worthy pursuits of life? If moral, meaningful choices is what’s important, why tell me where I should be finding it?”

But Judaism is the most meaningful and moral choice that there is. I really believe that. It’s the oldest tradition out there, with the most sophisticated and nuanced values. Don’t tell them I said this, I am very pro-interfaith, but at heart Christianity is based on irrational doctrines. And Judaism’s not got the political ramifications that Islam does, it’s not apathetic like the Hindus or ascetic like Buddhism. Look, I’m just telling you the way I see things. Don’t give me that look. (He loosens his tie and undoes his top buttons.) Judaism is about the here-and-now, making the most of the moment. It’s about tikkun olam, social justice, and doing good to others. It’s about community and family. Most important of all, it’s
the most pluralistic tradition in the world. Just look at the Talmud. If that’s not diversity, I don’t know what is. It wants us to think for ourselves, to debate, to express ourselves as ourselves. There’s really nothing like it. Sure, other traditions have something, but I think when you add it together, Judaism’s clearly the strongest out there.

“Jewish values? Look at the news. The people who are real professional Jews, not just amateurs like us, clearly don’t think they’re Jewish values at all. You’ve been duped! We just stole them from the West and call them Judaism to make ourselves feel better.”

Jahzeiah—

“But if that’s fine to do, why can’t the Christians and Muslims and the Hindus and Buddhists do the same to patch up the weak spots of their own faith? And why can’t we steal a bit more from the West, and be slightly more forward thinking about gay-marriage and other progressive ideas? But more than any of that (But Jahzeiah -), if Judaism’s so great, why are we so obsessed about being a people?”

Jahzeiah, don’t you—

“Let’s spread the word! Let’s go preach our gospel! Why are we being so private and keeping it to ourselves? Isn’t that selfish? We shouldn’t care so much about continuity for its own sake! Lets fund university programs and think-tanks and journals to encourage the spread of our values if they’re that good! We still learn from the Ancient Greeks even if there are no ancient Greek communities left! It doesn’t matter if the living communities don’t survive as long as the values do! And if—”

Jahzeiah, you think you’re a bit old to be asking these sorts of questions, no?

Meshullam’s wife was on her noon jog, and Jahzeiah was wandering aimlessly around the park. He had tried calling Shallum twice, but there was no response. “Jahzeiah!” she spotted him and called.

Meshullam didn’t have his son until he was nearly forty-five, not that he hadn’t been trying. Either way, Dan had become an almost iconic figure in the Jewish community. Hawkish opinions had flown in from somewhere—it certainly wasn’t Meshullam’s doing—and was debating and defending Israel like the Iron Dome. His long, wild hair caught the imagination of the press, and the controversies of his unstable love life only served his media presence.

Listen, Jehzaiah, I know it’s hard. When Dan first told us, we were up in the air. We told him, we did. You’d think that somewhere in the whole of this city there’d be someone for him before he’d have to turn to the goyim! But we thought about it a lot, and finally Meshullam turned to me and said, “Y’know, Hazel, he’s giving a lot to the community and that’s what matters, right?” And I think he’s right. That’s what matters, right?
“Well, I don’t know. What if the world needs more help than the Jews?”

Family comes first, you know that more than anyone! And what’s Judaism but a big family, hmm? A family that’s a whole culture that’s a whole civilization, right? We have to make sure that our family stays vibrant, buzzing, alive.

“Right, right. Individuals shouldn’t be self-centered, but communities should, I got it. And anyway, what makes you think we’re a civilization? Maybe the orthodox Jews can put up an argument for that because they’re way of life is so distinct and peculiar, but it looks like we’re pretty much the same as any other American to me.”

Which other Americans eat dry bread for a week in the spring and sit in a shed on the balcony in the middle of the winter, hmm?

“Which other Americans do marathons all night long with popcorn in front of a screen and go around with sabers, does that make Jedis a civilization?”

Well, no, of course it’s bigger than that. It’s about all the history we have, and the distinctive myths we live by, right?

“Do you really live by them? Like, really? And even if you did, why can’t I choose my civilization? I doubt my neighbors would be too flustered if I told them I was moving to France or even Japan. They might even be excited for me. Why not to a different religion or way of life as well? Why can I choose my country but not my culture?”

Well, who knew that you were a philosopher then! Listen, Jazz, I have to carry on my run, I can hear my calories screaming at me from round the corner!

The phone rang. He picked it up immediately.

“I kept meaning to give you a ring, as soon as I heard.” It was Jon. Jon was his closest friend from childhood through school. “Mazal Tov.”

My dad never forgave me when I told him. I really think he saw it as some sort of betrayal. I tried to discuss it with him, explain it to him, and for years he just couldn’t understand. I think at first he wondered why I couldn’t be like you. I think he saw in you everything that he ever wanted in a son. I think that turned to jealousy before long. I learned a lot from my father at that time. I learned that sometimes we let ideas get in the way of life. He’d become so sure about general principles that he forget about what’s right in particular. I really think this, everybody from the biggest philosopher in the world to the smallest nobody spends time, whether they realize it or not, trying to figure it all out, and then do what they can to live in accordance with whatever they find. Often we think too much, and our thoughts just take us to conclusions which we weren’t really expecting and which we know, inside, we’d prefer not to have come to, but we think we have to follow them because that’s what we worked out, right? I don’t think that’s true, not any more. We should stop being ideological and just take things as they come, working out what’s right case-by-case.

That problem is
an epidemic for Jews. People spend time justifying Jewish community and continuity in whatever way they can. Money, the rhetoric of continuity and the pro-particularism of postmodernity makes a knot not easily undone. But all this becomes idolatry if we forget about simple goodness that transcends ideology. I know you’ve been finding it hard to work out how to see Judaism. I searched for a long time for an answer, why I should stay Jewish, care about it as a living community. I put my mind to it, read what I could. I felt as though I knew more about theories of continuity than anyone else in the world. But I came to realize that it’s just chasing after the wind. Time is more enduring than truth. But truth is worth more, even in the short doses that we can have it. Jahzeiah, you’re allowed to let go. You’re the master, it’s the slave, not the other way around.

The phone rang. Jahzeiah looked at it. It was his brother, Shallum. He let it ring for a few seconds, and picked it up.

Jahzeiah, can the World come from nothing?
How did it happen that the Universe in its splendor has the perfect, exact conditions for Life?
How did unconscious matter in its bleak silence become conscious beings in all their majesty?
How could evolution allow for beings with fully functioning reproductive systems?
Can you really gaze at the equilibrium of the cosmos and call it chaos? Can you look around without seeing perfect order?
Look at yourself! Are you not more than cells, genes, dust? Rational, moral people who have done so much, are we mere animals?
Is the fact that we have free will not clearer than anything else in the world?
Where did man’s reason come from? Could such an accurate faculty be made by nature?
Can there be a moral world of atheism? Are you happy living in a world with sexual impropriety? murder of people still living? people doing what is right in their own eyes?
Is the science of today not just a dogma until the next generation comes along and shows why this too is wrong?
Jahzeiah, are you more intelligent than three thousand years of our ancestors? have you even met the gedolim of our time, never mind in the past? do you think that the tradition could seriously be wrong? do you think our tradition could have been simply invented in an instant?
How is it that the Torah was able to know obscure facts that science
Leo Mercer

has now proven, like that the camel, the shafan, the arnevet and the pig are the only animals in the whole world that have split hooves but don't chew the cud?

Can there have been a moral world without Judaism? Where else did the idolatrous world learn family, community, and human dignity? Where did Judaism come from? Could such an influential religion be made by man?

Is God's existence not clearer than anything else in the world?

Look at us! Are we not so much more other people, cultures, religions?

Holy, wise Jews who have given so much to the world, are we really like everybody else?

Can you read through the Torah and call it man-made? Can you not find the inspiration that billions have found in it?

How could the Jewish people with all their Truth have simply emerged from everything else?

How did animals in all their brute muteness become humans with all their profundity?

How did it happen that the Torah's profound predictions for our history have been so True?

Jahzeiah, do you know nothing about the World to Come?

9

There is a man whose name is Jahzeiah; he loves all people and seeks all truths. He reads widely, and gives generously of his time. He is a worthy, worldly man. He has three daughters, five in-laws and six sons. He lives in Georgia, just north of Spaghetti Junction with his wife, Tamica, and the youngest boys.

Friday night, and it is Passover and it is Easter and it is Spring Break. Around a long table sit Dee and Saleem; Joe and Ashley; Jay, Maria and Opera; Jerrica; Si and the twins, Jonny and Peter. Tami and Jahzeiah sit at its head. Jude comes in running and grinning to the polyphonic sounds of family. He kisses his father. He sits in his place.

“Sorry about that. Just doing some final festive deliveries over at Geths.” He whispers to Si, by his side, “Good money, thirty dollars per load, you should try it.” “How are you all?”

“Full of life,” Jahzeiah announces, “and you’ve come just in time for the Jonny’s performance of the monologue. He’s been slaving over this for weeks. Come on up.” Jonny stations himself. There is a moonlike lamp behind him. He is all dressed up: an expensive ring, his hands full of a tall staff, his overflowing cloak falling off behind him. He stands tall, and he begins:

“My father was a wandering American…”
“Greetings, rabbi.”

Rabbi Cohen glared at him.

Why not?
A Wittgensteinian Reading of “The Golden Calf”

Doni Bloomfield

Introduction

At first (and second, and third) glance, the Sin of the Golden Calf is a puzzling episode. The Israelites, just after witnessing direct divine revelation at Mount Sinai, only weeks out of an Egypt strewn with the debris of God’s wrath, decide to erect a statue in God’s place—and moreover, they seem incredibly confused as to what God is, who took them out of Egypt, or what Moses’ role is in their community. How is it possible for such recent witnesses of divine action to rebel so abruptly, and why does Moses’ failure to return from Mount Sinai cause confusion about even the most basic aspects of theology? I will use Ludwig Wittgenstein’s approach to language and learning to reconstruct how it is that the Israelites learn to become a God-worshipping community, which I will call joining divine covenantal way of life, and what causes this sudden breakdown in understanding and communication. In short, I will argue that a way of living gives content to language, and when that life changes radically the meaning of the language and its role in discussing the world grow confused. In Exodus XXXII, Moses does not return to the Israelites from Mount Sinai and, because his presence had been critical in shaping the Israelites’ life of divine covenant, his surprising absence throws the language they use to discuss God into confusion, resulting in the Sin of the Golden Calf.

This paper will restrict itself to considering the bare elements of Moses’ project to train the Israelites in the divine covenantal way of life. First, it will present a short summary of Wittgenstein’s relevant approach to learning, and then show this approach in action in the case of the Copernican Revolution, as explored by Thomas Kuhn. It will then examine the initial stage during which Moses trained the people in the claims, grammar, activities and use of rules within the covenant. Next, it will turn to the people’s increasing understanding at Mount Sinai. The paper will then turn to at Moses’ failure to make a timely return from the Mountain and, through a close reading of the Sin of the Golden Calf, show how this disrupted the Israelites’ form of life. The paper will conclude with a short account and analysis of Moses’ restoration of the normal case through a retraining of the people, and a summary of the overall argument.1

A Very Brief Summary of Wittgenstein’s Approach to Learning and Language

Wittgenstein argues that language is the result of a shared understanding of
symbols that come about from a shared way of living—what he calls a form of life.\(^2\) The consistent application of language within this form of life constantly substantiates the meaning and use of words and phrases. For example, we live in a world in which corporations and their products can be called things that have nothing to do with them, as with Apple Corporation. Because in America computers are a constant part of our lives, and Apple computers are common in some circles, to ask “Do you have your Apple with you?” is almost never posed to find out if someone has a bright, crisp, juicy fruit on them, but whether that person has a computer with them. Without the shared facts of life—the use of computers made by Apple—the terms would have different meanings. When we as a community link up our way of living with a consistent way of talking about it, this is the normal case.\(^3\) Our lives are almost always in the normal case—you can ask me about my Apple, or use the cliché about comparing apples and oranges, and, though the same syllables are uttered to mean a computer and a fruit, I have no difficulty understanding you. If, however, a sudden virus rendered all Apples completely inoperable people might be confused for a time by the question, “Do you have your apple with you?” This latter example is what Wittgenstein calls the abnormal case, when a change in facts on the ground—a change in form of life—renders our use of language, and indeed the concepts backing language up, less certain.

To Wittgenstein, we can think of propositions in language as coming in two primary flavors—grammatical propositions, which define terms, and empirical propositions, which make claims about the world. For example, it is a grammatical proposition that “all rods have length,” while it is an empirical proposition that “this table’s length is four feet.”\(^4\) When we learn a language we must be exposed to grammatical propositions to understand how to use the language. It is important to note, however, that grammatical propositions and empirical propositions can often blur together—for example, in claims like “the president is the commander in chief of the armed forces.” This can both define the office of the president and make a factual claim as to the president’s powers, depending on the context. In the abnormal case the gray area between grammatical and empirical claims can grow enormously, compounding the difficulty of communicating about the world, as we will see below.

**A Historical Example: The Copernican Revolution**

One helpful historical example to illustrate how a breakdown in form of life, in the appearance of the abnormal case, can spill over into a disruption in language is the Copernican Revolution and its effects on how Europeans spoke, both physically and theologically, about their place in the universe. In this case a key component of Europeans’ form of life was shattered—their shared reliance on the empirical fact of the Earth’s, and hence humanity’s centrality in the universe.\(^5\) Here, as well as in Exodus, the change in form of life manifested itself in confusion over terms and shared understanding.

The 1543 publication of Copernicus’ *De Revolutionibus*, which laid out the
case for heliocentrism, did not immediately spark massive controversy. The notion of the earth’s motion seemed so absurd that it was dismissed out of hand, even by the large majority of astronomers who applauded Copernicus’ work. But when the evidence for heliocentrism trickled out into the broader population, the European people exploded in rage. Luther and Calvin, respectively, condemned Copernicus as “an upstart astrologer…[a] fool,” and a man seeking to overthrow “the authority… of the Holy Spirit.” The Protestants’ mortal enemy, the Catholic Church, also joined the charge in 1610, after Galileo’s critical discovery of the telescope, and even the radical author Jean Bodin, whose book was banned by the Church, dismissed Copernicus’ theory as contrary to reason.

This exceptional unity among the factions of a divided Europe stemmed from the importance of the Earth’s stable centrality in Europeans’ “cosmology, morality and theology,” in their concept of the “drama of Christian life.” It is difficult for us to imagine, but to Christians in the 16th and 17th centuries it was an unshakable truth that the earth was wholly different, as humanity was wholly different, from the rest of the cosmos: the earth was God’s crown jewel, the centerpiece of creation. Brilliant astronomers like Tycho Brahe plowed their whole careers into pushing the planets into different configurations to reconcile Copernicus’ data with the centrality of the Earth.

But this effort, and the importance of geocentrism, was not enough; Copernicus’ theory was out there and suddenly supporting data seemed to come from all directions. New stars appeared in the sky to contradict the immutability of the heavens. New lenses showed that where there had been thought a known number of stars in the sky there were uncountably more and showed that the moon and planets were just as physical as the Earth itself. These lenses were the capstone to the Copernican Revolution: they showed in distinct, visible form that the universe was not what it had been.

In the shock of this discovery, terminology was confused; there was, to many, “a loss of conceptual coherence” to cosmology. Theologians questioned what it meant for Joshua to have stopped the Sun. What did Ecclesiastes mean that “the earth abideth forever”; what was David saying when he sang, “the earth is also stablished, that it cannot be moved”? In 1611, John Donne wrote in *The Anatomy of the World* that Copernicanism was a reflection of a world gone horribly awry:

> [The] new Philosophy calls all in doubt  
> The Element of fire is quite put out;  
> The Sun is lost, and th’earth, and no man’s wit  
> Can well direct him where to look for it….  
> ’Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone;  
> All just supply, and all Relation:  
> Prince, Subject, Father, Son, are things forgot,  
> For every man alone thinks he hath got  
> To be a Phoenix, and that then can be
None of that kind, of which he is, but he.\textsuperscript{15}

The universe without the earth at its center is a world full of devastating confusion to Donne, who argues that without the natural hierarchy of the heavens there can be no natural hierarchy on the earth. In the later 17\textsuperscript{th} century Milton, who besides being a brilliant religious poet was well versed in mathematics, reflects the continuation of this confusion. Raphael wonders in \textit{Paradise Lost}, “What if the Sun/Be Centre to the World, and other Starrs [sic]... Incited, dance about him various rounds?” To this there is no clear answer: “Heav’n is for thee too high/To know what passes there; be lowly wise/Think only what concerns thee and thy being.”\textsuperscript{16} As thinkers wrestled with this new universe, their terms grew confused and their vision of reality shifted powerfully.

\textit{The Initial Training of the Children of Israel in the Divine Covenantal Way of Life}

After that theoretical introduction, we return to the question from Exodus: how did the Israelites come to rebel against God in spite of their miraculous experiences, and why did they rebel in the way they did? To answer that question we need to see how the Israelites were trained in the covenantal way of life.

Much of the early sections of Exodus are taken up with Moses’ attempt to train the Israelites in the language and form of life of the divine covenant. If he is to get the people to understand the divine covenant, Moses must, initially, give grammatical training—training as to what God is—along with the commands of God. As Wittgenstein argues, theological claims are a form of grammar; they are statements about our words as well as about the world.\textsuperscript{17} In Wittgenstein’s terms, God’s unity is a grammatical proposition while God slaying the firstborn is an empirical proposition. Thus, when first instructed by God to lead the Israelites, Moses expects to be asked by the people not what God’s plan is, nor why He has chosen the Israelites, but what the name of the God of their fathers is.\textsuperscript{18} God’s response is that Moses “shall...say to the Israelites: ’YHWH, God of your fathers...sent me to you. That is My name forever.’”\textsuperscript{19} The grammatical proposition that God is YHWH and the empirical and grammatical proposition that He is the One who will lead His people the Israelites out from Egypt to the promised land are a central set of concepts in the language of divine covenant.\textsuperscript{20} The people initially accept this proposition of Moses, as spoken to them by Aaron, and they perform a ritual bowing to God.\textsuperscript{21} They do not master the system immediately, however, for when Pharaoh doubles their labor the people have a difficult time accepting that God will indeed free them from slavery.\textsuperscript{22}

Learning is a continuous process and understanding comes in stages—it connects “with an ongoing pattern of performance”—so Moses continues to train the people.\textsuperscript{23} He does this by instructing them in the activities of divine covenantal way of life. This consists in part of a host of commandments concerning the celebration of the new month, the Passover offering, and the eating of matzoth, each command punctuated by God’s grammatical reminder, “I am YHWH.”\textsuperscript{24} One clear educational
moment and illustration of the relationship between a way of life and an application of terms is the way that Moses trains the people to respond when “your son ask[s] you tomorrow, saying, ‘What is this [offering we are eating]?’ you shall say to him, ‘By the strength of hand YHWH brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slaves.’”25 This is not a literal answer to the question of what the Passover offering is, but an instruction in how to use the proposition that YHWH brought the Israelites out of Egypt, which is both empirical and grammatical. Wittgenstein writes that “agreement in judgments…is required for communication by means of language,” and the shared form of life substantiates those shared judgments.26 Thus, Moses guides the people through the states of learning by linking ways of life to certain terms and then to a place where the people can continue this way of life, and shared language, on their own. These shared actions allow the people to understand what they mean when they discuss God and their own history—both at the time of the Exodus and for all generations to come.27

Reaching Understanding and the Normal Case: Mount Sinai

The most consistent and correct use of the language of divine covenant within its form of life in early Exodus occurs at Mount Sinai, when the Israelites accept God’s covenant upon themselves. When God tells Moses to instruct the people, “if you [the Israelites] will truly heed My voice and keep My covenant…you will become for Me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation,” the people respond in unison, “Everything that YHWH has spoken we shall do.”28 The people’s understanding is shown through the consistent connection between this phrase and the observance of the commandments: understanding is shown when a pupil “is often successful, not if he does it right once in a hundred attempts.”29 Thus, at Mount Sinai the Israelites have achieved as close to normality as possible during the elevated circumstances of the Exodus, one where they can go on using the language of divine covenant correctly: their “abilities are augmented and [they] perceive [their] form of life as agreeing with being able to perform the task.”30 After the people accept the covenant, Moses ascends the Mountain to receive God’s laws.31

Besides being their teacher, Moses is a critical figure in the Israelites’ divine covenantal form of life; he acts as mediator between God the commander and the commanded people. Even after receiving direct revelation from God, the people plead with Moses to act as go-between: “Speak you with us that we may hear, and let not God speak with us lest we die.”32 God Himself demands this, commanding that “Moses alone shall come near to YHWH but [the people] shall not come near.”33 Indeed, when the people seal the covenant of the laws with God, it is the covenant as recounted by Moses.34 The people, though they are able to apply the divine covenantal language game, have not yet taken “the vital step of continuing independently.”35 Moses, in his capacity as intermediary with God, is still absolutely central to their form of life and their understanding of the divine covenant.
A Wittgensteinian Reaging of “The Golden Calf”

The Abnormal Case: The Sin of the Golden Calf

When Moses is late in returning from Mount Sinai, the normal use of the divine covenant language game dissolves as the Israelites’ form of life alters radically. Without their intermediary to God, the people demand of Aaron, “Make us gods that will go before us, for this man Moses who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him.” Seeing that the people need an intermediary, Aaron molds a golden calf from the people’s jewelry and the Israelites cry, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.” Aaron, seeing this display, builds an altar and declares, “Tomorrow is a festival to YHWH.” Translating the Hebrew to English here obscures two key points. First, the Hebrew word for “gods”—Elokim—is also the word for the singular God, and the only way to determine which one is meant is to examine the context: here it is ambiguous. Second, the phrase “brought us up from the land of Egypt” is a modification of a theological proposition often associated with YHWH’s role in the Exodus, here applied both to Moses and Elokim. Both of these points demonstrate the confusion of the Israelites as to how to apply the terms of the divine covenant. In the absence of Moses, the Israelites wonder, who or what are Elokim? Was it Moses who brought them out of Egypt, or the Elokim, or something else entirely? Who is YHWH? Is He identical to Elokim? How does a people approach its God, through a human intermediary or through symbolic objects like a golden calf? The Israelites are selecting from among divergent hypotheses as to how to use the language of divine covenant, and this only occurs in the abnormal case: usually, as at Mount Sinai, a community applies the rules of language instinctively. What follows is the ultimate misapplication, the Golden Calf. As in the case of “Apple” and “apple,” only much more radically, an aspect of the Israelites’ form of life has changed and the normal uses and rules have gone with it.

The Reformation of the Form of Life: The Second Tablets as Retraining

Following the great offense of the Golden Calf was an extreme effort on Moses’ and God’s parts to re-anchor the divine covenantal language in a renewed, consistent form of life. First Moses destroys the calf, then he gathers all those who are “for YHWH” and kills the offenders, and he finishes by ascending alone once more to Mount Sinai to receive a new set of tablets. In this reenactment the people respond appropriately: where they had assembled to create a golden calf, now they assemble to hear the laws of God. Before the Israelites had given their jewelry to create an idol, now they dedicate their gold to God’s Tabernacle. They had acted raucously and worshipped the idol before; now they turn to applying their artisanship to God’s dwelling. Through deliberate retraining Moses and God return the Children of Israel to the normal case in which their language can depend upon agreement in form of life.
Conclusion

The Book of Exodus is, in part, the narrative of the training of the Israelites in the ways of being God’s people—what I have called the divine covenantal way of life. Because Moses was required to act so prominently in the Israelites’ form of life through his mediation with God, their use of the terms and rules of the divine covenant language relied upon his presence. When Moses did not return as expected from Mount Sinai the Israelites entered the abnormal case. This shattering of their form of life, and their consequent inability to communicate or consistently apply the rules and terms of the divine covenant, led the people to commit the grave offense of the golden calf. Only after extreme exertion in retraining the people, and gaining independence through another round of Moses’ absence, do the Israelites emerge ready to go on with the divine covenantal way of life, until at last, with the construction of the Tabernacle: “As all that YHWH charged Moses, thus the Israelites did all the work.”

Notes

1 Due to space constraints the paper cannot address such critical questions as the role of the content of God’s commandments in this training, the nature of the relationship between Moses as trainer and God as commander, or the overarching question of how this text is supposed to train its audience. These are only a few of the absolutely critical questions to begin a full Wittgensteinian reading of Exodus, but unfortunately lie beyond the scope of this paper.


3 Ibid. §141.

4 Ibid. §251


6 Ibid. 186.

7 Many such astronomers treated the earth’s motion as a convenient mathematical fiction, just as today’s physicists might regard our visualization of the atom: it leads us to consistently correct predictions, but it doesn’t describe reality. Ibid. 187.

8 Ibid. 191-192.

9 Ibid. 192.

10 Ibid. 192.


12 Ibid. 208, 220-221.

13 Ibid. 226.

14 Ibid. 191-192, citing Joshua 10:13 [via Luther], Ecclesiastes 1:4 [via Melanchthon] and Psalm 93 [via Calvin]. Protestants, clearly, were the most visibly shocked by apparent contradictions with Scripture.


16 Milton, John, *Paradise Lost* 8.122-8.125, 8.172-173, the latter quoted in Catherine Gimelli Martin, “What if the Sun be Centre to the World?’: Milton’s Epistemology, Cosmology, and
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Paradise of Fools Reconsidered,” *Modern Philology* 99(2001), 238. As Martin explains, this is no simple shut down to the question – earlier the angel tells Adam, “Our knowledge, and the scale of nature set/ From centre to circumference, whereon/ In contemplation of created things/ By steps we may ascend to God” (Paradise Lost, 5.508-5.512)

17 Ibid., §373.
19 Ex. 3:15. All translations are from Robert Alter, trans. *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004) modified only by changing “The LORD” to “YHWH” for increased clarity. I will use the word “YHWH” to stand in for the Hebrew four-letter name of God, the Tetragrammaton, though it is often translated as “the LORD”, because the names of God are particularly important grammatical concepts in Exodus. Throughout, the translated name “God” will refer to the Hebrew word “Elokim”.
20 God refers to the Israelites as “My people” in Ex. 3:7. For the promise that YHWH will take the Israelites from Egypt see Ex. 3:17 among many others. This may at first seem only an empirical proposition, but God’s role in the Exodus is part of the definition of who God is, used throughout the remaining books of the Pentateuch, and as such is also a grammatical point.
21 Ex. 4:31.
22 Ex. 6:9.
24 Ex. 12, particularly 12:12.
27 This dual function of the ritual explanations of Passover in Exodus, both instructing those going out of Egypt and their descendants going forward, is beyond the scope of this essay but critical to understanding how this training of the people acted in history and acts through the text to maintain the peoples’ way of life in every generation. This is why the Haggadah, the service recited at the Passover Seder, instructs us that “in each and every generation one is obligated to see himself as if he had gone out from Egypt, as it says, ‘For the sake of what YHWH did for me when I went out of Egypt.’ [Ex. 13:8]” (my translation of the Haggadah, and Alter’s translation of Exodus).
31 Ex. 21-24.
32 Ex. 20:19.
33 Ex. 24:2.
34 Ex. 24:3, 24:7.
36 Ex. 32:1.
37 Ex. 32:4.
38 Ex. 32:5.
39 Usually when referring to God the phrase is “hotzeticha”, “brought you out,” (e.g., Ex. 20:1) whereas here it is “beleinu,” “brought us up” and “haeilucha,” “brought you up.” God later
refers to the Israelites as the people Moses brought up (“haeilita”) from Egypt. Ex. 33:1.


41 Ex. 32:19, 32:26.

42 Ex. 35:1; as Robert Alter notes, the same word—“vayikahel,” “assembled”—is used in both stories. Alter, *Five Books of Moses*, ad loc.

43 Indeed, the construction of the Tabernacle in Ex. 36:8–39:31 is almost a verbatim repetition of the steps God asks the people to take in Ex. 25–30, as noted by Robert Alter, reflecting a renewed consonance between the form of life, command, and use of the language by the Israelites. Alter, *Five Books of Moses*, ad loc.

44 Of course, as Wittgenstein notes, one never reaches the end of understanding. And indeed the Israelites will continue to behave quite badly now and again for the rest of the Wilderness narratives. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §145. As my friend Jonathan Nathan pointed out to me, perhaps an even surer attainment of understanding can be seen at the end of Deuteronomy, when after Moses’ death the people of the generation raised in the Wilderness hearken to Joshua and follow the commandments of God as given to Moses (Deut. 34:9).

45 Ex. 39:42.
Symposium: Is There a Jewish Aesthetic?
Jonathan Nathan, Michael Francus, Eric Gurevitch, Jonathan Katz, & Dory Fox
There is no Jewish aesthetic, and that’s a problem. Jewish belief used to be compatible with a scientific, rational worldview. In the days when it was still possible to believe in physical resurrection, in man’s instantaneous creation, and in the historicity of the Exodus, it made sense to call Judaism a rationalist religion. Faith in the Bible needed no cognitive effort: no elaborate metaphors, no furious attempts to reduce it to merely “moral truth.” God really split the sea.

That is no longer true. If we take history seriously, we will conclude that the Exodus probably didn’t happen. If we take biology seriously, we will conclude that man came from *pikaia* and apes, not a special act of creation. The religion that can survive in the world must be able to survive the onslaught of empirical science taken to its logical conclusion.

For that reason, if Judaism is to live, it cannot maintain scientific dogma like it used to. Modern Jews can no longer believe that the exodus really happened; nor can they believe that God interrupted history to tell his people not to eat pigs. Judaism must therefore be understood not as a set of dogmas that contradict science; but as a relationship between man and the world. A Jew can have a vivid experience of God without forcing himself to believe doctrines that he doesn’t hold.

But this raises two problems. First, if Judaism is a matter of inner devotion, of individual orientation in the world, where is there room for communal experience? How can I share my attitude to God with other people if dogma is eliminated? Second, if religion is purely transcendental—if there is no such thing as a miracle—where is there room for an experience of God? Man does not live by abstraction alone.

Aesthetic experiences can solve both problems. A congregation united in song does not necessarily subscribe to any common dogma. It does, though, adopt a common attitude to the sacred, transcendent God. The raising of the *sefer torah* in a synagogue doesn’t ask for any belief, but for common reverence.

The Catholics have understood this for millenia: the solemn mass is a sublime communal union in a devotional attitude to God. Perhaps, as the historians say, Christ never rose from the dead. Even so, the congregation shares tremendous joy in its salvation from sin and its love for God.

The Jews, though, do not understand it. Walk into an Orthodox synagogue today, and you will likely find a grim scene. Tired men sway mechanically, mumbling under their breath. The man leading prayers trips over his tongue in his rush to finish the service in under half an hour (It would be awful if any longer, anyway). The few women in the room, penned in on the side, bury their heads in their books, their silently moving lips the only activity on their expressionless faces.

The situation in most Reform and Conservative synagogues is little better—the aesthetic poverty is almost as acute, but this time it is accompanied by con-
gregational indifference. Most liberal Jews I know attend services only on the “High Holidays,” and even then they find the service boring, puerile, and long.

The synagogue where I grew up is an exception. The Sabbath service takes place in a vast, august sanctuary. Flickering candles ring the scarlet tebah, and a choir chants magnificently from the loft. The sanctuary is just that—a sanctuary from the world, where a Jew can feel peace in the presence of God. (None of this, by the way, is an innovation: the congregation was founded in the time of Oliver Cromwell, and it hews strictly to traditional observance.) If Judaism is to respond to the problem of modernity, it must embrace this this kind of experience.

How is this to be done? Here is what I propose:

We should regularly sing the psalms. We should revive the Spanish piyyutim. More than that—we should write new religious poetry.

Synagogue sanctuaries should be silent, beautiful, and dimly lit.

We should write sublime religious music—and failing that, we should set our texts to melodies from the Western, Islamic, and Russian classical traditions. Reform and Conservative congregations that use instruments on Shabbat should move beyond the guitar.

Optional: Rabbis should wear ceremonial clothing, like most Christian and Muslim clergy. Not optional: Rabbis should speak to our souls, not just our intellects.

At the end of Monday-morning prayer, the shaliach tzibbur murmurs the opening verses of the Aleinu, and the congregation follows suit by rote, quickly lapsing into silence. “Hu elokeinu ein od, emes malkeinu efes zulato,” the tired, bearded men mumble under their breath.

But at the end of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, the choir exclaims:

Ihr stürzt nieder, Millionen?
Ahnest du den Schöpfer, Welt?
Such’ ihn über’m Sternenzelt!
Über Sternen muß er wohnen.

Bow down, ye millions!
Do you sense your creator, O world?
Search for him above the starry vault:
Over the stars he must dwell.
Then a man can believe.
Michael Francus Historical Thoughts on Jewish Aesthetics

The central debate over Jewish aesthetics revolves around Exodus 20:4, the prohibition against physically representing God, and whether that prohibition defines Jewish aesthetics. Of the many approaches to this question, I will take the historical one, examining how Exodus was applied. Thus, my piece aims to work in concert with others in the symposium, and explore the development Jewish aesthetics, thereby laying the groundwork for debates over what defines the Jewish aesthetic.

From the beginning of Jewish settlement in Judaea, Judean life was decentralized and agrarian. Families farmed a plot of land for sustenance, divided labor by gender, and were self-contained family units. These units are often referred to in the Bible as mishpacha (family) or beit av (house of the father), and denote the kinship structure of agrarian life. Integrated into this familial agrarian structure was a family deity, which was tied to the land and integrated the various aspects of family life. We see evidence for this in the numerous figurines found in Judean graves, which are comparable to figurines found in the graves of many neighboring peoples. These figurines are recognizable and distinguishable by the deity: Edomite figurines of Qos, Moabite figurines of Chemosh, and so on. For the Jews, figurines were similarly common, and typically dedicated to YHWH. The figurines are ubiquitous in graves of the period and demonstrate a Jewish physical aesthetic that was not categorically distinct—in fact, it resembled that of Edomites, Moabites, and others—but depicted a different deity with identifiable features. Further evidence from Tanakh suggests that localized worship was prevalent, and the countless reminders to tear down asherot, destroy high places of idolatry, and not use bamot, indicate a significant gap between normative and actual practice.

These Deuteronomic polemics continued through the centralizing period of David and Solomon, in which the Temple became the main religious location and brought into force a complete rejection of any other deities that had previously been merely de jure. Nonetheless, the polemics’ continued existence, seen extensively in Isaiah and Hosea, demonstrates the prevalence of representational art. Further archaeological evidence of figurines in Jewish gravesites continues throughout the First Temple period.

The figurines abruptly disappear, however, after the Babylonian exile in 586 BCE, even after the Jews were permitted to reenter during the Persian period. The lack of figurines in Jewish areas and the concurrent diminished polemicizing against idols in Tanakh owe to the unique tragedy of exile, the severing of the family unit from its land. The exile removed any fundamental tie between family and land, and hence the deity of that land. Thus, the asherah (family deity) of a mishpacha (family unit) no longer obtained, and Judeans had only the Temple in which to see God manifest. The exile forced Judaism to rely more heavily on an abstract notion of God, for it no longer permitted God to be tied to a family locale. This shift can
Is There a Jewish Aesthetic?

be seen in the later prophets, who turned from polemics against idols to debates about the Temple, as evidenced in Haggai and Zechariah. Yet the God manifest in the Temple had no representation—He could only be seen through the Temple and its workings. These workings were primarily nonrepresentational, and as a result, the tradition of rejecting physical representation developed.

Because of the success of the nonrepresentational aesthetic in Judaism, the roots of Jewish aesthetics are easily overlooked. However, for centuries Judaism had a representational aesthetic, much like its neighbors. Its art mirrored theirs, though a formal prohibition may have been in force. Yet, after the exile, family ties to the land were severed, the physical representation disappeared, and only the nonrepresentational aesthetic remained. Thus, as we debate the meaning of a Jewish aesthetic today, and turn to the claim that its distinguishing feature is the lack of physical representation, we ought to bear in mind that historically this was not always the case.

Eric M. Gurevitch: Los’ Labors of Love

The question of whether there is a Jewish Aesthetic hinges on questions of people-hood raised by the German Romanticists. This is dangerous water for a Jew to enter, but we must not be completely afraid: we can gain much from the contemplation of Jewish aesthetics. Johann Herder noted the value of analyzing a people’s aesthetic inclinations:

In poetry’s gallery of diverse ways of thinking… we come to know periods and nations far more intimately than we can through the misleading and pathetic method of studying their political and military history. From this latter kind of history, we rarely learn more about a people than how it was ruled and how it was wiped out. From its poetry, we learn about its way of thinking, its desires and wants, the ways it rejoiced, and the ways it was guided either by its principles or its inclinations.

For Herder poetry is a stand-in for any type of artistic output that attempts to capture and meditate on a specific state. To understand a people is to contemplate their artistic output, and not only study their past actions from an ‘objective’ or ‘removed’ standpoint. We can only understand the heart of a people when we first look at when they abstracted their own experience. To ask the question, “Is there a Jewish aesthetics?” simultaneously asks the question, “Is there a Jewish people?” The question is imbued with political implications. Without an aesthetic, Jews don’t exist.

To understand Judaism is to understand how Jews re-present their experience. This re-presentation is enacted through discourse. And within the various modes of discourse employed, we find variations in aesthetics. Anyone who claims to be Jewish also shares a claim to a common origin, or, more accurately in the case of Judaism, a common dispersion. Just as the ancient Israelites created a sense of
unity by imagining themselves to be descendants of one father, modern Jews imagine themselves as being the heirs of an exile.

Still, the Jewish diaspora does not make Jews unique. Christians (among others) have experienced a loss of access to their sacred sites early in the timeline of their historic consciousness. But while they lost access to the *Via Dolorosa*, Christians were in positions of power and were still in control of the world around them. They replaced lost space with new time—the liturgical calendar came to replace to literal path of Jesus’ suffering. What is different for Jews is not the loss experienced, but how they dealt with (and continue to deal with) that loss. Unlike Christians, Jews were never able to create a new place, their savior did not rise again. Even once Jews had regained Israel and Jerusalem, they could only fill the ontological hole with people, with imperfect individuals.

Loss, as Elisabeth Kübler-Ross has shown, cannot be viewed as a unitary experience. She created the now famous categories of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance to describe the process of grieving and loss. Kübler-Ross’ model fails because it views these moments as being chronologically linked to each other. But the categories themselves can be useful to us when we apply them to Jewish art.

I will briefly provide three examples of how we can apply this psychological model of loss to Jewish art. Woody Allen’s mockumentary *Zelig* (1983) gives us a model through which to view denial. Allen plays a character named Leonard Zelig who can fit in with any situation or group of people. Of course Zelig never really fits in—as an individual he is defined by his uniqueness and separation—but he nevertheless tries. For me, the Song of Songs is the most “Jewish” book in the Hebrew Bible. We must understand the passion created by the separation of a lover from her beloved. The speaker in the Song goes through many of the Kübler-Ross stages, but, for the most part, the poem falls in the bargaining category where the lover imagines her absent beloved as if he were actually there. Marc Chagall’s *White Crucifixion*, painted in 1938, depicts a very Jewish Jesus being crucified as modern Jews are chased from their burning homes behind him. There is no single register for the painting, and the entire conception of place is absent. This can be understood through the category of “anger” created by loss. Here, the Jew will never fit in, will never get over her loss. The Jew will constantly be chased from his home by those with more power and control over space.

Any single piece of artwork will fit more than one of Kübler-Ross’s stages at any given time, and the stages should not be seen to follow each other in a logical (historical) fashion. And of course non-Jewish art can evoke the emotions of anger, denial, bargaining, and even loss. But Jews are in a unique position to help us understand these categories, and by breaking up the category of “loss,” we give ourselves the tools to understand Jewish Aesthetics more thoroughly.
Is There a Jewish Aesthetic?

Jonathan Katz Beyond Representation: Micrography in the Jewish Tradition

“As a result of the commandment to create no graven images of God, there is not a Jewish tradition of representational art.”

Judaism does have a long, multifaceted tradition of representational art. It is to some extent true that Judaism does not have the same type of representational artistic tradition that Christianity, Buddhism, and other religious cultures hold. The traditional prohibition on the creation of “graven images,” particularly in pre-Enlightenment European communities, certainly contributes to this notion. Nevertheless, Judaism does have, to a degree, a different sort of representational artistic culture: that of a representational tradition with a function beyond mere art. A bird, or a person, may be portrayed in the form of a word or a phrase, and an illustration may mark the boundary between books or orders of a text. Thus, Jewish tradition has a history of representational art that is also functional.

Take micrography, for instance—the creation of representational and geometric figures with words. Though Jewish tradition has long celebrated scribal work (sofrut), the trend of representational art—in which a figure can be displayed as an agglomerate of thousands of tiny words—remains less well-known. Jewish micrography originated among communities in Egypt and Palestine in the 10th century, initially as a form for organizing Masoretic notations in texts of the Tanakh. Such art then spread first across the Mediterranean world and eventually to Ashkenazi communities later in the medieval era.

By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such designs were common in marriage documents, texts of the five Megillot, and even mass-produced portraits of rabbinical luminaries. The art enjoyed renewed popularity in the modern era. These patterns are at once representational and not: whilst the words may be organized to portray biblical scenes or great scholars, the materials within also carry their own messages. For example, an illustration of the ship of Jonah contained text from that book and the discussion thereof in the Yalkut Shimoni, a medieval compilation of aggadah. Thus, this Jewish representational art goes beyond decorative traits, but also serves a functional role.

Other forms of representational art serve to further the message of the words of the text; one example comes through illustration. Illuminated manuscripts such as the famed Sarajevo Haggadah, or the less-known Nuremberg Mahzor, provide illustration and color to the words accompanied, from the Passover maggid to the words of daily prayer. The Sarajevo Haggadah, for example, not only portrays the events of the Exodus, but also serves as an explication of the text and ritual. One image shows Moses with the burning bush; another, the consumption of the mandated four cups of wine. In a society in which those fortunate to be literate would be celebrating Passover with those who were unlettered or poor in Hebrew ability, such art made the ritual accessible to those for whom the ceremony would otherwise be impen-
Such illustrations may also have served to highlight the “important” aspects of the text as well. A Christian example does so in a similar fashion: a key mention of Christ in the earlier, Irish Leabhar Cheanannais (Book of Kells), highlighted the importance and holiness of that personage with an illustration.

Given that imagery in and metaphor from the Tanakh has long served as a common point of reference for Jewry, illustrations of such tropes in illuminated prayer books may also have helped explain the words of prayers to worshippers. This task was important, given that literacy and knowledge of Hebrew varied widely, even among those wealthy enough to own a book in the medieval period. Thus, this form of representational art was also an art of assistance—as illumination often was in the wider context of the time. Through transmission of both text and understanding, Jewish art in the medieval era consistently demonstrated functional and artistic components.

Similar forms may be found within Islamic artistic traditions. Both religions have traditional strong interdictions against the creation of “graven images”; representational art from both traditions then often skirt this assumed prohibition in areas where such restrictions were enforced or customary. Arabic calligraphers from across the Muslim world—and particularly those of the Ottoman Empire—developed a long-standing micrographic tradition. For example, one eighteenth-century piece organized Koranic verses in the form of a ship. An earlier example is found in Moorish Spain: mosque-shaped motifs decorate parts of the walls of the medieval Alhambra in Granada. Thus, not only are ideas or metaphors illustrated, but the danger of “graven images,” despite the art’s representational nature, is avoided: after all, the image is “just text.”

In a sense wider than “parallels,” however, Jewish tradition does possess a history of representational art. It is simply that such art is not solely representational, or intended to be so. A claim, then, that the “graven images” interdiction cancels a tradition of representational art in Judaism is largely possible given a narrow, context-ignorant definition of what such art comprises.

Dory Fox Besides a Jewish Aesthetic

In the year 1919 a young group of writers penned their manifesto. They became known as the Introspectivists because they endorsed an introspective method of poetry. They believed that a poem should reflect a unity between the poet and the world; that regular rhyme and meter are incompatible with the “sped up” and “irregular” rhythm of modern life; and that a poem must have its own unique rhythm in order to be true. The Introspectivists’ grandiose aesthetic statements provide a universal gauge to assess all poetry in all languages. Ironically, no German-, Polish-, or Russian-language poet would likely ever read this manifesto; even the English-language poets who might be sitting a table away in a New York City café would
probably never hear of the Introspectivists.

The Introspectivists remained relatively unknown because they wrote in Yiddish. The Introspectivist movement (or `inzich`, meaning literally “into one’s self”) represents an essential tension in creating, reading, and studying the art of literature in Yiddish—or in any Jewish language. These poets’ modernist aesthetic guided them toward universalism, but their commitment to the Yiddish language also necessarily made their poetry particularly Jewish.

The Introspectivists exemplify the proposition that art might be Jewish in a significant way regardless of the artist’s other aesthetic commitments. Indeed, the Introspectivists made regard for the Yiddish language one of the defining tenants of their movement. As a part of their interest with rhythm they aimed to accentuate the language’s own musical qualities and idiosyncratic sounds. In this sense, Yiddish would formally determine their poetry; Yiddish would be the precious material from which they created their art but not the particular subject that they sought to represent. The manifesto quotes I.L. Peretz’s poem “Monish” that, “My song would have sounded differently if I sang for Goyim in Goyish.”¹ The Introspectivists acknowledge here that not writing for Goyim in Goyish but for Jews in a Jewish language determines the sound of their song. Though the Introspectivist manifesto does not place the reader in the forefront—it focuses on the poet and a commitment to creating a poem that is true to his subjective experience—it also gave weight to their Jewish readership in shaping their poetry.

Even without the Jewish readership in the equation, the Introspectivists claim an automatic Jewish identity as artists and automatic Jewish status of their art. The manifesto states, “We are ‘Yiddish (i.e. Jewish) poets’ simply because we are Yiddish (i.e. Jewish) and write in Yiddish. No matter what a Yiddish poet writes in Yiddish, it is de facto Yiddish (i.e. Jewish).”² One could understand this statement to mean that a Yiddish poem is Jewish only on the level of language, that the linguistic capsule in which a poet delivers the aestheticized rhythms and images happens to be a Jewish language. However, the mere idea of articulating “only the language,” in the context of poetry seems absurd, even if the goal is to discretely determine what in a poem is Jewish. Claiming “only the language” anything, would impoverish the value of poetry generally, for what is poetry’s content if not only language. For the Introspectivists, Yiddish and Jewish were one in the same, so their poetry had an incontrovertibly, deeply Jewish nature no matter how they sought to use the Yiddish language.

The Introspectivist Manifesto shows that distilling a unified Jewish aesthetic is not the only possible way to determine poetry or art as Jewish. These poets’ wide-eyed interest in the introspective method, free verse, and irregular rhythm exist in the realm of ephemeral aesthetic commitments. And yet their engagement with the question of Jewish art is lasting because it is free of aesthetic claims, it is outside of the aesthetic. The case of the Introspectivists suggests that the Jewishness in art functions on a different axis than does the aesthetic.
Notes

Jonathan Nathan There Is No Jewish Aesthetic
1 See Wittgenstein’s lectures on religious belief for an elaboration of this.
2 Nietzsche hated this part of Symphony IX, denouncing Schiller’s use of man’s resplendence to worship the old Judeo-Christian God. (Birth of Tragedy: A Retraction). For the same reason, I love it.

Michael Francus Historical Thoughts on Jewish Aesthetics
6 Stern 200
7 E.g. Exodus 34:13, Kings 18:1-4, Deutoronomy 12:8-11; Bamot and asherot were physical structures of worship—such as an altar or a tree. Often they would be dedicated to a divinity, such as Asherah and have served as the physical manifestation of her.
8 e.g. Hosea 13:2, 8:4, 4:17; Isaiah 2:8; Stern 201
9 Stern 201-2

Eric M Gurewitch Los’ Labors of Love
2 Before we can follow this question through to its logical conclusion, we must make a short diversion that is peculiar to Jewish Aesthetics. When addressing Jewish Aesthetics we must of course deal with the question of the Second Commandment, which forbids Jews from making “graven image(s)” (Ex. 20:2-5 & Deut. 5:6-9). It seems that Jews are explicitly forbidden to engage in aesthetic-making— at least of the plastic type. However, to use the Second Commandment as a starting point is a false start for two reasons. (1) Jews never followed the commandment. From the first day, they were making golden calves, worshiping nebesh nehustans, and placing cherubim in their temples. Even if there is a commandment against making plastic representations in Jewish scripture, to be Jewish is to make plastic images despite a textual injunction against them. (2) Perhaps more importantly, to understand the Second Commandment as speaking against the creation of plastic images may in fact be a misunderstanding of
the commandment. This is a question directly addressed by Bruno Latour in his essay “Thou Shall Not Freeze Frame” in On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).


7 It is important to distinguish Jewish-art from Art-made-by-Jews. Not all art that Jews make is Jewish. Jewish art is art that (re)expresses and continues a Jewish tradition. Interacting with prior work either consciously or unconsciously. As to whether non-Jews can make Jewish art I am still undecided.

8 Though there has been some debate over the date of the composition of the Song of Songs, both philological and content analysis place it in a post-Babylonian-Captivity period. (Stern, Elsie. “The Song of Songs.” In The Jewish Study Bible, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999)1564–1565.

9 For my previous discussion of the necessity of loss and alterity to the Song’s narrative and erotic structure, see: Eric M Gurevitch. “Why Is This Other Different from All Other Others? Love in the Time of Passover.” Makom 2 , (June 2012) 42-45.

10 On view at The Art Institute of Chicago.

Jonathan Katz Beyond Representation: Micrography in the Jewish Tradition

1 The prohibition of Exodus 20:4-6, translated from fesel into the King James Version as a “graven image,” is alternately translated as “idol,” or, in many Protestant translations, as a “carved image.” Sources differ on the meaning of fesel.


3 Notation to assist the vocalization and pronunciation of the text.


5 Ibid.


9 Ibid.

Is There a Jewish Aesthetic?
A family that owned a book in this epoch—and especially an illuminated volume such as the Sarajevo Haggadah—was generally quite wealthy, and would likely have at least one literate member. However, literacy was hardly universal, especially among women, among even the wealthy in this period—despite both the oft-repeated myth of Jewish mass literacy and unusually high literacy rates in Jewish communities by the medieval era. See Botticini, Maristella and Zvi Eckstein. *The Chosen Few: How Education Shaped Jewish History, 70-1492*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 2012).


*Dory Fox* *Besides a Jewish Aesthetic*


2 ibid 780. “Yiddish” and “Jewish” are the same word (“Yiddish”) in the Yiddish language. The sentence could alternately be translated as “No matter what a Yiddish poet writes in Yiddish, it is de facto Yiddish,” or “No matter what a Jewish poet writes in Jewish, it is de facto Jewish.” The idea expressed—anything that is Yiddish is Jewish—sounds more tautological in these other translations, and in the original Yiddish: Anything that is Yiddish is Yiddish, anything that is Jewish is Jewish.
The Jewish community in the modern period has been more or less constantly in a state of transformation. The definition of a Jew and by extension a Jewish community has been in flux and under debate.Responding to migration, innovation, intermarriage, nationalism, secularization, anti-Semitism, fanaticism, atheism, and violence, the Jewish community has both adapted and resisted evaluating and reevaluating its values, limits, and needs. As we transition into the post-modern era, with modernity still snapping at our heels, the Jewish community is in a state of rapid transformation. Most of all, the criteria for this community have been called into question: is the Jewish community a nation, the followers of the God of Abraham, a people who follow a particular set of laws, an ethnic identity, or individuals who hold a high standard of justice? Are Jews in China and in Skokie a part of the same community? How about secular Jews and Hasidic Jews?

Difficult Freedom by Emmanuel Levinas and The Lonely Man of Faith by Joseph Soloveitchik are texts which address both a struggling Jewish community and a troubled human community—each in the wake of a different crisis of the 20th century. Each thinker addresses the crisis his community is facing by reintroducing God’s presence in the human relationship; both establish “I, thou, and He” as the basic building block of communal experience. Each does so in a very distinct way with a different scope, a different audience, and different consequences. In the wake of post-Holocaust Europe, the essays of Levinas’ Difficult Freedom in large part address an altered Western world which is deeply disturbed by its horrific moral failings. It also addresses a shell-shocked Jewish community which is struggling to hold on to a belief in God and find a place for Him in their lives. In light of this historical context, Levinas chooses to reintroduce God into human community through the ethical relation, and explains that the imperative “Thou shall not kill” arises from the encounter with the face of the Other. This Other is unspecified and thus generalized—expanding the possibility of the ethical community to the Universal. Soloveitchik’s The Lonely Man of Faith addresses an assimilated Jewish community which, even if outwardly religious, is, nonetheless, disenchanted with the experience of faith. This audience may well extend beyond the Jewish community to humanity broadly speaking, which has wearily and complacently accepted the empirical world as the only world and instrumental reason as the only reason. Soloveitchik’s task is not to establish an ethical footing for a shaken-up humanity but rather to shake humanity out of its complacency and reawaken the experience of faith which it has lost, perhaps
Due to developments of science and technology. In contrast to Levinas’ attempt to broaden the community of ethical relations, Soloveitchik’s text works to deepen the community of faith and the experiences one has within it. He does so by setting up a sort of allegorical account of human nature which draws on the dual creation story from Genesis and speaks to a dual experience of human subjectivity—one dealing with the means of production and the other addressing the experience of faith.

At the heart of both Levinas’ and Soloveitchik’s conceptions of community is the presence of God in human interactions. This commonality is expressed by parallel structures of experience of community and the divine. Also, their understanding of God’s presence leads them to contrary yet symmetrical accounts of community: Levinas sees God’s presence as establishing conditions for the breadth of communal possibility while Soloveitchik understands God’s presence as establishing the conditions for the depth of a communal experience that exceeds mere instrumentality. In this essay I will seek to answer the question: if Levinas and Soloveitchik share a common touchstone—the presence of God as essential for community—then how do they conclude with such radically divergent views of community and its conditions? I will reconstruct the line of thought which leads each author from the presence of God to their respective notions of community, highlighting both structural similarities and conceptual differences. I will argue that, while each advances the importance of God’s presence, their views diverge with regard to the manner by which one accesses God (and consequently the nature of that God). Moreover, I will argue that their views on community are further differentiated by their conception of a person’s ability to communicate his or her subjectivity with other people and with God.

**Origin Stories and Dialectic**

In order to establish conditions for community and reintroduce God into the human relationship, both Levinas and Soloveitchik provide their readers with a sort of “origin story,” but they do so in very different ways.

**I. Levinas**

Levinas’ account for the origins of community is subjective and phenomenological. Rather than providing us with a sort of history, he is interested in explaining the necessary conditions for the human relationship. He investigates these necessary conditions by looking at how relationships manifest themselves in their most basic form—when an individual initially encounters another human being. In *Difficult Freedom*, this “originary story,” first arises in the opening essay, “Ethics and Spirit.” Levinas presents this originary interaction counter-chronologically: he begins with human communication (i.e. speech) and moves to the more primordial experience of the face of the Other. Regarding speech, Levinas writes:

> To speak, at the same time as knowing the Other, is making oneself known to him. The Other is not only known, he is greeted [*salve*]. He is not only named, he is invoked...I not only think of what he is for me,
but also and simultaneously, and even before, I am for him. In applying a concept to him, in calling him this or that, I am already appealing to him. I do not only know something, I am also part of society (Difficult Freedom, 7-8).³

Here Levinas describes the most basic experience of what he calls “society,” the conversation. In this phenomenology of conversation, Levinas is primarily interested in the attitude or perspective of the individual who engages with the Other—which in Levinas’s language refers to another person in general. This attitude is an essential condition for relationship; it is an attitude of responsiveness which he opposes to an attitude of violence. What Levinas calls “violence” is a sort of attitude of objectification or a way of approaching something as instrumental—such as a tool—or theoretical—such as a specimen or object of inquiry. He argues that violence is “to be found in action in which one acts as if one were alone to act: as if the rest of the universe were only there to receive the action.” This is an attitude which ignores response and thus precludes relationship (Difficult Freedom, 6). In the above passage, he argues that for actions to be ethical (and thus allow for the possibility of community) they must be interactions. On this point Levinas exceeds expectations: for actions to be ethical, they must consider the response of the Other simultaneously with, if not before, considering their own ends.

Beyond responsiveness, Levinas gestures toward a sort of vulnerability in establishing community on this basic interpersonal level. When he writes, “To speak, at the same time as knowing the Other, is making oneself known to him,” he refers to a movement from a safe space of objective or theoretical inquiry, in which one can merely investigate the Other, to a space in which one must engage with the Other and open up oneself to the needs, desires, and opinions of the Other (Difficult Freedom, 7). A one-directional relationship becomes two directional and thus requires an additional commitment to the interaction, which is now not a purely theoretical inquiry.

In this passage, it seems like this reorientation from one-directional to two-directional is immediate and direct, but Levinas later develops an additional, intermediary step which I would like to posit as the source of communal engagement: the initial encounter with the face of the Other. Levinas writes:

To look at a look is to look at something which aims [vise] at you: it involves looking at the face [visage]...The face is not the mere assemblage of a nose, a forehead, eyes, etc.; it is all that, of course, but it takes on the new meaning of a face through the new dimension it opens up in the perception of a being...The face is an irreducible mode in which being can present itself in its identity... To see a face is already to hear ‘You shall not kill’, and to hear ‘You shall not kill’ is to hear ‘Social justice’. And everything I can hear [entendre] coming from God or going to God, Who is invisible, must have come to me via the one, unique voice. (Difficult Freedom, 8-9)

There are three very important yet abstruse points to unpack in this passage. First, this passage begins by establishing a dual directionality—as you are looking at
the face, the face is also looking at you. It cannot be a mere object of inquiry because it inquires back. Second, the passage refers to the deeper level experience that motivates this dual directionality and safeguards it from being an experience of mutual violence, namely the irreducibility of the face. The face represents a personality that exceeds the sum of its parts and should not be reduced to them. Rather than merely determine what can be gathered from the Other’s appearance, to see the face of the Other is to already ask unanswerable questions. One asks, “Who is this person in all her complexity?” and “What are her thoughts?” and “What motivates her?”, etc. Thus, the Other becomes more than an object of inquiry; the Other becomes a living, breathing, irreducible personality.

Thirdly and finally, Levinas explains that a violent attitude is transformed to an ethical attitude by encountering the face of the Other and receiving the divine command, “Thou shall not kill.” The face of the Other, in a sense, communicates God’s imperative. The reception of this command is not voluntary but rather thrust upon the individual; rather than merely inviting one to transform his or her attitude, this command has causal power with respect to that attitude. Once one is faced with the command of the face of the Other, transgression—even murder—is still possible; what is impossible is to relate to this action as non-transgressive. One could choose to transgress the imperative, but as transgression that action would still be within the framework of the imperative and thus comes along with a different sort of attitude than does any other action. Moreover, this command is not prior to the encounter with the face of the Other, but, rather, arises from that encounter. Levinas further claims that God’s imperatives can only be understood through the face of the Other; for him there is no other form of access to God. In this way, Levinas necessarily situates God’s presence in the origin of human relationships. I will return to the necessity of this claim when discussing the communicability of God’s presence.

II. Soloveitchik

Rather than providing his audience with a subjective and generalized account, Soloveitchik uses an allegorical and exegetical method and draws on the oldest source regarding origins in the Jewish tradition: the dual creation stories in Genesis 1:26-30 and Genesis 2:7-25. He argues that these dual accounts are not two conflicting narratives written by different groups of individuals, as the historical-critical method suggests, but rather one fluid narrative that is meant to address the dual character of the human experience (Lonely Man, 10). Although I will briefly touch on man’s first character for context, man’s second character is most essential for the notion of community that Soloveitchik intends to forward.

Adam the first, or humanity’s character as indicated in the first creation story, is what Soloveitchik denotes as “dignified” and “majestic.” By this, Soloveitchik means that Adam the first is an active and creative force. This characterization in large part comes from God’s command to the first man and woman to “fill the earth and subdue it” (Lonely Man, 10). Reflecting God’s awesome creation over the first
six days of the world, this majestic creativity is also the way in which man is created “in His [God’s] image” (Lonely Man, 11). Although man’s majestic creativity is significantly inferior to that of God, man shares with God the ability to produce things in a substantial and orderly manner. Majestic man is social, as he is created alongside woman (who is also created in God’s image). He is able to—and needs to—utilize and organize social interactions to accomplish ends (Lonely Man, 22). These social interactions are not ends in themselves: they serve a merely instrumental purpose. As majestic beings, men work together to produce and accomplish things; in doing so, they relate to one another as means to other ends (Lonely Man, 28). For Soloveitchik the full human experience includes existential questions and longing. By using others as means one ignores these needs and does not relate to these others as human beings.

This social experience of majestic man is not enough for Soloveitchik; by ignoring his existential needs the social experience leaves man in a state of profound loneliness (Lonely Man, 27). This is due to Adam the second’s concern with his existential status, his relationship with the transcendent, and his place in the cosmos. In fact, Soloveitchik defines loneliness as this sort of concern: “Loneliness is nothing but the act of questioning one’s own ontological legitimacy, worth and reasonableness” (Lonely Man, 22). Moreover, this preoccupation is, in large part, illustrated by the moment of his creation. Soloveitchik writes: “The Bible has stated explicitly that Adam the second was formed from dust of the ground because the knowledge of the humble origin of man is integral part of Adam’s ‘I’ experience. Adam the second has never forgotten that he is just a handful of dust” (Lonely Man, 25). This exegetical move highlights Adam the second’s preoccupation with his mortality as well as strictly juxtaposing man’s nature with God’s nature by illustrating man as dust or unformed matter. In light of this origin, Soloveitchik characterizes Adam the second as “humble” rather than dignified. Soloveitchik clearly contrasts the attitudes of Adam the first and Adam the second: “Dignity is acquired by man whenever he triumphs over nature. Man finds redemption whenever he is overpowered by the Creator of nature” (Lonely Man, 24-25). In the moment of Creation, Adam as mere dust is overpowered by God. He is dependent on God’s breath for existence as a being; he is not creative but instead created. Moreover, like Levinas’ description of the encounter with the face of the Other, the formation of Adam from dust puts man in a place of vulnerability. In both cases, the fragility of human life comes to the fore.

In this second creation account, Adam’s vulnerability extends past his own creation to the creation of human community, in which—and here Soloveitchik’s account of the origin of community is structurally parallel to Levinas’—God’s presence is immanent. Leading up to the moment that community is created, Adam reflects on God’s creation and finds that his vulnerability is in his singularity as well as his fragility. He realizes that he is ontologically singular; there is no being of his kind to whom he may relate. For lack of a partner to share his existential fears, wonders, and doubts, he feels “existentially insecure” (Lonely Man, 26). Instead of meeting this insecurity with majesty—shielding him and masking his insecurity—as would the
first Adam, Adam the second make himself more vulnerable. As Adam is experiencing an existential crisis, he must seek redemption rather than employ his majesty. Soloveitchik writes:

[He] must initiate action leading to the discovery of a companion who, even though as unique and as singular as he, will master the art of communicating and, with him, form a community. However, this action, since it is part of the redemptive gesture, must also be sacrificial. The medium for attaining full redemption is, again, defeat. This new companionship is not attained through conquest, but through surrender and retreat. “And the eternal God caused an overpowering sleep to fall upon the man.” Adam was overpowered and defeated—and in defeat he found his companion. (Lonely Man, 26)

Just as in Levinas’ account, in Soloveitchik’s account the beginning of community engages Otherness: Adam’s companion is “other,” and yet able to communicate in the existentially profound manner that Adam needs. When Soloveitchik refers to the companion as being “as unique and singular as he,” he is gesturing towards the profound loneliness that Adam the second experiences. As this loneliness is necessarily an internal and subjective experience, it is still present in (although perhaps alleviated) by companionship. To alleviate this loneliness, however, Adam the second must experience a sort of loss. This loss is motivated by examining God’s creation and it comes in two forms: (i) Adam trusts in God because He seems to be his perfect companion, as evinced by “His transcendent loneliness and numinous solitude” (Lonely Man, 22) and (ii) Adam is overpowered by God’s transcendent majesty as the creator of the universe. Though Soloveitchik highlights only the second cause in this passage, the first cause helps to elucidate Adam the second’s attitude towards God. This desire to be in relationship with God causes him to surrender more easily. When confronted with God’s majesty, he willingly lets go of his own—he sacrifices his rib and, even more, his pride—to allow for God’s majestic force to create a companion for him.

Although these two origin stories differ radically it is important that for Soloveitchik they have the same referent: humanity and human community. Though the first story speaks of majestic, or natural, community and the second of faith community, Soloveitchik is dealing largely with the same thing in both stories. Though both of these characters manifest themselves in the same areas of human experience, one should not think that man constantly experiences both his majestic and his humble character or attitude simultaneously; in fact, their distinctness is very important. Soloveitchik asserts that halakhah serves to integrate these experiences through the form of a dialectic (Lonely Man, 50). It allows for the experience of faith, found in humility, to inform creative practices in the world, such as making Shabbat or working towards tikkun olam, oscillating from Adam the second to Adam the first.

*Argumentative Contact*

*Halakhah* is in large part ethical, and this draws out certain structural simi-
larities between Soloveitchik’s Adam the first-Adam the second dialectic and Levinas’ encounter with the face of the Other. Speaking to the Other is active and creative—like majestic man—while the encounter of the face causes one to be passive, humble, and receptive—like covenantal man. The dialectical movement occurs when receiving a command from the face of the Other results in responsibility to action, oscillating from the receptive realm of faith to the active realm of implementation. This primary experience of the face of the Other is crucial because it safeguards against man’s creativity becoming violent. Levinas would deem this justice rather than halakhah, yet for both it follows the same oscillating structure and performs a similar role.

Although they share a similar structure and both serve the purpose of transitioning between different subjective experiences, there is an important difference between the two oscillations. The major difference could perhaps be described figuratively as the space needed for either experience. Within his oscillation between covenantal and majestic Soloveitchik demands more space for the humble experience of faith, Levinas, on the other hand, describes the dialectical encounter with the face of the Other as quickly moving from the reception of the command—which corresponds to the faith experience of covenantal man in Soloveitchik—to the experience the responsiveness and activity of speech. Levinas does not claim that the ethical subject spends time contemplating and reflecting on God’s command as it arises from the face of the Other. Instead, that command leads directly and immediately to activity through responsive speech. Soloveitchik would perhaps argue that Levinas collapses the experience of faith into the majestic realm to the extent that it no longer leaves room for the doubting, longing, and wondering characteristic of Adam the second.

Accessibility and Communicability

Levinas’ and Soloveitchik’s divergence regarding the faith experience is due in part to their differing views of human nature and in part to their differing views of God’s nature. Though both express their theologies primarily in terms of God’s relationship to man, their respective notions of this relationship are the source of the most radical and essential distinction between their positions on community.

As I mentioned earlier, Levinas’ theology of community is dependent on God’s relationship with man because He must be and can only be accessed through interpersonal relations. It is only through “the one unique voice” of the face of the Other that an individual has an access to God (Difficult Freedom, 9). It is important to note that this “voice” is in no way phonological, but rather pre-linguistic and purely ethical. Indeed, for Levinas morality—which is manifested as divine command—is the foundation prior to all speech (Difficult Freedom, 9). Moreover, he argues that there is no communion with God outside of the human relationship—the only context that God can share with man or vice versa is through the face of the Other. In fact, in “A Religion for Adults,” Levinas defines God as a “civilizing force,” situating God’s role purely in terms of mitigating conflict between people and letting
go of some of the more traditional definitions of the divine, such as “Creator” or “Sovereign” (*Difficult Freedom*, 11).¹⁰

What seems to be an insubstantial God confined to a purely abstract construct and meant only to explain the source of moral authority is actually in Levinas’ system meant to be much more substantial. Levinas avoids discussing the divine outside of the framework of the ethical relation between humans because that framework is the only context in which God is intelligible for human beings. Perhaps following Maimonides’ advice, Levinas remains almost completely silent regarding God’s attributes or qualities.

On the last page of “Signature,” the last essay in *Difficult Freedom*, there is an obscure passage about the “Infinite” which, in light of his discussion about the face of the Other, seems to refer to God. Levinas situates the infinite within the interpersonal relation as the perpetual “third person” which influences the relationship but can never be directly addressed (*Difficult Freedom*, 295). This characterization of God as the infinite seems reasonable: God extends far beyond—infinity beyond—our experience of Him in the ethical relationship, and we can only access Him at this point because of our finitude. Therefore, when not imminent in the ethical relation as a condition of its possibility, Levinas’ God seems to be radically transcendent.

Soloveitchik’s conception of God also maintains a notion of transcendence in “His transcendent loneliness and numinous solitude,” but He shares a relationship with man which is more personal than the abstract Levinasian notion of God as the condition for morality (*Lonely Man*, 22). This more intimate relationship is clearly expressed in Soloveitchik’s discussion of the “covenantal faith community,” which is the existentially enriching community of Adam the second. He writes:

> Finitude and infinity, temporality and eternity, creature and creator become involved in the same community. They bind themselves together and participate in a unitive existence … We meet God in the covenantal community as a comrade and fellow member. Of course, even within the framework of this community, God appears as the leader, teacher, and shepherd. Yet the leader is an integral part of the community, the teacher is inseparable from his pupils, and the shepherd never leaves his flock. (*Lonely Man*, 28-30)

Here, as it is in Levinas’ discussion of the face of the Other, the presence of God is a necessary condition for human relationships. Instead of being an abstract precondition for the community, however, He is an active and essential member of it. Soloveitchik uses anthropomorphic metaphors to explain this relationship: God is a comrade and a teacher of the covenantal community. Although it hardly seems that Soloveitchik could mean that God is a person, this personality is important for Soloveitchik’s understanding of God and his relationship with man. Unlike Levinas’ God who has a set role of mitigating violence, Soloveitchik’s God is a being who acts with spontaneity and intercedes in the course of history both directly and through prophets. Moreover, unlike Levinas’ God who, as Other, is strictly differentiated from the individual (both through the face of the Other and in His incomprehensible in-
Communion of the “I,” “Thou,” and “He”

finity), Soloveitchik’s God has characteristics analogous to man’s personality both in terms of His majestic creativity and His lonely solitude.

It is also important to note that, for Soloveitchik, the participation of God in the covenantal community is a necessity relative to the relation; that is to say, God is only bound by the covenant in the context of His relationship to man. Soloveitchik explains that God “is everywhere but at the same time above and outside of everything” (Lonely Man, 31). This means that God does exist in the natural world but at the same time is elusive and effectively inaccessible to one observing it. If one does encounter God through nature, the experience is fleeting and insubstantial, like lightning flashes in darkness. Instead, it is only through the framework of the covenantal community that man can communicate with God and vice versa. Soloveitchik argues that this communication, or “colloquy” as he puts it, begins with the reception of the Law at Mount Sinai where not only does Moses ascend to receive but God descends in order to give (Lonely Man, 34). This experience is initiated by God but both parties participate. In the contemporary world this intimacy and communicability culminates in prayer, which is an experience which also involves both parties but instead is initiated by man (Lonely Man, 36).

The richness of this colloquy is missing in Levinas’ account of community because ethics does not require it. While God’s communication to the individual when encountering the Other must be powerful, it does not have to be comprehensive. It is similar to a mother yelling at her son who is about to be hit by a car; in that moment, she does not need to explain to her son why he should not be playing in the street nor the importance and meaning of his life. She only needs to save him—which most likely requires a quick and assertive scolding. Additionally, God’s command in the ethical relationship must be simple in order to be general and universally applicable. The specificity of God’s communication may, however, have a profound effect on an individual while still gesturing towards a vastly incomunicable God.

While the constraints and limitations of Levinas’ picture hinder the communication between God and the individual, Soloveitchik’s impede communication between people. Although one can trace the covenantal community back to Adam the second, who may represent humanity broadly speaking, the experience of Soloveitchik’s contemporary covenantal community is bound up by a framework of tradition starting at Mount Sinai. This reliance on a particular set of rituals and beliefs narrows the scope of a person’s community of faith and problematizes any genuine communion across traditions.

This exclusivity is not gratuitous; it is a consequence of Soloveitchik’s notion of time and its contribution to Adam the second’s loneliness. Mortality contributes to Adam the second’s existential doubt and causes him to feel that he is “evanescent” rather than temporally grounded. As covenantal man, Adam the second is able to assuage he feeling of fleetingness by participating in rituals which both temporally organize his day-to-day life and connect him to a near timeless experience of his particular community. Through the covenant and the practice of halakhah, Adam
the second “is rooted in everlasting time, in eternity itself. Thus, covenantal man confronts not only a transient contemporary ‘thou’ but countless ‘thou’-generations which advance toward him from all sides and engage him in the great colloquy in which God Himself participates with love and joy” (Lonely Man, 48). Nevertheless, it should again be noted that despite Soloveitchik’s claim that the covenantal embraces Adam the second and makes possible his participation in timeless traditions, Soloveitchik is still ultimately committed to the loneliness of a person of faith—perhaps due to the fact that the application of halakhah is still in time while merely its form latches on to eternity.

**Evaluation and Further Research**

There is a robust resonance between Soloveitchik’s and Levinas’ respective conceptualizations of God’s role in establishing community. Both require God’s presence in interpersonal relationships for community to be possible, and they exhibit strong parallels in the subjective experience of that intercession—evinced by the deep vulnerability in the experience of the face of the Other and Adam the second’s sacrifice of his rib for companionship, and later in the oscillation from receptive to active in both the encounter with the face of the Other and the practice of halakhah. The two accounts of the content of God’s presence in community, however, are incompatible; Levinas understands this presence to be formulated as a negative command which allows two individuals to enter an ethical relationship, while Soloveitchik understands it as an intimate experience of the divine which alleviates existential angst and allows individuals to commune with each other on a deeper, personal level. As the dialectical experience of halakhah allows one to behave ethically in the majestic or natural community, it seems that Soloveitchik’s account of the human experience by default achieves the primary aims of Levinas’ account.

To Levinas’ credit, his account of the encounter with the face of the Other is a more powerful presentation of the ethical conditions required for community than is Soloveitchik’s. Then again, Soloveitchik’s discussion of the ethical conditions for community is minimized in The Lonely Man of Faith to allow more emphasis on the experience of faith. Levinas needed a powerful and central ethical account for the conditions of community given that he was writing in wake of and response to the travesties of the Holocaust. Soloveitchik’s historical context did not require insistence on the priority of ethics, allowing him to explore a deeper level of the human experience and the community of faith. The problems of our historical moment more closely resemble Soloveitchik’s than Levinas’s. In the liberal, capitalistic bubble of the contemporary Western world, spiritual alienation is a more pervasive concern of communities than basic ethical relationships between their members. All told, to contemporary readers Soloveitchik’s account offers a more complete picture of the experience of faith and a more complete picture of community.
Notes

1. As will be made clear later, I think that Levinas would argue that you do need the experience of the Other for any community to exist.

2. By phenomenological, I am referring to a methodology which is interested in the structures of experience and uses a first-person perspective.


5. On Levinas’ terms these interactions could be understood as violence—using others as tools rather than relating to them as people. However, this view ultimately fails as an ethical relationship is introduced through the dialectical experience of the two characters to man. I will return to this more nuanced experience after laying out the personality of Adam the second.

6. This is from Genesis 2:21, but it is a slight interpretation because the original text does not say “eternal.”

7. This alleviation of loneliness is due to communication, which I will address shortly.

8. The communities are slightly different in terms of breadth. The majestic community does not require a religious relationship and thus can exceed one’s tradition. The covenantal community needs the particularities of tradition to be a unified community.

9. It’s interesting to note that Soloveitchik characterizes halakhah as the Aristotelian mean in his book *Halakhic Man,* but here characterizes it as a dialectic. He moves from a position that halakhah creates stability to one in which it navigates a constant vacillation.

10. A less than charitable reading of Levinas might argue that in Levinas’ picture, God is merely a construct meant to explain how morality arises from experiencing the face of the Other.

Rabbis, Politics, and Dissent: How Should Our Clergy Engage in Affairs of State?

Ben Silver

I

After completing my sophomore year of high school, my parents decided to cancel our membership at our synagogue. They claimed that our family had tolerated the head rabbi for far too long; the content of his sermons, which more often than not compelled the congregation to take up some political cause as if our very faith and culture depended on it, made them feel “un-Jewish,” or like bad Jews. My family’s distaste for this rabbi’s sermons was not generated by any propensity to disagree with him. (In fact, one of this rabbi’s most enthusiastic projects was fighting the genocide in Darfur, a cause that we strongly supported.) My parents’ issue was that they thought he was politicizing Judaism in a harmful way. By endorsing certain positions or causes and dispensing with opposing viewpoints without so much as a hint of the virtues they might harbor, it became possible to marginalize congregants who disagreed with his positions or who thought his causes relatively unimportant. And in fact, on more than one occasion, his sermons did alienate some of our fellow congregants, and stress relations with other synagogues. Additionally—maybe the greater transgression—by taking up a position on political issues, it seemed to my parents that the rabbi was speaking on behalf of the faith, of the synagogue as a united body, and of every congregant as a member of that synagogue. All of this meant, my parents thought, that any dissidence was branded as a failure to adhere to the faith or culture.

This movement from religion and ethics to political action seems to have flourished in the larger Jewish community during the past fifty years. For instance, the Reform movement has made it a point to lobby for positions on controversial societal issues like affirmative action, the death penalty, fair trade, and so on, all ostensibly supported by religious teaching. Republican Jews have also raised their voices over the past two decades, founding the influential Republican Jewish Coalition, which hopes to “sensitize Republican leadership in government and the party to the concerns and issues of the Jewish community.” They thereby interpret conservative values as not incompatible with, or maybe even supported by, Jewish core principles. Meanwhile, in Israel, the blending of religion and policy has always been a strong and uncomfortably tense one, especially considering December’s coup mounted by MK Avigdor Leiberman and his party against the Haredi-controlled Chief Rabbinate.

It is therefore hard to believe that my former rabbi was an anomalous data point, given the ever-more political Jewish community across the world. Given that this trajectory is liable to alienate Jews from their religion and culture, we must ask ourselves: what are we to make of rabbis and other religious leaders who venture into
politics, or, at the very least, seek to give Judaism an obvious and urgent political dimension? Does the fact that some Jews might be alienated because of this political Judaism mean that the clergy should shy away from political issues? It seems that we are in a curious dilemma whereby religious leaders can either fling Jews farther afield of their religion by alienating them or, in order to avoid such a dismal fate, Judaism would be stripped of its historical and deep connection to politics. It is unclear what the middle ground between these two opposites might be, and whether that middle ground could ever be stable. I hope to shed some light on these questions, because they are derivatives of a larger question: what is Judaism’s relationship to politics, in general? I think it is time to reconsider the desirability of having a rabbi tell congregants explicitly which positions Judaism endorses, and replace the current set-up with a healthier relationship between our faith and our politics.

II

The notion of a religious leader explicitly endorsing political positions to his followers is not a foreign concept in the history of Judaism or Jewish thought. It is, in fact, engrained in the very history of Judaism, meaning that allowing Judaism to inform our political opinions is not merely possible in democracy, but in all regimes.

This political dimension can most obviously be seen by the fact that the first Jewish community, whether one interprets that first community as the literal one from the Torah (i.e. the large “family” that lived as slaves in Egypt and fled to found their own nation) or as the community more supported by archaeological evidence (i.e. the Jewish people of the Babylonian Captivity and after), are both distinctly political communities. Each includes a strict internal hierarchy, including laws, culture, and some kind of government. This internal political nature comes from, it seems, the legacy of the Jewish figure par excellence, Moses. Moses was not only the means by which the Hebrews of the Exodus or the Jews of the First and Second Temples accessed their God, but he was also their legislator—the means by which the Lord connected to and ordered His people. For the Mosaic Jews and those who live in accordance with halakha, adherence to the divine will takes the form of adhering to the laws commanded by God, not of an internalized, spiritual faith, as is the case in most forms of Christianity. We might say, then, that Judaism, by virtue of its history and foundation in halakha, takes on a necessarily political dimension because the religion takes the form of law, which is a kind of ordering of society.

Similarly, we might look at the example of the prophet Isaiah to see that not only is the foundation of the Jewish community political, but that, in accordance with the tradition, God takes sides on political issues. In repeated circumstances when the Kingdom of Judah faces annihilation at the hands of various enemies (most notably the Assyrians), the Kings of Judah rarely seem to be able to make a cogent decision as to which neighboring kingdoms they should ally with in order to defend themselves. At one point, King Hezekiah—the last king under whose rule Isaiah prophesied—is faced with a dilemma: either join forces with the Egyptians against
the Assyrians, or stand alone and hope that God will save the Kingdom of Judah. God, using Isaiah as his voice, instructs the king:

For the Egyptians are man, not God,
And their horses are flesh, not spirit;
And when the Lord stretches out His arm,
The helper shall trip
And the helped one shall fall,
And both shall perish together.⁵

What is clear here is that God is taking a side on Hezekiah’s decidedly political dilemma. He says not to forge an alliance with the Egyptians, for that would, in some sense, compromise Hezekiah’s expectation that God will protect the kingdom. In this case, there is a political decision that has two sides, a Jewish side (do not enter into an alliance with Egypt) and a non-Jewish side (enter the alliance).

If we put aside the fact that our rabbis fall short of the standards set by Moses, Isaiah, the other prophets, and, in some sense, the Messiah,⁶ then it seems wholly reasonable to insist that our religious leaders have the right and maybe even the obligation to connect Judaism to our political lives. But such a reading of these figures fails to consider, I think, that we live in different circumstances than our Mosaic ancestors (or even the Kings of Israel and Judaea). Indeed, all of these individuals lived in what Jewish theology claims was a state exclusively of Jews, and lived wholly in accordance with Jewish law and practice. Those circumstances (that of living in an exclusively Jewish state that is governed properly in accordance with Jewish law), however, are not our circumstances—either in the Diaspora or in the present State of Israel. Similarly, these polities are ones that have kings who expressly give or enforce the divine commandments. As of now, the Jewish people have no prophet-king to unite us and show the true connection between our faith, our law, and our politics. Given the disparities between our current situation and those of the Mosaic (or Messianic) Jews, we might fall back to the claim that our contemporary religious leaders should shy away from making concrete claims about which political policies Judaism endorses, for fear of making a grave error.

But such an attitude toward the relationship between Judaism and politics—that is, ignoring the relationship because our ignorance might lead us astray—is deeply unsatisfying. After all, it fails to admit that one’s Jewish identity has a deeply political meaning, in the sense that the Jewish population constitutes a sort of transnational polity bound by Jewish heritage, tradition, and practice. How, then, do we move beyond this impasse? If we are to say that our rabbis are responsible not only for our religious life but also for informing our political lives (because the two are connected intrinsically by Judaism), then it is not clear how much credence we ought to give to their political teachings given how our political situation differs so greatly from that of the past. However, if we deny the rabbis’ prerogative, we seem to do away with the traditional relationship between religion and politics that Judaism provides in its holy texts and histories.
III

I think we might find a solution to this problem if we notice the fact that, while our circumstances are far from those of Moses and David, our circumstances as Jews in American and Israel force us to be residents and participants in states that function as liberal democracies. Noticing this, we might pare down our investigation from one of the relationship between Judaism and politics at large, to an investigation of the relationship between Judaism and liberal democracy. Thereby, we can begin to understand the enormous question of “what is Judaism’s relation to politics?” by considering “what is Judaism’s relation to our political situation?”

A Jewish interpretation of liberal democracy is complicated by the fact that there is substantial evidence that the only form of government Judaism endorses is monarchy.7 So we may not be able to say much about liberal democracy, but what we can say is quite helpful: both Judaism and liberal democracy encourage freedom of opinion, and they compel us toward free discussion of what is most important to our humanity. (To see this in America, we must only look at the First Amendment; to see it in Israel, we must only notice that their culture supports nearly constant energetic and passionate debate of issues at every level of society; to see it in the spirit of Judaism, we must only note the existence of the debates between rabbis that the Talmud recounts, or the very fact that one of Judaism’s iconic figures, Abraham,8 debates with God as to what constitutes a good and righteous deed.)

The fact that both Judaism and liberal democracy give a high value to this notion of freedom of opinion and open debate is certainly of some importance. For Judaism, it is the means by which Jews of every rank and order examine their relationship with God and—the theological domain aside—their relationships with each other as Jews. Similarly, in America and Israel, freedom of expression is the means by which the citizenry engages with government on every level, and is, perhaps, the basis for every one of our other civil rights. Because Judaism and liberal democracy hold this freedom to be so important, we ought not let it go to waste—especially considering that freedom of expression and opinion was not possible for Jews throughout much of Western history.

Perhaps, then, instead of compelling our rabbis to tell us which policies and causes Judaism supports, endorses, or encourages, we should compel our rabbis and their expertise of all things Jewish to foster the kind of discussion and openness that makes Judaism and liberal democracy function. That is, instead of expecting our religious guides to tell us that drone strikes, same-sex marriage, or human rights are or are not supported by our faith and culture, we should expect rabbis to note that a significant part of being a Jew and a part of living in a liberal democracy is free and open discussion. And it is precisely in those discussions that our Jewish identity and our identity as free persons both flourish. It is therefore proper and good that those kinds of open discussions be informed by our Jewish faith and culture. Put in simplistic terms, we should stray from saying that a certain policy is the one supported by Judaism in a dogmatic fashion; rather, we should say that the Jewish attitude toward
such a policy is that we should discuss it openly and seriously, and that we should feel free to inform our understanding of such a policy with our Jewishness (understood in all its different forms, such as scripture, the Talmud, philosophy, cultural practice, and so on), seeing that Jewishness unquestionably connects itself to political matters. In doing so, we might not only educate ourselves as Jews, but also as citizens.

IV

It could be hard for some to accept this sort of relationship between Judaism and politics, for in religion and tradition what we seek in part is an appeal to a source that can tell us what is true, what is right, and what is good. In that sense, Judaism should tell us what political causes are noble and base, worthy and unworthy, or righteous and unrighteous. But, I think, we still have room for that sort of religious or cultural inspiration without going so far as to say, “If you do not think X about political issue Y, or you don’t vote for candidate Z, then you are a bad Jew or are not a real Jew”; Judaism can still inform adherents that feeding the poor is just and righteous (i.e. an act that is, when taken outside the domain of government influence, an unquestionably good and ethical deed), but it might be up for debate as to whether Judaism compels adherents to compel others to feed the poor using the law of the state. Perhaps it is even the case that by giving various Judaism-based arguments for and against such political topics will give us a better sense of Judaism as a whole and, in particular, its relationship to politics as a whole. Indeed if the sages can disagree on such deep and important questions as they do in the Talmud, surely we can find room in our Jewishness to disagree on the most important political questions of our day.

Some will say that when these rabbis stand up on the bimah and address their congregations, they are actually engaging the community in the very kind of discussion for which I advocate. This may be true on a superficial level, because for a debate to exist, positive arguments must be made— and that is just what these rabbis are doing. However, the manner in which many of them make their arguments—that is, suggesting to the congregants that any dissent is not supported by Judaism, or not offering multiple Jewish viewpoints on the same issue and treating each with seriousness—can be the subtle poison that kills Judaism’s deeply held and cherished understanding of inquiry. This attitude toward politics is truly the root of alienating congregants, and it totally rejects the idea that a “Jewish identity” is what we all hold in common.

This view, I think, works in harmony with would-be counterexamples, like Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel’s famous role in the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Because he was a rabbi, Jewish teaching, theology, and tradition most certainly informed Heschel’s ideas and actions to a very high degree, but it would be, at least in this case, odd to think that Heschel would be intolerant of other ideas, since it was politically-endorsed intolerance he sought to eradicate in the first place. But in a larger scheme, it must be noted that Heschel was acting for himself, and not,
it seems, on behalf of congregants who might have disagreed with him. Heschel’s righteousness ought to be taken as a man doing what he sees to be the right thing to do. My view does not condemn rabbis for doing what they think is good and true, for they are human and, being men and women of God, ought to act ethically themselves. But acting ethically, while necessitating positive argument for the ethical act in question and arguing against what is perceived to be the unethical action, does not require silencing all dissent. It is therefore the rabbi’s responsibility to give his or her congregants the opportunity and ability to leave their lives Jewishly. Asking big questions, opening the congregants to the texts and various historical opinions, and cherishing productive, respectful debate all help us to understand the beautiful multiplicities that exist within Jewish thought and action.

V

A few months ago, I came across a public announcement that my former rabbi made in response to the Sandy Hook shooting, wherein he counseled his congregants that he and the other rabbis would be available for anyone who needed help to handle that unconscionable atrocity. He noted, as many pundits did at the time, that since we were in a state of national shock, it was prudent not to rashly jump to any conclusions; rather, we should deal with the tragedy methodically and slowly, so that our understanding of it might lead to true healing. Despite this call for calmness, he expressed a hope that, as we healed as a people, that we would honestly and openly discuss solutions which might prevent similar tragedies, including gun laws, mental health, ethics, and others, and he seemed hopeful that our Jewish religion, culture, and community would be of great assistance in forming those solutions. He was supremely careful not to place blame, even if he thought it was deserved, perhaps because doing so would cause more harm than good for those whom he is supposed to provide guidance.

Perhaps his response to the shooting was one merely formed by shock and a loss for answers. Then again, perhaps he had changed his understanding of his rabbinic purpose. Instead of counseling his congregants to adopt the “Jewish” political opinions that excluded all others and branded them as incongruous with the faith, maybe he had come to the conclusion that Judaism’s truest connection to politics and, in particular, our political situation is that of serious and open discussion, which is freely informed by Judaism in a variety of fashions, and is in attuned to our ethical needs. By engaging in these discussions, we may not find precisely what the relationship between Judaism at large and politics at large actually should be—that question perhaps may remain inconclusive as long as Jewish communities endure—but it seems that now we have a better means of engaging that question. Such a means—free and open discussion, disagreement, and debate—will allow us both as Jews and as citizens to sharpen our understanding of Judaism and of politics. If indeed my former rabbi truly did have a change of heart regarding Judaism’s association with politics, I can only hope that he strengthened the congregation, his understanding of
politics in a broad sense, and, likewise, Judaism’s kaleidoscope of opinion.

Notes


4 Cf. Exod. 31:18, 33:11

5 Isa. 31:2-3

6 I think including the example of the Messiah here deserves some explanation. It is difficult to read the Messiah as an unquestionably political character for two reasons: first, because the Messiah is, by definition, a person of the future, and we have no certain notions of the future beyond faith; second, because there is such a variety of interpretations of the Messiah’s actual actions once he comes. But it seems that the core of all of these accounts (including the Talmudic and Maimonidean) revolves around the fact that the Messiah is, in some sense, a “re-founder” of a strong, cohesive Jewish community. The Messiah becomes, then, some kind of “statesman” or “noble politician.” He then must have an eye to politics in order to be successful.

7 Cf. Deut. 17:14-15. My use of the word “Judaism” here is not meant to be very broad. Rather it is supposed to reflect the internal tradition of scripture. It is certainly difficult to say that some kind of leader with absolute or far-reaching powers is absent in the scriptural tradition, given the importance of the Davidic line.

8 Cf. Gen. 18:22-32. It has been suggested to me that an alterative reading of this story—namely, that Abraham is not really disputing “the Good,” but rather one of God’s actions, and not a human action—does not imply that this story shows a spirit of open debate in Judaism. While this reading is right to point out that Abraham’s interaction with God is literally questioning God’s divine action, it nevertheless fails to consider that Abraham is asking whether God’s proposal to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah regardless of all the innocents inside would accord with the principle that “the Judge of all the earth deal justly.” Abraham is therefore questioning how the idea of justice (as completely known by God, yet obscured in its totality to the human mind) manifests in the real world. Is it just to kill any innocents in order to punish the wicked? If so, how many? As God tells us, it seems that fifty, forty-five, forty, thirty, twenty, or ten are too many innocents to be killed in order to punish the wicked for their crimes. But the very fact that Abraham questions whether God’s proposition to destroy Sodom is just and the fact that God takes Abraham’s questioning seriously is enough to show that some moral questions do not have obvious, unproblematic answers—or at least that our knowledge of the principles that govern right and wrong can become clearer to us through questioning.

9 I think this discussion, for instance, would begin with a much more theoretical question: what does Judaism have to say of free will? This question is essential because it must be understood whether forcing someone to act ethically under the pain of being penalized really means that the person is acting ethically at all. Maimonides gives a thorough account of free will and how it affects responsibility and reward in the Mishneh Torah (Teshuvah 5:1).
The Stories We Do and Don’t Tell:  
A Review of the Film *The Flat*

*Eliza Brown*

When factors such as income and marital status remain equal, what differentiates one family from another? Why are some families happier and stronger than others? Two Emory psychologists provide a compelling answer for this long unanswered question. They claim that, in fact, it is the *stories* that families tell that make them strong. Telling any family narrative seems to improve outcomes for children as compared to not sharing anything about family history; stories about perseverance in the face of challenges prove to be the most strengthening.¹ Perhaps this theory and the importance it places on family history explains the intense yet quiet power of *The Flat*. This film by Arnon Goldfinger² recounts his own tale of uncovering family secrets—in this case, secrets that not everyone wants uncovered—and illustrates how families and individuals react when their family narratives shift beneath their feet.

Goldfinger’s family history centers about the idea that his maternal grandparents, the Tuchlers, escaped Nazi Germany in the 1930s, coming to Palestine to raise their families. Though perhaps their descendents never knew the whole story of their emigration from Germany, it seemed normal and appropriate not to ask too many questions about a painful period in their lives. When Goldfinger’s grandmother dies in her 90s, however, her Tel Aviv apartment reveals untold secrets of their lives in Germany. Arnon discovers letters and photos depicting his grandparents’ friendship with a German couple, the von Mildensteins. Remarkably, they traveled together to Palestine in the 1930s before his grandparents moved there. In fact, Baron von Mildenstein wrote an article about the trip, “A Nazi in Palestine” for a Nazi newspaper. The Tuchlers and the von Mildensteins may have shared Zionist views, but for utterly different reasons: Baron von Mildenstein argued that Palestine represented a good option as a new home for the Jews once they were to be removed from Germany.

Even more astonishingly, Arnon finds evidence that his grandparents continued to socialize with the von Mildensteins after the conclusion of World War II, sharing letters, photos and vacations. Like many family narratives about immigration, the Tuchler clan believed that they had left Germany entirely behind them upon their immigration to Israel, and the unearthing of this new information shatters this familial identity.

For our post-Holocaust, post-*Schindler’s List* generation, it is very difficult to comprehend how the continued friendship could be possible. It seems immoral for the Tuchlers to remain friends with the murderers of their family and friends. The
only way to reconcile this relationship relates to the idea of narrative: the Tuchlers must have convinced themselves of the relative innocence of the von Mildensteins in order to remain close confidants. The stories we tell ourselves about our relationships extend past the bounds of family.

Arnon and his mother Hannah incorporate the new information into their understanding of their family without much duress. Although it is certainly amazing that the Tuchlers could forgive or ignore the sins of the von Mildensteins, ultimately as Jews they play the role of the victims, not the villains. Indeed, Hannah seems to have known this information all along, though she has repressed it so deeply that she does not even consider it a hidden secret. She too immigrated to Israel from Germany and at first discourages Goldfinger’s searches into the family. Ultimately, towards the end of the film she grows more interested in the project when she travels with her son to Germany; nevertheless, as someone of the generation that abhors delving into family tales of the Holocaust, she always remains detached from the investigation.

At a certain point in his investigation, Arnon finds irrefutable evidence in German archives indicating that Baron von Mildenstein was the processor of Adolf Eichmann as well as a participating Nazi throughout World War II. Goldfinger struggles to decide whether or not he should disclose this information to von Mildenstein’s daughter, Edda Milz von Mildenstein. Ultimately, he decides that he has a moral requirement to do so. When presented with the evidence, Edda refuses to believe what Arnon tells her. Indeed, she refuses to allow her family narrative to change at all. Although as a viewer this reaction at first seems ludicrous, upon reflection it seems almost necessary: in order for Edda to continue her life happily, her family history cannot change. Where Arnon could change his understanding of his grandparents without damaging his own identity, Edda cannot do so, and thus cannot possibly accept this information.

To clarify, this essay is in no ways a support of forgetting the past as a means to move on. Indeed, if we follow the advice of the Emory psychologists, ignoring past events, even if painful, is correlated with harmful effects. The most effective narratives are those that acknowledge failure and hard times but point to the perseverance of the family during these trials and tribulations. This narrative proves the most strengthening for families, and, I would propose, could engender the same effects for nation states. Nations are not stronger for forgetting their past or dwelling on it, but for telling the narrative in such a way that citizens feel empowered to progress.

The film ends with Arnon and his mother searching for her grandmother’s grave in a dark forest, unable to find any mark amid the unkempt stones. It is difficult to say whether or not their search was a success. Like all family histories, theirs is filled with surprises, revelations, and dead-ends. Like all family histories, theirs must be a combination of historical “fact” and selective editing. Ultimately, The Flat represents the future of the Holocaust experience: as survivors dwindle away with the imminent years, descendents will shift from direct receivers of stories to archeologists, looking for clues in the homes and possessions of their ancestors.
Notes


2Full-disclosure: Goldfinger happens to be my father’s cousin’s husband’s cousin.
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Gabe is a third-year in the college. His interdisciplinary studies as a *Fundamentals* major tend towards philosophy but also include quite a lot of literature and religious studies. He recently wrote his Junior Paper on “the sacred” in *Anna Karenina*. As a math minor, he is looking forward to taking logic. Outside of class, Gabe works on *Makom* and as a research assistant for the *Committee on Social Thought*. He is committed to the Jewish community at UChicago and is sustained by sandwiches, sunny days, and long conversations. This spring he is studying in Paris, improving his French, strolling, and eating French sandwiches.

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Jonathan Nathan is a sophomore at the University of Chicago majoring in History and Law, Letters, & Society. He is especially interested in theology, grammar, law, nineteenth-century America, and prose-embedded blank heroic verse. Jonathan grew up in New York City, where he attended the Fieldston School. He has spent the last two summers working at a boys’ camp and exploring Maine and New England.

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Eliza is a fourth-year in the college at the University of Chicago majoring in Sociology and receiving a minor in French. In 2010, she founded Chicago Independent Minyan, a religious service group focused on forming a welcoming community, encouraging new leadership and maintaining traditional Shabbat services at the University of Chicago. She has also initiated and resided in jU House for the past academic year. Eliza does not have definitive plans for the coming year, but she hopes that whatever her pursuit, it allows her to maintain her bright spirit of inquiry and debate.

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Michael is a fourth-year in the College at the University of Chicago, where he majors in philosophy and political science. He is currently writing a thesis on political obligation, though his interests span a number of fields. Outside of academia he has worked for the Congressional Research Service and for the Obama campaign, and is an avid Scrabble player.

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Eric is a Fourth Year undergraduate at the University of Chicago. He spends most of his time reading Sanskrit ritual texts and thinking about how to safely destroy sacred things. For the past four years he has been trying to answer Wittgenstein’s question, “why do we feel a grammatical joke to be deep?”

Jonathan Katz

Jonathan is a third-year in the College at the University of Chicago, concentrating in History and Geographical Studies. His main focus is in comparative diaspora and migration in the modern era, with special focus on Jewish, ethnic Chinese, and Norwegian migrants. He takes special interest in the built environments and landscapes of diaspora, demographic histories of immigration, migration within and to settlement societies, and transnational cultural transfers. He will be travelling to South Africa in the summer of 2013 to conduct comparative research for his thesis on Jewish and Norwegian migrants in two towns during the British colonial and Union periods (1870-1945). In his spare time, he is involved in leading an egalitarian worship community, as an editor on a student history journal, and in peer-to-peer
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Benjamin is currently a third year in the College, double majoring in Philosophy and Political Science. His main academic interest is the history of political philosophy, and he will be writing his BA Thesis on the political and legal context of moral education in Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics and Politics. Originally from Dallas, Ben has a decidedly immoderate preoccupation with football, baseball, beef barbecue, and Tex-Mex. After graduating next spring, he plans to attend either Law School or enroll in a graduate program for political theory.

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Libbi is a fourth year philosophy and religious studies major at the University of Chicago. She is particularly interested in critical theory, ethics, the phenomenology of religious experience and religious praxis, as well as the history of Jewish thought. She is an active member of Egalitarian Chavurah and a representative on the university’s Spiritual Life Council. Libbi is passionate about interfaith dialogue and enjoys organizing interfaith programming on campus and in the broader Hyde Park community. Additionally, she was the recipient of the 2012 Seidel Scholars award, which she put toward creating a short documentary on religious praxis and community the in Chicagoland area.
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