



SOLOMON  JOURNAL

**The  
Semiquincentennial:  
Reflections on  
Jewish America**

Volume VIII / Spring 2026



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# SOLOMON JOURNAL

is a premiere outlet of young Jewish American journalism on serious, relevant topics. The journal brings together Tikvah's emphasis on lofty ideas with the impact of genuinely held beliefs, refined and articulated in a concrete way.

Solomon Journal is proudly Jewish, proudly Zionist, and proudly defends Western Civilization. We take positions on both current and perennial questions from this broad vantage point, acknowledging all the while that robust discussion and debate and not doctrinal purity are at the heart of the Jewish, Zionist, and Western traditions.

We believe that arguments matter but that they must be deployed in the service of the morally good and noble, not the deconstructive or subversive. At a time when the worlds of politics and culture are plagued by moral confusion and systemic doubt, we need to provide something more nurturing, something more bracing and clear.

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# Letter from the Editors

This year marks the 250th anniversary of America’s founding—250 years where America has rapidly changed from a group of scrappy thirteen colonies attempting to prove the worth of a new mode of governance to a global superpower with a central role on the world stage. Just as the nation has evolved, so too have the lives of its Jews. The Symposium for this issue explores the legacy and future of American Jewish life, challenging writers to reflect on the past 250 years and predict what comes next for American Jewry. Our contributors have taken diverse approaches to this theme, grappling with how freedom creates uniquely American tensions and opportunities from science and faith to art, intermarriage, and Jewish pride.



Central to the freedom that the American Jewish experience has brought is the openness it has given the Jewish community. This openness enabled Jews to adapt to diasporic lifestyles—integrating into the polity, developing new ways of religious practice, and contributing to American culture. While our Symposium debates whether this openness acts as a blessing or a challenge, it is indubitably what makes an American Jew’s experience distinct.



This same spirit of openness has also shaped the lives of our writers. In this issue, our contributors invite us to explore how openness shaped their personal lives, from a Qur’an chevruta to punk concerts and birding. Our writers have embraced an environment of openness, mirroring broader experiences of classes, discussions, and retreats at the Solomon Fellowship. We are grateful to our writers and editors for meeting the challenge of not only producing a finished piece, but also continually refining their writing and editing. We want to thank Mrs. Sarah Baird, Dean of the Solomon Journal, for helping us create a Journal that highlights student voices and provides an incredible opportunity for students to hone their craft in a professional environment.

The issue in your hands would not be possible without the diligence and effort of every Solomon participant and staff member, from our writers and editors to the dedicated team of educators behind the scenes. Thank you, the reader, for supporting our work. We are so grateful for all of you as we present this issue.

Now, as we look towards graduation, we are grateful for all that Tikvah has instilled in us, particularly an openness to new ideas and a love of learning. As we move on to gap years, college, and beyond, the Solomon Fellowship has empowered us to seek out places of learning where openness is not merely a general willingness to accept all perspectives, but rather a commitment to discourse that moves us closer to truth.

To next year’s cohort — we hope that you will take full advantage of the unique environment that Tikvah fosters; this community of learners and leaders is like no other. As the next generation of Jewish leaders, the values of deep thought, engagement with diverse sources, and open debate with your peers must guide you in a world that is increasingly hostile to these principles.

And to our fellow cohort of graduating seniors — this issue’s symposium highlights the complicated relationship between America and Judaism. However, Tikvah has shown us that the freedom America has bequeathed us does not necessarily erode our faith — rather, it can be harnessed to foster the same spirit of open inquiry that characterizes Jewish conversations since Sinai. As we close, we want to thank all the Solomon Fellows for broadening our perspectives; the Solomon teachers for challenging our ideas and directing us to even more of them; and finally Tikvah, for providing a space for us to grow into the Jewish thinkers and leaders we will become.

**Cordially,**  
**Rachael Kopylov and Benny Marmor**  
*Editors-in-Chief of the Solomon Journal*

# Symposium



## The Semiquincentennial: Reflections on Jewish America

Jonathan Sarna, in the introduction to *American Judaism*, writes, “Freedom, the same quality that made America so alluring for persecuted faiths, also brought with it the freedom to make religious choices: to modernize Judaism, to assimilate, to intermarry, to convert.” As America turns 250, we asked our writers to reflect on the history of American Jews. In what ways have the freedoms of America enabled the remarkable growth and achievements of American Jewry, and in what ways have these same freedoms posed challenges to Jewish continuity and identity? What does the future hold for American Jewry?

# Success Without Surrender

By Leah Gershgorin



A few years ago, my mom sat our family down to watch a movie about a Jewish immigrant family trying to make it in America. They settled in Baltimore with empty pockets, great ambitions, and a tight-knit Ashkenazi culture to ground them. As the years went by, the family grew more economically successful, but also more disconnected from their foundational traditions. *Avalon*, the 1990 film, suggested that while material success resolved their poverty, it had created a different,

and arguably more pronounced, deficiency in their cultural preservation.

In the melting pot that is American society, many decide that the freedom promised by assimilation overshadows its risks. Just learn English, celebrate Thanksgiving, and put in the hard work, and you've got a shot at achieving the "American dream." The idea that distinct inheritances can be merged rather than erased flatters Americans and encourages

unity. By assimilating, Jewish Americans achieved material growth and success in fields ranging from medicine, where Jonas Salk and Albert Sabin created the polio vaccine, to physics, where Albert Einstein revolutionized the discipline at Princeton University, to law, where Ruth Bader Ginsburg advocated for civil rights. These achievements are nothing short of remarkable, and America deserves praise for promoting equal opportunity for all.

America's declaratory promise of "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" contrasts with the prejudices that the Jewish people faced in other nations, first in pre-Emancipation Europe, and then in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. Fundamental American liberties such as free speech and a free press have allowed the Jewish people to advocate for causes we deem important and push back on policies we deem discriminatory. Freedom of religion has given the Jewish people a sense of true community within the melting pot, allowing for the establishment of yeshivas, synagogues, and Jewish advocacy organizations.

However, these freedoms come with a paradox: the same liberties that can protect can also harm. Free speech can be used to spread libels against the State of Israel and other antisemitic rhetoric. Freedom of religion creates an opportunity for extremist groups to spread intolerance of Judaism and justify their hatred with religious precedent. These same freedoms that ensure the free practice of religion also ensure that committed Jews will never be completely integrated into American society. Being close to belonging but never fully fitting in is a hallmark of the Jewish experience.

By choosing to assimilate, Jewish Americans face the overarching danger of losing the roots of our identity in the melting pot culture of America. While Jewish institutions exist and prosper, *Avalon* reminds the Jewish people to beware of bringing their guard down in the face of success. American Jews should prioritize lighting Shabbat candles every Friday instead of going out, take pride in seeing IDF soldiers singing and dancing to Hebrew songs during wartime, and look to the Torah for answers in

times of distress. Jewish Americans cannot let their spirit be diminished by pure ambition for financial prosperity, because Jewish success is meaningless without a strong Jewish life behind it.

The future of American Jewry is in our own hands. As Jewish people, we will never be able to fully assimilate into a society that isn't our own. America has given us a choice: we can choose to forget this reality and lose ourselves in material success, or we can choose to enhance American society with achievements grounded in the values of Judaism. The resilience of the Jewish people is not solely due to our success in so many disciplines, but also thanks to our ability to take pride in our culture despite adversity. Now, more than ever, is not the time to let our identity fade.

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*Leah Gershgorin lives in Livingston, New Jersey and attends Newark Academy.*

# Intermarriage and the Jewish Future: How Judaism Can Survive American Freedom

By Eitan Babich

**H**istorian Jonathan Sarna writes that the same freedom that drew persecuted religions to America simultaneously enables individuals within those groups to make their own religious choices. For American Jews, this incredible gift of freedom has also been an incredible challenge, as exemplified by the rapid rise of intermarriage. Although intermarriage can be viewed as a success by facilitating Jewish-American societal integration, it also raises questions about Jewish identity and the future of the Jewish faith. The existential struggle of the American Jew is ensuring freedom while battling for the maintenance and flourishing of a religious identity.

For the majority of Jewish history, intermarriage was incredibly rare. However, this was due to external restraints, not exceptional personal and religious commitment. In Europe, Jews lived in separate communities, restricted by local laws and customs from interacting with gentiles. Intermarriage was a natural byproduct of minimal inter-religious relations, and Jewish identity was preserved by the coincidence of this isolation.

In contrast, America offered the Jews unparalleled freedom and opportunity. They lived among non-Jews, went to school with them, worked with them, and became completely assimilated and cultured with

patriotic American society. This very openness, however, is what caused the rise in intermarriage for American Jews.

In this context, intermarriage is not understood to be solely negative. It is emblematic of how Jews have been accepted into the larger framework of American life. Unlike societies where Jews faced opposition and discrimination, America allowed them to participate equally, even on the interpersonal level. Relationships among diverse faiths are evidence of a society where cultural and religious boundaries are less concrete. One of the strengths of America is that people can form their relationships based on connection and shared interests rather than being limited by what divides them. In addition to this, some intermarried families have worked to raise Jewish children and maintain a connection to the Jewish people. These experiences imply that unique identities can adapt, not disappear.

However, intermarriage presents significant challenges to Jewish persistence. As intermarriage rates rise, fewer and fewer children are raised with a strong Jewish connection. Religious practice, communal involvement, and tradition are inevitably diminished over time. When Jewish identity is no longer enforced by religious boundaries or communal pressure, it becomes a personal



choice; such a choice can be easily pushed off and set aside. The freedom enjoyed by American Jews marks an important shift. Whereas for earlier generations, being Jewish was inescapable, in America, it is completely optional. With this freedom of choice, the sense of shared identity and unity that has maintained Jewish communities is weakening.

Looking to the future, American Jewry faces a vital question: how can identity be conserved in a society defined by this great freedom to choose? Some may argue in favor of drawing sharp lines in the sand by cutting off intermarried couples and families and issuing frequent and aggressive denunciations of intermarriage. They are entitled to this approach; that is the beauty of America. However, perhaps a more effective answer lies in adaptation, rather than resistance and rigidity. American Jews would do well to renew their commitment to strengthening Jewish education,

fostering deeper connections with intermarried families, and creating inclusive communities. Instead of rejecting the product of America's freedom, we could build on the existing diversity within American Jewry and emerge stronger than before.

As America approaches its two hundred and fiftieth birthday, the complexity of the American Jewish experience highlights America's promise of freedom. Intermarriage reflects the multifaceted levels of acceptance and integration that would have been inconceivable in earlier times but also reminds us of challenges that should not be ignored. The future of American Judaism will be decided by how Jews choose to navigate that balance.

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# Wrestling with Creation: Judaism, Science, and American Freedom

By Miriam Siroky

“**I**n the beginning of God’s creation of the heavens and the earth.”  
(Genesis 1:1)

In 21st-century America, the Genesis narrative is read against competing theories: The Big Bang (which posits a 13.8 billion-year-old universe), and a Darwinian view of humanity (as one contingent branch on an indifferent tree of life). In our modern times, the idea of a purposeful cosmos created in six days is considered outdated, to say the least.

Jews in America have been free to wrestle openly with this tension. Wrestling, after all, is one of our oldest traditions. The very name *Yisrael* means “one who wrestles with God.” The freedom America has granted Jews is not a threat but a gift.

America’s founding commitment to religious liberty and intellectual freedom created something genuinely new for Jewish intellectual life. For the first time, Jewish thought was protected as a matter of constitutional right. Across the medieval world, from the disputations of 13th-century France and Aragon to the courts of the Abbasid Caliphate and the fragile refuge of Fatimid Cairo, Jewish intellectual life flourished in the gaps that other civilizations permitted. Maimonides fled Almohad persecution as a child; Nachmanides was forced into exile after his superior performance in a debate against a Dominican friar; Saadia Gaon wrote under a tolerance whose limits were never his to set. America was

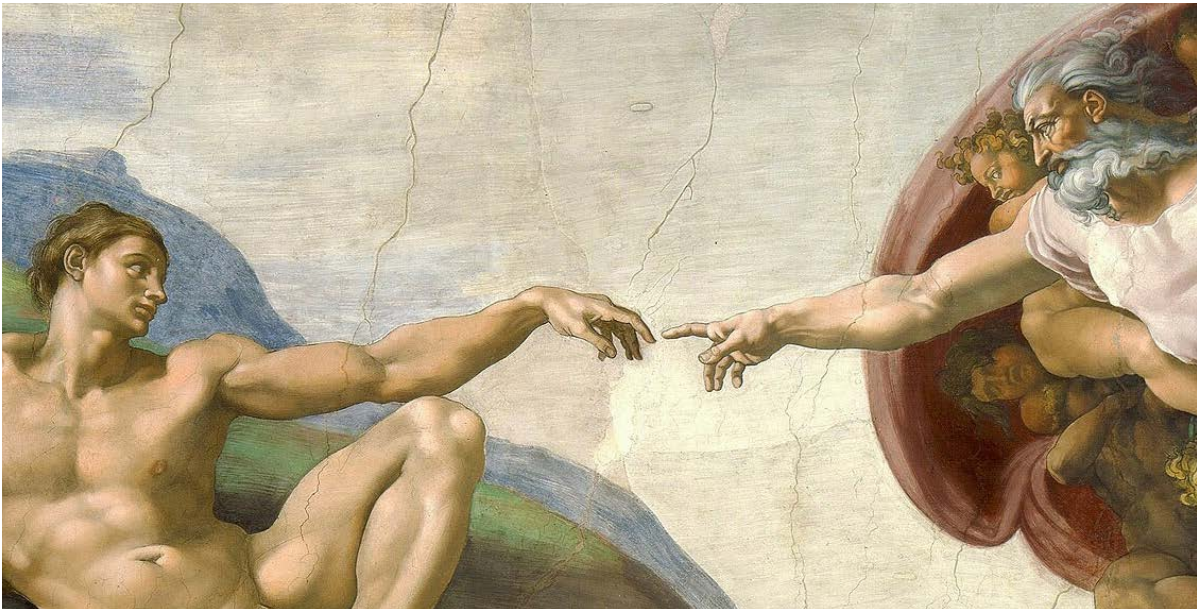
the first civilization to make Jewish intellectual sovereignty a founding principle.

Jonathan Sarna observes that freedom produced an unprecedented religious voluntarism in America, allowing Jews to abandon their faith, values, and communities, often turning to science as a replacement. Science became, for some, a reason to walk away from tradition entirely. This is the challenge that freedom poses.

However, even without knowledge of modern science, the Jewish tradition has long sought to reconcile reason and revelation. Saadia Gaon, writing in tenth-century Babylonia, argued that reason and revelation cannot ultimately contradict one another, since both derive from God. Any apparent conflict, he wrote, stems from human limitation and calls for renewed scrutiny of both reason and revelation to restore their harmony.

Maimonides builds directly on this foundation. In *The Guide for the Perplexed*, he argues that scripture must be reread non-literally wherever reason and science establish that the literal meaning is impossible. References to God having a body and emotions are simply the Torah using language comprehensible to human beings (*dibra Torah k’lashon b’nei adam*). In these instances, therefore, we must adopt a non-literal mode of interpretation.

Maimonides, like Saadia before him, believed that when scientific knowledge establishes that



a literal reading is flawed, it is incumbent upon religious individuals to reinterpret texts. Being faithful to the Torah means reinterpreting, not resisting. To read the “six days” literally in the face of overwhelming scientific evidence is therefore not an act of faithfulness. By Maimonides’ own standard, it is a failure of both reason and Torah.

According to the Big Bang Theory, all matter, energy, space, and time were emitted from a point of infinite density. Within seconds, protons and neutrons formed, leading to the first appearance of light. Science describes this progression towards life with precision, but hits a wall when it comes to explaining what precedes that moment. All the same equations that explain universal expansion after the Big Bang fail.

The Torah begins exactly at the point where science fails and where physics breaks down. Its opening word (“In the beginning...”) is an invitation to dwell on what it means that the furthest reach of physical description and the first word of revelation address the same mysteries of the universe.

Nachmanides argues that God first created a single formless substance, which contained the potential for all future forms. He was not

working in a physics laboratory, but the parallel with the Big Bang is noteworthy. The Psalmist writes, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims His handiwork” (Tehillim 19:2). For the modern Jewish reader, the James Webb Space Telescope is an instrument for hearing that declaration with a clarity no previous generation could have imagined.

The Torah and science are sometimes treated as contradictory, but should rather be seen as two sides of the same coin. Each seeks truth and a deeper understanding of the human condition. Science, with its endless expansion of what we do not yet know, should be seen as faith’s companion instead of its rival.

As America turns 250, Jews have been fortunate to enjoy the freedom not merely to ask any questions, but to follow answers wherever they may lead. Judaism can sit at the table with astrophysics, geoscience, and biology, not despite its tradition but because of it. Science allows us to probe our tradition by compelling us to ask new questions, engage with novel evidence, and see Torah in a new light.

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# The American Jew: A Halakhic Framework for Dual Loyalty

By Rachael Kopylov



**F**or much of history, Jewish communities have lived within host nations, either protected or ruled over by foreign powers. Because of this, diaspora communities have needed to balance maintenance of their separate religious identity with loyal participation in their host societies. This careful equilibrium of dual loyalty is as important today as ever, as Jews across America experience an unprecedented degree of both societal

participation and assimilation. The question of dual loyalty within American Jewish institutions is neither new nor abstract; rather, it has been a defining feature of Jewish communal life for centuries, informing how diaspora communities negotiate their responsibilities to both their host country and the broader Jewish collective.

Jewish law—*halakha*—offers a useful channel through which the tension of dual loyalty can be explored. In Tractate Gittin, the rabbis discuss

the religious validity of documents written by a gentile court. During this debate, Shmuel asserts that “*Dina De-Malkhuta Dina*”—the law of the kingdom is the law. Shmuel’s opinion is applied to both Jewish and non-Jewish “kings,” and establishes that Jews are halakhically bound to recognize and adhere to the laws of their country of residence. Through this ruling, *Dina De-Malkhuta Dina* acknowledges that participation in civil life within the diaspora can coexist with, and even enhance, Jewish identity.

Rav Moshe Feinstein, the famed modern *posek* (rabbi and legal scholar) expands upon this principle, connecting *Dina De-Malkhuta Dina* to another Jewish principle: *hakarat hatov*, or gratitude. Throughout his various responsa, Rav Feinstein repeatedly rules that American Jews must obey American laws, even referring to the American government as a “government of kindness.” This framing is significant as it shifts *Dina De-Malkhuta Dina* from mere legal compliance to a system of reciprocal obligation, not unlike a Lockean social contract. It means that when a nation provides the Jewish people with security, equal rights, and religious freedom, Jews in return are obligated to be upstanding citizens and active participants in that society.

The Rabbinic tradition further expands the notion of dual loyalty through the directive in *Pirkei Avot* 3:2 to “pray for the welfare of the government”—a command which applies to both Jewish and non-Jewish governments. This extension transforms the relationship between Jews and their host nation from pragmatic coexistence to a genuine concern for its stability and well-being. The Mishnah continues, stating that “were it not for the fear [the government]

inspires, every man would swallow his neighbor alive.” This rationale allows for a Jewish citizen’s allegiance to a government to be grounded in the government’s ability to govern well rather than a shared identity with those in power, a strongly American concept.

Taken together, these sources demonstrate that the Jewish tradition does not view dual loyalty as a problem to be resolved; instead, it supports a balance between allegiance to one’s country of residence and loyalty to the Jewish people. Civic loyalty, in the Jewish framework, is rooted in the recognition of the state’s role in maintaining social order and enabling Jewish life to function. By severing national loyalty from shared ethnic identity or tribal ideology, patriotism can simultaneously exist with Jewish identity without detracting from it.

This model of Jewish participation in society means that the phrase “American Jew” is not a contradiction, but a coherent and legitimate expression of diasporic Jewish life. This reframing is particularly significant in our modern context, when questions of societal affiliation and belonging are often cast in binary terms, forcing individuals to prioritize one aspect of their identity over another. *halakha*, by contrast, resists this dichotomy, offering a framework in which multiple forms of allegiance are mutually reinforcing—not merely compatible. Ultimately, this framework reimagines dual loyalty as a defining strength of diasporic Jewish existence.

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# Are the Haredim Wrong? Rethinking the Haredi Draft Debate

By Avigail Kundin

**T**he ongoing debate over whether Haredi men must serve in the IDF is often framed as a conflict of fairness, economics, or national security. However, after examining the religious and social nuances of this crisis, I believe the fundamental error lies not with the Haredi lifestyle, but our own insistence on questioning it. While the secular world demands a uniform standard of contribution, this demand overlooks the Haredi community's way of life, a path that is no less valid for being different. Those who insist on the Haredi draft argue that Israeli society is witnessing a failure of religious pluralism; however, the failure is actually in this insistence on claiming the right to judge another's way of life.

This is not a popular sentiment generally, especially within our Solomon Fellowship cohort. In one of our Great Ideas seminars, we discussed a podcast between Tikvah's own Jonathan Silver and Rabbi Yehoshua Pfeffer on the subject of Haredi military service in the IDF. Many of my fellow participants felt it was fundamentally unfair that one part of the country is fighting for their lives while others are learning in Yeshiva without bearing the same risk.

While the charge of unfairness is understandable, those who voice it do not make attempts to understand how Haredi society views the issue.

For one, while some Haredi Jews may oppose being governed by a secular state or refrain from singing *Hatikvah*, there is nonetheless a widespread sense of care and responsibility

among Jews for one another. Regardless of their stance on the State, they care for their brothers and sisters across the secular-Orthodox spectrum—praying for them, volunteering for them, and in some cases, sacrificing their sons for them.

Secondly, to most Haredim, the army is not an agenda-less institution. When they see the IDF, they see an organization whose goal is to integrate them into secular society. Their resistance is therefore not necessarily rooted in opposition to military service itself; *halakha* recognizes the principle of *pikuach nefesh*, and Haredim are not hesitant to break Shabbat to save lives. Like all Jews, Haredim have often faced situations where tradition and survival seemed mutually exclusive, and have consistently chosen preservation of life.

These tensions are reflected not solely in attitudes toward military service, but also in the economic structure of Haredi life. Regarding welfare, some families rely on government assistance while the father learns Torah full-time; this is a deliberate lifestyle choice. Similarly, many Haredi families in Israel work and raise large families; even with jobs, many in these communities struggle to support such large families without aid. The Haredi education system makes it difficult to enter college, and without army service, many career paths remain closed. A secretary's or teacher's salary simply cannot cover the needs of a very large family, which means many would require welfare regardless of their employment status.



Critics often point out that there are Haredi men who are not learning in Yeshiva full-time, but are still living on welfare. I believe this may be true, but generally, when men are no longer learning in Yeshiva, they seek employment. This may not be comparable to higher-paying positions in secular Israeli society, and it may not cover their family's basic expenses. Thus, they must still rely on state welfare; indeed, welfare systems are designed to provide exactly this kind of support. Even with welfare, though, most Haredi families do not live lives of luxury, often raising many children in small apartments. But these are the sacrifices they choose to make to live in the Land of Israel according to their interpretation of *halakha*.

Even if one accepts the internal Haredi perspective, ensuring adequate manpower remains a national predicament in Israel. For the army to function, more soldiers are needed. The Haredim make up about 13% of Israel's population, and that share is growing due to their large families. But this raises a more practical

question: Does the army actually want Haredim who do not wish to be there? In secular Israeli society, if someone wants to avoid the army badly enough, it is easy enough to do so, and that is no accident. Running an army with people who have no desire to be there is antithetical to military culture and will negatively impact military performance.

Some critics point out that many Haredim who claim to study fulltime also hold jobs and pay taxes (around 22% of those under 26, according to *The Times of Israel*), drawing a salary while avoiding army service. Yet this criticism reveals a contradiction: the same voices that condemn Haredim for being a drain on national resources are upset when these men join the workforce and improve their financial standing. If working Haredim are still resented, the issue seems less about fairness or economics than about discomfort with their way of life—raising the question of what kind of reform is actually feasible.

In my opinion, the best option would be the government cracking down to ensure Haredim are actually learning as they claim. Creating accommodations in the IDF for Haredim who do not want to serve is difficult and has shown uneven success, but enforcing standards within the Yeshiva system is something Haredi leaders would be hard-pressed to resist. These rabbis would, in effect, have to admit they are comfortable with young men who misrepresent themselves (lie), and with those who do not truly learn as they claim.

Beyond policy, this debate raises a deeper question about religious pluralism and judgment. As an observant Jew, I value Torah and believe prayer is vital. While I might not choose a life where full-time learning is the only option for men—aligning more, perhaps, with figures such as Rabbi Pfeffer, who maintain a strict halakhic life while participating in academic and political worlds—I respect the principle of “*Shivim Panim L’Torah*” (there are seventy faces to the Torah). I do not believe I have the right to judge how other communities choose to live a life of Torah.

I encountered one model of this approach in an unexpected place. When applying to seminaries, I looked at both Religious Zionist and more open-minded Haredi institutions. I was deeply impressed by the dean of a Religious Zionist seminary; when we discussed Israeli army service, she explained her view but noted that they also employ a Haredi woman whose husband does not serve. They include her in school panels to ensure her perspective is heard. The dean emphasized that while they may not agree, those views are valid and worthy of respect. Ultimately, that is what I find most valuable: the ability to disagree deeply without losing respect for one another.

Perhaps the Haredim are not wrong. Maybe we are the ones asking a naive question.

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# Birding as an Antidote for Our Distracted Generation

By Elie Sasson

**T**he following statistics describe a single hobby: 37% of Americans engage in it, it had a total economic output of \$279 billion in 2022, and it has a dedicated lobbying group that has existed for 121 years, named for a man born in Haiti in 1785. One is unlikely to guess that these stats describe birdwatching (the Haitian is French-American naturalist, John James Audubon). This prolific predilection for ornithological investigation has a wondrous impact on the human psyche.

A recent scientific study suggests many mental benefits to birdwatching. When learning a new skill, one's brain undergoes neuroplasticity, a process in which neural pathways are reorganized and strengthened, forming new pathways related to the skill. Birding has proven to be a uniquely powerful element in improving neuroplasticity. In a recent study in *The Journal of Neuroscience*, both novice and expert birders underwent MRIs where each group had to identify various birds. The experts obviously fared better, but the researchers were shocked by the increased density and greater amount of structure seen in the birder's brains in areas of spatial awareness, object recognition, and working memory. They concluded that these structures likely lessen the impacts of aging on the human brain and could even significantly lower the risk of memory diseases such as Alzheimer's.

The biological impact of birding on the brain pales in comparison to the emotional impact. Renowned modern birder, David Allen Sibley, author of the authoritative *The Sibley Guide to Birds*, attests to this impact, saying,

“The fundamental appeal of birding, I believe, is that it offers us a connection to that [natural] world. Birding is the activity that motivates us to go outside and provides a touchstone to make the connection, the reward is simply being out there to experience nature.”

This idea is echoed by many birders who value the connection with nature that comes with birding; as President Theodore Roosevelt—an avid birder—said: “Spring would not be spring without bird songs, any more than it would be spring without buds and flowers.”

In the thick of the Covid pandemic, my family was often outdoors in Central Park; after encountering odd collections of people staring at birds, we eventually took an interest in birding ourselves. Birding in Central Park, as we quickly discovered, is dominated by older retirees looking for serenity away from the bustling city. Since then, my bird-watching interest has waxed and waned (usually seasonally, with over 200 species to see in Central Park during peak migration periods). However, since I began birding, several aspects



of the activity have added to its allure for me.

The first allure is the necessity to embrace the unknown. One of the hardest aspects of birding is accepting when you are unsure of what you saw. Maybe the bird was too far, or maybe it was too fast, or maybe it was too quiet. But accepting that the unknown will endure forever leads one to detach themselves from the need for conclusion.

Birding also cultivates an appreciation for the natural world within the observer. Through birding, I periodically found myself marveling at the beauty and, quite often, the sheer diversity of life found on earth. I observed the contrast between a hummingbird (the size of my two fingers, zipping from flower to flower, sucking up nectar, and preparing to migrate thousands of miles under its own power) and a stately heron (strutting through a lake, seizing fish in one fell swoop). By viewing this great diversity, one recognizes the beauty in nature's variety and begins to appreciate not just the majesty of the natural world but the diversity of life in this paradigm.

Furthermore, the act of sitting and watching birds captures the beauty in a journey without an end goal. Often, I go birding in the hopes of seeing a particular species (like the biological

Class Aves) or a certain number of species. However, when birding in the off-season, I know there are fewer species to find and have little hope of spotting something rare. In these moments, I find myself examining and appreciating the regular birds with newfound interest. In this way, I gain the ability to appreciate my environment as it is, even the simple omnipresent components in it.

Through my birding experience, I have developed many skills that are sorely lacking in many of my generation. Skills like waiting, learning to live without instant gratification, and teaching oneself to enjoy a journey separate from the destination can all be gained through birding. They say that patience is a virtue, but it's hard to cultivate in an era of screens, reels, and Instagram stories. The solace that I find in birding is a feeling that every person should hope to experience at some point in their life. Experiencing the wonders of the natural world while enmeshed in the atmosphere of New York City is truly an incomparable feeling.

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# The *Halakha* Behind Israeli Food Technology

By Sadie Palker

Israel, a global leader in innovation, is experimenting in food technology, particularly in the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Some recent projects include lab-grown meat, milk made using cow proteins, and gene-edited hens that only hatch female chicks. The country's rabbinic authorities have generally supported the responsible development of genetically modified foods when such activities promote human welfare and respect traditional religious boundaries. Some commonly used principles that come up and are relied on in these decisions include *pikuach nefesh*, *bal tashchit*, *kilayim*, *shomrei adamah*, and *kashrut*.

The first principle, *pikuach nefesh*, is that saving a life takes precedence over other obligations. Israel has many programs using CRISPR, a gene-editing technology, to develop products such as lettuce with increased nutritional content, high-protein chickpeas, and technology to reduce sugar in drinks. To apply the principle of *pikuach nefesh* to these GMOs, CRISPR can be considered a way to save lives by improving health benefits in common foods and encouraging continued development of GMOs.

The second principle, *bal tashchit*, forbids senseless waste and environmental harm. In the context of GMOs, this commandment can be understood in two opposing ways: either permitting modification when it prevents food waste, or condemning gene editing itself as a form of environmental harm. Rambam (Hilchot Melachim 6:8) clarifies that the prohibition applies only to destruction without an additional constructive purpose. Cutting down one tree



to preserve others, he writes, is not wanton destruction and is therefore permitted. His interpretation suggests that technology designed to prevent waste accords with *bal tashchit* rather than violating it.

Several Israeli innovations reflect this reasoning. Scientists have genetically edited bananas to stay fresh for over a month—an application *bal tashchit* would permit, even promote, because it prevents waste. The startup Bountica develops food preservation technology that avoids hazardous materials, while Agritask uses crop data intelligence to reduce overproduction and crop failure. Each embodies Rambam's constructive reading of *bal tashchit* in modern technological form.

*Kilayim*, the third principle related to food technology, is the prohibition against mixing certain species. The most common examples are *sha'atnez*, when wool and cotton are sewn into the same article of clothing, and crossbreeding

a horse and donkey to create a mule. These prohibitions are commonly understood as helping preserve the natural distinctions in Divine creation. These halakhot suggest that certain forms of genetic engineering that take DNA from multiple species may be *kilayim*.

In Israel, one agricultural innovation is the pomelit, a grapefruit-pomello hybrid. However, some rabbis do not consider this *kilayim* for a couple of reasons. First, it does not seem to fall under the category of *kilei ilan*, grafting different species, since many *poskim* consider the closely related varieties of citrus to be members of a single species. Second, because the pomelit is a new creation, it is not explicitly forbidden in the Torah in the same way that *sha'atnez* or planting grain seeds in a vineyard are. Grafting trees is forbidden by the rabbis, not by the Torah, so there is a degree to which some modern authorities rule leniently in these cases. Ultimately, this is a *makhloket* (disagreement) with rabbis arguing on both sides.

The fourth principle, *shomrei adamah*, is that of human stewardship over creation. God commands Adam in the Garden of Eden that, along with his dominion over the flora and fauna in the Garden of Eden, he has a complementary responsibility to “till it and tend it” (Genesis 2:15). Jews extend this obligation to care for God’s gift and creation to the earth as a whole. This category encompasses the related principles of *bal tashchit* (previously discussed) and *tikkun olam*, repairing the world. Modern halakhic thinkers consider environmental sustainability as a religious obligation of *shomrei adamah*.

With this understanding, Israel’s genetically engineered crops enable humanity to care for the environment while also providing food security. Israel is over 60% desert, and rainfall in the Negev Desert is minimal. While Israel has developed efficient techniques—most notably

drip irrigation, which delivers water directly to plant roots—they have also genetically modified crops to require less water. For example, Tel Aviv University genetically engineered tomatoes that require 50% less water, enabling cultivation in arid regions like the Negev.

The fifth and final principle is *kashrut*. The laws of *kashrut* apply to all of Israel’s food technology, from lab-grown meats to 3D printed foods. Developers design these technologies in close collaboration with rabbinic authorities to ensure compliance with *kashrut*. Most contemporary rabbis rule that genetically modified foods do not violate the laws of *kashrut*. Israel’s Chief Rabbi, David Baruch Lau, ruled Aleph Farms’ lab-grown meat kosher because it is compliant with dietary laws. Remilk, a company that produces milk using cow proteins without animal products, was certified as pareve (neither meat nor dairy); Rabbi Lau’s logic is that while it tastes like real milk, it uses no real cow cells and can therefore be eaten with meat meals—a significant advantage. In a final case, hens genetically modified to only produce female chicks have generally been deemed kosher because only their DNA is edited, rather than combined with other species; consequently, their eggs are considered standard eggs.

As Israel continues to develop new food technologies, *halakha* provides a framework for evaluating these innovations from an ethical viewpoint. Through the principles laid out above, Jewish law not only allows, but encourages responsible genetic modification, as long as it is environmentally sustainable and enhances human well-being. In this way, *halakha* continues to guide ethical decision-making in the twenty-first century.

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# My Qur'an Chevrotah

By Avi Friedman



Recent events have not exactly made Jews enthusiastic about interfaith dialogue. If anything, they have made many of us more suspicious of engagement and less interested in being told that our deepest disagreements can be smoothed over by “holding space” for the other side and attending a couple of panel discussions. I understand that instinct, and sometimes it wins the day for me. However, my personal approach to politics has always been to understand opposing narratives as best I can. It can be both refreshing and valuable to hear those with different viewpoints explain themselves when they are not being filtered through my own camp. That principle has taken me to some strange places, from chatting with Russian ultranationalists on Telegram to attending a Zohran Mamdani victory party. Not because I agree, but because I think it is difficult to fully understand and definitively reject a point of view without seeing how its adherents think.

Last year, I noticed that an article calling for interfaith dialogue drew significant backlash from segments within the Jewish community. “Fair enough, given the circumstances,” I thought; we have a right to take a step back in light of everything going on. Still, the article’s

challenge to engage lingered with me. That summer, I happened to be discussing Islam with Shlomo, a former NCSY advisor and friend. On a whim, I jokingly suggested a ‘Qur’an Chevrotah’—one thing led to another, and we soon had biweekly midnight study sessions. Part of what made the learning work was that we came to it from different angles: Shlomo was more skeptical and contrarian, while I was more interested in understanding Islam’s internal logic and narrative.

The late hour was due to Shlomo being in Israel and having an all-day yeshiva schedule. Given that the two of us are both Jews, this might not count as true interfaith dialogue, but it still was an honest attempt to engage with Islam and encounter it on its own terms. I have to say that Shlomo and I made a great duo. His years in yeshiva formed a strong Judaic knowledge base and outlook that complemented my more academic, historical, and analytical approach.

We’ve been using Gabriel Said Reynolds’s *The Qur’an and the Bible: Text and Commentary*, which puts the Qur’an alongside related Jewish and Christian texts. For example, a Mishnaic passage from Masechet Brachot that may help explain when to start Ramadan or an

early Christian story about one of the Roman emperors. We chose this edition to provide familiar material in what we expected would be an otherwise foreign landscape, but to our surprise, there was considerable overlap between the Tanakh and the Qur'an. Beyond the large narrative parallels with stories we knew from *Bereishit*, both books share the idea that anonymous charity is the highest form of giving and that God does not test people beyond their capacity (2:286).

I can't deny that there were quite a few passages in the Qur'an that I, as a non-Muslim—and especially as a Jew—found problematic. Beyond verses that are horrifying from a humanistic perspective (such as 4:34, which instructs husbands to beat their wives to prevent disobedience), others directly target Jews. For starters, Muslim theology holds that the Tanakh was corrupted over the years (2:75, 4:46, 5:13, 5:41, an idea known as *tahrif*) and that God sent Muhammad as the final prophet to sort things out (33:40). The Qur'an likewise tells its adherents to kill enemies of Islam (9:5, 9:29, 2:191, 8:39), labeling the Jews in particular as having gone astray, distorted scripture, and shown hostility toward Muslims (5:82 calls them “the most hostile”; see also 2:65, 5:60, 9:30).

We couldn't simply try to rationalize those verses, nor could we view them as representative of the whole religion. We drew inspiration from how Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks addressed violence in religious texts: “If religion is perceived as being part of the problem, then it must also form part of the solution.” Therefore, we treated those verses as what Rabbi Sacks would call “hard texts”—verses that, if taken literally and applied directly, can lead to animosity—which meant reading them as real and troubling, but not as self-explanatory or as the whole religious doctrine.

Since starting the chevrotah, I've hoped to find a practical application for what I've learned. My opportunity for interfaith dialogue came last December, when I connected on LinkedIn with Mansoor Laghari, a Pakistan-born U.S. Army veteran and anti-extremism advocate whose work focuses on Jewish-Muslim relations. We

had constructive conversations over text and Zoom about religion and politics. What stood out about Mansoor was that he was trying to build something more serious than the usual vague talk of coexistence, based on the recognition of religious differences and the need to move forward for the common good.

Mansoor invited me to join his organization, the Global Youth Unity Project, as a founding member. GYUP is still in its earliest stages, but its basic premise was compelling because it attempted to answer what I saw as the central questions in interfaith dialogue: how do you build relationships without brushing aside religious differences as secondary or minor, and how do you fight extremism without reducing everything to a PR battle? GYUP's mission is to bring youth of all religions together through dialogue, education, and collaborative projects, while countering religious hate, especially antisemitism, and radicalization. What interested me beyond the youth-centered approach was that this was one of the first groups I had found where interfaith work was discussed not as a feel-good volunteering activity, but as something with real moral and political stakes.

For me, that was where the Qur'an chevrotah took on practical significance. Up to that point, the project had been two Jews reading Islam's foundational text late at night and trying to understand it without sanitizing it. In GYUP, I found myself in conversation with Muslims, Christians, Hindus, and Jews, trying to build something across religious lines. The value of the learning was not that it fully sorted out the tough parts of Islamic theology or that it turned me into an interfaith idealist. It was what made the conversations more serious. I was no longer approaching Islam as a headline, a stereotype, or a political issue. I had already spent months reading its text closely enough to recognize both the overlap and the hard edges, and that made actual dialogue feel less abstract and more honest.

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# What Punk Taught Me About Being Jewish

By Sara Lim

Peering at the stage through cigarette smoke, purple-tinted by the overhead lights, I glimpse a figure stepping forward. Clutching a cloth garment, whose angular geometric patterns I immediately recognize, the figure proudly announces, “This scarf means a lot to me, to *us*,” and ties the checkered keffiyeh around his neck. Movement ripples through the crowd—heads nodding, the collective exhale by people who, in this moment, feel unimpeachably righteous. Behind him, across the wall, the words, “FREE PALESTINE, END APARTHEID” claw their way out of the chaos: white letters pressed over layers of paint, peeling stickers, and smears of green that had once been posters and graffiti. The words stand out like a flash of neon in the dim haze—not quite a banner, not quite a shout, but something that cannot be ignored.

We are below street level, in a New Jersey basement venue where people gather to sing, dance, and listen to visceral, outspoken music. The walls sweat. The floor shakes. It is, in every physical sense, a place built for the dispossessed. It promised radical inclusivity and liberation for the marginalized. Yet, the feeling rising in my chest is not new. Jews have stood in rooms that did not want them for thousands of years and have walked out the other side carrying something that could never be confiscated: the insistence on remaining, on creating.

Raised on the mournful sway of klezmer and the raw dissonance of Russian post-punk, a culturally alternative Jew by upbringing and instinct, I have always been drawn to the counterculture ethos. Growing up within a predominantly Christian

community, I found in the subculture a space for creative expression and freedom. Punk’s defiance of authority, challenge to dominant narratives, and habit of building community at the margins naturally resonated with my life as a Jew in the Diaspora.

The Hebrew idea of *chutzpah*—audacity before authority—is more than a cultural quirk; it’s a survival instinct honed through centuries under regimes that demanded Jewish silence. The modern world’s artistic rebellion was shaped by that same refusal to bow before power. When the children of postwar Europe and America looked into the void left by the Shoah, they found the same fire—an urge to speak, to shout, to refuse obedience. Early punk’s raw defiance was no accident. Punk was born in the mid-1970s in New York and London—three chords, a scream, and a deliberate rejection of everything polished and powerful. It gave voice to those the mainstream had discarded and turned confrontation into an art form.

Its generation matured in the Shoah’s shadow, inheriting not only unimaginable loss but the collapse of the ideals that were supposed to prevent such an ineffable tragedy. When humanity’s promises failed so completely, nihilism filled the void. Punk gave that grief a pulse. In the aftermath of October 7th, many young Jews feel that old rupture. Once again, the myth of enlightenment fractures, revealing itself not as eternal truth but as performance—sustained only while it serves power.

Punk taught me that silence is always a choice. After October 7th, I encountered a silence that was harder to name, a silence Jews know well,



and punks have long recognized—the quiet that follows when a community decides which pain is acceptable and which is inconvenient. It is that dynamic—the conditional welcome, the tolerance with an expiration date—that defines the experience of Jews in countercultural spaces today.

The answer may lie not in abandonment but in reclamation: drawing on our own radical traditions, remaining at the center of these politically complex places, and recognizing that the punk spirit of questioning, creating, and resisting has always been part of our DNA. Reporting this piece pulled me closer to the scene and my Judaism alike, proving that redirection is not retreat—it is renewal. In the conversations I sought out, the shows I attended, and the stories I chose to follow, I found myself not just documenting a community but reckoning with my place in it.

So, what does the punk ethos offer Jews today? I believe it can be a catalyst for innovation, for exploring new ways of existing within those spaces as both a Jew and a punk.

My Judaism has often found its truest expression not in doctrine, but in belonging—in the warmth

of a creative, confident, and singular collective that mirrors the counterculture communities that first shaped me. It was in a synagogue that I discovered the comfort of shared spiritual life; it was in a music venue that I was first invited to inhabit myself fully, to speak without words in the way I moved through the world. Both spaces offered the same essential gift: the freedom to exist without apology, to bring your whole, unguarded self into a room and be received.

Rabbi Gavriel Goldfeder, a Jewish studies professor and self-described lifelong rock star sees the two communities as sharing a single, beating heart: allowing young people the “permission to experiment, to wonder, to create, to emerge, and often to rage.” What unites them, in his words, is a quality of “depth, realness, honesty, curiosity, and contact,” that rare, electric aliveness that refuses to be flattened, and that lies at the core of how a person truly becomes themselves.

My identity within these spaces, though sometimes threatened, is not so fragile as to be undone. It is sustained through connection—through finding the kindred spirits who understand that to be fully Jewish and fully punk is not to live in contradiction, but in completion. When Joey Ramone screamed into a microphone and when a yeshiva student pounds the table to prove the Rambam wrong, they are doing the same thing. It is the same deeply Jewish tradition that runs from Talmudic disputation straight through to the great muckraking journalists who believed that no power, no narrative, and no mob consensus is ever too sacred to interrogate. These two parts of me do not compete; they compose. One without the other would leave something essential incomplete. As Rabbi Goldfeder puts it: “Punk [is a] vision—expand! Try new things! Be you!” For someone who has always lived at the intersection of ritual and rebellion, this vision feels like home.

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# The False Choice Between Jerusalem and Athens

By Zac Geminder

**J**erusalem versus Athens. Faith versus Reason. Science versus Religion. The narrative is always the same: opposing philosophies too different to ever synthesize. Often, the impression one gets is that they must choose between the two. Athens claims that knowledge comes from reason and skepticism, while Jerusalem places its trust in a higher order beyond human understanding. And because Jerusalem cannot be proven in the same way as Athens, it is often dismissed.

Yet, there are moments where these systems of knowing intersect, and, as the Rambam argued, true wisdom comes not from choosing between them, but using Jerusalem and Athens together in harmony. Over the last century, as science has advanced exponentially, certain discoveries have supported stories in the Tanakh. It begs the question: what if science has been quietly proving the Torah right all along?

For centuries, the rise of science felt like the slow erosion of religious belief. The Enlightenment elevated reason and skepticism as the highest order of understanding and dismissed anything that could not be empirically verified. People were forced to make a choice: logic or belief. Darwin's theory of evolution contradicted Genesis, and Freud called religion "a collective illusion." When the French philosopher Pierre-Simon Laplace was asked by Napoleon where God was in his model of the universe, he famously replied, "I have no need of that hypothesis." For centuries, people relied on God as the answer for the mysteries in this world, but when those mysteries had answers in

science, belief in God became obsolete. Science was not competing with religion; it was replacing it.

Despite this, there is reason to believe that science does not contradict, but explains the awesome events described in the Torah. One such example is in Genesis, when Lot and his family flee Sodom. They are commanded not to look back, but not everyone can resist the temptation:

וַתִּבֶּט אִשְׁתּוֹ מֵאַחֲרָיו וַיִּהְיֶה נֹצֵיב מֶלַח:

"Lot's wife looked back, and she thereupon turned into a pillar of salt" (Genesis 19:26).

Today, a salt pillar lies on Har Sedom, long identified with this account. The Roman-Jewish historian Flavius Josephus was the first to claim to have seen it himself, writing of the episode:

"But Lot's wife continually turning back to view the city as she went from it, and being too nicely inquisitive what would become of it, although God had forbidden her so to do, was changed into a pillar of salt; for I have seen it, and it remains at this day" (*Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 1, Chapter 11).

Beyond this physical evidence of this event, there are also scientific parallels to the next part of the story. After they escape the miraculous divine destruction, Lot and his daughters run to the hills and huddle in a nearby cave. The Dead Sea is surrounded by some of the longest salt caves in the world, aligning with the Torah.

More significantly, a 2021 study published in *Nature Scientific Reports* identified a cosmic airburst that occurred in Jordan around 3,600 years ago. A cosmic airburst is when a meteoroid or comet enters Earth’s atmosphere and disintegrates, producing intense heat and shockwaves. This heat can vaporize surrounding materials, releasing sulfur-bearing minerals from the meteorite—literal “fire and brimstone.” This is exactly how the Torah describes the destruction saying:

וְהָהָרַיִם יָרְדוּ עַל-סֹדֹם וְעַל-עֲמֹרָה גִפְרִית וְאֵשׁ מֵאֵת ה' מִן-הַשָּׁמַיִם:

“GOD rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah sulfurous fire from GOD out of heaven” (Genesis 19:24).

Both the scientific paper and the Torah speak of the same event through different lenses. One through a more miraculous view, and the other scientific.

Another instance when science has proved the Torah is the most famous set of miracles: the Ten Plagues. They are often dismissed as scientifically impossible, yet when examined closely, can be understood through a chain of natural events. Research by epidemiologists John S. Marr and Curtis Malloy, along with Duncan Hoyte, suggest that the plagues may have begun with a bloom of dinoflagellates, microorganisms known for causing “red tides” that discolor water and kill aquatic life. According to the study, this caused the frogs to leave the Nile. Consequently, lice and gnats (specifically the *Culicoides* species) took over the lands. The fourth plague (wild beasts) included swarms of insects, and epidemiologists identified stable flies as the most likely species that attacked the Egyptians. Diseases caused by the stable flies and gnats could have then spread to the cattle. When the flies bit humans, they resulted in boils. The seventh, eighth, and ninth plagues were a hailstorm, locust swarm, and dust storm, respectively, all common natural events at the time in Egypt. Even the death of the Egyptian firstborns has been interpreted through naturalistic causes. In ancient Egyptian society, oldest sons were often given priority



access to food. If that food had been contaminated by toxins produced during earlier ecological disruptions, they would have been the most exposed. Once again, science does not disprove the events of the Torah; it provides a possible mechanism for them.

Make no mistake, to explain is not to diminish. Explanation does not remove wonder, and the same is true today. Miracles are happening all around us. The danger in becoming too focused on the how is that we forget to ask why. Right now, it is important to notice the miracles around us; even if they can be scientifically proven, they are still miraculous. True wisdom, as the Rambam understood, is knowing that Jerusalem and Athens are not contradictory. Science and faith are both tools to see the world more clearly—a reminder that understanding how does not replace asking why.

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# American Art: An Expression of the Life of a People

By Joey Bender

In his 1923 book *The Art Spirit*, American artist and teacher Robert Henri observed that “Art is the expression of the life of a people.” Henri’s principle, expressing the significance of art, remains integral to understanding American nationhood and its global impact. As the United States approaches its 250th birthday and the public celebrates great American contributions to the world, many forget American art. From fashion to theater, painting, music, dance, and beyond, American art must be recognized for shaping national identity, for revolutionizing culture, and for echoing new movements both domestically and across the globe.

One of the earliest demonstrations of American art reflecting broader social ideals emerges in the birth of American autonomy vis-à-vis colonial art. Reflecting its society, 16th and 17th-century colonial art was characterized by European artistic styles—most notably, the dramatic grandeur of the Baroque, which flashed European wealth and authority. Given that colonial artists brought the framework of European culture with them to the New World, their work exposes how, initially, American identity at large was limited to British subordination. The dependency on British cultural norms formed colonial America’s stylistic choices. Their European-styled art was the physical result of a politically, legally, and culturally derivative people. For instance, John Smibert’s 1729 portrait of Francis Brinley (now



on display at The Metropolitan Museum of Art), portrays Brinley sporting typical London fashion, and sitting in a European aristocrat’s pose. Yet Brinley was a colonial American official in his own right, something that cannot be discerned as he merely mimics English noblemen in this artwork.

The decades leading up to the American Revolution marked a turning point that produced a new generation of colonial artists who forged a distinct style: one marked by balanced dignity, simplicity, Neoclassicism,

and realism. Artists such as John Singleton Copely, known for his portraits of figures like Paul Revere (featured above), rejected European excess and aristocratic ideals, embracing a culture of stark contrast. Their art elevated honest and humble American professions and glorified practicality. In doing so, the artists concretized a new sense of American pride, autonomy, and civic virtue. These painting choices contributed to the creation of new and enduring American symbols that evoke national unity and pride to this day, including the bald eagle and the American flag.

Thus, art operated in two ways simultaneously: as political propaganda and as a cornerstone of an emerging and distinct American identity. In fact, according to American historian David McCullough, “The Revolution was as much about ideas as it was about action.” That is, the new American morale and culture, inspired by ideas made tangible and popular through the arts, defeated the British philosophically. Patriotic paintings, literature, and theater empowered colonial soldiers and the war effort, reminding them of what they were fighting for and inspiring them to victory.

However, Henri’s claim that “art is the expression of the life of a people” rings true in moments of triumph as well as in hardship. For instance, in the ‘Roaring Twenties,’ American art, taking the form of materialism in fashion, Jazz music, and dance, lulled the nation and world into a false sense of economic security. The art gave the impression that America’s period of prosperity could last forever, only to be devastated by the 1929 stock market crash and Great Depression.

Today, art is nationally accessible like never before in terms of available materials, education, and public galleries and museums. In cities, murals coat every corner, graffiti is ubiquitous, people dance in endless TikToks, and buskers serenade the public. In a generation of polarized social and political divides, art can be the common ground for people who otherwise clash. Individuals who disagree on social and political dilemmas can still attend the same concerts, adore the same street art, obsess over the same book series, and enjoy the same Broadway shows. The accessibility of art in public spaces and online contributes to a cultural scene that unites rather than divides Americans.

As for the American future, will we again turn to art to strengthen and reignite love for our national identity? Or, just like a century ago, will we hide behind our art to avoid deeper crises? Will our painting styles, fashion trends, and street art elevate our American reality or mask it? As our beloved country turns 250 years old, we hope to tap into our Revolutionary roots and embrace the rich history of American art. In doing so, we could create something fresh yet still containing the old colors of American pride, brush strokes of civic virtue, and themes of perseverance.

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“מים לאֲדָרָךְ כְּנִיַת בְּרֵשֶׁם. לְהַרְגִיעַ בְּרַעְפָּם לְנַפְוֵי נַשְׁם.  
לְהַחְיֹת מִזְפִּירִים גְּבוּרֹת הַגֶּשֶׁם:” (תפילת גשם)

מחוץ למולדתי, אני מברכת את הגשם כשהוא מפסיק לרדת, והמילים נושאות ודאות שקטה של שייכות.

בגיל שמונה, עליתי לארץ עם משפחתי באמצע האביב. הכרתי לראשונה את ארץ ישראל דרך טיולים ארוכים בפארק שנצבע אדום בכלניות, ואחרי הצהריים חמים בשמש הרותחת. את רוב הקיץ ההוא ביליתי בהליכות לאורך החוף. אספתי צדפים ומילים, והרגשתי את הרוח המלוכה של הארץ מחבקת אותי.

ואז, כשהתחילו הלימודים, ישבתי כמה שעות בכל יום באולפן, יחד עם שאר ילדי העולים. היינו מאיתים מילים חדשות, שרים שירים בעברית, וכותבים סיפורים קצרים על חוויות היום-יום שלנו. בסתיו, יצאנו לטיולים בבוסתן בית הספר, במשימה לתת שם לכל מה שיכולנו לזהות: חילוון, פטריות, ציפור זמיר, טיפות של גשם.

ביום סתיו קריר במיוחד, רב בית הספר קרא לכולנו לחצר באמצע השיעור. קפצנו בהתלהבות ורצנו אחריו, נרגשים

לגלות מה יש לו להראות לנו. פתאום, מצאנו את עצמנו עומדים בגשם, מבולבלים מתחת לעצי הזית, וכולנו השתקנו כשהחל לחוש לנו על משמעות הגשם.

“ילדים יקרים, אנחנו עדים ליורה, הגשם הראשון של העונה בארץ ישראל. זהו רגע משמח במיוחד בשנה, וסימן של ברכה בארץ. מאז ימי ישראל העתיקה, העם היהודי התפלל לקדוש ברוך הוא שהגשם יזין ויטפח את הארץ, וגם אנחנו ממשיכים את המסורת הזו בתפילת העמידה. בעונה זו, אנו מתחילים להלל את ה' באמירת 'משיב הרוח ומוריד הגשם'.”

חזרתי על המילים האלה לעצמי: הרוח והגשם. בפעם הראשונה, המילים שלמדתי בנפרד התגבשו לדבר שלם ובעל משמעות. הן כבר לא היו מרוחקות – הן קירבו אותי למסורת בת דורות וחיברו אותי לשורשיי. כאשר הגשם ירד והרוח הסתחררה באוויר, הקשבנו לרב שקרא לנו פסוקים מתפילת הגשם, והרגשנו שלוה מסוימת; צלילי העברית נשמעו בעדינות והדהדו סביבנו. עכשיו חוויתי את הגשם הקדוש והוחזקתי בו, וחשתי זכות לשבח את מה ששמר על אדמת ארצנו.

במקסיקו, הארץ שבה אני גרה כיום, עונת הגשמים נמשכת ממאי עד אוקטובר, ומסתיימת בדיוק כשהגשמים הראשונים יורדים בארץ הקודש. מאז שעזבתי את ישראל, אני פונה בשקט למזרח ומברכת את הגשם שיורד מרחוק, והברכה נושאת זיכרון עמוק של מולדתי.

בשיר השירים, הדובר קורא בקול לאהובתו: “כִּי-הִנֵּה הַסֶּתֶו, עָבַר; הַגֶּשֶׁם, חָלַף הַלֵּף לֹ: הַנְּצַנִּים נָרְאוּ בְּאֶרֶץ, עַת הַזְמִיר הִגִּיעַ” (2:11-12). לאחר עונת הגשמים בישראל, פסוקים אלה מעוררים התחדשות, חזרה, ושינוי לקראת האביב. הם שייכים לארץ, שם כלניות שבות לצמוח וצדפים נשטפים אל החוף באור השמש. הם מתעוררים לחיים בדיוק כשהשמיים מעליי מתכסים שוב בעננים אפורים.

כולנו מחפשים שייכות ומכוונים את עצמנו אליה— לעתים באור הזריחה ולעתים בלחש השקיעה. יש מי שמוצא אותה בין אחרים, בחדר תוסס ומלא חיים; יש מי שמוצא אותה במקום שקט ובודד. בשבילי, היא נמצאת בגשם—גשם שמלווה אותי ברגעי אושר ופוגש אותי כידיד ישן ברגעי געגוע, נוכח בשיחה שקטה ונושא אותי הלאה.

“*With water You symbolized Your might in Scripture, to soothe with its drops those in whom was blown a soul, to keep alive the ones who recall the strengths of the rain.*”  
(Prayer for Rain)

Outside my homeland, I praise the rain when it ceases to fall, the words carrying a quiet certainty of belonging.

When I was eight, my family made Aliyah in the middle of spring. I first encountered Israel on long walks in the park colored red by poppies, *kalaniyot*, and hot afternoons in the blazing sun. I spent the majority of that summer walking up and down the beach, picking up seashells and Hebrew words along the shore, and feeling embraced by the salty wind, *ruach*, of the land.

Then, when school started, I would spend a few hours each day with fellow *olim* in *ulpan* classes, learning Hebrew. We would spell out new words, learn Hebrew songs, and write short stories about our day. In the fall, we went on outings to the school orchard, finding and naming anything we could spot: a snail,

*chilazon*; mushrooms, *pitriot*; a songbird, *tzipor zamir*; and raindrops, *tipot shel geshem*.

On a particularly cool fall day, our school rabbi called us all out into the yard in the middle of class. We jumped out of our seats enthusiastically and ran after him, excited to see what he had to show us. Bewildered, we found ourselves standing in the rain under the olive trees, and we all fell silent as he began to whisper to us the significance of the rain.

“Dear children, we are witnessing the *yoreh*, the first rain of the season in *Eretz Yisrael*. It is an incredibly joyful moment in the year and a sign of blessing in the land. Since the days of ancient Israel, the Jewish people have prayed to God for rain to sustain and nurture the land, and we, too, continue this tradition in the *amidah*. In this season, we begin to praise God as He who ‘makes the wind blow, and the rain descend,’ *Mashiv HaRuach U’Morid HaGesem*.”

I repeated those words to myself: *ruach*, the wind, and *geshem*, the rain; for the first time, words I had learned in pieces became something whole, filled with purpose. They were no longer distant; they drew me closer to a tradition passed down through the generations, connecting me to the roots of my inheritance. As the rain fell and the wind whirled through the air, we listened to the rabbi read verses from the Prayer for Rain, and we felt a kind of serenity as the Hebrew words flowed out, reaching out to greet us softly. I had now lived through the holy rain, been held by it, and felt honored to praise what has sustained our land.

In Mexico, where I now live, the rainy season runs from May through October, ending just as the first rains begin in *Eretz Hakodesh*. Since leaving Israel, I turn silently eastward and praise the rain that falls from afar, the words of the blessing carrying a living memory of my homeland.

In *Shir HaShirim*, The Song of Songs, the speaker calls out to his beloved: “For now the winter is past, The rains are over and gone / The blossoms have appeared in the land, The time of

pruning has come” (2:11-12). Following the wet season in Israel, these verses evoke renewal, return, and a shift into spring. They belong to the land, where poppies begin to grow, and seashells wash up upon the sunlit shore; they come to life just as the clouds above me once again darken and gray.

We all seek belonging and orient ourselves toward it; at times, in the light of sunrise, and at times in the whisper of sunset. Some find it

among others, in a lively room; some find it in a solitary space. I find it in the rain, which takes me through moments of joy and greets me like an old friend in moments of longing, present in quiet conversation, carrying me forward.

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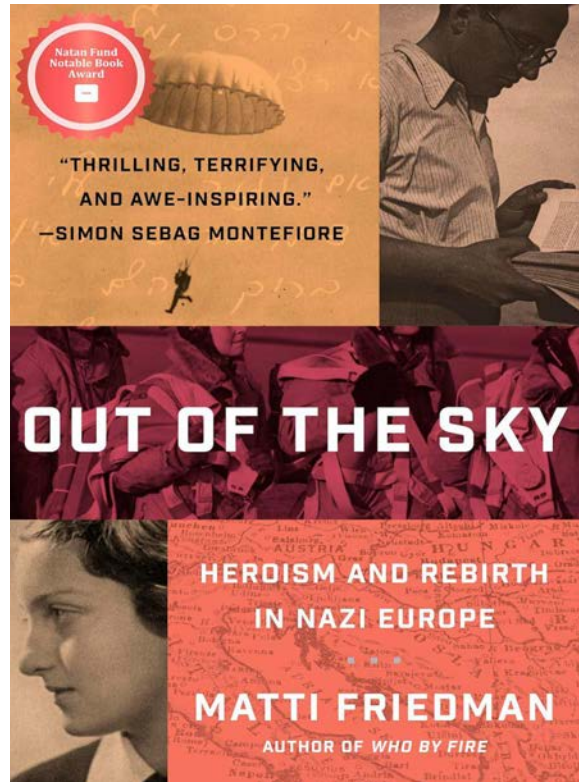


# *Out of the Sky: Heroism and Rebirth in Nazi Europe* by Matti Friedman

Review by Benny Marmor

**E**ver since I first heard the name Hannah Senesh in a seventh-grade Hebrew class, I've been fascinated by her story. At the time, it wasn't her poetry that captivated me, but the way she exemplified commitment to the Jewish people. Armed with the Hebrew she taught herself from a Bible she bought in Hungary, she moved to Mandatory Palestine before World War II to lay the groundwork for a new state. Once the war began, she returned to Europe as a paratrooper in the hopes of aiding the Jews of her home country. Ultimately, though, she was captured and killed by the Nazis and their Hungarian collaborators. Her independence and fortitude drew me to her story, and when I began teaching myself Hebrew, I used her poems as a resource. When I saw that Matti Friedman had published *Out of the Sky: Heroism and Rebirth in Nazi Europe*, to document the stories of the paratrooper group to which Senesh belonged, I eagerly picked up a copy, hoping to learn more about these volunteers.

To begin, it is essential to acknowledge that Friedman's work is not a mere history. He begins by declaring that his goal is to write a "true account of my journey into [the parachutists'] story," to understand why their legacy continues to captivate thousands. Ultimately, Friedman argues that, despite their minimal tactical success or military victories, the paratroopers' achievement lies in the power of their example. They showed a nation long removed from history how to rejoin it, proving



that individuals could once again be active participants in the Jewish story.

Starting with Haim Hermesh, whose memoir *Operation Amsterdam* is a foundational source, Friedman follows four of the thirty-two paratroopers who jumped into Europe, interspersed with his own journey through the continent in the present day. Although historical records are sometimes sparse, Friedman uses his travels as material for his own reflections,



elevating the book and giving meaning to the historical narrative. These reflections are rarely ponderous; rather than interrupt the narrative, they supplement it, challenging the

reader to move beyond the myth they already know. Friedman's use of the present tense for the historical narrative while writing about his reflections and the myths derived from the paratroopers' story in the past tense is brilliant. Aside from making the reader feel closer to events nearly a century old, the use of the present tense capitalizes on our ongoing fascination with the story overall.

Throughout the book, Friedman seeks to find what motivated these volunteers to risk their lives in Nazi-occupied Europe when they knew they would likely make little impact. To many of us, their decision seems absurd. This question is amplified by the distance (both temporal and circumstantial) between the modern reader and the paratroopers. Friedman's guidance through the remnants left by these heroes serves as a bridge, allowing the reader to feel closer to these legendary figures. Some of the most memorable scenes occur when Friedman shows us the soldiers attempting to answer this very question. Repeatedly, though they came to recognize the futility of their task, they rarely grappled with their choices in the writings they left behind. As our guide, Friedman tries to fill that gap, using scraps of diaries, poems, and interviews to color the internal motivations of these soldiers.

One of these soldiers, Enzo Sereni, renounces pacifism in his diaries. Friedman uses these entries to shed light on Sereni's decision.

"Is it always true, he now wonders ... that 'the call for such sacrifice is always a deception foisted by people with dark motives on naive idealists in order to use them as tools in the hands of evil and corrupt forces?' No, he [Sereni] sees now. There are causes worth dying for."

Friedman then pairs this quote from a diary with descriptions of Sereni from those who knew him to argue that he was motivated to do so because he was an "apostle":

"The story he wants to tell is enacted, not written. This quality brings to mind another great Italian, Francis of Assisi: 'You must preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary use words.'"

This is classic Friedman, relying heavily on historical sources, while using his own interjections to hammer his portraits home and contribute to characters that are just as much our own creations as they are historical figures.

Thus, Friedman continues by exploring his other three "characters"—Haim Hermesh, Haviva Reik, and Hannah Senesh. He shows how their mission wasn't just about military objectives, but crafting a story for the future. They hoped that later generations of Jewish youth would have a narrative to look back on to strengthen them as they "look out into the night" (a night that could feel overwhelming and never-ending in the Jewish experience) and push them to "grip the sides of the door and jump."

As I read this, I found that the ability to identify with these figures living the most extraordinary of lives was the most meaningful aspect of this book. Although the paratroopers were a diverse group, many were quite young, and reading how they contributed to the Jewish people was particularly poignant for me as I reflect on how I want to combat our own generation's challenges and grow into an age of Jewish communal responsibility. For this reason, *Out of The Sky* is an especially valuable read for young readers. It reminds us that Jewish history is marked by extraordinary individuals, and we must ultimately decide how best to carry on their legacy.

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*Benny Marmor lives in Saint Louis Park, Minnesota, and attends the Breck School.*

# A Conversation with Dr. Naya Lekht on the Hidden History of a “Respectable” Hatred: Soviet Antizionism

By Claire Ambinder Kanner

**D**r. Naya Lekht is a leading scholar, educator, writer, and lecturer on contemporary antisemitism, Zionism, and the Holocaust. She is the creator and host of the podcast “Don’t Know Much About,” which discusses contentious historical, geopolitical, and political topics. She is living proof that history is not a museum—it is a conversation we are still having with the past. What follows is our conversation, edited for clarity.

*An additional note to readers: in the interview below, the Solomon Journal has adopted the spelling “antizionism,” instead of the more commonly used “anti-Zionism.” This is intentional, and in line with the historical framework that Dr. Lekht has developed through her scholarship.*

*According to Dr. Lekht, Jew hatred has evolved throughout history and can be divided into three eras: “antijudaism,” which accused Jews of killing Jesus (deicide); antisemitism, which racialized hatred of Jews; and today’s iteration, antizionism, which attacks the Jewish people as oppressors and colonizers, rejecting their collective identity and right to self-*

*determination in their ancestral homeland.*

*Spelling “antizionism” as one word is meant to reflect this historical continuity of Jew hatred, a different strain of the same “antisemitism” virus. Both antisemitism and antizionism are distinct and identifiable forms of Jew hatred.*

*Because this interview directly examines how language shapes public understanding, this intentional spelling of antizionism is an extension of the discussion. Keeping antizionism consistent with antisemitism underscores Dr. Lekht’s argument that this phenomenon should be recognized, named, and understood with the same seriousness.*

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**Claire Ambinder Kanner:** Could you take us through the evolution of antizionism, particularly its roots in the Soviet Union, and how it emerged as a veil for deeper animosities and as the newest version of Jew-hatred that has spread like wildfire in recent years?

**Naya Lekht:** Antizionism was not simply a spontaneous political position. It was



deliberately engineered by the Soviet Union as a way to disguise hostility toward Jews and Israel as ordinary political debate.

Its roots actually stretch back to the early 1900s. In 1903, Vladimir Lenin was already writing angry essays denouncing “Zionists” as enemies of socialism. Then in 1918, the Soviet government created Jewish Sections, known as the *Yevseksiya*, whose purpose was to dismantle Jewish culture, close synagogues, and suppress Hebrew education. By the 1960s, this campaign became more sophisticated. A 1963 book called *Judaism Without Embellishment*, by Trofim Kichko, recycled classic antisemitic stereotypes, which embarrassed the Soviet government internationally for being too obvious with its hatred. So, they pivoted: instead of overt Jew-hatred, they began promoting “antizionism,” presenting it as a legitimate political critique while keeping the same animosity against Jewish people beneath.

**CAB:** How did the Soviets make antizionism

appear acceptable, even moral, while insisting that antisemitism was wrong?

**NL:** They achieved this through a clever rhetorical trick. Soviet leaders always paired their attacks on Zionism with public condemnations of antisemitism. This created the illusion that one could fiercely oppose Zionism without being anti-Jewish. For example, in 1971, the Soviet newspaper *Pravda* published an article called “Zionism: The Weapon of Reaction.” The author, Viktorovich Bolshakov, claimed that antisemitism was a “bourgeois racial ideology” unfit for socialism, but that Zionism was a political tool of capitalist powers.

Similarly, a 1974 article in *Kommunist* described antisemitism as hateful and outdated, while portraying Zionism as a reactionary movement serving Western imperialism. This false separation allowed the Soviets to persecute Jews while claiming the moral high ground. It’s one of the most effective propaganda strategies



of the 20th century, what Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan later called “the world’s most powerful propaganda apparatus.”

**CAB:** You describe antizionism as “the most sophisticated form of anti-Jewish bigotry.” Why do you consider it more dangerous or clever than older forms of antisemitism?

**NL:** Traditional antisemitism was usually easy to recognize. It involved explicit racial or religious hatred. Antizionism, on the other hand, was designed to appear reasonable. It used political language instead of racial language, replacing “the Jews” with “the Zionists.”

By framing Israel as a “colonial apartheid project,” the Soviets cleverly linked their campaign to existing Western guilt about slavery, racism, and imperialism. This allowed many Western intellectuals, especially those on the political left, to transfer their self-criticism about colonialism onto Israel. As I have written, Israel became an effigy for Western guilt: by

condemning Israel, people could feel morally pure without confronting their own societies’ flaws.

**CAB:** You mentioned that this focus on Israel blinds people to real suffering elsewhere. Could you explain what you mean by that?

**NL:** Yes. Because antizionism trains people to see Israel as the ultimate symbol of injustice, it distorts moral vision. In my classroom, when I mention the Uyghurs, a Muslim minority in China facing forced labor and imprisonment, many students respond, “The what? How do you spell that?” It’s not their fault; it just shows how public attention has been misdirected. There are over eight million Africans enslaved today and countless victims of persecution in places like Nigeria and China. Yet many Western activists devote all their energy to condemning Israel. Antizionism demands total fixation on one target, resulting in blindness to other global atrocities.

**CAB:** Could you tell us more about the connection between Soviet antizionism and earlier forms of antisemitism from the 19th century?

**NL:** Certainly. The Soviet manipulation of language reminds me of an earlier moment in history when Jew-hatred was “modernized.” In 1879, a German writer named Wilhelm Marr coined the term “antisemitism” to give Jew-hatred a scientific and respectable sound. In his pamphlet *The Victory of Judaism Over Germandom*, he described a supposed racial struggle between “Semitic” and “Teutonic” peoples.

Marr’s version was still openly anti-Jewish: he didn’t try to hide it. The Soviets took this wordplay much further. They created antizionism precisely to conceal the hate. It was not just rebranding prejudice; it was weaponizing language to confuse reality.

**CAB:** So why did Soviet antizionism manage to recruit some Jewish voices, when Marr’s antisemitism did not?

**NL:** Because the Soviets presented antizionism as something moral and progressive. They claimed it was not about race or religion, but about politics and social justice. That framing made it appealing, or at least confusing, to some Jewish intellectuals who already supported Marxism and internationalism.

The Soviets also deliberately sought Jewish participation to give their campaign credibility. In 1983, they established the Antizionist Committee of the Soviet Public, composed mostly of Jewish members. This allowed them to say, in essence, “See? Even Jews agree, antizionism isn’t antisemitic.” It was a brilliant piece of deception. Of course, most Soviet Jews rejected it and became “refuseniks,” fighting to emigrate. But a few willing participants helped the propaganda seem legitimate.

**CAB:** How did this ideology spread beyond the Soviet Union to influence the West?

**NL:** The Soviets exported antizionism across the globe through newspapers, international

conferences, and the United Nations. In 1975, their influence helped pass the infamous UN resolution declaring that “Zionism is racism.” This message resonated strongly in the West, where guilt over colonialism and racism was widespread.

As a result, antizionism became not just an attack on Israel, but also a vehicle for self-criticism of the West. It turned Western self-hate outward, toward Israel and Jews. And that’s why, decades after the Soviet collapse in 1991, its influence still shapes campus discourse, activism, and media coverage today.

**CAB:** You have mentioned that debating whether antizionism is antisemitism plays directly into the propaganda trap. Could you explain that?

**NL:** Absolutely. The endless question over whether antizionism is antisemitism was built into the Soviet strategy itself. It keeps people busy arguing definitions instead of recognizing the hate beneath them. For instance, there have been numerous high-profile debates, such as the 2024 Munk Debate in Toronto with Natasha Hausdorff and Douglas Murray [against opponents Gideon Levy and Mehdi Hasan], that start by defining “Zionism.” That mirrors how Wilhelm Marr once tried to define “Semitism” to make his hatred sound rational. Both tactics distract from the simple truth: they are debates about whether hating Jews in a certain form is acceptable.

The solution is to stop debating the definition and call antizionism what it is: a sophisticated hate movement rooted in propaganda.

**CAB:** You have also written that antizionism, like all forms of Jew-hatred, is built on a “cycle of libels.” What exactly do you mean by that?

**NL:** A libel is a harmful lie told about a group of people to justify maltreatment. In the past, there were blood libels, which falsely claimed Jews used Christian blood in rituals, or accusations that Jews controlled the world’s money. Antizionism works the same way; it spreads new libels.

Once those lies are introduced, they follow a predictable pattern. First, the targeted group, Jews in this case, is stigmatized, made to look evil or dangerous. Then society starts to exclude them: kicking them out of spaces, conversations, or communities. Finally, that exclusion can turn into violence. It's a cycle that always ends the same way, no matter what the specific lie is.

**CAB:** Why do you think people keep falling for these kinds of libels, even today?

**NL:** Because the lies change shape, but the emotional effect stays the same. Each generation thinks it's talking about something new, whether it's "race" or "Zionism," but the pattern of blaming Jews for the world's problems never goes away. Propaganda also makes these lies feel morally justified. People believe they're standing up for justice when, in fact, they're spreading hate disguised as politics or activism.

**CAB:** If the libels keep changing form, how can we stop this cycle?

**NL:** The key is to identify the pattern rather than argue about each claim. When we try to "debunk" every lie, like proving Zionism isn't racist, we're already playing the game that propaganda created. The lies aren't meant to be logical; they're meant to isolate Jews. Instead, we need to recognize the cycle itself. The



moment we see a community being accused of evil in broad, emotional terms, we should ask: "Is this another libel starting to spread?" Once people can see that mechanism at work, it loses much of its power. Awareness breaks the cycle; argument feeds it.

**CAB:** Thank you so much, Dr. Lekht. This has been incredibly informative and eye-opening.

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*Claire Ambinder Kanner lives in New York City and attends Lycee Francais de New York.*



# Never Again

By Lea Levy

“Never again, never again,” they repeat  
We won’t be so blind, so dumb, so weak  
“Never again, never again,” will the future be so bleak.  
Eighty-one years later, we are still living in the heat  
Of insults, attacks, and hate, whenever we cross the street.  
“Are the signs the same?” we shriek  
Will we have to flee because being Jewish isn’t chic?  
New style, same deceit.

Yet since 1948, we shall not fear  
Having a country, proud and strong when  
The again comes near.

Fills our lungs as we scream, women and men,  
We will never be victims as long as Israel is here  
Never again, never again, never again.

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*Lea Levy lives in Beverly Hills,  
California and attends  
Beverly Hills High School.*



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