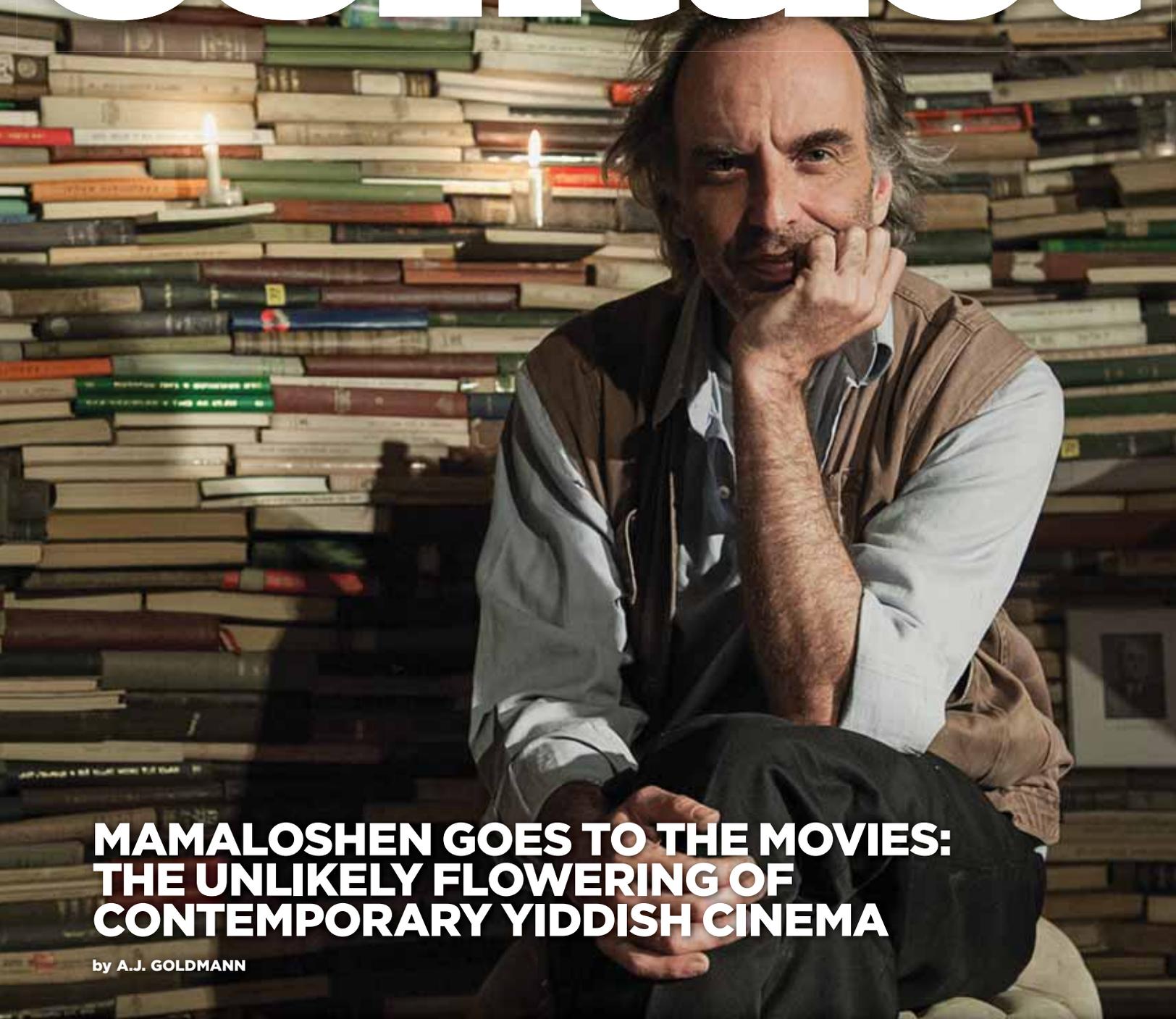


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## MAMALOSHEN GOES TO THE MOVIES: THE UNLIKELY FLOWERING OF CONTEMPORARY YIDDISH CINEMA

by A.J. GOLDMANN

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The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life is dedicated to strengthening and transforming American Jewish Life to ensure a flourishing, sustainable community in a fully integrated free society. We seek to revitalize Jewish identity through educational and cultural initiatives that are designed to reach out to all Jews, with an emphasis on those who are on the margins of Jewish life, as well as to advocate for and support Hebrew and Jewish literacy among the general population.

Cover photograph courtesy of Mendy Cahan by Maximilian Norz. Unless otherwise indicated, all other photographs in this issue appear courtesy of contributors.

**T**he Summer issue of CONTACT features fascinating forays into the languages and landscapes that have deepened contemporary Jewish experience. For our lead article, A. J. Goldmann investigates the surprising re-emergence of Yiddish in contemporary cinema. Far from its monolithic perception as a language of ghosts, Yiddish has reemerged in films in a spectacular gamut of styles, themes, periods, and approaches.

The issue then pays tribute to Dr. Alan Mintz, whose untimely passing this Spring stunned the world of Jewish scholarship and academics. Rabbi David Gedzelman offers personal reflections and reminiscences of Dr. Mintz's rigorous approach to Hebrew literature and language, and we reprint Dr. Mintz's thoughts on Hebrew and Jewish Peoplehood first published in CONTACT nine years ago.

CONTACT then visits two communities maintaining tradition while embracing change. David Ian Klein reports from the small, cohesive community in Ahmedabad, India, where Jews are building on two millennia of Jewish and local communal traditions. Rabbi Michael Cohen gives an insider view of The Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, where people from around the world gather at a kibbutz to work for the imperatives of peace, mutual understanding and environmental sustainability. In our Profiles Section, we visit three Jews making waves in music, secularism and Orthodoxy. Ari L. Goldman then revisits the first and last Chief Rabbi of New York City, from a time when kosher butchers had collective clout that might be unthinkable today. Finally, we present the colorful and kinetic paintings of Joel Silverstein, which reflect a community brimming with culture, history, tradition, and humor.

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Still from "Menashe," courtesy of the Berlin Film Festival.

# MAMALOSHEN GOES TO THE MOVIES

## THE UNLIKELY FLOWERING OF CONTEMPORARY YIDDISH CINEMA

by A.J. GOLDMANN

Every few years UNESCO issues a report, "Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger." In this year's edition, Yiddish is listed as "Definitely Endangered." As dire as that sounds, that's still not as bad as the fate of other languages that are said to be "Severely Endangered," "Critically Endangered," and — the kiss of death — "Extinct."

But even as it finds a place on the endangered list, Yiddish is being preserved as a living language in ultra-Orthodox precincts like Williamsburg and Monsey in the U.S. and Bnei Brak and Jerusalem in Israel. The history and use of the language is also being studied and chronicled in places like YIVO in New York City and the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Mass.

But Yiddish might have one other savior: the movies. Yiddish is making a modest but

consistent comeback in a variety of new films, both at film festivals and in general release. The latest of these is called *Menashe*, the story of a 38-year-old grocer, a Hasidic Jew, who fights to retain custody of his son following his wife's death. It shouldn't come as a surprise if *Menashe* becomes the first Yiddish non-Holocaust film to achieve moderate art-house success. It's full of compassion and pathos. In Yiddish.

What is striking about *Menashe* is that it was written in English and translated into Yiddish for the shoot. The filmmaker, Joshua Z. Weinstein, is a secular Jew who does not speak Yiddish. One scholar calls this translation effort "transvernacular" and it is something that is the new reality for most of contemporary Yiddish cinema.

When it comes to this genre of film, *Menashe* is just the tip of the new Yiddish iceberg. Over the past few years we have probably heard more Yiddish in movie theaters than at any time since World War I. Between 1911 and 1950, hundreds of Yiddish films were released. That was followed by a 60-year dry spell that was broken in 2010 by Joel and Ethan Coen's *A Serious Man*, which

opens with a curious 10-minute-long parable entirely in Yiddish.

The following year, 2011, there were at least two Yiddish entries, both by women directors: *Romeo and Juliet in Yiddish*, by Eve Annenberg, and *In Darkness*, a film about Jews hiding in Lvov's sewer system during World War II, by Agnieszka Holland. There was even a web TV series in Yiddish called *YidLife Crisis* that debuted in 2014. Capping the mini-revival of Yiddish was *Son of Saul*, directed by Laszlo Nemes, which won the Oscar in 2016 for best foreign film. The film, which takes place in a Nazi death camp, is technically in Hungarian, but many languages — including German, Hungarian, French, Russian, and Greek — are spoken by the frightened and confused prisoners. In the end, Yiddish accounts for roughly 70 percent of the film's dialogue.

How *Son of Saul* became so heavily Yiddish was something of a journey. The script, by Nemes and Clara Royer, was originally written in Hungarian, and later translated into Yiddish and the other languages not native to the writers. This transvernacular process — a term

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**A.J. Goldmann** is an American journalist and writer based in Berlin. His articles on European art, culture and German-Jewish issues have appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *The New Republic*, *USA Today*, *The Forward*, *Gramophone* and *Opera News Magazine*.



"Son of Saul," via Films Distribution.

applied by Rebecca Margolis of the University of Ottawa — is the primary mode in which Yiddish films are made nowadays. In an excellent article that appears in *In Geveb*, the online journal of Yiddish studies, Margolis claims that transvernacular Yiddish represents a new chapter in Yiddish film history.

"In this new mode, Yiddish appears as a fluently spoken language produced by, and for, non-fluent Yiddish speakers," she writes. Through such a process, she continues, Yiddish becomes "readily available to meet the artistic vision of the filmmaker."

"It's a relationship of big trust and understanding that must be between the director, the scriptwriter and the consultant," explained Mendy Cahan, a Yiddishist who served as language coach on *Son of Saul*. Speaking by Skype from his cluttered office at the YUNG YiDiSH Living Museum on the fifth floor of the Tel Aviv Central Bus Station, Cahan, a Belgium-born Israeli in his mid-50s, described his task on set: "What we tried to do was to give all kinds of different patinas of Yiddish: Moldavian Yiddish, Transylvania Yiddish; sounds which have been lost."

Between puffs of his cigarette, Cahan explained that the varieties of Yiddish spoken were tailored to both the artistic needs of the film and of the actors. "We weighed and measured the words, based on their sound, their shortness, on the rhythm of things. Also, because we worked with different actors who come with different linguistic landscapes, let's say, in their body. So I also worked with adapting the Yiddish to that. For instance, if we had someone from Czechoslovakia, we tried

to make him speak Moldavian Yiddish, which would suit his way of speaking more than, say, Litvish" — Lithuanian — "Yiddish."

Currently, Cahan is acting in an Austrian production, *Murer: An Anatomy of a Trial*, about Franz Murer, the Nazi known as the "Butcher of Vilnius," who was acquitted after a weeklong trial in Graz in the 1970s and died at a ripe old age in the Alps. In the film, Cahan plays one of the witnesses at the trial. "To use Yiddish in a German-speaking film is actually quite nice, because people can understand it directly and still it's different," he muses. "They know it's a Jew speaking, and they feel also a sense of what they don't hear on the streets anymore." That sentiment echoed the curious experience I had of watching *Der Dybbuk*, the classic 1937 Yiddish horror film, at the Berlin Kinemathek several years ago. The surprisingly full German (non-Jewish) audience at the screening chuckled through the ghostly melodrama in mirthful recognition of the familiar vocabulary and the off-kilter grammar. To quote the old joke: After all, everyone knows that German is just poorly spoken Yiddish.

For American and Israeli audiences as well, there seems to be a long-established view of Yiddish as a perfect vehicle for comedy, a perception that Mel Brooks, Woody Allen, *Seinfeld*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and the Coen Brothers have done much to reinforce. One of the first occasions on which mainstream film audiences encountered Yiddish post-World War II was *Blazing Saddles* (1974), which memorably featured Brooks as a Yiddish-speaking Indian chief.

This view of the Yiddish language as

inherently funny has been challenged, if not subverted, by several recent Israeli productions. In Daniel Rosenberg's *Homeland*, a 2008 short film that is freely available on the Internet, two Holocaust-survivors-turned-Israeli-soldiers meet on a remote desert hill at the height of the 1948 War of Independence. "In Israel, when you hear Yiddish in a film, you assume it's a comedy, because Yiddish feels like something faraway and irrelevant to them," Rosenberg told *The Forward's* Rukhl Schaechter. "So at every screening I attended, when Tiran" — the main actor, Itay Tiran — "in the first scene, answered the commander with the word 'Vus?' ['What?'], everyone laughed. But after the first five minutes, they weren't laughing anymore."

"I think what happened in the last [few] years is that there is more space, somehow, for Yiddish," Cahan tells me, referring specifically to *Shtisel*, the popular Israeli TV show, mostly in Hebrew, about a fictional Hasidic family in present-day Jerusalem. "The fact that they use Yiddish-language idioms creates a sense of authenticity that the Israeli public really appreciates," he continues.

In his role as consultant, he mentions that he's been contacted recently by a number of film students. "They put Yiddish into their scripts because they feel it's part of a world, a culture, a collective subconscious. To use this language gives you permission to do certain things," Cahan explains, adding that the language can open a window onto a different culture. "It's a kaleidoscope to a lost world, or to part of the world that we know and don't know."

Yiddish language, Yiddish culture — even Yiddish civilization — as something that we

both know and do not know, can help generate artistic meaning. “It’s interesting to work with the viewer, with known and unknown languages, the levels of connectivity and distance that this language evokes,” he adds. At the same time, he points to a challenge, if not a danger, inherent in the transvernacular mode, to refer back to Margolis’s term.

“Sometimes it is hard to find the right translators because of such a gap of spoken Yiddish and authentic Yiddish,” he explains. “There are many in our generation who have studied from textbooks and lack the spoken plasticity of the language, which is extremely important.”

Authentic Yiddish, which was of paramount importance to *Son of Saul*, couldn’t be further from the intentions of Jamie Elman and Eli Batalion, the comedic geniuses behind the web TV series *YidLife Crisis*, which first aired in 2014. The popular show, which has been described as “the first Yiddish-language sitcom,” features the two creators quarreling — in a kind of pigeon Yiddish — about Jewish identity in a secular world, while walking around their native Montreal. Despite the frequent profanity — much of which is creatively rendered both in Yiddish and in the English subtitles — their sparring takes on a Talmudic character.

Each episode of *YidLife Crisis* opens with a warning that appears over a black screen: “The following contains references to adult situations and coarse language. In Yiddish.” Adult circumcision, S&M, gay Hasidim — nothing is off limits for Elman and Batalion.

“People rightly associate Yiddish with being an old and dead or dying language and we wanted to bring it into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. People wouldn’t

expect to see us breaking the Jewish laws and doing it in Yiddish,” the creators explained in an interview with a Montreal television station that Margolis quotes in her study. Neither Elman nor Batalion is a native Yiddish speaker. In the show, they speak a highly individual, idiomatic Yiddish that spills over with neologisms from English and French-Canadian.

Margolis points out how many of the more recent Yiddish productions have been sparing in their use of language, possibly due to difficulties in the transvernacular process. One of the remarkable things about *YidLife Crisis*, which plays fast and loose with Yiddish, is just how much of the show is talk. In an interview with *The Jewish Journal*, Batalion explained that the show strives for homage rather than authenticity. “It’s like putting on your dad’s jacket,” he said. “It allows us to pay tribute and be like our elders, but doesn’t fit exactly the same way.”

“Imagine the world exactly like it is, except everyone speaks Yiddish and no one explains why,” Batalion offered by way of explaining his show’s premise. Such a world would seem neither surreal nor absurd — and certainly not funny — to the characters in Weinstein’s feature film debut *Menashe*, which is set in a Hasidic community in Borough Park.

A sparse, serious melodrama, *Menashe* premiered at this year’s Sundance Film Festival and was later screened at the Berlin Film Festival. Shooting your first film in a dead language that you have only a passing knowledge of sounds borderline crazy. But for Weinstein, the gamble paid off. In the process, he has practically created a genre of his own: call it Hasidic kitchen-sink realism.

A far better film than either *Romeo and Juliet in Yiddish* or *A Gesheft* (2005), a Yiddish action film set in Monsey that remains, to date, the only film made by *Haredim*, or ultra-Orthodox, for internal consumption, *Menashe* represents a definite advance in contemporary Yiddish cinema.

In 2010, the film scholar Eric A. Goldman was one of the first critics to recognize the potential for the regeneration of Yiddish cinema. In an article for *The Jewish Standard*, he mused, “Who knows? Maybe one day a Yiddish film will win the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. If a Yiddish writer could win the Nobel Prize for Literature,” — a reference to Isaac Bashevis Singer, who won the coveted award in 1978 — “why not an Oscar for a Yiddish film?”

Six years later, Goldman’s prophecy came true when *Son of Saul* took home the Academy Award for Foreign Film. Cahan, the film’s dialogue coach, says there’s no reason to think Yiddish should be confined to films about the Holocaust or the Ultra-Orthodox.

“I think that much can still be done,” he tells me after giving me a virtual tour of the YUNG YiDiSH Living Museum, where a stage is set up for a concert and performance that evening.

“I dream of a beautiful historical film in Yiddish, for instance, that would take place in the 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> Century, and it could play itself out in Amsterdam, in Venice, in Prague. Or you could set it in the 1930s, in pre-War Vilna, and you could have people from Warsaw and from Ukraine, where all these different Yiddishes come together and are alive,” he grows animated as he outlines his vision. “It would be beautiful to live to see such a thing.” ■



Courtesy of “YidLife Crisis.”

**D**R. ALAN MINTZ, Chana Kekst Professor of Hebrew literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, passed away unexpectedly, at the age of 70, on May 20<sup>th</sup>. The shock of Alan's death is still pointedly raw for his family and friends as well as for the larger Jewish community. His death is also a loss to the enterprise of moving forward the possibilities of Hebrew in America.

Alan was a champion of the Hebrew language and its literature. Besides being personal friends, Alan and I were able to share our passion for Hebrew in our work together as members of the founding group of the World Zionist Organization's Council for Hebrew Language and Culture in North America. Alan had proposed to the council the idea of creating Hebrew festivals (each known by Alan's proposed title as a Hagiga Ivrit) across the country, which became a reality in New York and other cities in 2015 and 2016. I had the honor of chairing the New York festival and felt inspired by Alan's vision.

In the Spring of 2011, Alan contributed to *CONTACT*'s issue dedicated to the theme of Hebrew in America, where he highlighted his then soon-to-be published book *Sanctuary in the Wilderness: A Critical Introduction to American Hebrew Poetry* (Stanford University Press, 2011). In that book, Alan sought to right the wrong of an historic Israeli lack of regard, or any kind of recognition, for the American Hebraist and literary contribution to Modern Hebrew literature and language in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Alan was concerned at the time that the enterprise of Hebrew in America not be exclusively judged or gauged by the reality of Hebrew language as experienced and developed in Israel. American Hebrew could not be Israeli Hebrew, Alan argued in the *CONTACT* article, and by seeing our achievements in Israeli terms, we do ourselves a disservice. Alan felt that an emphasis on oral proficiency in the Hebrew language was overblown for Americans and that American Jews were better served to emphasize literacy skills and a knowledge of Hebrew literature. Those of us who championed the adaptation of the Proficiency Approach for second-language acquisition to the Hebrew language in that issue of *CONTACT*, most notably Dr. Vardit Ringvald, found ourselves emphasizing a different focus from the perspective Alan highlighted in those same pages.

In an article written this past April for *Mosaic* magazine, however, Alan embraced the terms of the Proficiency Approach, seeing a focus on proficiency rather than fluency as far more helpful for thinking about his own path of learning and

mastering Hebrew in an ongoing way. He wrote about the four kinds of language skills (understanding, speaking, reading, and writing), essential to the thinking behind this approach, and he expressed appreciation for the use of the term "near native" speaker as being more helpful for his own sense of himself as a Hebrew speaker and for Americans wishing to master Hebrew in general. He wrote of an appreciation for the identification of a range of skill levels for language proficiency, which is a clear characteristic of the Proficiency Approach. Of course, Alan wrote about oral proficiency in the Hebrew language in the context of the mastery and internalization of Hebrew literature rather than as an independent goal unto itself.

When I read Alan's article this Spring, I could not help but recall that a year earlier I had given Alan and his wife Susannah a tour of Harlem Hebrew Language Academy Charter School in Manhattan, a prime example of the use of the Proficiency Approach in Hebrew. A little while back I had helped Alan find resources in order to complete the publication of a robust and monumental critical translation of S.Y. Agnon's *A City in its Fullness* (The Toby Press, 2016). I had one rather tongue-in-cheek condition for finding the resources: Alan would owe me a trip to Harlem Hebrew to see the Proficiency Approach for teaching the Hebrew language to children of all backgrounds at work with his own eyes. We had been respectfully debating these matters of Hebrew language learning for some time, and I hadn't previously been successful in getting Alan to visit the school. Now was my chance. Alan and Susannah thoroughly enjoyed their visit and Alan expressed appreciation for what he saw in the most gracious terms. He wrote to me afterwards, "As a Hebraist I was deeply gratified to hear and see Hebrew being used so naturally — and culturally."

Alan's earlier concern had been that Hebrew teaching and learning not be reduced to a technical methodology devoid of Hebrew's cultural breadth and legacy. He did not want the adoption of general language-acquisition practice to Hebrew to entail stripping Hebrew of its uniqueness and rich particularity. He was gratified to see that just because one teaches Hebrew in a public school where religion could not be taught or practiced, that kind of diminution need not be the case and graciously showed appreciation for how we had been able to teach kids of all backgrounds to use Hebrew "naturally and culturally."

It's not only that Alan Mintz was a champion of the Hebrew language, but that his exhaustive knowledge of the language and its literature as well as his singular seriousness of purpose inspired his colleagues towards imagining new possibilities and not giving up hope. We can honor him by redoubling our efforts to celebrate Hebrew in its fullness. ■

This essay by Alan Mintz is reprinted from the Spring 2008 issue of CONTACT.

# SEVEN THESES ON HEBREW AND JEWISH PEOPLEHOOD

by ALAN MINTZ

**1.** Hebrew is the deep structure of Jewish civilization. Hebrew accumulates meanings in an alluvial sense, never becoming depleted. The disused meanings of terms are retained and held in potential simultaneity with the meanings that have usurped them. When Zionist farmers needed terms for their agricultural work, the *realia* of Mishnah were there to be mobilized. *Ve'ahava* contains the arc of divine love as mandated in the *Sh'ma* as well as the psychological reticulations of the modern experience of love. The fact that *bitahon* can turn in the direction of either trust in God or military security tells us something about the protean potential of Hebrew. In short, Hebrew provides a plastic medium in which the contradictions and subversions of Jewish culture can be negotiated.

**2.** Hebrew, in far more than a figurative sense, is the unitary key to Jewish culture. It is the incredible — one might say miraculous — fortune of the Jewish People that its ancient language and its modern language lie within close conversational distance from one another. A Jew who can read a poem by Yehuda Amichai can understand large sections of Genesis, and vice versa. It is the “vice versa” of Hebrew that makes it such a powerful tool. The fact that one key can open so many doors is a strong argument for concentrating our resources on finding ways to make the acquisition of this key more widely attainable.

**3.** “Knowing Hebrew” is a modular, rather than an all-or-nothing, enterprise. Even if one knows some aspects of the language, there are great gains to be derived in access to the treasury of Jewish texts and cultural referents. So, for example, if one has not mastered the Hebrew verb system

but has learned to recognize the permutations of some of the key three-letter verb stems — say, *ts.d.k.*, *z.kh.r.* or *y.ts.r.*, one is in the exciting position of suddenly seeing how the permutations of these roots interlace to create the fabric of Jewish thought.

**4.** The enormous outpouring of translations from classical Hebrew sources is cause for both celebration and consternation. On the one hand, this phenomenon represents an admirable democratization of Jewish learning; on the other, it conduces to a belief that the Hebrew original is simply an obstacle to be overcome as well as a medium for messages that can be better, or at least more rapidly, understood in English. There is virtually no sense of the sacrifice and renunciation — however necessary they may be — inherent in the reliance on translation. Translation that acts as an adjutant to understanding the original is a far cry from translation that effaces the original.

**5.** Hebrew is a potential bridge between the observant and non-observant communities. This proposition is self-evident in Israel, where Hebrew is the shared linguistic medium; even in the Haredi world, Hebrew has increasingly become the standard for daily life. To be sure, this commonality often serves only to underscore the radically divergent experiences of the two communities. At the same time, however, as a portal of return and reconnection for Israelis who wish to explore their Judaism, Hebrew provides the kind of automatic access that is largely absent in Diaspora Jewish life. Yet even within the parameters of American Jewry, Hebrew remains — and is gaining ground, especially as manifest in textual proficiency — as a key marker of profes-

sional achievement in Jewish education, the rabbinate, the cantorate, and academic Jewish Studies across all denominational lines. Lay leaders increasingly recognize that knowing Hebrew is an essential goal, even if they often regard it as one beyond their attainment.

**6.** Hebrew is a potential bridge between Israel and the Diaspora. The asymmetry is stark: Almost all literate Israelis know English; very few literate American Jews can manage a sentence in the Jewish national language. Yet anyone who has learned even *some* Israeli Hebrew knows that it goes a long way toward granting access to the inner struggles of Israeli society beyond the media — and fundraising — images. There are possibilities of reciprocity, as well. The Hebrew of American Jews tends to be a mixture of the Hebrew of the prayerbook and Torah study and Israeli conversational practices — so that when we speak *our* Hebrew, however haltingly, we enact the richness of our Jewish identities in conversation with our Israeli brethren.

**7.** Hebrew, finally, is a point of consensus among the contentious and divergent parties in Jewish life. It is protean in its prestige, being not necessarily religious and not necessarily secular and definitively fused with Israel. Even if this prestige is often only lip service, the unexploited potential of this moral capital is enormous. For there are so very precious few sancta of Jewish life that cut across so many boundaries and maintain such a high level of acceptability. The protean nature of Hebrew is no conceit. Hebrew is the joystick of Jewish life, and it can be pushed in a number of directions to enrich and accelerate substantive Jewish identity. ■

# KABBALAT SHABBAT IN KHAMASA: THE JEWS OF AHMEDABAD

by DAVID IAN KLEIN



**AHMEDABAD, INDIA** — On a Friday springtime evening in the old bazaar in this busy city in India's western state of Gujarat, the sounds of Hebrew prayer drift out of the open doors of the Magen Abraham Synagogue. The sounds quickly get lost amid the congested byway, mixing with the calls of street vendors hawking their wares and the chug-chug of auto-rickshaws making their way through the streets. But the Hebrew prayers are a sound worth paying attention to. They come from the only synagogue in the entire state of Gujarat.

With a population of more than 5 million, Ahmedabad is the fifth largest city in India. The state of Gujarat, whose northwest corner borders Pakistan and whose peninsula juts out into the Arabian Sea, boasts more than 60 million people.

Compared to those numbers, the Jewish community of 140 is just a tiny drop. Nonetheless, the community frequently manages to get a *minyan*. On this particular night, 14 local Jewish men — 10 percent of Ahmedabad's Jewish community — plus three foreign guests turned out to welcome the Sabbath with a spirited *Kabbalat Shabbat* service.

Despite the isolation of this community, *Kabbalat Shabbat* in Ahmedabad doesn't look much different than it does in Conservative or Modern Orthodox synagogues elsewhere in the world. There is no *mehitzah* separating men and women, but

the two female guests who came for Friday night services sat on the other side of the aisle. While the community has *siddurim*, courtesy of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, the service is much like it was laid out in the 16th Century when it was established by Kabbalists in Tzfat.

Worshippers swayed back and forth during the *Amidah* prayer. At one point, a prayer was sung to

the tune of *Hatikvah*, the Israeli national anthem.

After the closing of the *Ma'ariv* service, some hints of the Indian Jewish tradition were more evident. One unique feature of Indian Jewish communities is the veneration of the prophet Elijah to an extent well beyond the level of other diaspora communities. The men lined up after *davening* to kiss the synagogue's Chair of Elijah and then stood before the ark, where they said their own personal supplications in a way not dissimilar to puja, a daily personal prayer practiced by Hindus.

"We are Indians and there is an Indian effect on us, naturally there should be," said Benson Enoch Argwarker, a member of Ahmedabad's Jewish community.

Argwarker laments that most of his generation does not speak Hebrew. One man serves as *chazan* for all of the community's needs, whether it is Friday night *davening*, weddings, bar mitzvah, or funerals. However, Argwarker is hoping to change that. The *chazan* has organized a class on Sundays which is attended by members of the community of all ages. Four young boys from the class have even become fluent enough in Hebrew to *daven* and read from the Torah for the community. "He is doing it out of love for the community and love for the synagogue," said Argwarker.

Ahmedabad's Jews are part of a community that has been native to the Indian subcontinent for nearly two millennia. Though there are many distinct Jewish groups in the country — the result of several periods of migration to the Indian subcontinent — there are three main groups. Cochin Jews, who came to the city of Cochin in Kerala possibly as far back as biblical times; Baghdadi Jews, who fled Iraq in the 1700s; and the Bene Israel community, who make up the majority of Ahmedabad's Jews. According to tradition, the first Bene Israel Jews arrived in India in the wake of the Second Temple's destruction, on a ship that wrecked off the coast of Maharashtra. There they stayed, settling in villages and later in the city of Mumbai.

Unlike the Jewish centers of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, Jewish life in India was relatively peaceful for thousands of years. "We as Indian Jews very proudly say that, until this date there has been no discrimination, no anti-Semitism, no persecution against Jews in India. Perhaps the only country in the world," said Argwarker.

Khamasa, the neighborhood around the synagogue, is a picture of diversity and tells the story of that spirit of tolerance. Across the street is a Zoroastrian fire temple. Around the corner is Ahmedabad's Jama Masjid, or grand mosque, and only a little farther away are a Christian church, a Hindu mandir, and a Jain temple.

Jews first rose to prominence in India in the oil pressing industry. The lore about them is that

they would not perform their trade on Saturdays, which paradoxically gave them a nickname. "Saturday in Marathi is called Shanivar, so they came to be known as Shanivar telis, Saturday oil pressers," explained Argwarker.

Bene Israel Jews first came to Gujarat from the Maharashtra coast in the mid-19th Century and most still speak Marathi in the home rather than Gujarati, the local language. With the arrival of the British in India, Jews became prominent in the British army, and followed the construction of British railroads to Ahmedabad.

The Magen Abraham Synagogue was built in 1934 and was named after Dr. Abraham Erulkar, one of the first Jews to come to Ahmedabad and the father of Solomon Erulkar, who put up the money for the project. It is an Art-Deco-style building and rises high above the surrounding houses and shops. The women's balcony on the second floor, no longer in use, harks back to a time when the community was much larger.

In the late 1940s there were over 30,000 Jews in all of India, according to a study by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee that assesses the world Jewish population after the Holocaust. However, with the end of British rule in 1947 and the establishment of the State of Israel less than a year later, mass migrations led to a steep decline in the country's Jewish population. Today there are only about 5,000 Jews in India, 3,500 of whom reside in Mumbai, according to the Jewish Virtual Library. In contrast, there are over 80,000 Jews of Indian descent who reside in Israel, according to *The Times of India*.

When asked why a small remnant chose to remain in Ahmedabad, Argwarker explained, "We have been born and brought up here. Our culture, of course we call it Judaism, but when we go and settle down in Israel we feel culturally uprooted."

Over their 2,000 years in India, Jews have flourished if not in number then in business, civic engagement, and the professions. The community of oil pressers became soldiers and later early stars of Bollywood cinema, such as Sulochana, a silent film actress whose birth name was Ruby Myers. In Ahmedabad, Jewish community members are heavily involved in education, and many work in English schools in Ahmedabad such as the Nelson's and Reubs Higher Secondary Schools, which both have Jewish principals. In addition, Ahmedabad's beloved zoo and natural history museum was established by Reuben David, and one of the leading scholars in the study of Sanskrit in India was Esther Solomon: both Ahmedabad Jews who were awarded India's Padma Shri award for their contributions.

"Yes, we have problems, we are not sure what the future has in store for us," Argwarker said, "but we are keeping the torch of Judaism burning in this corner of the world." ■



**David Klein** is a freelance journalist based in New York. He was raised in the Washington, D.C. suburbs and holds a bachelor's in anthropology from Drexel University and a master's in journalism from Columbia Journalism School.

# ARAVA:

## LEADING FROM THE GROUND UP

by RABBI MICHAEL M. COHEN

In June 1965, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. gave the commencement address at Oberlin College. There he taught, “All I’m saying is simply this, that all life is interrelated, that somehow we’re caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. You can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the inter-related structure of reality.”

With echoes of Hillel (“If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, who am I? If not now, when?”), King reminds us existentially we are not alone, we must act, and our actions do not happen in an isolated vacuum.

Mitigating climate change, the promotion of renewables, addressing food and water scarcity, strengthening women’s rights, working towards

border environmental discourse and cooperation, regardless of political conflict.

There are two paths to the Arava Institute. One is to be a student for a semester or full year, the other is to come as an intern and work in the Institute’s many transboundary Research Centers, including the Center for Renewable Energy and Energy Conservation, the Center for Transboundary Water Management, and the Center for Sustainable Agriculture. The Arava Institute experience is multifaceted and includes environmental leadership training, peacemaking skills, environmental education, kibbutz and desert living, and some would say modeling the best of Zionism. Of the many sub-texts of the Institute, one of the most important is the opportunities it offers women of the Middle East. In addition, students and interns are given opportunities to grabble head on with the challenging and demanding issues of the conflict through our Peace-Building Leadership Seminar.

Students and interns become members of the Arava Alumni Peace and Environmental Network (AAPEN), a member-run organization that aims to build capacity for cooperative alumni initiatives, engage alumni through outreach programs, and enhance Jewish-Arab networking in the Middle East.

AAPEN members communicate regularly through social media and convene at annual meetings in Israel, Palestine, or Jordan. Through these ongoing connections, Arava Institute graduates are able to work together on innovative projects of mutual concern.

Reduced to one of its essential components, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is about land — more precisely, the borders that nations draw on the land. When we look upon the land solely as a geopolitical instrument, it is viewed as one of the major stumbling blocks to any reconciliation. However, when the land is viewed from an environmental perspective — which does not know from political borders, walls, or fences — new frameworks opens up. Dr. Clive Lipchin of the Arava Institute makes the point to look at watersheds rather than political borders. This has led to work between Palestinians and Israelis in the



less violent conflict worldwide including a just settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict, are challenges we face. They call for leadership, activists, and activism. On face value they may appear separate, but on another level they are interrelated.

For 20 years, these issues have been addressed on a kibbutz in the southern Israeli Arava desert valley along the Israeli-Jordanian border at the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies ([www.arava.org](http://www.arava.org)). The Arava Institute is an academic studies and research program located on Kibbutz Ketura dedicated to preparing future leaders from Israel, Palestine, Jordan, and around the world, to cooperatively solve the regional and global challenges of our time by advancing cross-

**Rabbi Michael M. Cohen** is the Director of Community Relations for the Arava Institute and teaches conflict resolution courses at Bennington College.

Besor-Hebron-Beersheba watershed, and to similar ideas when it comes to the Jordan River watershed. The needs of the environment, rather than disputed land (the same piece of real estate), can become a bridge between people.

For 20 years, the Institute has developed a vast transboundary network of environmental professionals, all dedicated to the belief that protection of our shared environment cannot wait for the regional conflict to be resolved. Furthermore, a growing network of 1,000 Arava alumni is continuously being added to, both regionally and globally. In 2016, the Institute formulated a new strategic vision to advance cross-border environmental agreements between Jordan, Israel, and Palestine in the face of political conflict. In light of this vision, as well as the conspicuous absence of official Track I negotiations, the Arava Institute launched a multi-national action, the Track II Environmental Forum, to promote cross-border environmental agreements between Israel, Jordan, and Palestine.

The Track II Environmental Forum enables key civil-society organizations, and individuals who represent state and non-state actors, to meet, discuss, negotiate, and develop practical cross-border strategies to facilitate formal and informal environmental agreements. Despite current regional conflicts, creating such agreements now is vital if environmental challenges are to be mitigated.

The First Annual Cross-Border Environmental Cooperation Conference was held on September 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>, 2016 at the Arava Institute, with participants from Israel, Jordan, and the West Bank and Gaza. Roundtable discussions were held during the conference on wastewater treatment and reuse, renewable energy, and climate change. These were transformed into three permanent working groups.

These working groups have been meeting on a regular basis throughout the year and all three will come together at the Second Annual Track II Environmental Forum from September 12<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup>, 2017 at the Arava Institute. As Hillel taught, “If not now, when?” At the Arava Institute, we are answering in the affirmative. ■

# THREE PROFILES

For the profiles in this issue of CONTACT, we visit three individuals charting iconoclastic avenues of Jewish expression. Whether through Yiddish rock, atheism, or Orthodox feminism, they've deepened and enriched their connections to Judaism and to the larger culture by identifying and pursuing their most heartfelt passions.

by BATYA UNGAR-SARGON

## SARAH MINA GORDON Old-School Yiddish Rocker



“If you’re interested, then you’re one of us, and it doesn’t matter where you come from or who you are,” except insofar as its diversity makes the Yiddish community all the richer.”

**Batya Ungar-Sargon** is a freelance writer living in Brooklyn.

**M**oving to New York in May of 2010 had been a long time coming. But it wasn’t until I saw the Yiddish Princess perform one rainy night that I felt I had truly arrived in my diasporic homeland.

The Yiddish Princess is a six-member, Yiddish ’80s rock band that puts Yiddish folk songs to electric guitars, drums, and synthesizers. It’s a wonderful marriage, as full of true brilliance as it is of surprise and wit. For me, though, that night was all about the band’s lead singer, Sarah Mina Gordon.

With her big, black eyes and expressive eyebrows, Gordon at center stage was somehow evocative of a silent film star, like if Clara Bow opened her mouth and Kate Bush’s haunting and wry voice came out. Watching Gordon that night, I felt like I was in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century iteration of the Weimar Republic. It felt like it had taken the entire history of the Jews to make that show possible; it was an evening steeped in the past that was also insistently a future.

Seven years later almost to the day, I sat down with Gordon in a café in Brooklyn where I learned that she comes from Yiddish aristocracy. She’s the daughter of Adrienne Cooper, a singer, pioneer, and doyenne of the Yiddish revival movement. Born in Manhattan in 1979, Gordon grew up in Morningside Heights (“It was not called Morningside Heights back then,” she noted with a smile). She went to Jewish day school, which Gordon says was a good place to develop a relationship with Jewish learning.

But it was also lacking in one crucial way. “In most Jewish

day schools, Yiddish language and culture is relegated to only Holocaust Memorial Day,” Gordon explained. “I was very confused, and also, alienated, because I had this quite rich other Jewish life that was happening concurrently with my mother.”

Gordon’s childhood home was a hub for Yiddish musicians and artists of all kinds. Sometimes, Gordon thought she would also become a musician, but the financial instability that plagued her mother’s work was a big presence in her childhood, and so after college, she looked for full-time work. One day, folding mailers at a terrible office job, Gordon decided she didn’t want to work with adults ever again. She is now finishing her 11<sup>th</sup> year teaching third grade at a Quaker School in Brooklyn. Why third grade? “It’s the best age,” she explained. “They have a foot firmly rooted in weirdo-imagination world and the other one is rooted in the academically-invested truth-seeking world.”

Meanwhile, Gordon has consistently been involved in the Yiddish music and arts scene, teaching, building community, and singing. She started the Yiddish Princess with some friends after college. “I called myself, as a joke, Yiddish Princess in the days of Myspace or Friendster, as a little play on Jewish American Princess and Yiddish American Princess,” she told me. Plus, she’s literally a Yiddish Princess, in the sense that her mother, who died in 2011, was the Queen of Yiddish.

In person, Sarah Mina is quite different than her stage persona. She’s down to earth, *interested*, as she put it. But there’s a warmth to her that’s cut by an ever-present

wryness, and I realized while talking to her that this surprising juxtaposition is as crucial to her act as is the electric guitar. Yiddish Princess is now on a bit of a hiatus. Gordon was sick last summer with Hotchkins lymphoma, and though she is in full recovery, the time away gave her a chance to re-evaluate what matters most to her. Surprisingly, it wasn’t performing.

“Performing is funny that way, in that so much of it is people experiencing you, but when you’re on a stage, you look out and you can’t see people,” she explained. “It’s so one sided,” she went on. “And I want stuff from other people. I’m *interested*.” Performing does have meaning, she clarified, but it isn’t in itself fulfilling. “It doesn’t mean I don’t like performing,” she said. “It’s just not the thing that drives me.”

What does drive the Yiddish Princess? “Community,” she said decisively. “And learning and teaching. And making new things.” Especially when it comes to Yiddish culture.

Yiddish and Yiddish culture matter, Gordon explained, because of how open they are. “If you’re invested, you’re welcome,” she explained. “If you’re interested, then you’re one of us, and it doesn’t matter where you come from or who you are,” except insofar as its diversity makes the Yiddish community all the richer. “It’s this idea of a secular Jewish identity that’s firmly rooted in politics and advocating for all people and part of that also has to do with art and has to do with music.”

All that is part of our history, Gordon said. And now, thanks in no small part to Gordon, it’s part of our future. ■

## PAUL GOLIN

# Devoutly Secular



**W**hat is a Jew? The tension between Judaism as religion and Judaism as ethnicity is one that plagues every attempt to define us. But Paul Golin wants you to know that Judaism can be neither religion nor race. It can be a civilization, as Mordechai Kaplan defined it. It can be a history. It can even be an atheistic practice. In fact, it can be whatever you want it to be.

Golin grew up Conservative on Staten Island. After college, he came back to New York and worked in multimedia, and then went on to work

for the Steinhardt Foundation, where he designed the first issue of this very magazine. “I had never heard the phrase *tikkun olam* until I started working there,” Golin remembered recently.

Not long after, Golin heard of an opening at the Jewish Outreach Institute, where he went on to work for 17 years. It was there that Golin played

an active role in changing the way the Jewish community thinks about intermarriage. “In 2000, the community was still debating the question of whether we should welcome the intermarried,” he explained. “Fifteen years later, the question was, *how* do we do it.”

The organization changed its name along the way to Big Tent Judaism, with the goal of addressing issues of inclusion that transcended intermarriage. “We realized that issues of inclusion had commonalities regardless of who the marginalized

were — intermarried, Jews of color, LGBT Jews, Jews who don’t have money,” Golin said. These marginalized groups are less likely to belong to a Jewish community or to have a relationship with their Jewishness — and it’s not an accident, either. “Any segment of the Jewish community that doesn’t look the way the organized communities thinks Jews look have lower rates of engagement,” Golin said.

According to Golin, the organized communities have a very specific image in mind of what they consider Jews to look like: married, heterosexual, white Jews with children. “But that’s less than 20 percent of the Jews!” He exclaimed. “Helping the community lose that part of the image was part of the work we set out to do.”

But there was another issue that Golin himself had struggled with his entire Jewish life, one that had always made him, too, feel marginalized from the mainstream. “I knew from age ten that I was an atheist,” he explained. He just didn’t believe the stories he was being told. “And I felt alone.”

But Jewish atheism has a long tradition. One of its modern iterations comes in the form of Secular Humanistic Judaism, founded in 1963 by Rabbi Sherwin Wine to spurn the idea of a personal God. Wine reworked the Jewish liturgy, replacing God with a humanistic understanding of the world, meaning it’s up to people to address human challenges. Golin now serves as the Society for Humanistic Judaism’s Executive Director.

It’s a movement that subscribes to an expanding, rather than a contracting, model of Jewish identity. Golin defines as Jewish anybody who

wants to be Jewish and feels a connection to Jewish history and tradition and culture. And that is a point of view that represents most American Jews, he insists, who think the rules of who is a Jew and who isn’t a Jew are arbitrary.

“Was Sholem Aleichem writing religious stories? Are Woody Allen movies religious? Is lighting a Channukah menorah purely a religious act? I say no,” Golin said. “I say in most cases in America, when Jews light a Channukah Menorah, it’s a cultural expression and they don’t think God is listening to them say that blessing.” They’re doing it for other reasons, he explained. “For me personally, I derive meaning by knowing where I come from and where I fit into human history and that I’m part of a unique story.”

Judaism has never fit neatly into any existing box, be it ethnicity, nation, religion, race, civilization, or Peoplehood. “All of these are inexact descriptions,” said Golin. “What I would rather do is say, there’s nothing else like this. This is a unique experience. There’s never been a tribe of peoples who have survived 2,000 years separated from their homeland. That story is unique. Let’s stop trying to put ourselves into boxes.”

As for those who want to keep the laws of who is a Jew strict, Golin has a question for them. “What’s the fear? What’s going to happen? Are millions of people going to turn around and call themselves Jewish?” These fears suggest a preoccupation with dilution — which in turn evoke an unseemly notion of purity. “It skirts way too close to World War II where the notion of purity got 6 million Jews killed.” ■

“Was Sholem Aleichem writing religious stories? Are Woody Allen movies religious? Is lighting a Channukah menorah purely a religious act? I say no.”

## SHMUEL HERZFELD

# We Are The Tradition



**T**he role of women in Orthodox Judaism has in recent years been evolving. And one man is on the front lines of that struggle: Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld.

Herzfeld grew up on Staten Island, one of five children. After an uninspiring day-school experience, he went on a gap year to Israel and returned bent on becoming a professor of history. But his course was changed one day when Rabbi Avi Weiss put his arm around Herzfeld and said he thought Herzfeld should be a rabbi. “And I looked at him and said ‘what?’” Herzfeld recalled recently. “What are you talking

about — *Rabbi*? And he said ‘You can do it.’ That’s what made me feel like I could do it — because he told me.

That had a huge impact on me.”

Since 2004, Herzfeld has been the Rabbi of Ohev Sholom — the National Synagogue in Washington D.C. He was recently in the news for being escorted out of an AIPAC meeting in 2016 during presidential candidate Donald Trump’s address. Bedecked in a tallis, Herzfeld stood up and

started to approach the President, crying as he went, “This man is wicked!” “With every cell in my body, I felt the obligation to declare his wickedness to the world,” he wrote in *The Washington Post*.

Herzfeld is also famously a friend to Orthodox women.

His Synagogue, Ohev Sholom, employs a female member of clergy, known as a *maharat*.

“For all intents and purposes, she’s a rabbi,” he told me.

“There’s no question women can be rabbis.” He wrote vociferously on the subject of the Orthodox Union’s new policy barring women from serving as clergy. “The OU should stick to tuna fish,” Herzfeld told *The Forward*.

Like many feminists, Herzfeld demurs when it comes to the name. “I don’t know what it means to be a feminist,” he told me. But he clarified: “I certainly am sympathetic to the concerns of women, especially within Orthodoxy where it’s often the case that the concerns of women are not the most important concerns of the community.”

It’s a big problem, and one that Herzfeld feels passionately about. “I think that the flaw is not within the Torah, God forbid, and not with the rabbis, God forbid, but in the execution by some communities which are making in some cases fatal flaws by getting a message out to women that we don’t want your help in growing our community,” he explained. “The flaw is not within the holy Torah,” he repeated. “We’re not going to blame the Torah for the flaw in the Orthodox Union.”

I asked Herzfeld why, if he had such difficulty with the Orthodox leadership, he remained within the Orthodox community.

“It’s a fair question, but I feel that I have not changed,” he explained. “I have always been Orthodox. The problem is that a lot of people in the Orthodox community keep moving right, and have gone to a place that is not recognizable. The Judaism I practice has been practiced for thousands of years.”

Jews of the 1700s, for example, had an approach that was closer to Herzfeld’s than to today’s fundamentalists, he believes. “The approach of our ancestors has always been one of willingness and flexibility to deal with challenges of a situation,” Herzfeld said.

Because Herzfeld sees himself as the true inheritor of the tradition, he feels a great responsibility to speak out — precisely because others claim to be speaking for the tradition. “People assume that because you assume a more fundamentalist approach, it’s more *halachic*. *Nonsense!*” He cried. “We are the tradition. We haven’t deviated at all. All the courses of women being rabbis, that’s in the Talmud. That goes back to the Bible. We have not deviated from the tradition. We are the tradition!”

As Herzfeld spoke, his voice rose, and he got more passionate. And it’s contagious. I felt tears prick my eyes as he told me about the female spiritual leaders of the Bible — Devorah the Judge, and Miriam. “It goes without saying that women who were spiritual leaders in the Talmud were looked at with great dignity,” he told me. “And if women in the time of Talmud had been as advanced professionally as women are today, it goes without saying the place of women in Jewish law would be entirely different than it is in Orthodoxy today. It goes without saying, it’s not even a question!” He cried. “A person who doesn’t recognize this is just in denial.”

Failure to incorporate women as spiritual leaders is not only giving up on 50 percent of the potential workforce. It means alienating people from Judaism and Torah. “If that’s Orthodoxy,” Herzfeld said, “then I’m not Orthodox.” ■

“Have always been Orthodox. The problem is that a lot of people in the Orthodox community keep moving right, and have gone to a place that is not recognizable. The Judaism I practice has been practiced for thousands of years.”

**M**ore than a century ago, the leaders of Orthodox Jewry in New York feared that they were growing too fast, too haphazardly, and in too many directions. What they needed, they decided, was a chief rabbi, one who would set rigorous community standards and fight the assimilation and the anti-Semitism that they faced in America.

The rabbi they chose was a great Torah scholar and compelling orator from Lithuania named Rabbi Jacob Joseph. After a huge fundraising effort among Orthodox congregations, the dream came true: Rabbi Joseph arrived in New York in 1888 and was installed as the city's first Chief Rabbi at the Beth HaMedrash HaGadol, a congregation on New York's Lower East Side, the neighborhood that was then the center of the city's Jewish life.

In the years that followed, however, Joseph met with one frustration after another: his efforts to regulate the sale of kosher meat were rebuffed, his rabbinic edicts were ignored, and even his sermons were mocked (his English was terrible). In the words of Jonathan D. Sarna, the preeminent historian of American Jewry, Chief Rabbi Joseph proved to be "an utter failure." There is no better proof of this than the fact that he was not only the first, but the last chief rabbi of New York.

Joseph is certainly a quixotic and colorful figure in American Jewish history. Sarna devotes four pages to him in his book, *American Judaism: A History* (Yale University Press, 2004). Joseph's name still graces a Jewish day school, the Rabbi Jacob Joseph School, which was once on the Lower East Side, and now operates with 1,200 students at campuses on Staten Island and New Jersey. But another link to Rabbi Joseph has now been lost. The Beth HaMedrash HaGadol Synagogue, where he once presided, was destroyed by fire earlier this year.

On Sunday, May 14, 2017 a fire swept through the synagogue, a Gothic revival building at 60-64 Norfolk Street. Like several other synagogues in the neighborhood, this one was built as a church and then converted for a new use. It has been used as a synagogue since 1885, although it fell into disrepair and has not been in use for several years. No persons or Torah scrolls were damaged in the blaze, which effectively destroyed the building, a New York City Landmark. Police charged a 14-year-old boy with setting the fire.

Rabbi Yonah Landau, the author of a book about Joseph called *The Rav Hakolel and His Generation* (2011), said that Rabbi Joseph lived nearby on Henry Street and most often preached and prayed at the Beth HaMedrash synagogue. "He was responsible for more than 20 shuls," Rabbi Landau said, "but this was the one he frequented."

In his book, which was originally written in Yiddish and just recently translated into

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# WHEN NEW YORK HAD A CHIEF RABBI

by **ARI L. GOLDMAN**

English, Landau describes the Beth HaMedrash as "the largest, most flourishing congregation in New York, and possibly all of America." When Joseph arrived from Lithuania, he gave his very first sermon there. The congregation was "renovated to fit the occasion," Landau wrote.

Joseph's arrival from Europe was much heralded. "Some hoped that he would clean up the *kashrus* scene," Landau wrote, "while others wanted more intense yeshivos for their children. Yet a third category hoped the Rav would focus on building Yiddishkeit in general, and refrain from pointing out their failings."

The plan of the Orthodox leaders who brought Joseph to America was to put a tax on kosher butchers who would seek his approval. "They thought the tax would pay his salary," Sarna said in an interview. "It was a fine theory, but they forgot the competition. Many butchers sought out other rabbinic authorities. The whole economic scheme collapsed."

As a result, the tax didn't work, they were unable to get the kosher butchers under one authority, they had trouble paying the rabbi and "the poor man had a stroke," Sarna said. He was incapacitated in 1897 and lived out the last years of his life in poverty. He died in 1902 at the age of 62.

There was a great outpouring of grief (some say guilt) upon Joseph's death. Tens of thousands attended his funeral through the streets of the Lower East Side. In his book on American Judaism, Sarna notes that "even his massive funeral in 1902 ended in tragedy." The procession that accompanied his casket was pelted by Irish and German workers, some of whom had been taunting local Jewish immigrants for years. "A riot ensued," Sarna adds, "abetted by the police, in which many Jews were brutally beaten."

The casket finally made its way to the Beth HaMedrah synagogue on Norfolk Street, Landau records. From there his body was

taken by ferry to Queens where New York's first and last chief rabbi was buried at Union Field Cemetery in Ridgewood.

In the year of his death, a yeshiva on Henry Street was renamed for him. "He had nothing to do with the school," said Marvin Schick, who has been president of the Rabbi Jacob Joseph School for 45 years. "There was a sense that he had been mistreated. Many felt guilt about him. The school was made a memorial to his name."

Over the years, many have speculated on what might have been if Joseph had succeeded. If he had been a stronger leader, would the institution of chief rabbi have taken root in America the way that it did in the United Kingdom?

The consensus among historians is that Joseph was the wrong person for the job, but it is unlikely that anyone could have flourished in the position. No chief rabbi could succeed in America, with its strong separation of church and state. In Europe religion and state are much more intertwined. What's more, the American spirit is one of independence, not of joining.

But Joseph's failure helped contribute to what Schick calls "the Shteibelization of America." "There are a huge number of synagogues and each constitutes a universe unto itself. This is not what exists in the great cities of Europe, which invariably have a chief rabbi. Here, as the Yiddish expression goes, 'everyone makes Shabbes for himself.'"

With the yeshiva that bears his name now on Staten Island and with the Beth HaMedrash destroyed by the recent fire, there is still one reminder of the rabbi on the Lower East Side. On Henry Street, where he once lived, stands the Jacob Joseph Playground. It is named not for the chief rabbi but for his great-grandson, Captain Jacob Joseph, who died in action at Guadalcanal in 1942 at the age of 22. A bronze plaque there notes his service and sacrifice. ■

# FROM PULP TO PARADISE

## THE ART OF JOEL SILVERSTEIN

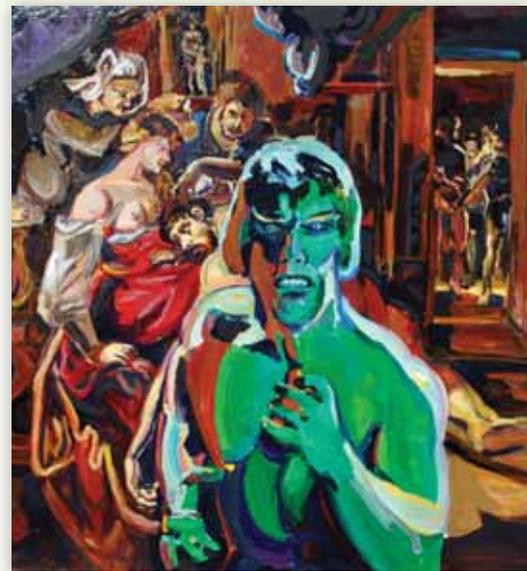
*Clockwise, from below: Ten Commandments and a Question; Hulk Meets Samson; Revelation at the Beach; Superman In Exile; Gentlemen Krypton is Doomed. Back cover: Joe-El Jore-El.*

With its bold primary colors, its playful mashup of popular Jewish icons with sacred figures of tradition, and its introspective autobiographical flourishes, the art of Joel Silverstein provides a new way of seeing and expressing contemporary Jewish and American consciousness.

Brooklyn-born and raised amidst the confluence of cultures near Coney Island, Silverstein was influenced at an early age both by Cecil B. De Mille's "The Ten Commandments" and by the sight of Holocaust survivors on Brighton Beach. The spiritual and artistic inspiration – and the secular and sacred merger of lurid popular culture with horrifying reality – would come to inform his work to this day.

Digging through the crates of American

and Jewish popular ephemera, Silverstein's art provides a space where the Golem, the Incredible Hulk, the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, Houdini and Moses can mingle as one. But he adds images of himself – rarely flattering, but just as palpably Jewish if not more so than the icons seared into our collective memory – as if to playfully remark on the abyss between our majestic mythology and our all-too-human frailness. In so doing, Silverstein makes us rethink what we have come to accept as iconic heroism while shining a new light on the culture, history, spirituality, and memory that constitute our Jewish selves. As Silverstein writes, "If Judaism is a culture, a people and perhaps a civilization, then Jewish art is not an anomaly but a necessity." ■





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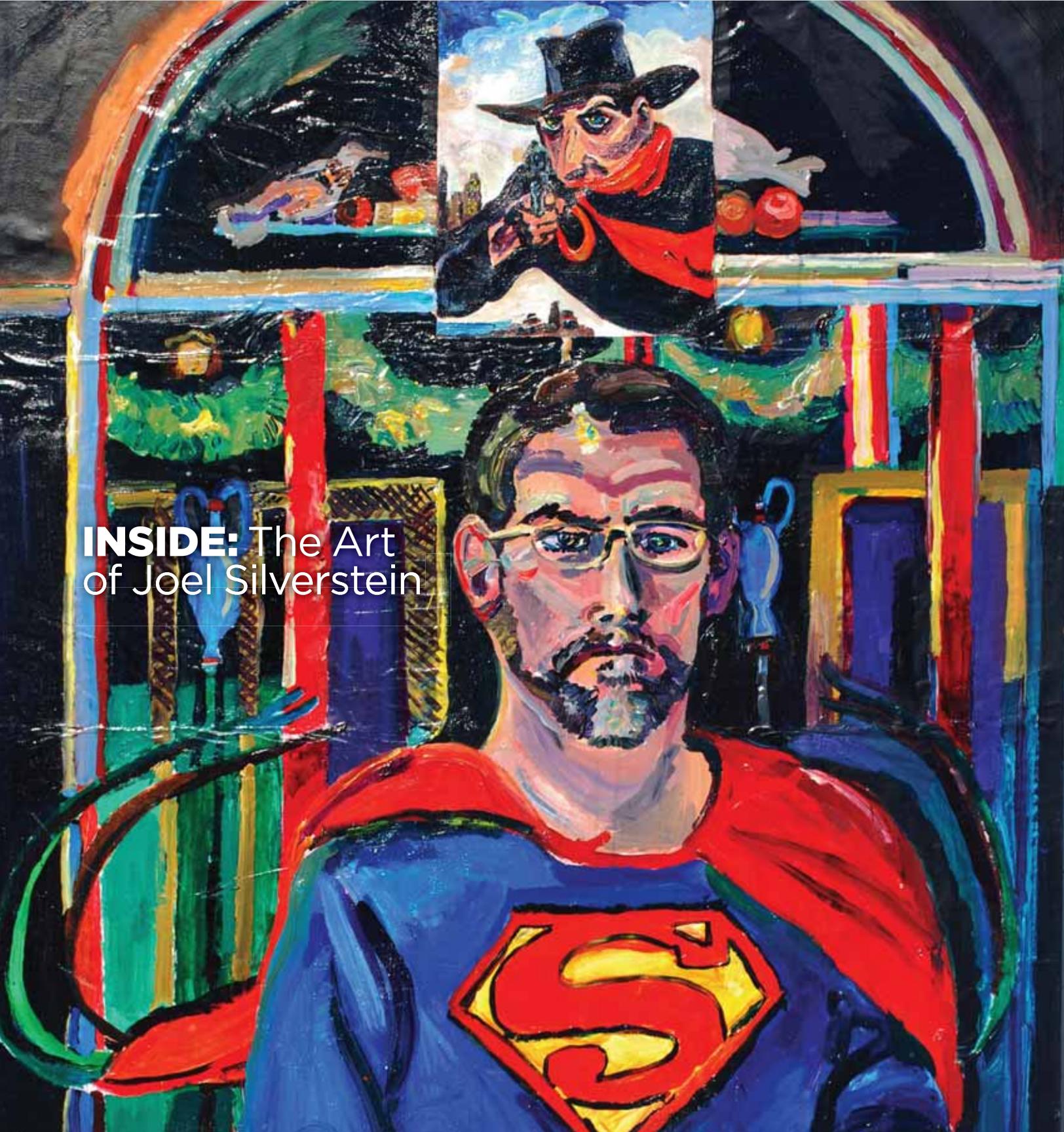
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